

# *Britain and the Soviet War on Religion: Labour Government, Christian Protest and the Churches, 1929–1931*

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*During the winter of 1929–30, Russian persecution of religious believers aroused considerable public indignation in Britain. This article considers why the Labour government refused to make formal complaints to the Soviet government, and why protests against the persecution soon subsided. A Christian Protest Movement failed to gain support from many church leaders, because of its right-wing political associations. English church leaders arranged their own protests and a day of special intercessions, causing some friction with the government; but in what might be termed ‘Christian realism’, they accepted that there were principled and practical limits to government actions.*

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**D**uring late 1929 and early 1930, the British Churches and many politicians, newspapers and members of the public were distressed and angered by reports of religious persecution in Soviet Russia. A Christian Protest Movement (CPM), created to publicise and protest against the persecution, attracted considerable public support and organised a large number of meetings in cities and towns throughout the

ASPSLL = The Anti-Soviet Persecution and Slave Labour League; CAB = Cabinet records, The National Archives; CPM = Christian Protest Movement; FO = Foreign Office records, The National Archives; *HC Deb* = *House of Commons Debates*, 5th series; *HL Deb* = *House of Lords Debates*, 5th series; LPL, Lambeth Palace Library, London; RCCAF = Russian Clergy and Church Aid Fund; TNA = The National Archives, Kew

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United Kingdom. There were calls for the British government – the second Labour government, formed in June 1929 – to make official protests to the Soviet government, and even to repudiate its resumption of British diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, concluded in the Anglo-Soviet protocol of October that year. The persecution was raised repeatedly in both houses of parliament, and the leading British Churches appointed special intercessions on behalf of its victims. The issue became still more politicised when in February 1930 the Labour cabinet banned the intercessions from religious services in the armed forces, provoking accusations of a threat to freedom of worship within Britain itself. For a time it seemed that protests against what newspapers described as ‘the Soviet war on religion’ might reach similar proportions to those of the great Victorian moral and political campaigns against the persecution of Christians in the Ottoman empire. According to the CPM’s chairman, the Revd Alfred Gough, its protest was against not just ‘the Anti-Christian animus’ of the Soviet government but also a more general ‘Anti-God movement against all religions and all ethical principles and practices’. The protest was a ‘beacon of hope’ to the British as well as the Russian people: it would ‘waken the soul of the Nation’.<sup>1</sup>

The CPM continued to exist for the rest of the 1930s, turning into an organisation promoting religious freedom across the world and directed against Communism and atheism in general.<sup>2</sup> But the nation-wide protests against Soviet religious persecution reached a peak in March 1930, and then quickly subsided. The Labour government made no official complaints to the Soviet government and persisted with the Anglo-Soviet protocol. Nor was there any religious revival. In consequence, this episode has been noticed only in specialised political histories of Anglo-Soviet relations.<sup>3</sup> It has not been considered in histories of the British Churches, even though it is a striking instance of the moral and practical quandaries they faced over the repression of religious believers in foreign nations amid the harsh complexities of modern international relations. More particularly, the episode was a precursor of the dilemmas created for them by the Nazi persecution of Jews and the German ‘confessing Church’.

<sup>1</sup> A. W. Gough statement, *Morning Post*, 12 Dec. 1929.

<sup>2</sup> CPM, *A world war on all religions*, London 1933. The organisation was renamed the Faith Defence League in 1936, and the Christian Defence Movement in 1937: *The Times*, 19 Aug. 1935; 20 Jan. 1936; Ben Edwards, *With God on our side: British Christian responses to the Spanish civil war*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne 2013, 9, 35.

<sup>3</sup> W. P. Coates and Zeldia 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; Gordon Morrell, *Britain confronts the Stalin revolution: Anglo-Soviet relations and the Metro-Vickers crisis*, Waterloo, ON 1995, 56–61; Jonathan Davies, ‘Labour and the Kremlin’, in John Shepherd, Jonathan Davis and Chris Wrigley (ed.), *Britain’s second Labour government, 1929–31*, Manchester 2011, 165–8.

Why, in contrast to the agitations in British Churches against the Bulgarian atrocities in 1876 and the Armenian massacres in 1894–6,<sup>4</sup> were the public protests against Soviet persecution of such short duration, and have no effects for British government policies? The fullest accounts of British reactions towards the Soviet ‘war on religion’ in 1929–31, by Giles Udy, claim that the Labour government ignored the Russian persecution and the British protests because the Labour party and Soviet Communism shared ‘a common inspiration’ in Marxism, and because ‘on religion as well as Marx ... Labour and the Bolsheviks were in broad agreement’.<sup>5</sup> Another explanation might be that the episode is further evidence of a secularisation or ‘desacralisation’ of British public life after the First World War; but this was more evident in the agenda of party politics than in public debates and practices more generally.<sup>6</sup> Here it is argued that the explanations lie elsewhere. Victorian statesmen had wrestled with the tensions between different and often conflicting objectives in the conduct of foreign policy: how to balance diplomatic interests, military power, financial constraints, domestic political pressures and moral causes. After the First World War, the tensions were still greater. There were stronger commitments to international peace and conciliation, larger economic and financial problems, and new imperatives to reduce unemployment and social distress. After the failure of British armed interventions in the Russian civil war during 1919, and with the fiercely ideological character of Bolshevik rule, it was obvious that the Soviet government would resist – and probably retaliate or seek retribution against – any overt attempt to influence its internal policies. All this greatly complicated what Labour ministers judged to be desirable and possible in their dealings with Soviet leaders. Leading clergymen were divided over the best way to react to the persecution, because it exposed tensions between different moral issues – liberty of worship and protection of victims on the one hand, and the benefits of international conciliation on the other – and disagreements over the appropriate relations between religion, domestic politics and international relations. For many of them,

<sup>4</sup> See R. T. Shannon, *Gladstone and the Bulgarian agitation, 1876*, London 1963; Peter Marsh, ‘Lord Salisbury and the Ottoman massacres’, *Journal of British Studies* xi (1972), 63–83; Roy Douglas, ‘Britain and the Armenian question, 1894–7’, *HJ* xix (1976), 113–33; and D. W. Bebbington, *The Nonconformist conscience: chapel and politics, 1870–1914*, London 1982, 115–17.

<sup>5</sup> Giles Udy, ‘The Christian Protest Movement, the Labour government and Soviet religious persecution, 1929–1931’, this JOURNAL lxvi (2015), 116–39, quotations at pp. 118, 122; *Labour, and the gulag: Russia and the seduction of the British left*, London 2017, esp. chs xiii, xv–xxiii and also ‘For slaves: against Labour’, *Church Times*, 5 Apr. 2013.

<sup>6</sup> S. J. D. Green, *The passing of Protestant England: secularisation and social change, c. 1920–1960*, Cambridge 2011, 33–60; Philip Williamson, ‘The British state and spiritual mobilization during the Second World War’, in Michael Snape and Stuart Bell (eds.), *British Christianity and the Second World War*, Woodbridge 2023, 25–45.

particularly the archbishops and most bishops of the Church of England, and eventually even leaders of the CPM itself, the controversy over the Soviet persecution strengthened what might be termed 'Christian realism'. They recognised the constraints imposed on British government by the principles and practicalities of international relations, especially in dealings with authoritarian regimes. They accepted that protests by the Churches not only had limits, but might further imperil the victims of persecution.

There are two further explanations: the character of the Christian Protest Movement, and changes in the attitudes of the Nonconformist denominations, re-named the Free Churches from the 1890s. The CPM's origins lay in right-wing political and evangelical groups deeply antipathetic towards the Labour party and critical of the prevailing opinions in the Church of England. Labour ministers and leading figures in the Churches had ample reasons to be sceptical about the CPM's purposes. While Nonconformists had taken a large and independent part in the moral agitations of late Victorian Britain, as closer relationships developed among the leaders of the British Churches from 1914 the Free Churches were more ready to follow the example of the archbishops of Canterbury, and to share their sensitivity towards the pressures on government policies.

## I

No serious scholar of early twentieth-century British politics would accept Udy's descriptions of the Labour party as semi-Marxist, effectively atheist and hostile towards the Churches. Some comments on his claims will, however, help to clarify the second Labour government's attitudes towards the Soviet Union.<sup>7</sup> These claims centre on his reversal of a supposed dictum of Morgan Phillips, a later secretary of the Labour party: that British Socialism owed more to Methodism than to Marx.<sup>8</sup> As an assessment of relative influences on British Socialist ideas and values, Phillips's statement has historical cogency. However, if his statement is extended to the Labour party as a whole and treated as describing alternative and exclusive categories – that Labour politics was derived from either Methodism or Marx, and from no other sources – it becomes historical nonsense. Udy assumes a

<sup>7</sup> Udy's starting point was research on the horrors of Soviet labour camps: *Labour and the gulag*, pp. ix–x.

<sup>8</sup> *Idem*, 'Christian Protest Movement', 118, and *Labour and the gulag*, pp. xiv, 167. The familiar phrase, 'Methodism, not Marx', was not Phillips's own, but a journalistic abridgement of his statements in *The Times*, 3 June 1950. His full speech was a sophisticated contrast between British Socialist reformism and Marxist revolutionary doctrines: Morgan Phillips, 'Marxism and the Labour party', *Tribune*, 9 June 1950.

series of conflations: Labour party = Socialism = Marxism = Bolshevism. None of these connections is necessary. Bolshevism was one of several versions of Marxism, and there were numerous types of non-Marxist Socialism: many Marxists and most Socialists repudiated Bolshevism. The social and political authors that Labour and trade-union 'Lib-Lab' MPs elected in 1906 cited as inspirations were chiefly Thomas Carlyle, Henry George, Charles Kingsley, J. S. Mill, Robert Owen, John Ruskin and William Morris. Just two MPs, neither of them future government ministers, mentioned Marx, and then as only one among numerous other authors.<sup>9</sup> Ramsay MacDonald, Philip Snowden and other British Socialist writers respected Marx's ideas, but criticised his central theories and rejected his political prescriptions.<sup>10</sup> As Phillips wrote, British Socialism was more ethical than materialist, and Labour party leaders were reformist, democratic and parliamentarian, with no sympathies for revolutionary violence. The party's new constitution of 1918, which included the symbolically Socialist clause IV on common ownership, was intended to distinguish it as much from the Bolsheviks as from the Liberal party.<sup>11</sup> Most members of the 'Hands off Russia' movement and the Councils of Action that obstructed British supplies to anti-Bolshevik forces in eastern Europe in 1919–20 were more concerned to prevent a renewed European war than to express Socialist fellowship towards the Soviet government.<sup>12</sup> Nor did the Labour party consist only of Socialists. It contained a large body of liberal- and even conservative-minded trade unionists, and during and after the international and domestic dislocations of the First World War it attracted support from a broad range of 'progressive' opinion, as much for its commitments to international peace as to social and industrial reform. During the 1920s the Labour party consisted of an alliance of trade unionists and co-operators, of ethical, gradualist, Christian, guild and Fabian Socialists, and of internationalists, pacifists and recent defectors from the Liberal and even Conservative parties.<sup>13</sup> While it certainly

<sup>9</sup> [W. T. Stead], 'The Labour party and the books that helped to make it', *Review of Reviews* xxx (1906), 568–82. Marx was mentioned only by James O'Grady and Will Thorne.

<sup>10</sup> Ramsay MacDonald's *political writings*, ed. Bernard Barker, London 1972, esp. pp. 12, 18, 27–33, 44, 81–2; David Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald*, London 1977, 89–93, 227; Philip Snowden, *Socialism and syndicalism*, London 1913, 66–82.

<sup>11</sup> J. M. Winter, 'Arthur Henderson, the Russian revolution, and the reconstruction of the Labour party', *HJ* xv (1972), 753–73; Ross McKibbin, *The evolution of the Labour party, 1910–1924*, Oxford 1974, 91–106.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen White, *Britain and the Bolshevik revolution: a study of the politics of diplomacy, 1920–1924*, London 1979, 38–51, 241.

<sup>13</sup> McKibbin, *Evolution of the Labour party*; Maurice Cowling, *The impact of Labour 1920–1924*, Cambridge 1971, 26–44, 174–80, 285–93, 359–81; Catherine Anne Cline, *Recruits to Labour: the British Labour party, 1914–1931*, Syracuse, NY 1963; David Howell,

contained some gullible enthusiasts for Soviet Russia, and although Labour politicians hoped that it would in time turn into a peaceful, reformist Socialist state, most of the leading members of the party were outspoken critics of Bolshevik ideas, policies and methods. For MacDonald, prime minister in 1924 and from 1929 to 1935, the Soviet regime was fanatical, cruel and ‘fundamentally anti-socialist’.<sup>14</sup>

Morgan Phillips’s ‘Methodism’ was a shorthand term chosen for its alliteration with Marxism; his meaning embraced wider contributions from English and Welsh Free Church influences, and could have been extended to those of Anglican Christian Socialists and Scottish Presbyterian radicals. The Labour and Lib-Lab MPs of 1906 listed the Bible, *Pilgrim’s progress* and collections of sermons among their further inspirations, more often than any individual social or political writer.<sup>15</sup> From 1910 to 1914 Labour parliamentary leaders, including Keir Hardie, Arthur Henderson, MacDonald and Snowden, addressed ‘Labour weeks’ organised and praised by clergymen, which presented Labour politics as founded in personal Christian beliefs.<sup>16</sup> While the party did contain some secularists and members of rationalist associations,<sup>17</sup> these were far outnumbered by committed or cultural Christians, as is evident from a detailed contemporary study of religion in the Labour party by a German sociologist, Franz Linden. From

*MacDonald’s party: Labour identities and crisis, 1922–1931*, Cambridge 2002. For the Labour party’s deep political culture see Ross McKibbin, ‘Why was there no Marxism in Britain?’, *EHR* xcix (1984), 297–331.

<sup>14</sup> Marquand, *MacDonald*, 256, 258; J. R. MacDonald, *The foreign policy of the Labour party*, London 1923, 43–5. Udy offers statements by Hardie, Bevan, Maxton, Laski and Bernard Shaw as evidence that ‘the British Labour party saw itself as a Marxist party’, yet none were representative of mainstream Labour opinion in 1930: *Labour and the gulag*, 63–7. Others to whom he gives prominence were also unrepresentative: Brailsford, Brockway, Cook, Tillett and Wise; the Independent Labour Party (with its newspaper, *The New Leader*), which from 1925 was a dissident left-wing faction, repudiated by MacDonald, Snowden and most other Labour ministers; and even, despite their membership of the 1929–31 cabinet, Lansbury and Lord Passfield (Sidney Webb). Udy’s selections of quotations are highly tendentious, and mostly date either from before the revelations of Soviet repression in the early 1920s, or from after the Labour divisions and defeats during the 1931 political and financial crisis, which caused a sharp Labour party shift towards the Socialist left and an interest in Soviet economic planning.

<sup>15</sup> Stead, ‘The Labour party and the books that helped to make it’.

<sup>16</sup> *Labour and religion, by ten Labour members of parliament*, St Albans 1910; *Christ and Labour by eleven members of parliament*, London 1911; *The gospel of Labour by seven Labour members of parliament*, London 1912; *To the workers of the world: an appeal for personal religion by eight Labour members of parliament*, London 1913; *The soul of Labour as voiced by eight Labour members of parliament*, London 1914. In ‘Christian Protest Movement’ (pp. 118–19), Udy presents a statement that ‘Christianity on the whole was attacked’ as applying to ‘the late nineteenth-century Labour movement’, though it was actually used to describe the explicitly Marxist, and numerically miniscule, Social Democratic Federation: Graham Johnson, ‘British social democracy and religion, 1881–1911’, this *JOURNAL* li (2000), 94–115 at p. 104. <sup>17</sup> Udy, *Labour and the gulag*, 175, 179–80, 456.

interviews with and questionnaire returns from the Labour government ministers, MPs and peers of 1929–31, he found that large numbers of them had been or continued to be church members, local preachers, Sunday school teachers, Bible class readers or lecturers for the Young Men's Christian Association, Young Women's Christian Association, or Brotherhood Movement. Many regarded Labour politics or Socialism as the practical application of Christianity.<sup>18</sup> So considerable was this evidence that Linden concluded that 'the majority of the leaders of the British Labour movement are committed Christians'.<sup>19</sup> This was overstated. Past experiences are not proof of current belief, but they do explain the party's collective religiosity and Christian ethical assumptions. It is also certain that almost half the Labour cabinet ministers were active Christians. William Adamson and A. V. Alexander worshipped as Baptists, and Margaret Bondfield and J. R. Clynes as Congregationalists. Arthur Henderson, who as foreign secretary was chiefly responsible for policy towards Soviet Russia, was a prominent Wesleyan Methodist and local preacher, a former president of the Brotherhood Movement and from 1928 an elected vice-president of the National Free Church Council. Noel Buxton, who had been a Liberal MP before 1918, was one of four Anglican cabinet members. Lord Parmoor, a Conservative MP until 1914, had been vicar-general of the Church of England provinces of York and Canterbury, and chairman of Canterbury convocation's house of laymen and the Church Assembly's house of laity. Lord Sankey, another former Conservative, had been

<sup>18</sup> Franz Linden, *Sozialismus und religion: konfessionssoziologische untersuchung der Labour party, 1929–1931*, Leipzig 1932. This reported testimonies from all but 12 of the 287 Labour MPs, and most of the 19 Labour peers. See also Arthur Henderson, 'British labor and religion', in Jerome Davis (ed.), *Labor speaks for itself on religion*, New York 1929, 140–9; Peter Catterall, *Labour and the Free Churches, 1918–1939*, London 2016, esp. ch. v; and W. W. Knox, 'Religion and the Scottish labour movement, c. 1900–1939', *Journal of Contemporary History* xxiii (1988), 609–30. Statements that Free Church members before 1914 were mostly Liberal in their political allegiance leads Udy to conclude, illogically and despite Catterall's ample evidence to the contrary, that 'there was no significant Nonconformist voice in the Labour party by the late 1920s': 'Christian Protest Movement', 118, 120. Udy also stresses, at p. 119, Catterall's statement that from the late 1900s 'political nonconformity largely ceased to count', yet his meaning was a decline in partisan nonconformity, in organisational alliance with the Liberal party. The Free Churches remained important as pressure groups in interwar public life, although the political allegiances of Free Church voters were now more dispersed, towards the Labour party as well as the Conservatives: 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*, London 2024, 190–209.

<sup>19</sup> Linden, *Sozialismus und religion*, 168. Catterall more carefully concluded that the Free Church presence in and influence on the tone of the party was 'substantial': *Labour and the Free Churches*, 148–9, 213.

chancellor of Llandaff diocese and was a member of the governing bodies of the Church in Wales and Pusey House, Oxford. George Lansbury, the most left-wing member of the cabinet, had served in the Canterbury house of laymen, the council of the Church's National Mission of Repentance and Hope, and the archbishops' committee of inquiry into Christianity and industrial relations.<sup>20</sup> Nor were other cabinet members hostile towards the Churches in general or the established Church of England in particular.<sup>21</sup> MacDonald, who as a former Unitarian preacher stressed the congruence of British Socialism and the Christian conscience, addressed the National Free Church Council in 1924 and maintained cordial relations with successive archbishops of Canterbury.<sup>22</sup>

Labour ministers were not clandestine Communists or closet atheists. Nor was the Labour party alone in wanting closer British relations with Soviet Russia. Its policies were more determined versions of measures initiated by Liberal and Conservative ministers in the Lloyd George coalition government by the Anglo-Soviet trade agreement of 1921 – negotiated during an earlier period of Soviet religious persecution – and sustained with Foreign Office advice and support from business interests by the Conservative government of 1922–4.<sup>23</sup> The main impetus for the first Labour government's diplomatic recognition of Soviet Russia in 1924 came from its internationalist converts from the Liberal party, not from the Socialists among its leaders.<sup>24</sup> These *rapprochements* with Soviet Russia provoked relentless opposition from substantial parts of the Conservative party, and from further right-wing organisations and newspapers addicted

<sup>20</sup> Linden, *Sozialismus und religion*, 101–12, 153, and see ODNB and *Who was who* entries. Lansbury is a particular target of Udy's criticism, although as first commissioner of works he had no direct responsibilities for policies towards Soviet Russia. For him, like other Christian Socialists, criticism of the social attitudes of Anglican clergy was compatible with an Anglican religious faith. He was clearly deluded about the Soviet government's actions; but Church Congress organisers accepted his argument that Christian faith was consistent with general sympathy towards Soviet Russia: *Church Times*, 26 Sept. 1921.

<sup>21</sup> Nor did church members necessarily regard the Labour party as hostile towards the Churches. For support from some 500 Anglican priests see *The Times*, 14 Mar. 1923, and for Free Church sympathy towards aspects of Labour policies see Catterall, *Labour and the Free Churches*, passim.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas McCready, 'Blessed is the peacemaker – James Ramsay MacDonald, Unitarian', *Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society* xxvii (2020), 97–109; Ramsay MacDonald, 'The labour movement and its implications for Christianity', in A. S. Peake and R. G. Parsons (eds), *An outline of Christianity*, London 1926–7, v. 122–34; *Manchester Guardian*, 7 Mar. 1924; G. K. A. Bell, *Randall Davidson, archbishop of Canterbury*, London 1935, ii. 1175–6, 1251–3, 1317, 1380n.; J. R. MacDonald to Archbishop Cosmo Lang, 7 Mar. 1930, LPL, Lang papers 73/225–31 ('our relations have always been ... friendly').

<sup>23</sup> White, *Britain and the Bolshevik revolution*, passim; Gabriel Gorodetsky, *The precarious truce: Anglo-Soviet relations, 1924–27*, Cambridge 1977, esp. pp. 258–61.

<sup>24</sup> White, *Britain and the Bolshevik revolution*, 204–5, 217–24, 244.

to international conspiracy theories. This was most evident in the exploitation of the forged 'Zinoviev letter', a supposed Communist International (Comintern) call for Communist subversion in Britain which contributed to the Labour government's defeat at the 1924 general election.<sup>25</sup> Trade and diplomatic relations with Soviet Russia were nevertheless continued by its Conservative successor, until party pressures upon and within the Conservative cabinet forced a breach during 1927.<sup>26</sup>

The leaders of the 1929 Labour government were determined to restore diplomatic relations and negotiate new commercial agreements for four reasons, as much moral as political. Still more than the Liberal and Conservative supporters of the 1921 trade agreement, they believed, first, that restored trade and financial relations with Russia would assist British economic recovery and alleviate the chronic problems of mass unemployment and social distress – aims which became still more pressing after the onset of a deep world depression in late 1929. Second, they had stronger commitments to international reconciliation. Labour ministers wanted to draw the Soviet government into the international diplomatic networks and eventually into the League of Nations, in order to advance the causes of world disarmament and European peace. Here a fundamental precondition was acceptance of the self-determination of other nations, however unpleasant their regimes. Third, they had greater cause to seek a halt to Soviet and Comintern propaganda in Britain and the empire. As well as threatening national interests, this propaganda was doubly damaging for the Labour party: its aims included subversion of the Labour movement, while fuelling the right-wing smears that associated Labour politics with Soviet Communism. Fourth, more firmly than the Liberal and Conservative advocates of closer relations with the Soviet Union, Labour leaders believed that diplomacy and commerce would bring wider influences to bear on its government, and in time result in the dissolution of Bolshevism.<sup>27</sup> As MacDonald wrote in 1923, only by ending the Soviet government's international isolation would this 'noxious weed ... be cleared out'.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Jack Grimley-Ward, 'Bolshevik bogies; red scares in Britain, 1919–1924', *Contemporary British History* xxxviii (2024), 146–75; Gill Bennett, *The Zinoviev letter*, Oxford 2018.

<sup>26</sup> Gorodetsky, *Precarious truce*, and Roger Schinness, 'The Conservative party and Anglo-Soviet relations 1925–7', *European Studies Review* vii (1977), 393–407.

<sup>27</sup> David Carlton, *MacDonald versus Henderson: the foreign policy of the second Labour government*, London 1970, 144–63; Williams, *Labour and Russia*, 79–86, 88–94, 99–102, 110–15.

<sup>28</sup> MacDonald, *Foreign policy of the Labour party*, 49–50, and see similar comments by other Labour leaders as well as Liberal and Conservative ministers in White, *Britain and the Bolshevik revolution*, 3–4, 19–20, 24–6, 38–9, 53–4, 228.

Labour ministers were not, as Udy states, ‘uninterested in the plight of Russian believers’.<sup>29</sup> The new Soviet ‘anti-God’ campaign from early 1929, now directed against Protestants, Catholics, Jews and Muslims as well as the Orthodox Church, was for Henderson a matter of ‘much anxiety’. Parmoor, leader of the House of Lords, insisted that the government was ‘fundamentally opposed to any form of religious persecution’. MacDonald wrote of Labour ministers coming from a ‘stock’ – meaning the English and Scottish Free Church heritages of many of them – that regarded religious persecution as ‘hateful’, and described assumptions that they were indifferent to the issue as ‘neither fair nor honest’.<sup>30</sup> Henderson promised during February 1930 that the government would ‘when possible or compatible with the interests of those affected, use all its influence in support of the cause of religious liberty and the freedom of religious practice’ in Russia.<sup>31</sup> But like all Labour ministers he regarded this cause as unavoidably subordinate to the wider aims of British and Labour policies. They also knew that British governments could have very little effect on the Soviet government’s internal policies, and believed that any influence it might exert depended on the preservation of diplomatic relations and commercial negotiations. Henderson’s qualifications had special weight: ‘when possible’, or when ‘compatible with the interests’ of the persecuted. Given Soviet ideological sensitivities, readiness to treat external criticisms as a capitalist conspiracy against the regime’s existence, and vindictiveness towards internal opponents, formal diplomatic protests might not just jeopardise the British government’s political aims, but make matters worse for Russian religious communities. This produced a dual approach in policies and statements towards Russia. Labour ministers publicly upheld the long-established principles of British foreign policy – MacDonald cited the authority of the late Victorian Conservative foreign secretary and prime minister, Lord Salisbury – that they should proceed ‘without reference to [the] internal beliefs or policies’ of other nations, and ‘could not interfere in the internal affairs of a foreign state’.<sup>32</sup> Yet at the same time they trusted that better relations and informal diplomatic persuasion might result in alterations in Soviet policies. As Henderson wrote to the archbishop of Canterbury, Cosmo Lang, he had to choose ‘the best opportunity and the best means’ to express concern about the religious persecution.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Udy, ‘Christian Protest Movement’, 120.

<sup>30</sup> Arthur Henderson to Lang, 24 Dec. 1929, Lang papers, 73/71–2; Parmoor in *HL Deb.* lxxvi.581–2, 13 Feb. 1930; MacDonald public letter, *The Times*, 25 Feb. 1930.

<sup>31</sup> *HC Deb.* ccxxxv.607, 13 Feb. 1930.

<sup>32</sup> MacDonald letter, *The Times*, 25 Feb. 1930; CAB 23/63, Cabinet 10(30), 12 Feb. 1930.

<sup>33</sup> Henderson to Lang, 24 Dec. 1929, Lang papers, 73/71–2. The duality in the ministerial position causes confusion in Udy, ‘Christian Protest Movement’, 126, and *Labour and the gulag*, 227.

Propaganda and information were large problems both in Anglo-Soviet relations and in British debates about Russia. As a pre-condition for the resumption of diplomatic relations, Labour ministers insisted on Soviet re-affirmation of the guarantee in the Anglo-Soviet treaty of 1924 against hostile propaganda and for mutual respect in matters of internal government.<sup>34</sup> In trying to keep the Soviet government to this pledge and end its anti-British propaganda, and especially to accept responsibility for the quasi-independent activities of the Comintern, they and their Foreign Office advisers wanted to avoid actions or impressions that might provoke accusations that the British government was promoting or tolerating anti-Soviet propaganda. This made the issue of Soviet religious persecution particularly delicate. It was difficult to obtain and assess information on religious conditions within Russia, in part because of sharp changes in Soviet policies, divisions within the Orthodox Church, and varied national, regional and local actions,<sup>35</sup> though chiefly because reports reaching Britain were liable to be highly partial or to have propaganda purposes, whether produced by 'White Russian' anti-Soviet émigrés or British anti-Bolsheviks, or by Soviet agencies or British sympathisers with the Soviet regime. Labour ministers particularly distrusted critical reports of Soviet actions by right-wing newspapers, politicians and public figures, given the long use of such reports for anti-Labour smears and 'scares'. Consequently, Labour ministerial statements vacillated between acceptance that persecution existed, uncertainty about its extent, and doubt about the quality of reports by newspapers and campaign groups. Their officials and diplomats resorted to the terms 'allegations of religious persecution' and 'alleged atrocities'.<sup>36</sup>

The government's own efforts to obtain accurate information directly from Russia and to express concern to the Soviet government were compromised by these problems of evidence and by the priority placed on the preservation of diplomatic and trade relations. As ambassador in Moscow it appointed a Russian-speaking career diplomat – not a Labour figure or Soviet sympathiser, as it might have done had its aims really included Socialist fellow-travelling. But Sir Esmond Ovey had difficulties in interpreting the conflicting information about Soviet treatment of religious communities that he received from fellow diplomats, foreign journalists,

<sup>34</sup> Henderson in *HC Deb.* ccxxxi.900–3, 5 Nov. 1929; Carlton, *MacDonald versus Henderson*, 153–4, 156.

<sup>35</sup> Arto Luukkanen, *The party of unbelief: the religious policy of the Bolshevik party, 1917–1929*, Helsinki 1994, and *The religious policy of the Stalinist state*, Helsinki 1997; Daniel Peris, *Storming heaven: the Soviet League of the Militant Godless*, Ithaca, NY 1998; Edward Roslof, *Red priests*, Bloomington, IN 2002.

<sup>36</sup> Cabinet secretary's summation in CAB 23/63, Cabinet 10(30), 12 Feb. 1930; Udy, 'Christian Protest Movement', 127.

Russian newspapers and Soviet officials, and in distinguishing the Soviet government's religious policies from its economic and political policies – its measures against priests from its coercion of 'kulaks' and 'counter-revolutionaries'. In consequence, a report that Henderson commissioned from Ovey on Russian religious conditions confirmed the existing assessments of the Foreign Office and Labour ministers: there were indeed anti-religious policies and some persecution, but these were not as severe as some critics claimed and, by careful informal conversations with the Soviet foreign ministry, it might be possible to obtain alleviations.<sup>37</sup> This report was not published, because Ovey, the Foreign Office and the cabinet all thought that the Soviet government would treat it as improper interference in its internal affairs, and might cause it to end otherwise promising diplomatic and trade discussions.<sup>38</sup> Ovey also reinforced further ministerial concerns: that the Soviet government would treat a formal British government protest about religious persecution as anti-Soviet propaganda, providing an excuse to continue its anti-British propaganda, raise difficulties on other matters or, again, break off relations altogether.<sup>39</sup>

## II

Labour ministers had particular reasons for treating the British protest movement with suspicion. It was not a spontaneous expression of concern about religious persecution, nor did it originate with the heads of the Churches. The Christian Protest Movement was created by its two eventual presidents, the 1st Viscount Brentford and the 8th earl of Glasgow, and more especially by H. A. Gwynne, the editor of the *Morning Post* daily newspaper.

Early reports of intensified Russian persecution made little impression in Britain, either in newspapers or among public figures. Religion was barely mentioned during the House of Commons debate on approval of the Anglo-Soviet protocol in early November 1929, which the government,

<sup>37</sup> Sir Esmond Ovey to Henderson, 24 Feb. 1930, circulated in CAB 24/210, CP 74(30), 3 Mar. 1930. Ovey is another particular target for Udy, even positing a pro-Bolshevik cabal from his old school, Eton: 'Christian Protest Movement', 127–8, and *Labour and the gulag*, 116–26, 240–50. For a contrasting interpretation of Ovey's work see Morrell, *Britain confronts the Stalin revolution*, 48–63.

<sup>38</sup> The subsequent Anglo-Soviet commercial agreement, *Temporary commercial agreement* [between the UK and USSR governments], 16 Apr. 1930, Cmd. 3552, remained temporary because of continued difficulties over various details.

<sup>39</sup> Henderson in CAB 24/210, CP 74(30), 3 Mar. 1930; decision in CAB 23/63, Cabinet 13(30), 5 Mar. 1930. See also Ovey to Henderson, 18, 31 Jan., 19 Feb. 1930, TNA, FO 371/14840/212, 227–8; FO 371/14841/50–2.

with the support of Liberal MPs, won by a large majority. This enabled the government to ignore a defeat in the House of Lords on 4 December, on a Conservative motion for rejection of the protocol on the grounds of continued Soviet revolutionary propaganda in Britain and the empire. But this second debate opened a new line of attack for the government's critics. It developed from comments by Archbishop Lang. In the course of urging that abhorrence of Soviet anti-religious policies should not obstruct efforts to aid Russian religious believers through diplomatic channels, he imprudently remarked that the 'more flagrant' injustices had ceased. Brentford chided the archbishop for failing to emphasise Soviet opposition to religion in all nations, citing two instances of Soviet officials calling for a 'pitiless war against religion'.<sup>40</sup> In a letter published in the *Morning Post* on 6 December, Glasgow was still more critical, insisting on the severity of the persecution and suggesting that Church leaders should launch a 'crusade' against the Soviet 'war against God and religion'. Gwynne accompanied Glasgow's letter with reports of Soviet outrages and an editorial article that accused Lang of being 'tainted with ... vacillation and weakness', asked whether the Churches were 'content to condone murder on a wholesale scale' and declared that unless they took a stand against evil, their places of worship would empty. Gwynne also published the first replies to telegrams he had sent to a hundred prominent clergy and churchmen, in which he re-focused the target of attack from Lang to the Anglo-Soviet protocol. The clergymen were asked:

In view of the facts disclosed in yesterday's debate in the House of Lords on the Russian Soviet's persecution of the Christian faith, are you prepared as a Minister of Religion to join in a national protest against relations with the avowed enemies of the Christian faith.<sup>41</sup>

Gwynne maintained the momentum during the following days. He printed more accounts of Soviet destruction of places of worship and brutal treatment of religious ministers. He also published further replies from clergy and churchmen, and pages of messages of support for a protest from the newspaper's readers, eventually numbering into the hundreds.<sup>42</sup>

Given the *Morning Post's* accusations of complacency among church leaders, it did not conceal disagreements among the replies to Gwynne's telegrams. Well over half of the respondents either refused to join a protest or were described as suspending judgement.<sup>43</sup> But enough offered support

<sup>40</sup> *HL Deb.* lxxv.897–901, 4 Dec. 1929.

<sup>41</sup> *Morning Post*, 6, 10 Dec. 1929.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 7, 9–14, 16–19 Dec. 1929.

<sup>43</sup> From replies in *Morning Post*, 6, 7, 9 and 10 Dec. 1929, the totals were 33 'for protest', 23 'for acquiescence' (meaning noes, pejoratively presented as acceptance of the Soviet persecution), and 19 'for suspense' (several of which were actually noes). Other replies were not printed: see n. 72 below.

to give credibility for a national campaign. In quick succession, the *Morning Post* announced the formation of an 'emergency clerical committee', a mass meeting at the Royal Albert Hall, council members of a 'Christian Protest Committee' and a subscription list.<sup>44</sup> The early council members, soon named as vice-presidents,<sup>45</sup> included Bishops Headlam of Gloucester, Wilson of Chelmsford, and Winnington-Ingram of London, Archbishop D'Arcy of Armagh, Edmund Knox, the retired bishop of Manchester, and several prominent Free Church ministers: S. M. Berry, secretary of the Congregational Union, Douglas Brown, the Baptist Union president, John Maclagan, moderator of the English Presbyterian Church, and Dinsdale Young, minister of the Wesleyan Methodist Central Hall. The chief rabbi, Joseph Hertz, became another vice-president. In further acknowledgement that persecution was not restricted to Christians, during January 1931 the CPM briefly renamed itself as the 'National Protest Movement',<sup>46</sup> until it was realised that the term 'Christian Protest Movement' had more popular purchase.

The CPM therefore included representatives from a range of religious groups for its main purpose, protest against Soviet religious persecution. But its creators, further council members and prominent early supporters gave the movement a different, and distinctly political, character and purpose. Most were members of the Conservative party or of radical right bodies who wanted not just to destroy the Anglo-Soviet protocol but to discredit the Labour government and if possible force its defeat. Some were also critics of leading tendencies in the Church of England or the Churches generally. Brentford, formerly Sir William Joynson-Hicks, had as home secretary in the Conservative government of 1924–9 ordered the 'Arcos raid' that precipitated the break in diplomatic relations with Russia in 1927, and as an Anglican Evangelical had led the successful House of Commons opposition in 1927 and 1928 to the revised Prayer Book prepared by the bishops and the Church Assembly.<sup>47</sup> Glasgow, hailed by the *Morning Post* as the 'inspiration' for the CPM, had been vice-president of the British Fascists and a co-founder of the anti-trade union British Loyalists and the anti-Labour Union of Scottish Loyalists; for him, the Soviet government was 'the Anti-Christ'.<sup>48</sup> The vice-presidents and council included four more Conservative peers and four Conservative MPs.<sup>49</sup> The chairman

<sup>44</sup> *Morning Post*, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14 Dec. 1929.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* 12, 13, 16 Dec. 1929.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 3, 9 Jan. 1930.

<sup>47</sup> The best sketch of 'Jix', his popular name, remains Ronald Blythe, *The age of illusion*, London 1963, 21–41.

<sup>48</sup> *Morning Post*, 19 Dec. 1929; 4, 10, 12 Feb. 1930; *Edinburgh Evening News*, 10 Dec. 1924; *Scotsman*, 28 Apr. 1926; 5 Apr., 27 Nov. 1929; Thomas Linehan, *British Fascism 1918–39*, Manchester 2000, 62, 65–6; *Morning Post*, 6 Dec. 1929.

<sup>49</sup> Lords Cushendun, Ebbisham, Clifford of Chudleigh and St John of Bletsoe, and John Gretton, Henry Haslam, Basil Peto and Earl Winterton.

and two further members of the executive committee – James Knowles, the Revd Pascoe Goard and Herbert Garrison – were the president, deputy president and general secretary of the religiously heterodox and politically right-wing British Israel World Federation, which organised the CPM's first public meeting and hosted its committee meetings.<sup>50</sup> A large part of the CPM's substantial funds came publicly from Lady Houston, a well-known donor to hard-right causes and co-owner of the diehard Boswell Press and *Patriot* weekly journal.<sup>51</sup> The *Morning Post* itself was the leading daily newspaper of right-wing Conservative opinion. Since publicising the fabricated antisemitic *Protocols of the elders of Zion* in 1920, Gwynne had pursued a series of radical-right, anti-Bolshevik and anti-Labour causes.<sup>52</sup>

Gwynne himself chose the chief organiser and spokesman of the CPM.<sup>53</sup> Alfred Gough – the hero of Udy's account – was vicar of the prosperous London parish of Brompton, a prebendary of St Paul's Cathedral and a popular Evangelical preacher. He was also, for a clergyman, a remarkably active political speaker, writer and campaigner, addressing meetings across the United Kingdom. His Christianity centred on 'masculine' values: power, strength, hard work, competition, struggle, mastery and an imperial mission. He despised what he regarded as the prevalent British religion, as wasting sympathy on the 'under-dog' and promoting idleness, 'morbid sentimentalism', the 'feminine man' and 'pacifism'. This 'ecclesiastical religion' was a 'degradation of Christianity', and the root of chronic failures in British politics, in all parties. Although he had accepted Prayer Book revision, he described one leading element in the Church of England, Anglo-Catholicism, as 'foreign to our race'. Another, Christian Socialism, was for him 'pure poison', exemplified by the bishops and clergy who organised the Conference on Christian Politics, Economics and Citizenship in 1924 and tried to mediate during the general and coal strikes in 1926. He was, he said in 1928, more afraid of Christian Socialist bishops than the 'red' Socialists.<sup>54</sup> Even *The Daily Mail*, another amplifier of right-

<sup>50</sup> *Morning Post*, 14 Dec. 1929; J. A. Douglas, undated note, LPL, J. A. Douglas papers, 42/210. For British Israelism see Gerald Studdert Kennedy, 'The Christian imperialism of the die-hard defenders of the Raj, 1926–1930', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* xviii (1990), 362–62, and Aidan Cottrell-Boyce, *Israelism in modern Britain*, London 2020.

<sup>51</sup> *Morning Post*, 12, 28 Dec. 1929; 10 Dec. 1930 (three donations totalling, in 2025 values, over £500,000); Richard Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, Oxford 1987, 46–7, 49–50.

<sup>52</sup> Keith Wilson, *A study of the history and politics of the Morning Post, 1905–1926*, Lampeter 1990.

<sup>53</sup> *Morning Post*, 9 Dec. 1929; A. W. Gough, 'The protest against persecution', *National Review* xciv (Apr. 1930), 1160. Gough became president of both the CPM council and its executive committee.

<sup>54</sup> A. W. Gough, *God's strong people*, London 1915, pp. v–vii, 70, 73, 80–2; *Repentance and strength*, London 1916, 3, 5, 21–2; 'Spurious democracy', *National Review* lxxvi

wing opinion, regarded Gough's politics as unusual: 'militantly Conservative and Nationalist'.<sup>55</sup> His insistent theme was the threat of 'Socialism', treated as synonymous with Bolshevism or Marxism and encompassing not only the Labour party and trade unions but also welfare policies, internationalism and pacifism. He spoke for Conservative parliamentary candidates, yet regarded even Conservative governments as 'semi-socialist'.<sup>56</sup> He promoted the *Patriot* in his parish magazine,<sup>57</sup> and published articles in the diehard *National Review*. Since 1918, there had scarcely been a hard-right organisation with which he had not been associated as a speaker, member or vice-president, including the British Workers' Party, British Empire Union, People's Defence League, National Democratic Party, National Party, Britons, Middle Classes Union, National Citizens' Union, Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies, Industrial Peace Union and British Fascists.<sup>58</sup> His reply to Gwynne's telegram specified his own opposition to diplomatic relations with Soviet Russia, and his sermon on the following Sunday, reported prominently in the *Morning Post*, joined in the criticisms of Archbishop Lang's statements about the Russian persecution.<sup>59</sup>

If Gough seemed a perfect agent for Gwynne's purposes, the CPM was an ideal vehicle for Gough's long-standing ambitions. As a condition for launching the movement, he did insist that it should have a 'definitely religious character' and not be a 'largely political' campaign: the phrase 'non-political and non-denominational' became a CPM slogan.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, given his distinctive linkage of religion with politics, his aims remained implicitly political. A broad-based religious protest would not just maximise the moral force of the campaign against Soviet persecution; it would also give 'such a spirit to our own country' that the British people,

(1920), 347–52; *Fight for man*, London 1924, 7–8, 17–27, 34, 59–60, 78–87; and *The lure of simplicity*, London 1929, 47–73, 104–8; 'Notes by the vicar', *Brompton parish magazine*, Aug. 1923, May, July 1924, June 1926, Feb. 1928, June 1929 [issues located in The London Archives, P84/TRI2/193–200]; and Gough speeches in *Middlesex Times*, 13 Apr. 1921, *Hampstead News*, 16 Feb. 1922, and *Kensington News*, 30 Feb. 1928.

<sup>55</sup> Obituary notice, *Daily Mail*, 8 Oct. 1931, and see 'Janitor' [J. G. Lockhart], *Pulpits and personalities*, London 1930, 49–58.

<sup>56</sup> Gough, 'Spurious democracy'; *Fight for man*, 54–8, 67–9; *Lure of simplicity*, 24–46; speeches, *Britannia*, 29 Nov. 1918. See also *Daily Mail*, 27 Oct. 1924; *Northampton Chronicle*, 27 Nov. 1928; *Hampstead News*, 13 June 1929.

<sup>57</sup> *Brompton parish magazine*, Dec. 1924, June 1925.

<sup>58</sup> *Chelsea News*, 1 Feb. 1918; 21 Feb. 1919; *Leicester Mail*, 22 May 1918; *The Globe*, 28 Nov. 1918; 6 Mar. 1919; *The Times*, 10 June 1919; *Daily Telegraph*, 9 Jan. 1924; 11 Oct. 1926; *Brompton parish magazine*, Oct. 1925; Nov. 1926; *Kensington News*, 23 Mar. 1928; Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, 69; Martin Pugh, 'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!'; London 2005, 63. For this political milieu see Linehan, *British Fascism*, 38–56, 61–71.

<sup>59</sup> *Morning Post*, 7, 9 Dec. 1929.

<sup>60</sup> *Brompton parish magazine*, Jan. 1930; CPM pamphlet, *Persecution of religion in Russia must cease*, Jan. 1930, Lang papers, 73/83–4.

'tired of dead-alive Christianity', would 'throw off the poison that is brought to us from Russia'<sup>61</sup> – that is to say, what Gough regarded as British 'socialism'. His meaning of 'non-political' was detachment from party politics, in a particular but still political sense. Just as he had described the National Citizens' Union as 'non-party but anti-socialist',<sup>62</sup> he intended the CPM to be an alliance of Conservatives, Liberals and the politically uncommitted against the Labour party.

Gwynne accepted Gough's condition, because their shared objective was to galvanise church opinion against Labour policies. The *Morning Post*, he claimed, had 'helped the Churches to organise themselves'.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, his recruitment of Gough altered the movement's focus, from protest against the Anglo-Soviet protocol to protest against religious persecution. This enabled the CPM to embrace members and speakers with different opinions towards diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, but its original aims still included a call for action by the British government. The chief speakers at the CPM's meeting at the Royal Albert Hall on 19 December were Glasgow, Brentford, Gough and the chief rabbi. They also included Theodore Aubert, president of the *Entente Internationale Anticommuniste*, who had evidently persuaded the movement's founders to broaden their ambitions into an international protest, and provided contacts with continental European anti-Soviet organisations.<sup>64</sup> It was resolved

That this meeting of worshippers of Almighty God vehemently protests against the persistent and cruel persecution of our fellow-worshippers in Russia, and calls upon all believers in God and lovers of liberty throughout the world to pray and work without ceasing for the religious freedom of the people of Russia.

That the British Government be urged to make the strongest possible representations to the Soviet Government to bring this persecution to an end. That copies of this protest be forwarded to the heads of all civilised governments.<sup>65</sup>

The movement was well-organised as well as amply financed. Gough was soon speaking in twelve towns a month, and during its first year the CPM held 270 meetings throughout the United Kingdom, addressed by its council members together with sympathisers among the local clergy and

<sup>61</sup> Gough statement, authorised by the CPM 'emergency committee', *Morning Post*, 12 Dec. 1929.

<sup>62</sup> *Brompton parish magazine*, Nov. 1926. 'Non-party' or 'non-political' were common interwar codes for alliances against Socialism.

<sup>63</sup> Editorial, *Morning Post*, 10 Dec. 1929; cf. Udy, *Labour and the gulag*, 207.

<sup>64</sup> For Aubert see Michel Caillat, 'Theodore Aubert and the Entente Internationale Anticommuniste', *Twentieth Century Communism* vi (2014), 82–104, and for his link to the CPM, Stephanie Roulin, *Un Credo anticommuniste*, Lausanne 2010, 123–6.

<sup>65</sup> *Morning Post*, 20 Dec. 1929.

dignitaries.<sup>66</sup> It distributed pamphlets describing the Soviet suppression of religious activities, churches closed or destroyed, and priests imprisoned or killed.<sup>67</sup> Early in 1930 Glasgow, Gough and Knowles sent out letters appealing for support for what they called ‘one of the greatest movements of our time’: to MPs of all parties, to every clergyman of all denominations and to both national and provincial newspapers.<sup>68</sup> During March, 10,000 copies of a special hymn and prayer were distributed to British churches and chapels.<sup>69</sup> These efforts brought considerable publicity. CPM meetings were well attended and well reported. All national newspapers now contained reports, correspondence and editorials on the persecution, with extracts from the Soviet newspapers *Pravda* and *Izvestia*. Further Conservative newspapers joined in the *Morning Post*’s denunciations of the persecution. Conservative MPs and peers added Russian religious conditions to their parliamentary questions or motions hostile towards British relations with Soviet Russia. The CPM’s right-wing origins aroused scepticism about reports of the persecution in the liberal *Manchester Guardian* and Labour *Daily Herald*, and left-wing Labour and trade union figures accused ‘the capitalist press’ of peddling ‘false atrocity stories’.<sup>70</sup> The Communist *Daily Worker* denied the existence of any persecution, and British Communist party members disrupted CPM meetings. A national debate had been created, putting pressure on both the Labour government and the heads of the Churches. During January, *The Morning Post* declared the CPM’s organisation complete, and switched its attention to lauding the ‘achievements’ of Mussolini’s fascist government in Italy.<sup>71</sup>

### III

Despite the CPM’s vigorous beginning and his own criticisms of the Churches, Gough was disappointed by the early failure of many church leaders to join or endorse the movement. In reply to Gwynne’s telegrams in December 1929, five Church of England diocesan bishops and four cathedral deans agreed to support the protest; but these were exceeded by

<sup>66</sup> *Brompton parish magazine*, Apr. 1930; CPM annual report, *The Times*, 12 Feb. 1931.

<sup>67</sup> For example, *List of Churches and monasteries which have been closed in Russia during 1929*, and *A challenge to Christendom*, both London 1930, copies in Douglas papers, 40/157–60, 42/211–26.

<sup>68</sup> CPM appeal, *Persecution of religion in Russia must cease*, London 1930; *Morning Post*, 29 Jan 1930; *Scotsman*, 1 Feb. 1930; *Western Mail, Dundee Courier* and further provincial papers, 6 Feb. 1930; *Daily Telegraph*, 7 Feb. 1930.

<sup>69</sup> *Morning Post*, 13 Mar. 1930.  
<sup>70</sup> See letter by Cook, Maxton, Bernard Shaw, Wilkinson and others in *Manchester Guardian*, 6 Mar. 1930; Udy, *Labour and the gulag*, 271–2.

<sup>71</sup> Twice-weekly feature articles in *Morning Post*, 9 Jan.–3 Mar. 1930.

refusals or non-committal replies by the two archbishops, fifteen bishops, six deans, the archbishop of Wales, the primus of the Episcopal Church in Scotland, two Roman Catholic bishops and several prominent Free Churchmen.<sup>72</sup> Gough took their opposition or uncertainty to mean that they regarded 'spiritual action' and 'concerted and organised efforts of prayer' as 'useless'. They confirmed his assessment of the 'decayed condition' of the 'despiritualised' British Churches.<sup>73</sup>

Gough had forgotten the numerous 'concerted and organised' special prayers observed in the Church of England since 1914, often co-ordinated with other British Churches.<sup>74</sup> He also misunderstood the objections or reservations towards the CPM. Many church leaders had long been aware of Soviet religious persecution. In 1919 and 1922, Archbishop Davidson had called for the Church of England to pray for the Russian Orthodox Church. During 1922 he also led a public protest addressed to Lenin by British Protestant leaders. The text of a second public protest in 1923, also signed by the Roman Catholic archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Bourne, and by the chief rabbi, was now pointedly re-published by *The Morning Post*. The experiences of these protests had been frustrating for the church leaders. They had produced adamant Soviet denials, fierce counter-accusations, rebuttals by some Orthodox Church leaders and warnings from others that they only caused fiercer repression.<sup>75</sup> From 1923, a Russian Clergy and Church Aid Fund (RCCAF) provided assistance from British Protestant churches for Orthodox priests in exile, and sent the heads of the Churches regular reports on Russian conditions.<sup>76</sup> But they had learned that protests by British Churches had negligible if any effects on Soviet policies, and could be counter-productive.

During 1929 and 1930, Lang publicly re-stated his 'detestation' of the Soviet government, and privately his 'utter dislike' of diplomatic relations with it. But he and most other bishops accepted that, as an international

<sup>72</sup> *Morning Post*, 6, 7, 9, 10 Dec. 1929. Archbishop Lang's 'no', in Lang papers, 73/30, Mervyn Haigh (for Lang) to Gwynne, 6 Dec. 1929, was among the replies not reported in the newspaper.

<sup>73</sup> Speech in *Morning Post*, 14 Dec. 1929; Gough letter, *Manchester Guardian*, 30 Jan. 1930; *Brompton parish magazine*, Feb. 1930.

<sup>74</sup> *National prayers: special worship since the Reformation*, III: *worship for national and royal occasions in the United Kingdom, 1871-2016*, ed. Philip Williamson, Stephen Taylor, Alasdair Raffe and Natalie Mears (Church of England Record Society xxvi, 2020) (hereinafter cited as *National prayers, 1871-2016*), 130-268.

<sup>75</sup> Bell, *Davidson*, ii, 1067-86; Charles Edmondson and Barry Levis, 'Archbishop Randall Davidson, Russian famine relief, and the fate of Orthodox clergy, 1917-1923', *Journal of Church and State* xl (1998), 619-37; *National prayers, 1871-2016*, 215-16, 247-8; *Morning Post*, 6 Dec. 1929.

<sup>76</sup> *Russian clergy and church aid fund: report and description of ten years work, 1923-33*, London 1933.

principle, governments could not be concerned with the internal politics, religion and morals of other governments. They agreed with Labour ministers that quiet diplomatic persuasion was probably the best secular method of assisting Russian religious believers.<sup>77</sup> Most Free Church leaders shared their assessment, which was reinforced by the mutual trust developed between them and the Anglican bishops since 1914,<sup>78</sup> and by their belief in the moral rectitude of Labour ministers. Scott Lidgett, the eminent Wesleyan Methodist minister and honorary secretary of the National Free Church Council, declared that Archbishop Lang's uncertainty about the severity of the persecution 'would make it difficult for Free Churchmen to go beyond his words'.<sup>79</sup> J. H. Rushbrooke, secretary of the Baptist World Alliance, and well aware that Baptists were the chief Protestant victims of the Soviet persecution, spoke at the CPM's first meeting at the Royal Albert Hall; but, confident that Henderson and other ministers were 'religious men', he argued that the Churches should support the Labour government's diplomatic efforts.<sup>80</sup>

Lang and other bishops were especially concerned that public protests, particularly if associated with anti-Soviet political objectives, might provoke the Soviet government into harsher repression of Russian believers. As the archbishop of York, William Temple, publicly declared, there was a 'real danger lest we relieve our own feelings at the cost of the very people we wish to succour'.<sup>81</sup> Lang's opinion of the CPM can hardly have been unaffected by its founders' public criticisms of himself, nor those of other church leaders by Gough's reputation as a controversialist. But the chief objection of most church leaders towards the CPM was that, despite its self-description as 'non-political', it was at root a political movement. It could not be dissociated from the *Morning Post's* political campaign against the restoration of diplomatic relations, and would not be so by the Soviet or British governments.<sup>82</sup> The BBC reached a similar conclusion when refusing a CPM request for a broadcast talk: the movement was 'almost bound to have political reactions', at least from the Russian government and

<sup>77</sup> Lang (after consulting other bishops) to H. L. Hubbard, 23 Oct. 1929, and Lang to Gough, 13 Dec. 1929, Lang papers, 73/20–21, 47–8.

<sup>78</sup> Williamson, 'What happened to political nonconformity?', 198–9.

<sup>79</sup> J. Scott Lidgett reply to Gwynne telegram, *Morning Post*, 6 Dec. 1929.

<sup>80</sup> *Morning Post*, 20 Dec. 1929; J. H. Rushbrooke article, *Baptist Times*, 16 Jan. 1930.

<sup>81</sup> Lang to Hubbard, 23 Oct. 1929, and Lang to Gough, 13 Dec. 1929, Lang papers, 73/19, 20–1, 47–8; William Temple in York Convocation, reported in *The Times*, 13 Feb. 1930, and quoted approvingly by Parmoor, *HL Deb.* lxx.583, 13 Feb. 1930, and the Free Church newspaper, *Christian World*, 20 Feb. 1930.

<sup>82</sup> Lang to Gough, to Archbishop Charles D'Arcy, and to the bishops of Bradford, Ely and Sheffield (dissuading them from joining the CPM), all 13 Dec. 1929, Lang papers, 73/46, 47, 50.

'possibly' from the British government, and it was 'contrary to the Corporation's licence and policy to permit broadcasts of this nature'.<sup>83</sup>

As Gough himself remarked, the church leaders who opposed or were doubtful about the CPM regarded it as 'a political adventure or newspaper stunt'.<sup>84</sup> Realising the character of this criticism and the consequent difficulty of securing general support from the Churches, he altered the CPM's position. He placed still more stress on its purely spiritual aims. Despite its origins in criticism of Lang, he asked him (without success) to become the CPM's president or to nominate a representative or send a message of support. He reassured other bishops that it was not opposed to diplomatic relations with Soviet Russia.<sup>85</sup> In January 1930 he dropped one of its objectives. The CPM would 'make no suggestion of diplomatic action as a means of mitigating the persecution of religion in Russia', because as a non-political body it was 'not justified in applying for Government representations'.<sup>86</sup> A confidential briefing from Foreign Office officials, belatedly responding to the CPM's Royal Albert Hall resolutions, completed Gough's shift. He now 'expressed agreement' that any British government intervention in Russian affairs (the officials meant a formal public protest) 'would defeat its own object and increase the distress of Church members in the Soviet Union'.<sup>87</sup> In a published correspondence with Henderson in February, he wrote that the CPM had 'no desire to attack the Government', recognised that Labour ministers 'detested' religious persecution, understood their difficulties in dealing with Soviet Russia and reiterated that it was not calling for government action. Rather, the CPM's appeal was 'to God' and to the people who believed in God. He asked only that Henderson, as a fellow-Christian, should unite with its members in prayer.<sup>88</sup> From the government's perspective, the CPM had been neutralised.

#### IV

Gough's accommodation with ecclesiastical and diplomatic realities helped the CPM to gain support from more leading churchmen. As vice-

<sup>83</sup> Roger Eckersley (BBC) letter, *Morning Post*, 28 Feb. 1930.

<sup>84</sup> *Brompton parish magazine*, Jan. 1930.

<sup>85</sup> Gough to Lang, 12 Dec. 1929, Lang papers, 73/41; Gough to Bishop Arthur Winnington-Ingram, published in *Morning Post*, 16 Dec. 1929.

<sup>86</sup> Letter in *The Times*, 11 Jan. 1930.

<sup>87</sup> FO 371/14840/219-23, Foreign Office notes, 1-5 Feb. 1930; FO 371/14842/145-51, confidential print, 'Religious persecution in the Soviet Union 1917-29', 10 Apr. 1930, 10.

<sup>88</sup> Gough to Henderson, 25 Feb. 1930, copy in Lang papers, 74/113, summarised in *Daily News*, *Daily Herald* and other newspapers, 6 Mar. 1930.

presidents or speakers these included Bishops Pollock of Norwich and Cecil of Exeter, the Baptists S. W. Hughes and F. W. Norwood, the Congregationalist J. D. Jones, and the Wesleyan Alfred Sharp, the new moderator of the National Free Church Council.<sup>89</sup> There were, though, larger reasons for this increased support. From December 1929 the increased harshness of the Soviet persecution, became clear from sources independent of the *Morning Post* and the CPM, in reports published in other newspapers and sent from the Churches' contacts in continental Europe. For the heads of the Churches the evidence was so compelling that they now organised their own expressions of sympathy for the Russian religious communities.

In early January 1930, the Church of Scotland added 'intercessions for our suffering and fugitive brethren in Russia' to a call for special prayers in all its churches on 12 and 19 January for the success of the London naval conference. Shortly afterwards, John White, the moderator of the general assembly of the Church appealed to 'the whole Christian public of Scotland' for donations to a European fund for relief of Russian Christians.<sup>90</sup> Any doubts that Scottish church leaders may have had about the CPM were set aside. At the end of the month, White, together with the Roman Catholic archbishops of St Andrews and Glasgow, became vice-presidents of the CPM's newly-formed Scottish committee. In February representatives of all the Churches and the Jewish community in Scotland attended a CPM mass meeting in Edinburgh.<sup>91</sup>

Lang took a different course. In the House of Lords debate in December 1929 and in correspondence with Henderson, he had stated that if he received information of further 'flagrant acts of injustice' towards Russian believers he would raise these matters in the Lords and with the government.<sup>92</sup> In early February, he decided to act. The increased evidence of Soviet injustices was not his only reason. The extent of concern aroused among British Christians by the CPM, and motions of protest against the persecution submitted to the lower houses of the Canterbury and York convocations made it desirable that the Church of England bishops, as the leading figures in British religious opinion, should collectively issue an authoritative public statement and call for prayers. Lang and Temple co-ordinated identical resolutions on 12 February, in which the Canterbury and York houses of bishops each recorded

<sup>89</sup> *Morning Post*, 13, 25 Feb. 1930; letterhead list of vice-presidents, in S. M. Dawkins (CPM secretary) to Lang, 10 April 1930, Lang papers 74/33.

<sup>90</sup> *National prayers, 1871-2016*, 274-6; *Scotsman*, 18 Jan. 1930.

<sup>91</sup> *Scotsman*, 29 Jan., 18 Feb. 1930.

<sup>92</sup> *HL Deb.* lxxv.900, 4 Dec. 1929; Lang to Henderson, 18 Dec. 1929, Lang papers, 73/63-4.

its indignant protest against the persecution of all who profess any form of religion in Russia; offers its most deep and heartfelt sympathy to those who are suffering through this persecution; calls upon all members of the Church to unite in prayer to God on their behalf; and expresses its conviction that if the Soviet Government desires satisfactory relations with this country to be maintained it must observe the principles of a just and humane civilization.<sup>93</sup>

Lang was acutely conscious that the Church of England had to be careful in its statements on international affairs, because foreign governments might assume that as an established Church it had special influence with, or might in some sense speak for, the British government. Given also his fears of a Soviet backlash against Russian Christians,<sup>94</sup> in his widely-reported address to the Canterbury house of bishops he went to considerable lengths to deny that the Church's protest had political purposes and any connection with the CPM campaign. He dissociated it from criticism of 'the political system or the economic principles of the Soviet Government', and from 'any political issues in this country' and 'any movements which might be regarded as propaganda against the present political regime in Russia', while declaring that satisfactory diplomatic relations depended on acceptance of the international principles of 'justice, liberty and humanity'.<sup>95</sup> Lang reiterated the Church's protest in the House of Lords on the following day, again stressing its detachment from political issues, in which he now included criticisms of the Soviet regime by Conservative politicians.<sup>96</sup>

Many British Christians continued to want action by the British government. The lower clergy of York convocation preferred its own resolution to that of the bishops, calling for the British government to take 'every suitable step to influence the Soviet government to refrain from hostile actions against Christians'. The National Free Church Council's executive, which reacted to the bishops' resolutions by casting aside its earlier caution and issuing its own protest, urged on the government 'the imperative necessity of using to the utmost all available means of remedying this terrible situation'. Despite Gough's recent retractions, the Scottish CPM meeting repeated the movement's Royal Albert Hall resolution asking the British government to make official complaints to the Soviet government.<sup>97</sup> Lang

<sup>93</sup> *The chronicle of... the Convocation of Canterbury... February 12 and 13, 1930*, 7; *York journal of Convocation... February 12, 1930*, 30; *The Times*, and many other newspapers, 13 Feb. 1930; *National prayers, 1871-2016*, 280.

<sup>94</sup> Lang to Prebendary Frederick Joyce, 17 Jan 1930, Lang papers, 73/78-9.

<sup>95</sup> Lang in *Chronicle of Canterbury Convocation February 12 and 13, 1930*, 7, and see Temple in *York journal of Convocation February 12, 1930*, 33-4; *The Times*, 13 Feb 1930.

<sup>96</sup> *HL Deb.* lxxvi.575-8, 13 Feb. 1930.

<sup>97</sup> *York journal of Convocation February 12, 1930*, 65-7, 77-9; *The Times*, 15 Feb. 1930; *Scotsman*, 18 Feb. 1930.

had hoped that by emphatic disclaimers of any political purposes, the bishops too might call for British government representations in Moscow or to the Soviet ambassador. But so sensitive was he to possible political repercussions – including ‘in any way embarrassing the position of the British government’ – that he took the precaution of obtaining advice from Sir Robert Vansittart, the permanent under-secretary of the Foreign Office. Vansittart agreed that protest by the bishops might, by indicating the rising British public concern, have some influence on the Soviet government. But he dissuaded Lang from an appeal for formal government action by confirming Lang’s own concern that it might ‘defeat its own end’. Despite the archbishops’ disclaimers, the Soviet government would represent it as part of a political movement, and increase both its resistance to private diplomatic efforts and the difficulty of persuading it to refrain from anti-British propaganda.<sup>98</sup>

At a late stage, though, Lang added another element, without alerting Temple or consulting Vansittart. He asked the bishops to turn the general call for prayers contained in the convocation resolutions into a more definite ‘united act of intercession’ in all Church of England services on Sunday 16 March.<sup>99</sup> On Temple’s suggestion, in a later joint public notice the archbishops elevated the occasion into a ‘day of prayer’ and extended the special intercessions for the whole of the following week, particularly specifying the Wednesday.<sup>100</sup> Again, Lang was probably in some general sense responding to the CPM. But there was a more immediate motive, certainly for the timing of his announcement of the intercessions and his selection of the opening date for their observance. Just before the convocations met, Pope Pius XI, exasperated by the failure of the Vatican’s prolonged efforts to influence the Soviet government, issued his own protest against the persecution, and asked for prayers for Russian Christians on Wednesday 19 March. His appeal, addressed not only to the whole Catholic Church but to the ‘entire Christian world’, was reported prominently in British newspapers.<sup>101</sup> In an otherwise improbable enthusiasm for papal statements, it was also publicly welcomed by several Free

<sup>98</sup> Lang to William Temple, 11, 14 Feb. 1930, and Lang note of conversation with Robert Vansittart, n.d. Lang papers, 73/113–14, 124, 132.

<sup>99</sup> *Chronicle of Canterbury Convocation February 12 and 13, 1930*, 6–7; Lang to Temple, 14 Feb. 1930, and Temple to Lang, 17 Feb. 1930, Lang papers, 73/132, 143. Temple learned of Lang’s call after the York convocation had ended, so the northern bishops’ agreement had to be obtained by post.

<sup>100</sup> Temple to Lang, 17 Feb. 1930, Lang papers, 73/143; joint Lang and Temple newspaper notice, *The Times*, 1 Mar. 1930; *National prayers, 1871–2016*, 280–1.

<sup>101</sup> *The Times* and other national newspapers, 10 Feb. 1930; full text in the *Tablet*, 15 Feb. 1930, 209–10.

Church leaders and by Gough and Gwynne, who both claimed some credit for the pope's initiative.<sup>102</sup>

Lang aimed to forestall any impression that the Church of England was remiss or being outmatched in its religious supplications, and to reassert its leadership in English occasions of special worship. Most obviously – as Lang's and Temple's public notices pointedly indicated – this was achieved by beginning its intercessions first, on the Sunday before the Wednesday of the special Catholic masses. Lang even spoke, perhaps unconsciously, of the Catholic Church as 'joining in our prayer'.<sup>103</sup> As was now usual, and as Lang's and Temple's joint notice reported, the National Free Church Council and the presidents of the Wesleyan, United and Primitive Methodist conferences followed the Church of England's lead and also appointed special prayers for 16 March.<sup>104</sup> Largely, it seems, through the work of Aubert and the *Entente Internationale Anticommuniste*, this date became an international day of prayer, observed in Protestant Churches across western Europe and in the United States of America.

Yet for all Lang's efforts to avoid embarrassing the government, Labour ministers themselves turned a particular aspect of his call to prayer into an embarrassment. The cabinet 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'.<sup>105</sup> This decision became public knowledge at the end of February, when a consequent War Office order to army commanders and chaplains was reported in a Conservative newspaper, the *Daily Telegraph*.<sup>106</sup> There was widespread outrage against what the Churches and the Jewish community, the religious press, and Liberal as

<sup>102</sup> *Morning Post*, 10, 11, 12, 15 Feb. 1930. Gough had, through Cardinal Bourne, invited the Catholic Church to 'join the protest movement', and the *Morning Post* made much of a papal message of gratitude for its publicising of the Soviet persecution. The Vatican, though, had its own sources of information about Russia, and its own reasons for making a protest at this time: Dennis Dunn, *The Catholic Church and Soviet Russia, 1917–1939*, Abingdon 2017, chs iii–vi.

<sup>103</sup> *Chronicle of Canterbury Convocation February 12 and 13, 1930*, 7.

<sup>104</sup> *Morning Post*, 14 Mar. 1930; *Methodist Times*, 27 Feb 1930; *Times*, 15, 18 Feb., 1 Mar. 1930; *National prayers, 1871–2016*, 281. The bishops of the Church of Ireland and the commission of the Free Church of Scotland also appointed special prayers on 16 March, although White did not repeat his earlier call for prayers in the Church of Scotland: *Belfast News-Letter*, 22 Feb. 1930; *Scotsman*, 6 Mar. 1930.

<sup>105</sup> CAB 23/63, Cabinet 11 (30), 19 Feb. 1930. For fuller discussion of the circumstances and repercussions of this ban see Philip Williamson, 'Freedom of worship and the armed forces in early twentieth-century England', in David Ceri Jones, Charlotte Methuen and Michael Snape (eds), *The Church and the military* (Studies in Church History lxii, 2026), forthcoming.

<sup>106</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 28 Feb. 1930, followed by *The Times* and all other national newspapers, 1 Mar. 1930.

well as Conservative politicians and newspapers regarded as interference with freedom of worship. The *Morning Post* described it as an example of 'Soviet methods of government'.<sup>107</sup>

The Labour cabinet had made an extraordinary misjudgement, explicable only by a conjuncture of its fear of another right-wing 'anti-Socialist' scare and its over-sensitivity towards Soviet attitudes. It was reacting to a mischievous question by a Conservative MP in the House of Commons,<sup>108</sup> which implied that the intercessions would compromise the political neutrality of the armed forces and caused ministers to assume that despite Lang's denials they would be connected with the political elements of the CPM campaign. As MacDonald complained privately to Lang, 'this agitation has had far more of the *Morning Post* in it than the Gospels and ... its devotion to prayer is much less conspicuous than its desire to produce political results'; the intercessions would be 'much more profitable for the Party in Opposition to us than ... for the promotion of religious toleration in Russia'.<sup>109</sup> Given the importance the cabinet attached to strict adherence to international treaties, it also wanted the Soviet government to understand that the intercessions were not 'an official exercise contrary to well-established usage in diplomatic relations'.<sup>110</sup> A Labour cabinet, particularly one containing Anglican and Free Churchmen, would no more consider obstructing or criticising the intercessions in general than would any other British government: it would be contrary to the shared values of British public life. But the Anglo-Soviet agreements required the British as well as the Soviet government to 'restrain ... persons and organisations under their direct or indirect control ... from any act overt or covert liable in any way whatsoever' to embitter relations between the British Empire and the Soviet Union.<sup>111</sup> The cabinet expected the Soviet authorities to represent the special prayers as quasi-official propaganda; they might even present those said at military services as 'preparing the armed forces ... to engage in a Holy War against Russia'.<sup>112</sup> Banning observance of the intercessions for persons under the government's most 'direct ... control' – members of the armed forces – would, they hoped,

<sup>107</sup> *Morning Post*, 1 Mar. 1930.

<sup>108</sup> Carlyon Bellairs in *HC Deb.* ccxxxv.1359, 19 Feb. 1930. The damage was increased by clumsy civil service wording of the orders to the army.

<sup>109</sup> Ramsay MacDonald to Lang, 7 Mar. 1930, Lang papers, 73/225–31.

<sup>110</sup> Snowden, in *HC Deb.* ccxxxvi.900, 10 Mar. 1930.

<sup>111</sup> Article 16 of *General treaty between Great Britain and ... the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics*, Cmd. 2260 (1924), 13, reaffirmed as 'the pledge with regard to propaganda' in the Anglo-Soviet protocol of 3 Oct. 1929, in *Correspondence regarding the resumption of relations with the government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics*, Cmd. 3418 (1929), 8.

<sup>112</sup> MacDonald to Lang, 7 Mar. 1930, Lang papers, 73/225–31. Ministers were right to be concerned: see Luukkanen, *Religious policy of the Stalinist state*, 90–2.

show that they were not an 'official exercise', and not a cause for Soviet complaint or retaliation.

The new round of protests, now directed against a British restriction on worship, produced sharp parliamentary exchanges during early March. Although the government lacked an overall majority in the House of Commons, it was in no danger of defeat: the Conservatives were distracted by internal party disputes, and most Liberals supported the Anglo-Soviet protocol and wanted a general alliance with Labour ministers.<sup>113</sup> But criticism by both the Conservative and the Liberal leaders, Stanley Baldwin and Lloyd George, obliged MacDonald to concede a conference of party leaders and armed forces ministers to consider the terms of the orders.<sup>114</sup> Lang's accusation in the House of Lords that it was not his appointment of the intercessions but the cabinet ban that gave the prayers a political character provoked furious private complaints from MacDonald, which Lang soothed away by yet further denials of any intention of causing difficulties for the government.<sup>115</sup> The outcome of the protests and conference of party leaders was nevertheless striking: the orders were not withdrawn, but 'clarified'. They would apply only to compulsory services held in military bases and naval ships, not to servicemen who voluntarily attended services in churches and chapels elsewhere. This exemption was sufficient to satisfy church leaders as well as the Conservative and Liberal parties. Compulsory religious services in the armed services were, it was agreed, a special case. In Lang's words, the military and naval authorities had the 'right ... to decide what forms of service are or are not used within their jurisdiction'.<sup>116</sup> Some Free Churchmen even sympathised publicly with the government's perspective, either because they recognised the risk of hostile Soviet reactions or because they disliked the inconsistency of servicemen being compelled to pray for freedom of worship.<sup>117</sup>

## V

Clarifications of the government ban and observance of the day of prayer took the energy out of the protests against the Soviet persecution, with the

<sup>113</sup> For the complex politics of this period see Philip Williamson, *National crisis and national government: British politics, the economy and empire, 1926–1932*, Cambridge 1992, ch. 3.

<sup>114</sup> *HC Deb.* ccxxxvi.252–7, 4 Mar. 1930.

<sup>115</sup> *HL Deb.* lx.823–30, 6 Mar. 1930; MacDonald–Lang letters, 7, 8, 10 Mar. 1930, Lang papers, 73/225–31, 234–8, 269–70.

<sup>116</sup> Lang to Temple, 5 Mar. 1930, Lang papers, 73/198–200. For the clarifications, see Williamson, 'Freedom of worship and the armed forces'.

<sup>117</sup> Rushbrooke and T. R. Glover letters, *The Times*, 3, 6 Mar. 1930; M. E. Aubrey in *Baptist Times*, 6 Mar. 1930.

intercessions providing an outlet for much of the spiritual and political outrage. The protests also faded for a further reason: in March, Soviet leaders criticised the extent of attacks upon the Churches, and during the following months reports from Russia suggested that the worst of the violence and discrimination was passing. The context was the Soviet government's realisation that its drastic social and economic measures to enforce collectivisation were damaging agricultural production and threatening the next harvest.<sup>118</sup> But the international protests may have contributed to the easing of religious repression. This was certainly how it was interpreted in Britain, by the government, by church leaders and especially by the *Morning Post* and the CPM leaders, who were quick to claim credit for themselves. These new conditions improved relations between the CPM and church leaders. Lang and Gough reached agreement for the RCCAF and the CPM to co-operate in fund-raising to assist Russian priests.<sup>119</sup> Lang could also agree with the CPM on the efficacy of prayer: a message from him, supporting its continued campaign for prayers while also approving of the movement's non-political character, was read out at the CPM's second mass meeting at the Royal Albert Hall, during July. At this meeting, Brentford declared that there was no doubt that the CPM's 'appeal to God to help their fellow-religionists in Russia had been heard'.<sup>120</sup>

Few believed that the persecution had completely ended. The government, church leaders and the CPM were not misled by Soviet 'disinformation'.<sup>121</sup> They knew that anti-religious policies remained in place, and might again be intensified. Rather, church leaders and the CPM had accepted that the main hope for ending the persecution was moral witness and prayer, not pressure for diplomatic or political action. In March, a Church of England newspaper noted that 'there seems now to be a fairly universal consensus that the Government was only doing what any responsible British Government would do, in refusing to make religious persecution a matter of diplomatic protest'.<sup>122</sup> In April, Lang reported in the House of Lords the conclusions of an enquiry he had commissioned from Lord Charnwood, an author, Liberal peer and churchman much respected by successive archbishops, who was also a further CPM vice-president. Lang pointedly dismissed the value of reports from the Moscow embassy as unavoidably influenced by the Soviet government, and argued that his own independent enquiry, using information from Russian newspapers, the Orthodox and Baptist Churches and the chief rabbi, left no doubts

<sup>118</sup> Luukkanen, *Religious policy of the Stalinist state*, 93–101; Peris, *Storming heaven*, 168–70.

<sup>119</sup> Lang memo of conversation with Gough, 9 Apr. 1930, and Dawkins to Lang, 10 Apr. 1930, Lang papers, 74/28, 33.

<sup>120</sup> *The Times*, 15 July 1930; Udy, *Labour and the gulag*, 294, 298–302.

<sup>121</sup> Udy, *Labour and the gulag*, 294, 297.

<sup>122</sup> *The Guardian*, 21 Mar. 1930.

about the reality and extent of the religious persecution. But he had already assured MacDonald and Henderson – as he reiterated during his speech – that he did not intend ‘any kind of attack or criticism of the Government’. He hoped only to have some effect upon the Soviet government. He acknowledged that as a principle of international relations, it could not be expected or even be asked to end its opposition to religious beliefs. Instead, he repeated his earlier appeal to other principles: the Soviet government should understand that friendly diplomatic relations required it to proceed with ‘some heed to the claims of justice’, without forceful repression.<sup>123</sup>

Lang did declare that British government inaction ‘cannot go on indefinitely’; ‘we cannot permanently acquiesce’ in seeking diplomatic and commercial benefits from Anglo-Soviet relations ‘yet make no kind of representations’ about the persecution.<sup>124</sup> But he never did ask for formal representations, and both archbishops discouraged further protests and special prayers. As Temple wrote in June 1930, with the persecution apparently relaxed, any further ‘nagging’ at the Soviet government was only likely to cause harm.<sup>125</sup> In early 1931 Lang and Temple declined requests from the RCCAF for a second day of prayer for Russian believers, even though its intended purpose was to assist its fund-raising, not to revive the public protests. Instead, the bishops urged the clergy to ask congregations for continuous prayers for ‘the Church in Russia’.<sup>126</sup> In July, the Church Assembly declined to consider a petition from Gough asking it to appeal for a League of Nations investigation into Soviet rule.<sup>127</sup>

Nor did reports from early 1931 of the use of forced labour in Russian timber camps revive the interest of church leaders in protests against the Soviet government. The CPM undertook no new initiatives on this issue, and its activities declined as Gough, its most active leader, became ill (he died in October). The emergence of a new protest movement made little impression. The Anti-Soviet Persecution and Slave Labour League (ASPSLL) was created in February 1931 by Bernard Wilden-Hart, a former CPM lecturer and another British Israelite with right-wing sympathies. As

<sup>123</sup> Lang to MacDonald, copy to Henderson, 20 Mar. 1930, with cordial replies from MacDonald, 21 Mar. 1930 (‘there is no disagreement as to purpose’) and Henderson, 22 Mar. 1930: TNA, J. R. MacDonald papers, PRO 30/69/1175, and FO 371/14842/225; *HL Debs.* lxxvi.1131–48, 1178–81, 2 Apr. 1930.

<sup>124</sup> *HL Debs.* lxxvi.1180, 2 Apr. 1930. Gough, in a further indication of co-operation, encouraged Lang to publish this speech: Lang memo, 9 Apr. 1930, Lang papers 74/28.

<sup>125</sup> Temple to Lang, 22 June 1930, Lang papers 74/107.

<sup>126</sup> H. J. Fynes-Clinton (RCCAF secretary) to Lang, 17 Oct. 1930, Alexander Sargent (Lang’s chaplain) to Temple, 25 Feb. 1931, and Temple to Sargent, with circular for bishops, 27 Feb. 1931, Lang papers 74/152, 243, 257–8; Temple notice, *Guardian*, 27 Mar. 1931.

<sup>127</sup> *The Times*, 15 June 1931; *Church Times*, 19 June 1931.

well as promoting daily prayers ‘for the abolition of the Soviet Concentration Camps and for the cessation of Persecution and Slavery’, its aims included obtaining pledges from MPs and parliamentary candidates for the total exclusion of Soviet imports from Britain and ‘the severance of all diplomatic and trading relations with Soviet Russia’.<sup>128</sup> Wilden-Hart sent copies of the League’s printed appeal to each of the diocesan and suffragan bishops of the Church of England, but these were immediately counteracted by Canon J. A. Douglas. An expert on the Orthodox Church, Douglas was a CPM council member and author of articles exposing the Bolshevik attacks on religion.<sup>129</sup> He nevertheless believed that by keeping the issue ‘clear of politics’, Lang had ‘done the greatest service to the Russian church’, by protecting it from Soviet reprisals. With the approval of the RCCAF, he too wrote to all the bishops, warning them against the ASPSL. Its political aims would provoke ‘the extreme Godless section in Russia’ and lead to an intensification of religious persecution; if the bishops supported it, this would cause ‘further disaster’ for Russian believers.<sup>130</sup> Numerous bishops expressed agreement, or hastily withdrew from association with the League.<sup>131</sup> The only bishop to call for British government protests against the labour camps was Henson of Durham, but he too refused support for the ASPSL.<sup>132</sup> The League – indeed the issue of Soviet labour camps – aroused no interest among leaders of the Free Churches and the Scottish Churches.<sup>133</sup>

## VI

Labour ministerial reactions to the reports of Soviet labour camps were the same as those towards the religious persecution: assertion of the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other nations, and scepticism

<sup>128</sup> Douglas undated note, ASPSL, *Liberty & religion in Russia*, London 1931, and Bernard Wilden-Hart to bishops, 14 Feb. 1931, all in Douglas papers, 42/210, 244–5, 247; Wilden-Hart notice, *The Times*, 15 Feb. 1931.

<sup>129</sup> J. A. Douglas, *The crucifixion of Russia*, London 1930, a CPM reprint of articles in the *Morning Post*, 14, 15 Mar. 1930.

<sup>130</sup> Douglas to Sargent, 18 Feb. 1931, Fynes-Clinton to Douglas, 24 Feb. 1931, Douglas to the bishops, 25 Feb. 1931, Douglas papers, 42/252, 254, 257–8.

<sup>131</sup> Bishops’ replies, 25 Feb.–16 Mar. 1931, *ibid.* 42/263–95, 299–301, 304–7.

<sup>132</sup> *HC Deb.* lxxix.857–60, 5 Feb. 1931; Udy, ‘Christian protest movement’, 116–17, and *Labour and the gulag*, 328–30; Hensley Henson to Douglas, 26 Feb. 1931, Douglas papers, 42/272. Henson had also supported the Lang and Temple refusal to join in political protests against the religious persecution: *The Times*, 3 Mar. 1930.

<sup>133</sup> The ASPSL also suffered from Wilden-Hart’s summons before the law courts on bankruptcy charges: *Daily Mail*, 15 July 1931.

about the accuracy of reports again publicised by Conservative critics of the government's policies towards the Soviet Union.<sup>134</sup> Its priorities remained increasing trade and strengthening European peace – the more so after the League of Nations in early 1931 summoned a world disarmament conference – and it persisted with its liberal internationalist faith in the ameliorating effects of diplomatic and commercial relations on autocratic governments. Again, as during much of the 1920s, these priorities and these hopes were not limited to the Labour government alone. For all the Conservative opposition's criticisms of the Labour government's attitude towards religious persecution and labour camps, after the Labour party's political and electoral collapse later in 1931 the new Conservative-dominated National government maintained the Anglo-Soviet protocol. Despite their fiercer ideological resistance to Communism, once in government office the policies of Conservative leaders towards the Soviet Union were again little different from those of Labour leaders. The National government preserved relations with the Soviet Union despite continued frictions over Comintern propaganda, and despite bitter exchanges over the Soviet show trials of British engineers during the 'Metro-Vickers crisis' in 1933.<sup>135</sup>

For the Labour government and many church leaders, the Christian Protest Movement was tainted by its right-wing political origins and early purposes. The CPM initiated the public protests against the Soviet persecution and prayers for its victims, but few church leaders supported its call for political measures against the Soviet government. Once Archbishop Lang had established that reports of the persecution were not just a newspaper 'stunt' or manufactured by anti-Soviet interests, he was sure that the Churches should make a moral protest and invoke God's assistance. But he essentially shared the perspective of the government on international relations – that of the professional Foreign Office officials as well as Labour ministers. He also accepted that in practice as well as in principle the British government had so little chance of affecting the Soviet government's internal actions that the risks of attempted intervention outweighed any likely advantages. Consequently, the Churches could offer only prayers and financial assistance. CPM leaders soon came to similar conclusions. Church leaders did not accuse Labour ministers of indifference towards the violence of Soviet policies or towards religion in general. Free Church ministers in particular continued to express confidence in their religious faith. Canon Douglas, who in early 1931 advised Labour

<sup>134</sup> Udy, 'Christian Protest Movement', 138, and *Labour and the gulag*, chs xxiv–xxxiii.

<sup>135</sup> See Morrell, *Britain confronts the Stalin revolution*, and Udy, *Labour and the gulag*, ch. xxxv. Udy is silent on the National government's maintenance of relations with the Soviet Union.

ministers about the Russian Orthodox Church, assured the bishops that he had ‘ample reason to know that Mr Henderson has taken every step which could be beneficial, to secure the mitigation of religious repression in Russia’.<sup>136</sup>

The twentieth-century Church of England was not politically subservient to the government. As an established and national Church, its leaders were conscious of a special responsibility to express the ‘national conscience’, but also to be sensitive towards the pressures on international policy. For the most part, they distinguished between policies initiated by the British government, and its attitudes towards the internal affairs of other nations. During the First World War, Archbishop Davidson criticised Liberal and coalition governments for their use of poison gas and reprisal bombing-raids, just as in 1956 Archbishop Fisher protested against the British armed intervention in the Suez crisis.<sup>137</sup> There are several further instances of the public disquiet of church leaders towards what they considered to be morally questionable government priorities in foreign, colonial and military as well as domestic policies. During the 1980s, they spoke almost as an opposition towards Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government.<sup>138</sup> They could also be critical of the policies of foreign governments. Here too, they preserved an independent perspective, even if they prudently asked for Foreign Office advice, as Lang did over the Soviet Union in 1930; but they also made allowances for the great moral as well as practical difficulties of international relations in an age of mechanised warfare and pagan dictatorships. In their specialised area of religious and moral issues, the Churches might pass judgements and protest against the actions of foreign regimes, but they accepted that in foreign policy British governments rightly had their own specialised concerns, involving hard choices between multiple diplomatic, political, economic and moral matters. As Andrew Chandler especially has shown, the Nazi government’s persecution of central European Jews and the German ‘confessing Church’ and its belligerent external policies and military rearmament together caused considerable moral perplexity for Church leaders: there was now an even starker clash between different moral goods. Again they offered prayers and organised relief funds, but made few public protests and did not press the National government to make its own protests or to apply any sanctions.

<sup>136</sup> Douglas to the bishops, 25 Feb. 1931, Douglas papers, 42/257–8.

<sup>137</sup> Bell, *Davidson*, ii. 757–60, 832–4; Andrew Connell, ‘A “baffling task”: Archbishop Fisher and the Suez crisis’, in Tom Rodger, Philip Williamson and Matthew Grimley (eds), *The Church of England and British politics since 1900*, Woodbridge 2020, 262–78.

<sup>138</sup> For a review of the historical literature see Matthew Grimley and Philip Williamson, ‘Introduction: the Church of England, the British State and British politics during the twentieth century’, in Rodger, Williamson and Grimley, *The Church of England and British politics*, 1–35.

Again they feared that persistent protests and diplomatic interventions might antagonise an autocratic and aggressive government – and, now, precipitate the catastrophe of a new and more terrible European war.<sup>139</sup> This restraint by church leaders and their support for the National government's policies of appeasement and the Munich settlement marked, perhaps, an extreme of 'Christian realism'. *Kristallnacht*, the German occupation of Prague and the outbreak of the Second World War brought moral and political clarity about the boundless evils of Nazism. The dilemmas, though, were always liable to recur, particularly during the Cold War. In 1949, Fisher and Archbishop Garbett failed to obtain agreement among the bishops for the appointment of a day of prayer for the persecuted Christians of eastern Europe, because most of them did not want to risk antagonising the governments of the Soviet bloc.<sup>140</sup> In modern international relations, pragmatism outweighed moral principle nearly as much for church leaders as it did for governments.

<sup>139</sup> See Andrew Chandler: 'A question of fundamental principles: the Church of England and the Jews of Germany, 1933–1937' and 'Lambeth Palace, the Church of England and the Jews of Germany and Austria in 1938', *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* xxxviii (1993), 221–61, and xl (1995), 225–47; 'Munich and morality: the bishops of the Church of England and appeasement', *Twentieth Century British History* v (1995), 77–99; 'The judgement of an archbishop: Cosmo Gordon Lang and British foreign policy 1928–1939', in Keith Robbins and John Fisher (eds), *Religion and diplomacy: religion and British foreign policy, 1815–1941*, Dordrecht 2010, 183–224; and *British Christians and the Third Reich: Church, State and the judgement of nations*, Cambridge 2022.

<sup>140</sup> *National prayers, 1871–2016*, iii, p. cv.