

Freedom of Worship and the Armed Forces in Early Twentieth-Century England

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During 1930, the British government ordered that special intercessory prayers appointed by leaders of the English Protestant churches were not to be said by naval, army and air force chaplains. This order provoked widespread ecclesiastical and political protests. Ironically, since the intercessions were concerned with religious persecution in Soviet Russia, the government order infringed the principle of freedom of worship. This article considers the reasons for the government ban, and why the controversy did not provoke a crisis in relations between the churches, the military authorities and the state. It is particularly concerned with the attitudes of free church leaders, those most sensitive towards the principle of religious liberty, and especially with their apparently paradoxical acceptance of compulsory attendance at religious services in the armed forces. It connects this episode with a general change in free church attitudes towards the state, the Church of England and national institutions.

In February 1930, the British government banned the saying of special intercessory prayers at religious services in the armed forces. By orders sent from the Admiralty, War Office and Air Ministry, Church of England and free church military chaplains were instructed to disregard recommendations for worship issued by the leaders of their churches. These orders provoked a public outcry, with protests not just by chaplains, clergy, bishops and denominational bodies, but also in national newspapers, by opposition political parties, and in both houses of Parliament. *The Daily Telegraph* declared that ‘by interfering

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with the religious freedom of clergymen to preach and pray in the manner their several denominations direct, the Government has raised a constitutional issue of the gravest import'.¹

This was a remarkable episode: it is the sole modern instance of a British government prohibition on special prayers appointed by church leaders.² It was, though, only a brief incident, and the consequences were limited. After angry exchanges, the scope of the orders was modified, and the controversy quickly subsided: there was, after all, no crisis between the state and the churches. The episode nonetheless raises matters of general significance. Several obvious questions arise. Why was the ban imposed? What does the incident reveal about relationships between the military command and military chaplains, and between government and the churches? Why did the controversy *not* become a crisis, and pass so quickly? The simple answers are that government ministers and civil servants mismanaged a diplomatic dilemma and political challenge; that they unwittingly breached an official boundary between the military and spiritual authorities; and that the disagreement was resolved by qualifications of the orders and by a clarification of the demarcation.

Yet the ban was still enforced: on the designated day, the prayers were not said in the armed forces. So why did church leaders let the matter subside? Deeper questions are involved here. The free churches, especially – including Baptists, Congregationalists, the various Methodist connexions, and Presbyterians – might have been expected to be highly sensitive towards state orders on religious matters, as an infringement of their principles of freedom of worship. One free church leader was particularly tenacious in securing a reaffirmation of the demarcation between the religious and military authorities. However, the episode did not produce scrutiny of a paradox in free church military chaplaincy: that the chief proponents of voluntary religion accepted the British state's requirement of compulsory attendance of sailors, soldiers and airmen at religious services. Why was this

¹ *Daily Telegraph*, 28 February 1930, 13.

² Friction had become possible only since the 1870s, once the archbishops of the Church of England began to arrange special prayers for general use on their own authority, independently of orders by the state. For the character of special prayers, see *National Prayers* [hereafter: NP]: *Special Worship since the Reformation*, 3: *Worship for National and Royal Occasions in the United Kingdom, 1871–2016*, ed. Philip Williamson et al., CERS 26 (Woodbridge, 2020), esp. lxii–lxxii, xcii–xcviii.

so? Reflection on what did not happen can be as historically revealing as explanations of what did happen.

THE GOVERNMENT BAN

The orders of February 1930 were issued after a decision by the cabinet of the second Labour government of 1929–31; the prohibition was on prayers of intercession for the victims of religious persecution in Soviet Russia, which were to be added to Church of England and English free church services on Sunday 16 March. Prayers for this purpose were not new: there had been protests and prayers by British churches in support of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1919 and 1922.³ Now, however, a more intensive Soviet persecution was directed against members of all religions, including Protestants, Catholics, Jews and Muslims. The British publication of reports of these ‘anti-god’ policies also coincided with the Labour government’s restoration of diplomatic relations with the Soviet government. The controversy over the 1930 prayers has been described in a number of historical studies,⁴ and by the Durham state prayers project,⁵ but the fullest commentaries so far, by Giles Udy, have muddied serious explanation of the issue of the orders.⁶ This is not the place to detail Udy’s extraordinary misrepresentations of both Labour party politics in general, and the Labour government’s attitudes towards Soviet Russia in particular.⁷ It is sufficient to state that, contrary to his assertions and tendentious selections of evidence, the Labour party was emphatically not a semi-Marxist party, but a broad progressive or ‘labourist’ coalition consisting

³ *NP* 3, 215–16, 247–8. There had also been English and Scottish prayers for victims of Russian famines during 1919 and 1921: *ibid.* 232–4, 244–5.

⁴ W. P. and Zelda K. Coates, *A History of Anglo-Soviet Relations* (London, 1943), 333–47; Andrew J. Williams, *Labour and Russia: The Attitude of the Labour Party to the USSR, 1924–34* (Manchester, 1989), 102–9; Alan Robinson, *Chaplains at War: The Role of Clergymen during World War II* (London, 2008), 50–3; Neil Allison, *The Official History of the United Board, 1: The Clash of Empires 1914–1939*, rev. edn (London, 2014), 140–4.

⁵ *NP* 3, 277–81.

⁶ Giles Udy, ‘The Christian Protest Movement, the Labour Government and Soviet Religious Persecution, 1929–1931’, *JEH* 66 (2015), 116–39; *idem*, *Labour and the Gulag: Russia and the Seduction of the British Left* (London, 2017), esp. 195–304; and see *idem*, ‘For Slaves: Against Labour’, *Church Times*, 5 April 2013, 17–18.

⁷ For more detailed comment, see Philip Williamson, ‘Britain and the “Soviet War on Religion”: Labour Government, Christian Protest and the Churches 1929–31’, *JEH* 77 (forthcoming, 2026).

of trade unionists and cooperators, of ethical, evolutionary, guild, Christian and Fabian socialists, of internationalists and pacifists, and of recent defectors from the Liberal and Conservative parties. Very few of its members were Marxists or uncritical sympathisers with Soviet policies.⁸ Nor, as Udy also argues, was the Labour party hostile towards Christianity and the churches. Many of its MPs had much-valued personal experiences of Nonconformist religion, and the cabinet contained former local preachers and Sunday school teachers, four active Baptists and Congregationalists (William Adamson, A. V. Alexander, Margaret Bondfield and J. R. Clynes), a Wesleyan Methodist vice-president of the National Free Church Council (Arthur Henderson) and four Anglicans (Noel Buxton, George Lansbury, and lords Parmoor and Sankey).⁹ The prayers were not banned because Labour ministers were clandestine communists or closet atheists. They restored diplomatic relations with the Soviet government – negotiated by the first Labour government in 1924, but severed by the Conservative government in 1927 – because they were committed to international peace and conciliation, wanted to stop subversive Russian and Comintern propaganda in Britain and the Indian empire, and sought trade agreements to assist the British economy and reduce unemployment.¹⁰ Labour ministers abhorred the Soviet government's fanaticism and brutality, but believed that its harshness could, in time, be mitigated by diplomatic and economic connections. As progressives or socialists, this belief was reinforced by a disposition to hope for the best from what claimed to be an egalitarian state, and to distrust the criticisms of its enemies. Hoping for the best from foreign despotisms has not been a sentiment restricted to Labour governments: Neville Chamberlain and Hitler's Germany are other examples.

Reports of renewed Soviet oppression and violence towards Russian religious believers began to be published in British newspapers from

⁸ This point is amply established in the many studies of the Labour party, but for a penetrating (and apt) analysis, see Ross McKibbin, 'Why was there no Marxism in Britain?', *EHR* 99 (1984), 297–331.

⁹ See Franz Linden, *Sozialismus und Religion. Konfessionssoziologische Untersuchung der Labour Party 1919–1931* (Leipzig, 1932), for a contemporary study of the religious attitudes of Labour party members, drawing on questionnaires and interviews, with cabinet members at pp. 98–112, 153; and Peter Catterall, *Labour and the Free Churches, 1918–1939* (London, 2016), 127–49.

¹⁰ David Carlton, *MacDonald versus Henderson: The Foreign Policy of the Second Labour Government* (London, 1970), 144–63; Williams, *Labour and Russia*, 76–100.

November 1929. They were much amplified from early December by a 'Christian Protest Movement' which, created and promoted by *The Morning Post*, attracted considerable public support for protests against 'the Soviet war on religion', and for appeals to the British government to make 'the strongest possible representations' to the Soviet government on behalf of the Russian churches.¹¹ Ramsay MacDonald, the prime minister, and other Labour cabinet ministers insisted that they were 'fundamentally opposed to any form of religious persecution', but they faced a problem common to all governments: conflicting objectives, uncertain knowledge and practical limitations. They wanted to preserve their larger diplomatic aims; the reports about Russian conditions were of questionable and contested quality; and they were conscious of the constraints and risks in diplomatic pressure. A fundamental principle of good international relations was non-interference in the internal affairs of other nations – at least, no public interference – and the Labour government, as a target of both Comintern subversion and anti-Bolshevik smears, had a particularly strong interest in persuading the Soviet government to respect this principle and to end its anti-British propaganda. Ministers knew that they could do nothing directly to halt the persecutions, but believed that something might be achieved quietly through diplomatic conversations. A formal protest or another break in diplomatic relations would, they thought, be counter-productive: Soviet attitudes would harden, making matters still worse for the Russian religious communities. Henderson, the foreign secretary, undertook to make representations about the religious persecution to the Soviet authorities, but only after obtaining better information from the new British ambassador in Moscow, and at a time and by ways that would not jeopardize progress in the government's other aims and cause further peril for religious believers.¹²

¹¹ *Morning Post*, 6–16 December 1929, including numerous pages of letters of support from readers and reports of the creation of a committee and appeals for funds; and *Morning Post*, 19 December 1929, for the Protest Movement's formal aims.

¹² Henderson in HC Deb. (5th series), 17 July 1929 (vol. 230, col. 405) and 13 February 1930 (vol. 235, cols 607–8); London, LPL, Archbishop Lang Papers, vol. 73, fols 71–2, Henderson to Lang, 24 December 1929; Parmoor in HL Deb. (5th series), 13 February 1930 (vol. 76, col. 582); MacDonald open letter, 'The Government and Russia', *The Times*, 25 February 1930, 16; Kew, TNA, WO32/4015, Henderson to W. F. Lofthouse, Wesleyan Methodist Conference president, 13 March 1930.

All British religious leaders were appalled by the persecution, but they were divided over what could be done. Three English bishops, six leading free churchmen and the chief rabbi became vice-presidents of the Christian Protest Movement (CPM).¹³ But the two archbishops, most of the other bishops, and numerous free church leaders refused to be associated with the CPM, because they regarded it as more of a political than a religious campaign, because they understood the Labour government's policy dilemma, and because they agreed that diplomatic persuasion might do more for Russian religious believers, and at less risk, than official protests.¹⁴ J. H. Rushbrooke, secretary of the Baptist World Alliance, whose members were among the most publicized victims of the Soviet persecution, publicly supported the Labour cabinet as 'religious men' who had 'not the faintest sympathy with religious repression'.¹⁵ The archbishops of Canterbury and York, Cosmo Lang and William Temple, both warned that, in Temple's words, 'there is real danger lest we relieve our own feelings at the cost of the very people we wish to succour'.¹⁶ After they had obtained better evidence of the Soviet persecutions, and once they had decided in early February 1930 that the Church of England itself should act, they proceeded with great care. The archbishops associated the church's protest against the persecutions not with an appeal for action by the British government, but with a 'united act of intercession', and went to considerable lengths to dissociate these intercessory prayers from the CPM campaign and from any political purpose. Their call for prayers – subsequently joined, as was now common, by leaders of the various free churches,¹⁷ and elevated by the archbishops into a special 'day of prayer' – was, Lang insisted, separate from 'any movements which might be regarded as propaganda' against the Soviet government

¹³ List in Christian Protest Movement (CPM), *Persecution of Religion in Russia Must Cease* (1930), in LPL, Lang Papers, vol. 73, fols 83–4. Other members included a retired bishop, and the archbishop of Armagh. In acknowledgement of the chief rabbi's participation, for a brief period the CPM was renamed the 'National Protest Movement'.

¹⁴ *Morning Post*, 6, 7, 9 December 1929, for replies to its telegraphed appeal for support to a 'hundred' church leaders.

¹⁵ *Baptist Times*, 16 January 1930; and see Geoffrey Shakespeare, 'The Persecution of Baptists in Russia', *Baptist Quarterly* 5 (1930), 49–54.

¹⁶ Lang in HL Deb. (5th series), 4 December 1929 (vol. 75, cols 897–900); Lang to A. W. Gough of the CPM, 13 December 1929, in *The Times*, 14 December 1929, 12; Temple in 'Convocation of York', *The Times*, 13 February 1930, 14.

¹⁷ For this now well-established practice, see *NP* 3, lxxi–lxxii, lxxiv–lxxv.

and, as he also meant but did not say, from criticism of the Labour government.¹⁸

The Labour cabinet nevertheless decided that ‘in view of the political complexion which the question of alleged persecution in Russia has assumed, it would be undesirable that Intercessory Prayers should be read at religious Services of the Navy, Army and Air Force’.¹⁹ Ministers knew that Russian newspapers were attacking the CPM for propagating anti-Soviet propaganda, and, despite the archbishops’ public assurances, expected the Soviet government to interpret the prayers as yet another instance of propaganda. Indeed, their chief concern was specifically with the archbishops’, rather than the free churches’, call for special prayers, because the Soviet authorities might assume that prayers in the established Church of England had some degree of government approval. This created a diplomatic problem. The Anglo-Soviet treaties specified that the signatories agreed:

scrupulously to respect the undoubted right of a State to order its own life within its own jurisdiction in its own way, to refrain and to restrain all persons and organisations under their direct or indirect control, ... from any act overt or covert liable in any way whatsoever to endanger the tranquillity or prosperity of ... the British Empire or the USSR.²⁰

If the cabinet ignored the call for special prayers altogether, the Soviet government’s suspicions of the British government’s approval of them might be reinforced, and it might retaliate – resuming its propaganda against Britain, withdrawing from the trade negotiations, and ending any opportunity to assist Russian religious communities by diplomatic persuasion. There was no question of trying to obstruct or criticize the call for prayers as such; for the Labour government, no less than for any other British government, this would have been an illegitimate infringement of religious freedom. Instead, they resorted to what

¹⁸ *The Chronicle* of the Convocation of Canterbury (London, 1930), 5–8 (12 February 1930). See also Lang in HL Deb. (5th series), 13 February 1930 (vol. 76, cols 575–8); National Free Church Council statement (which did include an appeal to the government, asking it to use ‘all available means of remedying this terrible situation’), *The Times*, 15 February 1930, 12; presidents of the Methodist conferences, and Lang and Temple statement in *The Times*, 1 March 1930, 12.

¹⁹ TNA, CAB 23/63, Cabinet 11(30), 19 February 1930.

²⁰ Article 16 of *General Treaty between Great Britain and ... the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics* (London, 1924), 13, reaffirmed as ‘the pledge with regard to propaganda’ in the Anglo-Soviet protocol of 3 October 1929, in *Correspondence Regarding the Resumption of Relations with the Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics* (London, 1929), 8.

might later have been termed ‘gesture politics’, deciding on a prohibition (in the terms of the treaties) for those ‘persons and organisations’ under the government’s most ‘direct ... control’: the armed forces.²¹

The ministers had a further perspective: the agitation against Soviet religious persecution was led by their political opponents, and they distrusted both the sources and the interpretations of its information about Russian conditions. *The Morning Post* was a hard-right newspaper, deeply hostile to the Anglo-Soviet agreement. Although the CPM had clerical members and insisted that it was not a political but a religious movement, its chairman, Prebendary A. W. Gough, was well known as a militantly Conservative, nationalistic and anti-socialist preacher.²² Its two presidents were an ex-leader of the British Fascists, the eighth earl of Glasgow, and the former Conservative home secretary, Lord Brentford (William Joynson-Hicks), who had precipitated the break in Anglo-Soviet diplomatic relations in 1927; its vice-presidents and council members included further right-wing Conservative peers and MPs. Together with *The Morning Post*, the CPM was providing political ammunition for Conservative politicians who added the reports of religious persecution to their relentless efforts to wreck the new Anglo-Soviet agreement and to defeat the Labour government. It was a parliamentary question from a Conservative MP and former naval officer, Carlyon Bellairs, about observance of the Church of England’s day of prayer in the Royal Navy²³ that provoked the cabinet decision to ban the special prayers in the armed forces as a whole. The first Labour government had suffered parliamentary and electoral defeats by Conservative exploitation of anti-Soviet opinion and by the distortions of right-wing newspapers, most notably by their publicizing the forged ‘Zinoviev letter’;²⁴ the second Labour government was determined to avoid a similar fate.

²¹ See Philip Snowden (chancellor of the exchequer) in HC Deb. (5th series), 10 March 1930 (vol. 236, col. 900), for the government wishing ‘to take care that these prayers will not amount to an official exercise contrary to well-established usage in diplomatic relations’.

²² Obituary, *Daily Mail*, 8 October 1931, 12; ‘Janitor’ [J. G. Lockhart], *Pulpits and Personalities* (London, 1930), 49–58.

²³ HC Deb. (5th series), 19 February 1930 (vol. 235, col. 1359).

²⁴ See especially Gill Bennett, *The Zinoviev Letter* (Oxford, 2018). The ‘letter’, published by *The Daily Mail* just before the 1924 general election, purported to be a Soviet government directive to British communists, instructing them to use the recent Anglo-Soviet treaty as an opportunity to promote revolutionary ideas among British workers.

Even so, the cabinet's decision was a miscalculation, worsened by poor civil service advice and heavy-handed communication. It originated in an over-reaction of the Admiralty Board to the political trap laid by Bellairs, and in its officials persuading the other service ministries to issue similar orders.²⁵ The Admiralty's parliamentary answer and its order to naval commanders in all British fleets and stations during mid-February were at least carefully stated: they read like administrative instructions, and attracted little attention.²⁶ But the War Office's order a week later to army forces in Britain and across the empire, copied verbatim by the Air Ministry for RAF stations, was a blunt version of the cabinet minute, explicitly presented as a government decision taken because of 'the political character' of the 'controversy' about the Soviet persecution.²⁷ This text, when leaked to the Conservative *Daily Telegraph*, was easily sensationalized.²⁸ The cabinet decision and the orders also overlooked distinctions between the churches. In the Church of Scotland (and consequently in Scottish military units), prayers had already been said for persecuted Russians two months earlier, and the Church of Scotland's General Assembly had no intention of repeating them now.²⁹ Pope Pius XI had summoned Roman Catholics throughout the world to special masses three days after the date selected by Archbishop Lang, on a Wednesday rather than a Sunday, which appeared to leave Catholic chaplains and servicemen outside the remit of the orders. Still more ineptly, the army and RAF orders ignored the lines of authority for chaplaincy services, and the different types of chaplaincy provision. The chaplain of the Fleet, Walter Knight-Adkin, gave his approval to the Admiralty

²⁵ TNA, WO32/4015, A. E. Gloyn-Cox (Admiralty) to F. C. Bovenschen (War Office), 14 February 1930; TNA, FO371/14841, Gloyn-Cox to G. Jebb (Foreign Office), 17 February 1930.

²⁶ Alexander (first lord) in HC Deb. (5th series), 19 February 1930 (vol. 235, cols 1359–60); Admiralty wireless message to all ships and naval establishments, 20 February 1930, copy in TNA, AIR2/378/S29115. Lang, like other religious leaders, had failed to notice Alexander's parliamentary statement: LPL, Lang Papers, vol. 73, fols 234–8, Lang to MacDonald, 8 March 1930.

²⁷ TNA, WO32/4015, Herbert Creedy to commanding officers of British and imperial army bases, 27 February 1930; TNA, AIR2/378/S29115, Walter Nicolson to commanding officers of British and imperial RAF bases, 1 March 1930.

²⁸ *Daily Telegraph*, 28 February 1930, 13, followed by the *Morning Post*, *Daily Mail*, *Times* and other newspapers on 1 March 1930.

²⁹ NP 3, 274, 276; TNA, WO32/4015, assistant chaplain general, Scottish command, quoted in A. C. Jarvis to Creedy, 27 February 1930.

order.³⁰ But Alfred Jarvis, the chaplain-general of the army, warned the War Office that its order would cause trouble with the churches; and to emphasize its imprudence, he sarcastically asked whether the government would also want to restrict the choice of lessons and content of sermons, and to exclude hymns referring to martyrdom for the faith. Jarvis refused to issue or approve the order himself, and when unable to prevent its communication to army commanders, he insisted that it should be explicitly worded as a matter of government policy.³¹ The chaplain-in-chief of the RAF, Vernon Hanson, was simply not consulted by the Air Ministry.³² The outcome was that orders affecting divine worship in the army and the RAF were sent not by their accredited religious authorities, but by two civil servants, Herbert Creedy and Walter Nicholson, the permanent under-secretaries of the War Office and the Air Ministry.

The orders provoked widespread protests, reaching well beyond the Conservative newspapers which first published them. Withdrawal of the orders was demanded by M. E. Aubrey, general secretary of the Baptist Union and joint secretary of the United Navy, Army and Air Force Board of the Baptist, Congregational and Primitive and United Methodist churches (United Board); by the National Free Church Council; by the Wesleyan Methodist Committee of Privileges; by Sidney Berry, secretary of the Congregational Union; and by the chief rabbi.³³ Similar protests appeared in the editorials of denominational newspapers. A statement by J. C. Carlile, a former chairman of the Baptist Union, that he would defy the orders and say special prayers for Russian Christians even if he lost his position as an officiating chaplain for the RAF – that is, as a minister conducting services at a local place of worship attended by servicemen, rather than a commissioned chaplain responsible for services within military bases – was widely

³⁰ Alexander 'interview' for the Press Association, reported in *The Times*, 3 March 1930, 9.

³¹ TNA, WO32/4015, Jarvis to Creedy, 17 February 1930 and undated [late February 1930]; LPL, Lang Papers, vol. 73, fol. 176, Jarvis to Mervyn Haigh (Lang's chaplain), 26 February 1930.

³² LPL, Lang Papers, vol. 73, fol. 224, Hanson to Lang, 7 March 1930.

³³ Aubrey public statement, 28 February 1930, in *Baptist Times*, 6 March 1930, 156; TNA, WO32/4015, Aubrey to Tom Shaw, 3 March 1930, and Thomas Nightingale (for the National Free Church Council) to MacDonald, 4 March 1930; Berry (and other leading free churchmen), and the chief rabbi in *Daily Telegraph*, 1 March 1930, 13; J. H. Bateson (Wesleyan committee) telegram to service ministries, 4 March 1930, in *Methodist Times*, 6 March 1930, 11.

publicized.³⁴ Temple privately thought the orders ‘offensive’, and that a ‘formal protest’ from the Church of England was needed to demonstrate that it was ‘not a department of state’. More circumspectly, Lang complained privately by telephone to MacDonald, and after a Conservative peer made the orders an issue for debate in the House of Lords, he publicly repeated these complaints and forcefully restated that the special prayers had no political motivations.³⁵ After criticisms from both the Conservative and the Liberal leaders in the House of Commons, MacDonald – as leader of a minority government – was obliged to arrange a conference of the party leaders and the armed forces ministers in order to avert a hostile parliamentary vote.³⁶

During early March, these protests extracted two successive government clarifications, contained in further sets of instructions to the armed forces and reported in Parliament or released to newspapers. The first, issued ‘in order to remove any possibility of misunderstanding’, stated that the ban on the prayers was confined to compulsory religious services, and did not apply to services in parish churches and local chapels which servicemen attended of their own accord.³⁷ The second set of orders, sent a week later, included the more precise instruction that on the day of prayer, individual soldiers and airmen could, if they wished, be exempted from compulsory parades to churches and chapels outside military bases, where the congregations included civilians and where the prayers would be said.³⁸ This narrowing of the wide scope of the original orders – to exclude services in parish churches and local chapels, and to take some account of the personal preferences of servicemen – also meant that they

³⁴ *The Times*, 3 March 1930, 9, and in numerous further national and regional newspapers on the same date.

³⁵ LPL, Lang Papers, vol. 73, fols 191, 198–200, Temple to Lang, 2 March 1930, and Lang to Temple, 5 March 1930; HL Deb. (5th series), 6 March 1930 (vol. 76, cols 823–30), commenting on a motion by the duke of Atholl. Lang’s speech provoked a furious letter from MacDonald, but Lang sent a soothing reply: LPL, Lang Papers, vol. 73, fols 225–31, 234–8, 269–70, MacDonald–Lang letters, 7, 8, 10 March 1930.

³⁶ HC Deb. (5th series), 4 March 1930 (vol. 236, cols 253–7).

³⁷ TNA, WO32/4015, Admiralty to ships and naval establishments, 1 March 1930; Creedy to army commanding officers, 4 March 1930; HC Deb. (5th series), 4 March 1930 (vol. 236, col. 269); HL Deb. (5th series), 6 March 1930 (vol. 76, cols 817–18). Alexander had made this qualification in his original parliamentary statement, but this got lost in the orders, perhaps because it was taken for granted: HC Deb. (5th series), 19 February 1930 (vol. 235, col. 1360).

³⁸ TNA, WO32/4015, Creedy to army commanding officers, 11 March 1930; TNA, AIR2/378/S29115, J. A. Webster to RAF commanding officers, 11 March 1930; *The Times*, 14 March 1930, 11.

did not affect officiating chaplains, including Carlile. The clarifications were sufficient to end the complaints of the archbishops, Jarvis, most free church leaders, Conservative and Liberal politicians, and the newspapers. Nonetheless, a government ban remained, as articulated in the now finely honed army order of 11 March: 'At services conducted by Army Chaplains in Barracks or Garrison Churches provided for the special use of troops out of public funds, for which troops are compulsorily paraded, no intercessory prayers for Russian subjects are to be used'.³⁹ Commissioned military chaplains were not to say the prayers to men under military orders in official services conducted on government property, whether army base, RAF airfield or naval ship, but servicemen were free to join in the prayers said at services elsewhere which they attended voluntarily.

On 16 March, special prayers were said at Church of England and free church services, except for those in military garrisons and naval ships. Attendance at many churches and chapels was high, but soon afterwards public agitation over Soviet religious persecution faded. This was partly because the day of prayer had provided an outlet for the spiritual outrage, but it was also because new reports from Russia suggested a decline in the worst of the violence and discrimination. Labour ministers could convince themselves that diplomatic efforts were working; the CPM and *The Morning Post* could claim that their public campaign had influenced the Soviet government; and many British Christians could believe that their prayers had had some effect.⁴⁰ All accepted that the Soviet campaign against religious belief would continue, if in less harsh forms, but few now thought that much more could be done. In February 1931, the Church of England bishops rejected a proposal for a second day of prayer for Russian Christians, while agreeing to ask the clergy and congregations to remember the Russian church 'constantly in their prayers'.⁴¹

STATE AND CHURCH IN THE ARMED FORCES

What, though, of the basic issue of government intervention in matters of worship?

³⁹ TNA, WO32/4015, Creedy to army commanding officers, 11 March 1930.

⁴⁰ TNA, MacDonald Papers, PRO30/69/1175, MacDonald to Lang, 21 March 1930; LPL, Lang Papers, vol. 74, fol. 107, Temple to Lang, 22 June 1930; CPM meeting, in *The Times*, 15 July 1930, 16.

⁴¹ *NP* 3, 279.

Lang had considered the orders ‘stupid’, but ultimately, from the establishment perspective of the Church of England, did not think ‘it is possible to question the right of the naval and military authorities to decide what forms of service are or are not used within their jurisdiction’.⁴² Conservative and Liberal politicians and newspaper editors evidently had a similar attitude. Some free church leaders, while criticizing the clumsiness of the original order, had publicly accepted that the government had a case for the ban. Rushbrooke defended its ‘rightness’, declaring both that it would be paradoxical if prayers for religious freedom were required at compulsory military services, and that such prayers would be open to propagandist misrepresentation.⁴³ Even Aubrey, who on behalf of the United Board became the most persistent critic of the orders, observed that the government was rightly concerned that ‘hostile and scrupulous propagandists’ might represent the prayers as an attempt to inflame anti-Soviet feeling in the armed forces, and even as a ‘subtle preparation’ for a future war. Chaplains, he wrote, would have understood and accepted a *request* from the government to omit references to Russia in their prayers, if this had been communicated and explained to them by the senior chaplains for each of the armed forces.⁴⁴

Aubrey’s main objection was procedural, though founded in the free church principle of freedom of worship. He did not go so far as the National Free Church Council in spelling out that the free churches ‘do not ... receive instructions from any outside body as to what we should pray for, or refrain from praying for’.⁴⁵ But on behalf of the United Board he protested that the order was ‘a very serious infringement of the liberty of our Chaplains in their spiritual ministrations’, as officially defined in *The Army List*: that in religious matters, chaplains worked under the oversight not of the military authorities, but of their denominational representatives accredited by the Royal Army Chaplains’ Department. A particular concern was that government ‘interference’ would make it ‘difficult, if not impossible, for the Churches to induce their finest young men’ to become military chaplains.⁴⁶ Aubrey

⁴² LPL, Lang Papers, vol. 73, fols 198–200, Lang to Temple, 5 March 1930.

⁴³ *The Times*, 3 March 1930, 15.

⁴⁴ *Baptist Times*, 6 March 1930, 156.

⁴⁵ TNA, WO32/4015, Nightingale to MacDonald, 4 March 1930.

⁴⁶ TNA, WO32/4015, Aubrey to Shaw, 3 March 1930, and to Creedy, 14 March 1930; Aubrey in *Baptist Times*, 6 March 1930, 156; *The Monthly Army List. February 1930* (London, 1930), 795.

demanding special meetings of the Interdenominational Advisory Committee on Army Chaplaincy Services (IACACS) and the RAF Advisory Board for Chaplaincy Services, which gathered representatives of the various churches and the Jewish community with army and air force officials and officers, in order to clarify the lines of authority. But the War Office and Air Ministry refused on the grounds that it would be inappropriate for bodies containing civil servants to enter into discussion of a political decision taken by their ministerial superiors.⁴⁷ On Creedy's advice and at the request of the United Board, Aubrey next appealed to MacDonald for a meeting between the IACACS and government ministers, though he made it 'perfectly clear' that he had no political purpose: his complaint was not now about the specific prayers for Russia, but about any ban on prayers, whatever their purposes.⁴⁸ Eventually, he obtained a meeting with Tom Shaw, the secretary of state for war, who introduced a further – and remarkably contrived – distinction, which he had agreed with MacDonald. 'Whatever the impression created, it was not the intention of the Government to dictate to Chaplains the lines of their spiritual ministrations', but the government 'insists upon the right to decide whether attendance at services should be compulsory or not'. This was not what the orders had stated: the ban had been on the saying of prayers by chaplains, not on attendance by servicemen. But if Aubrey noticed this evasion, he let it pass, because he had now obtained what he considered to be a satisfactory 'reciprocal understanding' with the government. When 'services of a special kind' were contemplated, the senior chaplains would 'communicate' with the secretary of state, and when in the opinion of the military authorities such services 'were for political reasons undesirable', they would make 'representations' to the senior chaplains.⁴⁹ Aubrey interpreted this agreement to mean that any military orders relating to religious

⁴⁷ TNA, WO32/4015, Aubrey–Creedy correspondence, 14–27 March 1930; TNA, AIR2/378/S29115, Aubrey to Nicolson, 19 March 1930, and T. Webb-Bowen to Aubrey, 27 March 1930.

⁴⁸ Oxford, Regent's Park College, Angus Library, Baptist Union Minute Books, United Navy, Army and Air Force Board Minutes, 28 March 1930; TNA, WO32/4015, Aubrey to MacDonald, 31 March 1930, observing that the objection would stand even if the prayers happened to be for rain.

⁴⁹ TNA, WO32/4015, H. J. B. Clough (Shaw's secretary) to H. G. Vincent (MacDonald's secretary), 7 April 1930, Vincent to Clough, 9 April 1930, and Aubrey to Shaw, 1 May 1930.

services would be issued only after consultation with the representatives of the various churches on the IACACS, and that these orders would be communicated to chaplains by the chaplain-general, explicitly on behalf of the committee.⁵⁰

Aubrey's efforts had secured reaffirmations of a consultative procedure in religious matters and a religious line of authority for chaplains, which he evidently expected to apply to the navy and air force as well as the army. But he and the other senior denominational representatives in the chaplaincy services pressed no further. They did not reject the underlying principles of the agreement: that governments and military authorities might intervene in worship in the armed forces for political reasons, and determine the attendance of servicemen at religious services, albeit now after consultation with representatives of the churches. Nor, more fundamentally, did they challenge the basis of the government's ability to prohibit the special prayers in February and March 1930: the requirement in the King's Regulations for compulsory attendance of members of the army, royal navy and air force at religious services and in church parades.

COMPULSORY CHURCH SERVICES

Some Labour MPs argued that the most obvious solution to the controversy over the prayers for Russian Christians – more obvious than clarifications of the orders – would be to cancel compulsory church parades on the day of prayer.⁵¹ This solution was not proposed by Aubrey or other free church leaders. Members of the Society of Socialist Christians went further and revived a common theme among some radical and particularly pacifist Christians, calling for abolition of the whole system of compulsory religious services as 'contrary to the spirit of Christianity', a call also made by several Labour MPs in an amendment to the annual army estimates later in March.⁵² MacDonald had hinted that if the controversy was not quickly settled, this

⁵⁰ Regent's Park College, Angus Library, D/UBD/1/2, Minutes of Committee of non-Anglican Protestant Members of the IACACS, 5 November 1930.

⁵¹ Leonard Matters and Ernest Thurtle in HC Deb. (5th series), 6 and 10 March 1930 (vol. 236, cols 629–30, 899–900).

⁵² TNA, WO32/4015, F. Hughes to Henderson, 14 March 1930 (for this Society, see Catterall, *Labour and the Free Churches*, 36); HC Deb. (5th series), 23 January 1930 (vol. 234, col. 344) and 24 March 1930 (vol. 237, cols 89, 153–5, 226–7).

pressure for abolition might gain traction.⁵³ Yet most church leaders – in the free churches as well as the Church of England – avoided or were silent on the issue. Lang was especially concerned that the government should not begin to consider the matter, and warned Aubrey that his persistence over the orders might provoke a general debate about abolition.⁵⁴ As a good free churchman, Aubrey wrote in public that he ‘dislike[d] compulsory religion and compulsory parades’. Yet privately he reassured Lang that he was alert to the risk, and to the need for caution: for this reason he asked only for a definition of the government’s competence in determining a chaplain’s religious duties, and had ‘not made any more vigorous demand’.⁵⁵ The government had no difficulty in resisting the critics of compulsory religious services, with Jarvis as chaplain-general preparing a robust defence for Shaw’s use in the House of Commons, even arguing that they were consistent with freedom of worship: recruits knew that they were required, provision was made for servicemen to attend services of their own faith, and no one was forced to act against their conscience.⁵⁶ When the War Office, anticipating further parliamentary criticisms, took the precaution later in 1930 of canvassing the opinion of the IACACS, its free church, as well as Anglican, Scottish Presbyterian and Roman Catholic members all accepted the continuation of compulsory attendance.⁵⁷

Compulsory church parades in the armed forces were eventually abolished after the Second World War, by the next Labour government in 1946. As Jeremy Crang has shown, the change was made at the insistence of Jack Lawson, the secretary of state for war, prompted by a parliamentary motion that was eventually supported by over 200 MPs of various parties. Abolition (except for servicemen under seventeen and a half years of age, and with special provisions in naval ships) was achieved despite divided opinions in the Army Council, and despite very strongly expressed objections by the archbishops of Canterbury

⁵³ HC Deb. (5th series), 6 March 1930 (vol. 236, col. 630); LPL, Lang Papers, vol. 73, fols 225–31, MacDonald to Lang, 7 March 1930.

⁵⁴ LPL, Lang Papers, vol. 74, fol. 2, Haigh (for Lang) to Aubrey, 2 April 1930.

⁵⁵ *Baptist Times*, 13 March 1930, 175; LPL, Lang Papers, vol. 74, fol. 25, Aubrey to Haigh, 3 April 1930.

⁵⁶ TNA, WO32/4014, Jarvis, ‘A memorandum on compulsory attendance at divine worship in the army’, 17 March 1930; HC Deb. (5th series), 24 March 1930 (vol. 237, cols 89–90, 155).

⁵⁷ TNA, WO32/4014, extract from IACACS minutes, 5 November 1930: the discussion focused on ensuring good attendance by officers, and removing any irksome aspects of the parades.

and York, Geoffrey Fisher and Cyril Garbett. It was also opposed by almost all members of the IACACS, including most of its free church representatives, with the Methodist member, Joseph Firth, as the sole dissident.⁵⁸ It was left to Lawson to make the strongest case for voluntary religion: the free churches had a 'healthy spiritual life without compulsion'; as a Primitive Methodist local preacher, his own experience of compulsory attendance had been 'very discouraging'; and it was 'in the interest of religion that he wished to see compulsion abolished'.⁵⁹ Only after the decision for abolition had been taken did Aubrey remark that 'the more I think of it the more I feel that as a Free Churchman I cannot possibly press for compulsion' in military church parades.⁶⁰ After senior army officers re-opened the issue with the War Office in 1950, most members of the United Board and the IACACS supported their desire for the reinstatement of compulsory attendance at religious services. Aubrey blandly commented that the free churches 'rather shrink from any element that looks like "compulsion" in matters of religion', yet favoured compulsory parades as an acknowledgement of the place that 'religion should have in the thoughts of men serving their country'. A reintroduction of 'communal worship' should be presented as 'an opportunity being offered rather than a compulsion being imposed'.⁶¹

William Temple had felt an 'intense repugnance' towards the compulsory church parades he had witnessed in France during the First World War, and remarked during the controversy in 1930 that he thought their continuation should in time be questioned.⁶² But Lang, and later Fisher and Garbett, with their more 'establishment' minds, and the Anglican chaplains-general with their vocational and professional interests, accepted compulsory attendance at religious services as a natural part of the moral and martial discipline required for men who volunteered or were conscripted to serve and, if necessary, fight for the nation, and also as a desirable means to inculcate and sustain regular

⁵⁸ Jeremy Crang, 'The Abolition of Compulsory Church Parades in the British Army', *JEH* 56 (2005), 92–106; TNA, PREM8/332, A. Drew (War Office) to Leslie Rowan (prime minister's private secretary), 25 March 1946; Tom Driberg in HC Deb. (5th series), 29 March 1946 (vol. 421, col. 705).

⁵⁹ TNA, WO32/4688, extract from Army Council minutes, 15 March 1946.

⁶⁰ TNA, WO32/4688, Aubrey to Eric Speed (chairman, IACACS), 15 May 1946.

⁶¹ TNA, WO32/4688, Aubrey to H. G. Brenan (War Office), 10 March 1950, and extract from IACACS minutes, 4 April 1951.

⁶² LPL, Lang Papers, vol. 73, fol. 233, Temple to Lang, 7 March 1930.

religious observance. It is less obvious why, despite their otherwise deep-seated commitment to freedom of worship, compulsory religious services in the armed forces were accepted and defended by free church leaders.

FREE CHURCH CONFORMITY

The establishment of commissioned free church military chaplains has been well-explained in a number of studies.⁶³ Once free church leaders had decided to support the war against Germany in 1914 and to encourage members of their congregations to join the armed forces, they understandably wanted to ensure that free church servicemen received religious ministry by chaplains from their own denominations, and not to have them obliged under military regulations to attend, by default, services led by Church of England, Methodist or Scottish Presbyterian chaplains. They also wanted, through the United Board formed in 1915 and representation on the IACACS created in 1916, to have influence on, and equal status in, the further development of chaplaincy services and religious provision in the armed forces. This was achieved after the end of the war, when free church chaplains secured permanent commissions and senior positions in the chaplaincy departments, and when the United Board and the IACACS became permanent bodies, with similar interdenominational advisory arrangements created for the air force and navy. Acceptance of the existing regulations for compulsory religious services was part of the means to preserve these gains, to the extent that in 1930 the free church representatives on the IACACS did not demur from Jarvis's paradoxical argument that 'there was no other method by which freedom of worship for the soldier could be ensured'.⁶⁴ After the Second World War, in conditions of continuing military conscription, the free church members of the IACACS joined again with the Anglican chaplain-general, now F. L. Hughes, in arguing that in the

⁶³ See, for example, J. H. Thompson, 'The Free Church Army Chaplains 1830–1930' (PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, 1990), 280–390; idem, 'The Nonconformist Chaplain in the First World War: The Importance of a New Phenomenon', in Michael Snape and Edward Madigan, eds, *The Clergy in Khaki: New Perspectives on British Army Chaplaincy in the First World War* (Farnham, 2013), 17–39; Allison, *Official History of the United Board*, 1: 26–36; Michael Snape, *The Royal Army Chaplains' Department 1797–1953* (Woodbridge, 2008), 198–200, 202–3.

⁶⁴ TNA, WO32/4014, extract from IACACS minutes, 5 November 1930.

armed forces, as corporate bodies, many activities 'were necessarily made matters of organised duty'; that young men 'could not be left entirely to follow their own inclinations off duty', needed help to overcome a diffidence about religion and susceptibility to the opinions of others, and required 'general training towards a right way of living'; and that parents of recruits from religious homes would be upset by the ending of official compulsory attendance. It would also be 'a grave action on the part of an avowed Christian community' to depart from the tradition of corporate worship, especially after 'a long and successful war fought in defence of Christian principle', and it would cause considerable harm in overseas communities, particularly in eastern (meaning non-Christian) countries.⁶⁵ Compulsory religious worship in the armed forces, the free churches had learned, was a type of mission, acting *in loco parentis* for young servicemen and checking an erosion of religious observance at home, while setting an example to the world, or rather the empire.

There was another, more deep-rooted, aspect to the free church participation in military chaplaincy and its corollary, acceptance of compulsory church parades. This was part of an extensive change in the attitudes of many free church leaders, a change that is often obscured by historical presuppositions about the 'decline of nonconformity'. From the 1780s to the 1880s, Dissenters or Nonconformists had sought religious equality in the sense of political and civil rights. Once the disabilities and exclusions imposed by the establishment of the Church of England had been removed – and with the collective membership of the now self-proclaimed free churches reaching similar numbers to those of the Church of England's regular worshippers – they sought religious equality in a different sense, that of ecclesiastical parity. For Wales, this meant legislation to disestablish the church. In England, where enforced disestablishment was politically impossible, free church leaders wanted ecclesiastical equality in the forms of recognition, status, influence, partnership – a full part in national life – in what David Thompson has described as 'the Free Church search for legitimation and social power'.⁶⁶ Gradually yet surely, these were

⁶⁵ TNA, WO32/14820, IACACS minutes, 7 February 1946. See also Crang, 'Abolition', 97–8.

⁶⁶ David M. Thompson, 'The Unity of the Church in Twentieth-Century England: Pleasing Dream or Common Calling?', in R. N. Swanson, ed., *Unity and Diversity in the Church*, SCH 32 (Cambridge, 1996), 507–31, at 527.

being achieved, in representation at great national and royal religious services, and at the annual Cenotaph service of remembrance; in membership of government committees; in receipt of royal honours; and in consultations and joint statements with the Church of England's archbishops. A new status was also obtained from the discussions on church reunion between representatives of the free churches and the Church of England after the Lambeth appeal for church unity in 1920, during which the bishops publicly recognized free church ministries as 'effective ministries of grace', and free church leaders stated their willingness to accept some form of episcopacy.⁶⁷

CONCLUSION

The controversy over the Labour government's ban on special prayers in the armed forces is a revealing episode. In itself, it was a fleeting matter. Its only direct consequence was reaffirmation of the established lines of spiritual authority in the military chaplaincies, though it perhaps deterred later governments from similar interventions. Its historical significance is that it provides further instances of a momentous change in free church relations with the state.

John Thompson noted of the creation of the IACACS that it must have given free church leaders 'a sense ... that they had now joined the Establishment'.⁶⁸ Although they would not have used this terminology, in practice this was what these leaders collectively sought to achieve for their denominations. In 1953, the Free Church Federal Council would declare that while continuing their churches' historic rejection of 'state *control* of religion', it 'welcomed state *recognition* of religion' and wanted to preserve 'the existing valuable cooperation between Church and State, in which the free churches had come increasingly to share'.⁶⁹ This attitude had obvious consequences. From the 1900s, free church leaders became better disposed towards the roles of the state and national institutions in religious matters, and more prepared to accept that they had benign effects for religious

⁶⁷ Philip Williamson, 'What Happened to Political Nonconformity?', in Paul Readman and Geraint Thomas, eds, *Culture, Thought and Belief in British Political Life since 1800: Essays in Honour of Jonathan Parry* (Woodbridge, 2024), 190–209.

⁶⁸ Thompson, 'The Nonconformist Chaplain in the First World War', 30. See also idem, 'Free Church Army Chaplains', 7–8, 367–8, 382–3, 437–8, 470.

⁶⁹ Free Church Federal Council, *The Free Churches and the State* (London, 1953), 62–3. Emphases in original.

observance. Once the free churches became participants in the military discipline and practices of the armed forces, they could appreciate their benefits in sustaining religious adherence among young men, and more particularly among members of their own churches. So integrated into the armed forces had the free churches become, that during the controversy over the special prayers for Soviet victims of persecution, their leaders criticized a failure of consultation, but not, ultimately, a government right to limit the attendance of servicemen at divine worship on particular occasions, and still less the regular practice of compulsory religious services. What free church leaders had not anticipated was that the achievement of a new ecclesiastical status – a junior partnership of their churches with the established church and with the state – would result in a process of social and cultural assimilation which contributed to the decline in membership of their churches. Only after 1945 did this decline begin to seem inexorable. It is even probable that in 1950 Aubrey hoped that the reinstatement of compulsory church parades would help to check this loss of free church worshippers.