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The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and the coming of the Second World War

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War

With the conference taking place at LSE, it seemed only proper that a paper was presented based on a collection held by LSE Archives and Special Collections. The collection in question is the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. This had previously been split between LSE and the Women's Library until the collection was transferred fully to LSE in 2008. Since then, as some of you may be aware, the Women's Library has also transferred to LSE and a new reading room built. The WILPF collection has now been fully catalogued as part of the Swords into Ploughshares project, which also saw the records of the London region of the Fellowship of Reconciliation catalogued.

WILPF was formed in April 1915 at a meeting in The Hague, which had been called to explore ways of ending the Great War. This aim can be seen in the resolutions, which formed the basis of the organisation. Gertrude Bussey and Margaret Tims in their work covering the first fifty years of WILPF draw attention to three particular articles, namely numbers four, nineteen and twenty. These called on belligerent nations to send in ideas for a just settlement; for a women's conference to take place alongside any peace conference in order to give women a voice in any settlement; and to carry the message of the Congress to neutral and belligerent nations.¹ They therefore enshrined the idea of just settlements, achieved by peaceful negotiation into the organisation. The efforts of the organisation to end the conflict by peaceful methods at this point failed. When the conflict was finally over, a Congress took place in Zurich in 1919 at the same time as the Paris Peace Conference was in session. During the Congress, the terms of the peace settlement were made public. They were condemned by the Congress as 'violating the principles upon which a just and lasting peace can be secured'.²

This paper will tell part of the story of the British section of WILPF in the two years prior to the declaration of war in September 1939, further elaborating on parts of a recent article by Julie Gottlieb, which highlighted the organisation's humanitarian work following the Munich agreement as well as its determination to maintain its core principles.³ It will examine the attitudes and discussions of executive and branch meetings towards Spain; Central Europe with particular

¹ G. Bussey and M. Tims, *Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 1915-1965: A Record of Fifty Years' Work* (London, 1965): 20.

² Bussey et al., *Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 1915-1965: A Record of Fifty Years' Work*: 31.

³ J. V. Gottlieb, 'The Women's Movement Took the Wrong Turning: British Feminists, Pacifism and the Politics of Appeasement', *Womens History Review* 23, 3 (2014): 450.

reference to Czechoslovakia; and British defence preparations. The concentration on these years does not mean that the rest of the 1930s should be ignored. It is in fact well covered by Dorothy Van Seters examination of women's foreign policy advocacy in Britain during this decade. Van Seters highlights WILPF's opposition to the announcement of rearmament in March 1935, a stance that was in keeping with one of their principal objectives, namely disarmament.⁴ Despite this objection, WILPF's attitude was in line with the governments' and many other organisations and people of influence when it came to Germany, namely, that there was a degree of sympathy with the claims that were being put forward by Germany as a result of the harsh treatment that she received in the Treaty of Versailles. The British section of WILPF differed from its continental counterparts by the mid-1930s as by then the continental sections were advocating the need to combat fascism before any agreement on arms reduction could be achieved, though by February 1938, branches within the British section were warning its' member to be vigilant about this threat.⁵

Thus far in setting the background to the years under consideration, it has been noted that the organisation was committed to the principles of disarmament, peace by negotiation, and a concern for the freedoms of people. This would continue to be seen in the period under consideration.

At the beginning of 1937, the international scene was dominated by the Spanish Civil War, an event that acted as a catalyst for the crystallisation of opinion within Britain. In keeping with the government, WILPF supported the principle of non-intervention but were concerned that this policy was ineffective due to violations by other nations and urged the government to prevent interference by outside parties.⁶ There was therefore a good deal of concern expressed when the question of giving Germany and Italy areas of the Mediterranean to patrol in order to make non-intervention effective.⁷ The executive committee's concerns about the conflict in Spain continued on into April and May 1937. By this time the minutes begin to reveal an increased concern about the humanitarian impact of the conflict. This increased sharply following the bombing of Guernica, an action that they protested about in a resolution that was sent to the government, namely Anthony Eden and Stanley Baldwin. They encouraged local branches to undertake a similar course of action.⁸

⁴ D. E. Van Seters, 'Women's Foreign Policy Advocacy in 1930s Britain' (Ph.D., University of Toronto (Canada), 1999), :54.

⁵ LSE: WILPF/BRAN/1/4, Executive Committee Meeting, 1 February 1938

⁶ LSE: WILPF/1/13, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 9 February 1937

⁷ LSE: WILPF/1/13, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 9 March 1937

⁸ LSE: WILPF/1/13, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 13 April 1937 ; LSE: WILPF/1/13, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 4 May 1937; LSE: WILPF/1/13, B. Duncan Harris to Rt. Hon. Anthony Eden, 5 May 1937

As the conflict continued, the executive committee heard from one of its members, Miss Nye, who had been working to ensure the safe arrival of children from the Basque region, though not under the auspices of WILPF. She reported that there was interest from a number of municipal areas in providing support.⁹ One such area was Bolton in Lancashire, as the local newspapers from the period detail. Miss Nye's report prompted the committee to appeal to the Chancellor, Sir John Simon, to provide funds to support this work, a request that was politely denied. The government was however, willing to provide support for a collective effort under the auspices of the Red Cross, if other governments joined it.¹⁰ Following on from this, the minutes of the executive committee feature less discussion about Spain, with most remaining references being made to the subject of aerial bombardment, one of the concerns of the organisation. In connection with this, they sent a letter of indignation to General Franco, following the bombing of Guernica.¹¹ They continued to make appeals to both sides to refrain from this measure.¹² Their dislike of aerial bombardment and measures associated with it will be highlighted further in relation to British defence preparations.

1938 began on a hopeful note following recent Anglo-German and Anglo-French conversations. These were welcomed by WILPF as a step towards a general settlement.¹³ These hopes were quickly shattered by the resignation of the Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden in February, following a methodological difference of opinion with the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, about the opening of talks with Italy. WILPF joined the chorus of organisations such as the League of Nations Union,¹⁴ who expressed concern at this development. Their resolution to the government deplored the resignation and accused the government of 'creating the impression that His Majesty's government have surrendered to the demands of the dictatorial powers'. The resolution of the executive committee was joined by similar ones from the Manchester and Salford branches, which provide an expression of support for the principles that Eden stood for.¹⁵ By the time of the March meeting, they had been joined in taking action by the Preston, Stockport, Bristol, Glasgow, Edinburgh, and Welwyn branches of the organisation.¹⁶

The 'Cabinet crisis' of February was soon overshadowed by the Anschluss in March 1938. The union, whilst generally expected, created shock as a result of the methods used. The executive committee was more concerned with the humanitarian effect. The annual report for 1937-8 viewed the

⁹ LSE: WILPF/1/13, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 8 June 1937

¹⁰ LSE: WILPF/1/13, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 13 July 1937

¹¹ WILPF/1/13, 8 June 1937

¹² LSE: WILPF/1/14, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 8 February 1938

¹³ LSE: WILPF/1/14, The German Demand for Colonies, 18 January 1938

¹⁴ LSE: LNU 2/16, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive Committee, 24 February 1938

¹⁵ LSE: WILPF/BRAN/1/4, Executive Committee Meeting, 22 February 1938

¹⁶ LSE: WILPF/1/14, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 8 March 1938

Anschluss with a degree of apprehension as it resulted in the extension of the persecution of the Jews.¹⁷ This concern was expressed by the Executive Committee and the Manchester branch, in a letter to the Home Secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare, calling for changes to be made to the Aliens Act to enable a greater degree of immigration. In addition to this letter, they indicated their support for Josiah Wedgwood's parliamentary campaign for lifting restrictions on groups affected by events in Central Europe.¹⁸

Austria was only the beginning of trouble in Central Europe. Following the Anschluss, Germany turned its attention to Czechoslovakia. This subject arose at the April meeting of the Executive Committee, who were in receipt of a letter from the international committee asking for support in relation to Czechoslovakia. Members were advised that the only support they could give would be if they were to take a holiday in Czechoslovakia thus allowing them to provide support whilst they were there.¹⁹

The situation in Czechoslovakia continued to be discussed at the following months' meetings. By the time of the June meeting, the Executive Committee had received a letter from the head of the Czechoslovak branch of WILPF. The letter protested against information that had been given in the monthly newsletter and undertook an historical survey as well as pointing out the dangers of propaganda. In addition, the committee were also in receipt of letters from former members of the German section that urged WILPF to pressure the government to see that any concessions did not affect the overall stability and integrity of Czechoslovakia. It was agreed after discussion of these points that WILPF in Britain would adopt this line of argument.²⁰

The crisis surrounding Czechoslovakia eventually came to a head in September 1938. On 15 September, Neville Chamberlain flew to Germany for talks with the German Chancellor, Adolf Hitler. They held a second meeting a week later. Between these meetings, informed opinion in Britain began to advocate taking a firm line towards Germany, a move that WILPF supported as they made clear in a letter to the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax.²¹ The letter argued that the proposals made by the Czechoslovak government covered all of the demands and any move to buy Hitler off would only strengthen his position. This course of action would only postpone war not prevent it.²² It was statements of opinion such as this, which helped to prompt Halifax to write his highly cited letter to

¹⁷ LSE: WILPF/2/7, Annual Report 1937-38, 1938

¹⁸ LSE: WILPF/BRAN/1/4, Executive Committee Meeting, 29 March 1938; LSE: WILPF/1/14, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 12 April 1938

¹⁹ WILPF/1/14, 12 April 1938

²⁰ LSE: WILPF/1/14, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 14 June 1938

²¹ LSE: WILPF/1/14, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 20 September 1938

²² TNA: FO371/21780, C10393/6490/18, German-Czech Situation, 20 September 1938; LSE WILPF/1/14, Statement of German-Czech Situation, 20 September 1938

the British delegation at Godesberg, warning them of this change that was taking place 'within the press and elsewhere'.²³ The British section of WILPF, like others, failed to suggest a method of resolving the crisis, whilst expressing a desire to avoid war.

The meeting to discuss the resolution that was sent to Lord Halifax was the only meeting of the Executive Committee to be held during the crisis, a fact that was criticised following the agreement by the Manchester branch.²⁴ The lack of guidance from the Executive Committee added to the sense of a lack of information about the situation. The Cheadle Hulme branch minutes from 26 September indicate that they felt it would be useful to have a talk by someone who knew Czechoslovakia well, thereby implying a lack of definite information and knowledge of the subject.²⁵

The organisation's reaction to the Munich agreement was similar to many within the country. The Executive Committee along with the Manchester branch noted their relief at the preservation of the peace but were concerned about the price that had been made. It was reported at the Manchester branch meeting that Lancashire and Cheshire members had sent a telegram to the Prime Minister recognising his efforts and urging him to call a world conference to discuss further revisions to treaties.²⁶

The Manchester branch meeting took place before the national Executive Committee met on 11 October. At the meeting, it was reported that several branches and individual members felt that a gift should be sent to the Czech section of WILPF, an idea that went against the general attitude of not undertaking relief work. Without waiting for official sanction for this, the Golders Green branch, as Mrs Garside reported, had already raised £32 13s. The official attitude of the organisation was seen in the letter that they sent to the Czech section:²⁷

'We feel overwhelmed with shame at what you and your country have suffered for the sake of the peace of Europe and we are constrained at the same time to express to you our admiration for the nobility and self-control of your leader and your people.

We believe that by this self-control you have made the greatest contribution that is possible for any nation to make towards the establishment of peace in the world. You have stood for a civilised standard of conduct, the effect of which will, we are convinced, be written into human history.'

²³ TNA: FO371, C10664/1941/18, 23 September 1938

²⁴ LSE: WILPF/BRAN/1/4, Executive Committee Meeting, 4 October 1938

²⁵ LSE: WILPF/BRAN/2/1, Cheadle Hulme Committee Meeting, 26 September 1938

²⁶ WILPF/BRAN/1/4, 4 October 1938

²⁷ LSE: WILPF/1/14, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 11 October 1938

The appeal to provide some form of support was relayed at Manchester branch meeting. The appeal for funds was accompanied by resolution that was to be sent to local MPs urging them to ask the government to help support emigration from Czechoslovakia.²⁸ The need for funds increased in urgency following the report of Mrs Barbara Duncan Harris, the chairwoman of the British section, to the November Executive Committee meeting. She reported that there was a need to get 19 members of the Czech section out of Czechoslovakia as they were in danger from persecution and detention. Following on from her report, Miss Edith Pye, vice-chairwoman of the Friends' Germany emergency committee, and Mrs Kathleen Innes, one of the overall organisation's three international joint chair women, also reported on efforts to help secure the passage of these members to Britain. The relief work that the British section was undertaking in support of Czech section members was not unanimously supported by all of the branches. The minutes of the November meeting refer to a letter from the Northampton branch, who opposed the policy now being implemented. They felt that the money should have been used in the distressed areas within the UK,²⁹ a point that would be made by others in early 1939 in connection with Lord Baldwin's appeal for funds to help German Jews following Kristallnacht.³⁰

The day after the Executive Committee meeting came the events of Kristallnacht, which were widely condemned in Britain. The Manchester branch added to the chorus of condemnation. At the same time, Mrs Rothschild, a member of the branch argued that the time for protests was over and that practical action needed to be taken, a view that the November meeting of the Executive committee concurred with.³¹ The organisation once again called for an increase in the numbers that were allowed to enter Britain.

Whilst protesting against the treatment of the Jews, WILPF continued with its efforts to provide relief to members of the Czech section. All of the branches had received a letter from Mrs Duncan Harris asking for assistance to provide homes for 20 members of the Czech section. Assistance was duly forthcoming from the Cheadle Hulme branch who agreed to provide support for two of this group. Part of the provision of support was the necessity to raise funds to prevent the Czech arrivals

²⁸ LSE: WILPF/BRAN/1/4, Executive Committee Meeting, 18 October 1938

²⁹ LSE: WILPF/1/14, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 8 November 1938

³⁰ *Luton News*, 19 January 1939

³¹ LSE: WILPF/BRAN/1/4, Executive Committee Meeting, 15 November 1938; LSE: WILPF/BRAN/1/4, Executive Committee Meeting, 29 November 1938

being a burden to the state.³² The Manchester branch was one of several that had been doing this with its November minutes noting that £31 5s had been raised.³³

The rise in the number of people seeking entry into Britain following Kristallnacht, affected the efforts that WILPF were making as it slowed down the visa application process, a fact that generated several letters to the *Manchester Guardian* in December 1938, mainly in relation to the Jews. The delay was a cause for concern for the Executive Committee as the situation in Czechoslovakia was continuing to deteriorate.³⁴ By January 1939, some of those seeking refuge had arrived and the business of day to day help began.³⁵ An example of this can be seen in the Cheadle Hulme branch minutes on 24 January when a Mrs Lockhart asked if the group would provide funds to pay for a work uniform for Zdeaska Ekstein, whom the group had taken responsibility for. This was agreed to.³⁶ The Manchester branch meanwhile was using its relief fund to provide 5s per week spending money to those it was responsible for.³⁷

The relief effort being undertaken by WILPF continued throughout 1939. At the April meeting of the Executive Committee, it was reported that 53 members of the Czech section had arrived in the country with several more expected.³⁸ These members continued to be supported by funds raised across the country as a result of a variety of activities. These included appeals to members at meetings and bring and buy sales.³⁹ It was noted in the Croydon branch annual report that the former of these methods had raised £59 18s.⁴⁰

The international situation continued to deteriorate following the German invasion of the remainder of Czechoslovakia. WILPF viewed this move as a foregone conclusion following the Munich agreement and they viewed the seizure of Memel as revealing Hitler's plan to annex the Polish Corridor. These developments only increased the need for WILPF's relief effort on behalf of its members but did not prevent it from remaining cautiously optimistic.⁴¹ They welcomed a statement by the Foreign Secretary that the British Government was keeping the door open. The National Executive believed that this needed to be made more convincing and called for a conference to

³² LSE: WILPF/BRAN/2/1, Cheadle Hulme Emergency Committee Meeting, 21 November 1938

³³ WILPF/BRAN/1/4, 15 November 1938

³⁴ LSE: WILPF/1/14, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 13 December 1938

³⁵ LSE: WILPF/1/15, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 10 January 1939

³⁶ LSE: WILPF/BRAN/2/1, Cheadle Hulme Emergency Committee Meeting, 24 January 1939

³⁷ LSE: WILPF/BRAN/1/4, Executive Committee Meeting, 12 January 1939

³⁸ LSE: WILPF/1/15, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 4 April 1939

³⁹ LSE: WILPF/BRAN/2/1, Cheadle Hulme Committee Meeting, 4 May 1939

⁴⁰ LSE: WILPF/2009/7/1, Croydon and District Branch: Twenty-Second Annual Report, March 1939

⁴¹ LSE: WILPF 15/1, Monthly News Shhet, April 1939

address the claims of Germany.⁴² This view was reinforced in the July monthly newsletter, which added that negotiations 'must take place in an atmosphere of mutual confidence'.⁴³ The attitudes on display mirrored those of the government during this period.

The continued emphasis on peaceful settlement of disputes was only one part of the government's strategy during this period. It was accompanied by increasing defence preparations and rearmament. As stated earlier, WILPF had opposed the rearmament proposals in 1935 and continued to do so, even in the areas of civil defence and national service.

In the early months of 1938, the question of air raid precautions and support for the Territorial Army at the outbreak of war were discussed.⁴⁴ WILPF were not prepared to support either, even after a lengthy discussion on the former. The question of ARP had first been raised at the December 1937 Executive Committee, when a letter from Holborn council was received asking for assistance⁴⁵ but did not receive the full attention of the Executive Committee until July 1938, when a full discussion was held. During the discussion Mrs Innes felt that the three main points of ARP were to 'drill the country, train women for women's job in time of war, and to free men for the fighting services'. This was seen by Mrs Lankester as preparing the people for war, whilst Mrs Duncan Harris was of the opinion that 'not participating, risked less than creating a war mindedness'. The link with preparation for war was a key factor in the organisation's decision not to take an active part as it went against one of the core principles of the organisation. It was decided not to press the government to abandon them but to continue campaigning for the abolition of bombing aircraft.⁴⁶ The decision not to press the government to abandon them was an acknowledgement of the reality of the situation that Britain was facing.

The Executive Committee continued to advocate non-participation in defence orientated services in the aftermath of Munich crisis. At the December 1938 meeting, discussion turned to the proposed national register and the likelihood that some form of military service would eventually be the outcome.⁴⁷ The campaign for a national register was initially a voluntary one but the German invasion of Czechoslovakia changed the international situation. Initially the voluntary principle continued to be advocated by the government but by the end of April, conscription had been announced. This subject was of interest due to the perceived threat to civil liberties that the

⁴² LSE: WILPF/1/15, Statement, 18 July 1939

⁴³ LSE: WILPF 15/1, Monthly News Sheet, July 1939

⁴⁴ LSE: WILPF/1/14, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 10 May 1938

⁴⁵ LSE: WILPF/1/13, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 14 December 1937

⁴⁶ LSE: WILPF/1/14, Discussion at July Executive Committee Meeting on Air Raid Precautions, 12 July 1938

⁴⁷ WILPF/1/14, 13 December 1938

organisation believed that it represented.⁴⁸ They were not alone in this position with organisations such as the Peace Pledge Union advocating a similar line. A major difference between the two organisations was that WILPF was not prepared to support individual objectors unlike the PPU. The Executive Committee were of the opinion that they should 'confine ourselves to dealing with matters of principle and keep within our objectives'.⁴⁹

Sticking to the principles of the organisation has been one of the key themes of this paper. It has been seen in the campaigns that WILPF took part in, from calling on both sides in Spain to refrain from aerial bombardment to opposition to the government's defensive preparations. They were campaigns to enable people to live in peace and have the freedom to choose their course of action. It was a combination of the desire for peace and freedom that I believe led to the decision to provide relief for members of the Czech section of the organisation in the aftermath of the Munich Agreement as in this case the organisation internationally was directly affected by events. Adherence to the founding principles continued even after the declaration of war on Sunday 3 September as the October newsletter stated.⁵⁰ Whatever else can be said about WILPF, the British section was one that was not prepared to compromise upon its fundamental principles even in the face of the threat posed by Germany during this period.

⁴⁸ LSE: WILPF/BRAN/1/4, Executive Committee Meeting, 18 April 1939; P. J. Wainwright, 'The National Service Debate: The Government, Conscription and the Peace Movement in Britain, 1936-1942' (Dissertation, 1994), 102.

⁴⁹ LSE: WILPF/1/15, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 13 June 1939

⁵⁰ LSE: WILPF 15/1, Monthly News Sheet, October 1939

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