Soviet Foreign Policy and the League of Nations
Growing Criticism in the ILP

There had always been some in the ILP who were less than starry-eyed about the USSR. In his biography of Orwell, Bernard Crick mentions, for example, Myfanwy Westrope. A writer herself, Westrope ran the Booklovers’ Corner bookshop in Hampstead, where she worked part-time in 1934 and 1935. She had visited the Soviet Union in 1931 but had returned “profoundly disillusioned” and “plunged into ILP activity even more heartily on her return.”

The CPGB and the USSR: Contrasting Views Within the ILP

Anyone reading the publications of the ILP in the interwar period is bound to be struck by the very different ways in which the USSR, on the one hand, and the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), on the other, were perceived by many in the party. In spite of the attempts to achieve campaigning unity with the latter—and the efforts of the ILP’s Left Wing and, a decade later, the RPC—relations between the ILP and the Communists were never very good. Just after disaffiliation from the Labour Party, Brockway, while praising the “achievement of the Russian working-class,” had little time for homegrown Communism. He felt that the CPGB’s “rigidity of mind and method” made it incapable of appealing to the working class in Britain. Nor was it prepared to cooperate with others on the Left. As Brockway noted of the Communist Party, “It speaks of a united front of revolutionary Socialists only to destroy it in practice.”

At about the same time as Brockway’s comments, in 1932, the Chelsea ILP branch published a glowing account of life in “Socialist Russia.” There were fifty children’s theatres in the USSR, it reported, and “in all Soviet plants and factories the seven hour day will generally be introduced by the end of 1932, and the conditions in which the WORKERS work keep them healthy.” This was not so different from the sort of thing that appeared in the Communist
press. “Soviet Prisoners Get Fortnight’s Holiday,” declared a headline in the Daily Worker around this time, followed by another that claimed the existence of ten million walkers (“ramblers”) in the USSR. A few months later, a New Leader headline asked, “What About Political Prisoners in the British Empire?” and the paper attacked critics of the USSR in “The Hysteria Against Russia.”

The contrast in attitudes towards the CPGB, on the one hand, and the Soviet Union, on the other, could hardly be plainer. Of course, this contrast can, in large part, be explained by the fact that British Communism lived, so to speak, next door and its behaviour could be directly experienced, unlike the USSR, which for most on the Left existed only as an idealized entity in the imagination. Then there was the emotional investment in what seemed the only successful example of socialism and the demand for solidarity that this required. This was made more intense by not-so-distant memories of armed intervention against the Bolsheviks and fears that this might soon be repeated. Another factor was, no doubt, that so much of the reporting and criticism of Communist Russia could be dismissed as hostile propaganda from “bourgeois” politicians and a “capitalist” press. Both were noted neither for factual accuracy nor fair play.

We have seen examples of distrust and criticism of the CPGB in earlier chapters. Even the members of the RPC, most of whom left the ILP for the CPGB in 1935, had not been uncritical of some aspects of the Communist Party—and even of Soviet policy and behaviour. In his article “On Leadership” in the June 1934 edition of Controversy, Gaster’s criticisms were blunt and outspoken: “The C.P.G.B. has lamentably failed to offer sound revolutionary leadership to the workers of this country. It is to a large extent discredited. It is criminally sectarian.” Nor was the RPC completely trusted by the Communists—hence, the CPGB-sponsored Affiliation Committee and undercover infiltration by Communist Party members.

But until the mid-1930s, there was, in the ILP, little criticism at all of the USSR and only in the later part of the decade did critics become outspoken. There was, of course, nothing peculiar to the ILP in this. One has only to call to mind the Webbs’ Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation? of 1935 and its even less critical edition, without the question mark, in 1937. When John Evans reviewed the book over two issues in the New Leader in early 1936, in the midst of the internal conflicts over Abyssinia, he recommended it enthusiastically. It was “no mean feat” for the authors “to shake free in their eighties from the mental habits of a lifetime,” he wrote. “Yet the Webbs have done no less.” He saw this as part of “the leftward swing within the Labour movement.” Any notion that Russia might be living under an authoritarian regime was quickly dismissed in the first part of the review: “To the question ‘is Stalin a Dictator?’ the Webbs
reply that he is ‘not the sort of person to claim or desire such a position even if it were possible, which it is not, for him to achieve it.’”

It is difficult now to fully appreciate the magnetic attraction for almost the entire British Left of the Russian Revolution, both before and after the Bolshevik takeover. In the earliest days and until some time after the end of the First World War, even MacDonald and Snowden maintained at least a “benefit of the doubt” view of the Bolsheviks. And even those fiercely opposing Third International affiliation would often go on to maintain very uncritical views about what was happening in the USSR, even long after the advent of Stalin.

The memoirs of prominent members of the ILP confirm this long-lasting attraction. John Paton, national secretary for many years, was a firm opponent of the British Communist Party, as we have seen. The disaffiliated ILP would, he hoped, replace it as a revolutionary alternative to Labour. In contrast, he records in Left Turn! that for him, “as for most Socialists, the fate of World Socialism was bound up with the success or failure of the Russian Revolution.” He later refers to “the immense Socialist achievements in Soviet Russia.”

Fenner Brockway succeeded Paton after the latter resigned as secretary at a time when it looked to many as though the pro-Communist faction in the ILP was going to carry all before it. Brockway, like his predecessor, was also late in becoming a critic of Communist Russia. Rather more surprisingly, Fred Jowett, that quintessentially democratic socialist whose ideas on radical parliamentary reform were examined at the beginning of this book, had, according to Brockway, “unbounded” admiration for the USSR in spite of his fundamental rejection of the CPGB and of the Comintern. “Jowett was a fervent and almost uncritical admirer of the Soviet Union,” writes Brockway. “There was a tendency among many British Liberals and even among some Labourists, to identify the dictatorships in Germany and Russia. Fred devoted much of his writings at this time to countering this case.”

There had, however, long been critics of Bolshevism in the ILP. The earliest one to appear in Labour Leader was Dr. Alfred Salter, later the Labour MP for Bermondsey West. Salter, in March 1918, praised the Bolshevik Party’s “uncompromising devotion to the ideal” but went on to conclude that “we must definitely dissociate ourselves from its violence, its suppression of opposing criticism and its disregard for democracy.” Ethel Snowden’s negative views, based on her visit to Russia as part of the Labour Party/TUC delegation, were expressed in her book Through Bolshevik Russia and in press interviews and brought a storm of criticism from the Left in 1920, which contributed to her husband dropping out of ILP activity.

In 1926, the New Leader did publish an attack by the Menshevik Raphael Abramovitch on the “present terrorist dictatorship” in Russia, and Brailsford,
the editor at the time, conceded that “on this subject we must accept the literal truth of the Menshevik indictment.” But Brailsford nevertheless stressed the need for “socialist unity” and the acknowledgement of the achievements of the revolution.15 In 1927, the New Leader reported, under the headline “The Soviet Prisoners” on critics of the regime being held by the Soviet Union, explaining that, in protest against the suppression of critics, Fenner Brockway regretfully felt he must decline the kind and courteous invitation to attend the recent 10th anniversary of the Russian Revolution. The reason still stands.”16 But such criticism was exceptional. Praise and celebration were far more usual.

Included in the NAC’s report to the 1924 annual conference was an obituary of Lenin, who was described as “unquestionably one of the greatest figures in the history of the Socialist movement.” Cablegrams had been sent to “Madame Lenin” and the Council of People’s Commissars expressing the ILP’s “profound sympathy” and its “deep admiration for Lenin’s great work for world Socialism.”17 In 1930, Emrys Hughes, the editor of Forward, defended the USSR in “How the Press Lies About Russia,” while a few months later, the New Leader published an article by Karl Radek under the title “Capitalism Attacks Russia: The Truth about the Moscow Trial.” Radek defended the trials and, in some cases, executions of engineers “for industrial sabotage instigated by foreign and Russian capitalistic interests.”18 Seven years later, he would himself be a victim of one of Stalin’s show trials.

The articles by Hughes and Radek appeared in the middle of Comintern’s “class-against-class” period, during which organizations like the ILP were denounced as “social fascists.” At the beginning of 1929, Forward had warned of the attack on the ILP in “New Ideological Attack on Left Wing: Sinister Strategy of the C.P.G.B.” The Communist, the article reported, had attacked Maxton and the ILP leadership as “the most dangerous enemies of the working class” and had called for “a persistent ideological campaign,” which, the writer commented sarcastically, was just “the way to rouse the masses and take their minds off the football coupons.”19

When, later that year, Maxton was expelled from the Communist-dominated League Against Imperialism, a New Leader writer noted that “the whole episode throws a brilliant searchlight on the almost total failure of Communist propaganda in this country. When the Third International decreed, against the advice of its most level-headed adherents, that Labour must be fought at the polls, it signed the death warrant of the British Communist Party.” The CPGB’s decline in membership and influence, the article concluded, was a “reflection of that dictatorship and domination which are entirely alien to the spirit of the British Labour Movement.”20
The ILP thought no better of the CPGB when, in the mid-1930s, the Communists became advocates of the “popular front,” urged workers to vote Labour, and renewed its attempt to be allowed to affiliate to the Labour Party. In the October 1935 issue of *Controversy*, Edward Conze mocked the CPGB in “The Communist Party’s Last Somersault.” He recalled that in 1928, the Comintern had adopted standing orders requiring biennial world congresses, yet because such democratic procedures were disliked by “the more dictatorial-minded Communists,” none had been held until the current year. The result had then been that Communist parties, with the British being a little slower than most, had “swung round to a policy of extreme right-wing reformism.”

At the beginning of 1936, John McGovern, fresh from being returned to the House of Commons as a Clydeside MP, one of the four successful ILP candidates, all in the Glasgow area, asked what the ILP’s reaction would be “if Willie Gallacher is admitted to the Parliamentary Labour Party.” Gallacher was the sole Communist returned in the 1935 election. He represented another Clydeside constituency. McGovern compared the uncompromising socialist policies of the ILP with those of CPGB: “Three years ago the crime of the I.L.P. was that we were inside the Labour Party. Our crime to-day is that we are not following the C.P. in a wild scramble to get inside and place ourselves under the heel of the T.U.C. and Labour Party bosses.” Gallacher and the CPGB, McGovern noted sarcastically, were trying to demonstrate to Labour that “the I.L.P. are bold, bad boys, and the C.P. are good little lads who will help, if admitted to the Labour Party, to put the I.L.P. in its place.” He mocked the swings in Communist policy: “When Bertram Mills requires turns for his circus he should apply to the C.P. It has a leadership that can turn every kind of somersault ever recorded.” The ILP’s members were not “robot enough to turn right about when ordered.” On the contrary, he concluded, “we retain our rights as a democratic organisation and intend to defend them against all comers.”

But such disdain for the homegrown Communists and even for the Comintern had little impact on the ultraoptimistic views of the USSR. Throughout 1931 and into the following year, Labour’s *Northern Voice* devoted much space to the Five-Year Plan adopted in the Soviet Union, as did *Forward*, while the New Leader published its praise under the headline “Russia’s Second Five Year Plan: Amazing Details.” At about the same time, the ILP’s Welsh Division carried a motion congratulating “the Soviet Union upon the titanic effort it is making to reveal to the Workers of the World that Socialism is the only escape from the chaos of Capitalism and pledge ourselves to do all in our power to expose the abusive and lying campaign now being waged against the U.S.S.R.” Soon after this, the party published a Commons speech made by Fenner Brockway...
in a no-confidence debate on the Labour government, which included the following confident prediction:

Tory members sneer at Russia, but, sooner or later, we shall have to face the fact that the five-year plan which Russia is putting through is a quite deliberate plan to raise the standard of her people by 100 per cent, a quite deliberate plan to rationalise and modernise her industry on the basis of Socialist principles, which will become a competitive factor in the world.  

Beginning in April 1932 and running throughout the year and into the following one, the *New Leader* included more than a dozen well-illustrated “New Russia Supplements.” Titles included “The Soviet System Explained” in May and “Russia is Wonderful—But Don’t Be Expecting Too Much!” the following month.  

At the 1933 annual conference, Brockway included in his chairman’s address the statement “We declare to the workers of Russia that if any conflict develops between the British Government and Soviet Russia our stand will be with them and not for the capitalist and imperialist Government of this country.” The conference went on to carry unanimously a motion moved by the Sheffield branch and the Edinburgh Federation, which pledged resistance “to any attempt to strangle the progress of Soviet Russia” and “to agitate for a general strike to restrain the Government in the event of any attempt to make war on Russia.” The constitution adopted by the conference stated, in the section “The Development of World Socialism,” that “the I.L.P supports the U.S.S.R., the first workers’ republic.”

Later that year, Brockway and Maxton’s “Clear Lead” statement, though pledging cooperation where possible, stressed the differences between the ILP and the CPGB, charging that “the Communist Party is not prepared to break from the rigid organizational and financial control of Moscow.” The difference in attitude towards “Soviet Russia” and “Moscow,” which were somehow perceived as independent of each other, is again clear. The NAC’s statement to the 1935 annual conference, “A Socialist Policy for Britain,” once again underlined the contrast in perceptions of the Soviet Union and the CPGB. It concluded that “the Soviet Union is a Socialist citadel in a hostile Capitalist world and must be defended at all costs.” But in Britain, the statement went on, the Communist Party frequently pursued tactics that hindered the development of an effective revolutionary movement. It was sectarian in its attitude and actions, which prejudiced its work in the trade unions and tended to make united action difficult. “Its organisational basis prevents freedom of discussion and decision within the Party and tends to create an automatic mind among its membership. Its financial dependence upon the Communist International involves a control
of policy detrimental to the development of a revolutionary policy suited to British conditions.”

However, the sudden changes in Soviet foreign policy and in Comintern attitudes towards those not so long before despised as “social fascists” began a prolonged and very hesitant process of change in attitudes towards the Soviet Union. This change began when Brockway criticized the USSR’s recent positions on international issues.

Brockway’s “Anti-Soviet Slanders” and Relations with the Comintern

Hostility towards Brockway from the Communists and, prior to its departure from the ILP, the RPC, had been building since 1933. A straw in the wind appeared in May 1933 in an article that was part of the New Leader series “The New Russia Supplement.” Under the title “Russia’s Peace Policy,” it was as uncritical and laudatory as was the rest of that series. It complained about the exclusion of the USSR from the “Four-Power Pact” that MacDonald was promoting, commenting that “Russia obviously cannot be excluded from any pact whose object is to maintain peace in Europe. Her exclusion clearly meant her isolation.” This suggested the direction that Soviet policy was now taking—trying to avoid isolation by seeking international agreement. Brockway would soon make himself very unpopular in parts of the Left—especially the CPGB and the RPC—by his criticism of the USSR for joining the League of Nations and attempting to achieve alliances with “bourgeois” states.

A few weeks later, Brockway’s article “Workers Prepare: The Bankruptcy of the Internationals” appeared in the New Leader, spread over the paper’s two middle pages and adorned with photos that were eye-catching if not particularly relevant. In it, Brockway maintained that the Comintern was sacrificing the interests of the workers, citing two actions as evidence: first, its resistance to calls for an international workers’ boycott of German goods and, second, the “Russian acquiescence in Japanese Imperialism in the Far East, by its recognition of Manchukuo and its offer to sell Japan the Chinese Eastern Railway.” He went on: “Russia does not want war. That is understandable. But international working class opposition to Imperialism must not be sacrificed even to the interests of Russia.” The following week, a letter from a member of the Stepney branch alleged that Brockway’s comments ran contrary to the ILP’s policy of support to the USSR, a policy adopted little more than a month earlier at the Derby conference. The writer, who was not alone in his complaints, asked for “a definite statement from the Party Chairman. Does he want Russia to go to war with Japan?”

In the next four issues of the New Leader, Brockway developed his arguments further. On 30 June, he noted that his article published two weeks earlier had
caused “considerable controversy”—as he had anticipated—but went on to repeat his criticisms, adding that Russian trade agreements with Germany would “help to stabilise Hitlerism.” He returned to these allegations the following week, in an article that began, “I shall ignore the hysterical Communist charges that I am a ‘cheap publicist of the bounds of War and Fascism,’” before he proceeded to engage with them. In his third article, Brockway reiterated his criticism of the Communist International’s failure to support a working-class refusal “to handle or transport goods for Germany,” speculating that such an action might have sufficed to bring the Hitler regime down. He rejected Communist charges that he was colluding with Paton and others to avoid carrying out the pro-USSR policy of the Derby conference.

By now, the ILP was committed to exploring the possibility of cooperation and even—once again—affiliation to the Third International. In the early part of 1934, the party published correspondence arising from Brockway’s letter of inquiry about the conditions of affiliation to the Communist International. The reply, signed “O. W. Kuusinen, for the Political Secretariat of the E.C.C.I. (dated Moscow, February 20th 1934),” began with the greeting “Comrades” and then immediately went on to characterize Brockway’s letter as consisting for the most part of “anti-Communist and anti-Soviet slanders.” It referred to his “notorious articles last summer against the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Communist International,” which were in “full conformity with the anti-Soviet slanders of the counterrevolutionary traitor, Trotsky.” Brockway’s reply, dated 12 March 1934, stressed that the views he had expressed were not just his own but also those of the NAC and that they were borne out by the “history of Communist Parties both in Europe and America.”

Brockway saw the changes in Russian foreign policy as predicated on the Soviet Union’s fear of Nazi Germany and consequent wish to draw capitalist countries—above all, Britain and France—into cooperation against the growing threat it represented. The Comintern’s official adoption of the Popular Front policy, at its Seventh World Congress in the summer of 1935, was a corollary. The policy was dismissed by the ILP, in a one-page leaflet titled What the I.L.P. Stands For, as “the surrender of the class struggle and the fight for Socialism.”

**The USSR and the League of Nations**

The ILP had always been, at best, highly suspicious of the “bourgeois” League of Nations, and never more so than during its period of revolutionary policy in the 1930s. There were persistent reports that the USSR was intending to join the League, which it finally did in September 1934. Those hostile to the League were bound to be critical of the Soviet Union’s action. Brockway had
already refused, in May, to withdraw criticism of the direction in which the USSR appeared to be heading.35

Editorial comment followed over the summer. In July, the New Leader argued that “in entering ‘pacts’ and ‘alliances’” with capitalist governments, soviet Russia was in danger of taking on obligations that might conflict with “the interests of revolutionary action by the working class.” In September, while acknowledging the circumstances that had brought about the Soviet decision, the ILP paper declared that “whatever may be said for Soviet Russia entering the League from a Governmental standpoint, nothing can be said for the International Working-Class Movement entering the League either in mind or action.”36

At the end of November 1934, Brockway’s article “Soviet Russia’s Foreign Policy: An Issue Socialists Must Face” appeared in the New Leader. It was prompted, he explained, by reports from the French Chamber of Deputies about a secret Franco-Russian alliance. Fear of attack by Germany and Poland, in the west, and Japan, in the east, had led the USSR “entirely to reverse her foreign policy.” Previously, the Soviet Union had managed to combine the aims of the preservation of peace, “so that the great work of Socialist construction might proceed in Russia,” with that of encouraging social revolution in capitalist countries and nationalist revolt in their empires. It had relied on action by the working class to prevent war rather than on pacts with capitalist countries or the intervention of the League of Nations. But now it had joined the League and accepted the “collective system” of peacekeeping.37

What if, asked Brockway, “a British Government fights side by side with Soviet Russia against Germany and Japan in the next war, not because of any regard for Russia, but because it wishes to maintain the Versailles Treaty and the British Empire. Will Socialists be expected to enlist?” If they did so, they were likely, among other disastrous outcomes, to end up having to “crush a revolution in India.”38

Brockway explicitly connected the change in Russian foreign policy to the new popular front line of the Comintern and the CPGB. Everywhere, Communist parties were moderating their policies. In Britain, the Communist Party was clearly preparing the way for a changed attitude towards the Labour Party. As he explained, his article had been prompted not only by recent events but also by Gore Graham’s War and Peace and the Soviet Union, which had, he maintained, misrepresented “a former warning which I wrote on . . . Soviet Russia’s foreign policy, as I anticipate this warning will be misrepresented.” It was an issue of “first importance” to all socialists, he concluded.39

The December meeting of the Inner Executive noted a complaint about Brockway’s article from Gaster, who maintained that a position on Russian foreign policy was “a matter definitely decided by Annual Conference.” The
IE’s April meeting rejected a motion from the London Division “strongly protesting against the Editor’s article on the diplomacy of the Soviet Union.” The Inner Executive insisted that there was no divergence from ILP policy. When it reported this to the NAC, however, it added that a number of resolutions and letters had been received about the issue.”

Soon thereafter, Gaster was supported by A. H. Hawkins, now chair of the London Division, in a bid to get his own article, critical of Brockway, published in the New Leader. But he was reminded by the Inner Executive “that the principle had been accepted that inner-Party controversy should be excluded from its columns.” Undeterred, Gaster attempted to refer the Inner Executive minutes back at the next NAC meeting. Gaster was by no means alone in protesting against the line being taken on the issue of Soviet foreign policy, although opposition was concentrated in his own London Division. Another NAC meeting a few days later, at the annual conference, noted protests from the London Divisional Council, five London branches, and fourteen individual London members.

International Alignments

“Make 1934 Historic!” Maxton had demanded on the front page of the first New Leader of the New Year. A month earlier, Controversy had predicted that at the 1934 annual conference, the “real alternatives” would be affiliation to the Communist International, or the creation of a new united international. When, in keeping with the resolution passed at its 1933 conference, the ILP had approached the Comintern with an offer of cooperation, the initial response had been encouraging: the Comintern welcomed “united front activity” with the ILP and expressed its “readiness to commence negotiations with the N.A.C. of the I.L.P.” However, the later exchanges over Brockway’s “anti-Soviet” articles in early 1934 made this seem less and less likely, in spite of determined efforts of supporters to bring the ILP around to this position.

February 1934 saw the RPC-dominated Affiliation Committee protesting to the NAC against the London Division’s exclusion of its members from holding office. The committee went on to request the circulation of its statement favouring affiliation with the Comintern. The NAC instructed Maxton to investigate and refused to circulate any material from such “unofficial bodies.” The next NAC meeting endorsed the London Division’s action on the understanding that the rights of members who had signed the Affiliation Committee would be restored “when satisfactory guarantees of Party loyalty were given.”

In the meantime, the ILP had been busy exploring other possibilities for international cooperation. The previous March, Paton had written to the Socialist and Communist Internationals on behalf of the “International
Committee of the ‘Left’ Independent Socialist Parties,” which represented a number of left-wing parties spread across Europe and hoped to achieve “real proletarian unity.” Paton had now left the party, but the **ILP** remained committed to a wider form of unity. Brockway, his successor as general secretary, presented a draft statement of **ILP** objectives. Its first aim was “to bring about the unification of all genuinely revolutionary sections of the working-class in one International.” The **ILP** would oppose any new international being formed but would work with “independent Revolutionary Parties” to bring them to support an “inclusive revolutionary international.” This was approved after the defeat, by 9 votes to 4, of a motion by Gaster calling for “sympathetic” affiliation to Comintern.50

“Is a New International Necessary? Revolutionary Parties of Ten Countries Meet in Paris” was the headline of a *New Leader* report in February 1935 by “our own correspondent.” The report gave details of the meeting of parties supporting the International Bureau. The **ILP** was firmly opposed to the formation a new international, and that view won the day in Paris, the writer explained. At the Paris meeting, Brockway spoke of the need to bring together three elements of what he and the **ILP** regarded as the political side of the working-class movement: the “revolutionary sections” of the Socialist International, the “independent revolutionary parties” represented at the meeting, and the Communist International. He insisted that “there can be no real revolutionary international without the Russian Communist Party” and other Communist parties. Although he conceded that there were “no prospects for reform” of the Comintern in the immediate future, the time for a unity conference would arrive at some stage.51

The difference between an international bureau and an “international” seems extremely difficult to discern—and evidently was so at the time. “Is not the Bureau in fact if not in name, an International?” asked the *London R.P.C. Bulletin* in June. It rejected the idea that the other participants were “genuinely revolutionary.” The claims to this status of Norwegian, Dutch, and German supporters of the Bureau were duly trashed in some detail. As to “revolutionary unity between the C.I., the Trotskyists and other ‘revolutionary’ sections and parties,” it concluded, “we fear the N.A.C. lives in dreamland.” This is a conclusion from which it is difficult, with the benefits of hindsight, to dissent.52

Nevertheless, in the summer of 1935, the **NAC** decided that if the **ILP** was invited to send fraternal delegates to the Comintern’s upcoming World Congress in Moscow, it should send two members plus one from each divisional council.53 But when Brockway reported that the **CPGB**’s J. R. Campbell had indicated that it was unlikely that such an invitation would be forthcoming

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unless the ILP specifically requested it, the Inner Executive agreed that “the decisions of the annual conference and of the N.A.C. did not entitle it take such action.” The following year, 1936, the NAC reported that it had told the Communist Party that it was willing to send fraternal delegates to the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern on the understanding that the ILP was not committed to the decisions of the congress and was free “to express the Party view.” The ILP annual conference was told subsequently that “no invitation was received and fraternal delegates were not sent.”

Meanwhile, in April 1935, the Inner Executive responded to a resolution from the London Division “protesting against the political line of the Editor’s article on the diplomacy of the Soviet Union.” The Inner Executive insisted that there was no divergence from party policy. It also noted letters from the Harrow branch, which had refused to distribute the New Leader containing Brockway’s article until instructed to do so by the divisional council. How divisive the issue had become in the London Division is clear from the minutes of the NAC meeting two weeks later. In opposition to the London divisional statement, as well as other resolutions critical of the articles from London already noted, Brockway’s line was supported by eight London branches as well as by two letters from members outside the capital.

Still operating within the ILP, the London R.P.C. Bulletin, in July 1935, had taken issue with Brockway’s “Final Rejoinder” on the USSR foreign policy issue in that month’s Controversy. The R.P.C complained that though the Inner Executive and the Derby conference had eventually backed “Brockway’s line,” he had been propagating it in the New Leader long before this, while other points of view were “suppressed.” Had as much space been given to “an explanation of the Soviet Union’s foreign policy,” the Bulletin argued, the voting at Derby would have been different. Whatever Brockway’s intentions may have been, his articles “hindered the closer unity of the I.L.P. and the C.P.”

Moreover, Brockway was “fundamentally pacifist” rather than revolutionary. Under his editorship, the departing R.P.C alleged in its final Bulletin, the New Leader had “come out with insinuations, questions and innuendos about the good faith and revolutionary integrity of the Soviet government.” This was not “comradely criticism but the cautiously deliberate encouragement of anti-Communist sentiment.” Under the subheading “The New Leader’s Crooked Line,” the “mountebank” Brockway’s article of 30 November 1934 was particularly singled out for denunciation: “Unscrupulous hostility to Communism could go no further,” the Bulletin article concluded.

In his 1938 book Workers’ Front, Brockway set out to demonstrate succinctly how Hitler’s rise to power and the USSR’s consequent fear of Germany had brought about a “complete turn” in Communist foreign policy:
When Mussolini established his dictatorship in Italy, the Communist International called on the working class to organise a boycott of goods to Italy, to refuse to handle or transport any articles destined for Italy. When Hitler established his dictatorship, Soviet Russia immediately renewed its trade agreement with Germany. At the moment when Hitler was rounding up the German Communists, imprisoning them, herding them in concentration camps, inflicting indescribable tortures on them, executing them, the representatives of Soviet Russia were putting their pens to an extended agreement for mutual trade between the two countries.  

This account was even more dismissive of the USSR’s foreign policy changes than Brockway’s New Leader articles of earlier years had been. It reflects the growing disillusionment with the USSR that was taking place, albeit in a very uneven way, within the ILP.

Conflicts over Russian foreign policy and Abyssinia were as nothing compared to the divisions that were opened up by the Moscow trials between 1936 and 1938 and, above all, by the Spanish Civil War during the same period. The earlier gap between the way the CPGB, and even Comintern, were dismissed and the laudatory view of the Soviet Union was narrowing rapidly. Unlike the criticism of Soviet adhesion to the League of Nations and the reorientation of its foreign policy, this time there would be implications for the way the state of affairs in the Soviet Union itself was regarded.