

From Civil Liberties to Human Rights? British Civil Liberties Activism and Universal Human Rights

Moore, Christopher

DOI:

[10.1017/S0960777312000100](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777312000100)

License:

None: All rights reserved

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Moore, C 2012, 'From Civil Liberties to Human Rights? British Civil Liberties Activism and Universal Human Rights', *Contemporary European History*, vol. 21, no. 02, pp. 169-192.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777312000100>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

Publisher Rights Statement:

© Cambridge University Press 2012

Eligibility for repository: checked July 2014

General rights

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

Take down policy

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

Contemporary European History

<http://journals.cambridge.org/CEH>

Additional services for ***Contemporary European History***:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



From Civil Liberties to Human Rights? British Civil Liberties Activism and Universal Human Rights

CHRISTOPHER MOORES

Contemporary European History / Volume 21 / Issue 02 / May 2012, pp 169 - 192

DOI: 10.1017/S0960777312000100, Published online: 29 March 2012

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0960777312000100

How to cite this article:

CHRISTOPHER MOORES (2012). From Civil Liberties to Human Rights? British Civil Liberties Activism and Universal Human Rights. Contemporary European History, 21, pp 169-192
doi:10.1017/S0960777312000100

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

From Civil Liberties to Human Rights? British Civil Liberties Activism and Universal Human Rights

CHRISTOPHER MOORES

Abstract

This article discusses British civil liberties organisations hoping to engage in a broader human rights politics during and immediately after the Second World War. It argues that various movements and organisations from sections of the British Left attempted to articulate a human rights politics which incorporated political, civil, social and economic rights during the 1940s and early 1950s. However, organisations were unable to express this and mobilise accordingly. This reflected the collapse of the popular-front-style alliances forged in the 1930s and the difficulties in articulating political positions distinct from the ideological polarisation that emerged with the onset of the Cold War.

By the end of the twentieth century a marked shift had taken place in the rhetorical framing of the activities of the British civil liberties lobby. The National Council for Civil Liberties (NCCL) became Liberty, operating under the tagline 'protecting civil liberties: promoting human rights'. Similarly, the Scottish Council for Civil Liberties had become the Scottish Human Rights Centre, while the British branch of the International Commission of Jurists, JUSTICE, now describes its first aim as the promotion of human rights. These shifts appeared to mark the emergence of a new *Zeitgeist*, in which a broader, inclusive language of human rights has replaced a more individualistic conceptualisation of civil liberties.¹

I am extremely grateful for the comments and suggestions of three anonymous reviewers for Contemporary European History, and wish to also thank Matthew Hilton, Nick Crowson and the audience at a Contemporary History Seminar at the University of Birmingham for criticisms and comments on earlier versions of this article. School of History and Cultures, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham. B15 2TT; mooresci@bham.ac.uk

¹ Francesca Klug, *Values for a Godless Age: The Story of the United Kingdom's New Bill of Rights* (London: Penguin, 2000), 6–7.

Such a shift in the language of British civil liberties activism reflects the increased importance of human rights in twentieth-century politics. Historians have placed great emphasis on the Second World War as a key period in this transformation.² Positivist and legal interpretations have identified this emergence within the United Nations Charter of 1945, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948 and the European Convention on Human Rights in 1950.³ These apparently marked an era in which the individual's rights had a place within the institutions of a new world order. As Paul Kennedy has made clear, this was 'qualitatively different from anything else that had gone before'.⁴

A number of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) played a significant role in this emergence.⁵ Eleanor Roosevelt, leading the UDHR's drafting committee, explained that NGOs could provide a 'curious grapevine' to carry the Declaration to all peoples in all regimes.⁶ Yet, NGOs working around the formation of the UN, and the UDHR's drafting, were largely American. Within Britain, the transition from national civil liberties politics into an international language of human rights did not occur in the immediate aftermath of the war.⁷ A member of the NCCL's executive committee in the immediate post-war period would later reflect that the organisation was 'very ambitious' in trying to organise an international conference on human rights, but admitted that such a project 'was ten years too early'.⁸

In discussing the relationship between British civil liberties and rights organisations and the new frameworks for transnational human rights, this article focuses on the activities of those from the British Left who had been associated with civil liberties politics during the 1930s.⁹ At the heart of this are a series of difficulties that organisations had in pursuing an effective politics of human rights. As will be demonstrated, there was a newfound interest in the idea of human rights from the

² Paul Kennedy, *The Parliament of Man: The United Nations and the Quest for World Government* (London: Penguin, 2006), 178–9; Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (London: W. W. Norton, 2007), 200–214; Klug, *Values*, 86–7.

³ Article 1, Charter of the United Nations (1945).

⁴ Kennedy, *Parliament*, 177; the uniqueness of this is also commented on in Tony Judt, *Post-war: A History of Europe Since 1945* (London: Pimlico, 2007), 565; John Humphrey, 'The UN Charter and Universal Declaration of Human Rights' in Evan Luard, ed., *The International Protection of Human Rights* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1967), 39–40.

⁵ William Korey, *NGOs and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: 'A Curious Grapevine'* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), 39.

⁶ Kennedy, *Parliament*, 178–9; Korey, *NGOs*, 48–9; Johannes Morsink, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Origins, Drafting and Intent* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Paul Gordon Lauren, *The Evolution of International Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 116.

⁷ Tom Buchanan, 'Human Rights Campaigns in Modern Britain' in Nick Crowson, Matthew Hilton and James McKay, eds, *NGOs in Contemporary Britain: Non-state Actors in Society and Politics since 1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 113–28; Stephen Hopgood, *Keepers of the Flame: Understanding Amnesty International* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006), vii.

⁸ Barry Cox interview with Neil Lawson, Hull History Centre, University of Hull Archives, Scaffardi Papers (hereafter U DSF), U DSF/4/3; this interview is undated but was conducted for the preparation of Barry Cox, *Civil Liberties in Britain* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975).

⁹ See Janet Clark, 'Sincere and Reasonable Men? The Origins of the National Council for Civil Liberties', *Twentieth Century British History*, 20, 4 (2009), 513–37.

British Left in the 1940s and 1950s, which expanded on civil and political rights and moved into the socio-economic sphere at both national and international level. Yet, this did not find effective organisational expression.

The article will consider four efforts to promote human rights organisations and movements that emerged during the 1940s and early 1950s. First, it will discuss a nationwide debate on the need for a new declaration of the rights of man, which was instigated by the writer H. G. Wells and the journalist Peter Ritchie-Calder and took place within the *Daily Herald* and *New Statesman* newspapers in February 1940. Second, it will consider the interest of the NCCL, an organisation which was formed in 1934 and was Britain's leading civil liberties group, in human rights. Its involvement in relation to the *Daily Herald* debate and at a series of national and international human rights conferences in the immediate post-war period will be covered. Third, it will examine the League for the Freedom and Dignity of Man, a short-lived organisation put together by the writers George Orwell and Arthur Koestler in 1946. Fourth, it will discuss an unnamed liberties and rights group associated with the publisher Victor Gollancz that met on numerous occasions in 1950 and 1951.

Of course, the emergence of human rights in the institutions of global governance had roots beyond leftist politics, the most obvious being ecumenical; nonetheless, strands of the Left that had been active campaigners on civil liberties were excited about mobilising around human rights in the post-war era.¹⁰ During the 1930s, in the context of the ascent of the dictators, difficulties of liberal political systems, and rising political extremism in Britain, civil liberties carried a great resonance.¹¹ Within this environment, civil liberties activism was one of a number of projects aiming to find 'agreement' between liberal and left-wing views.¹² Civil liberties politics appeared to offer some obvious shared ground between socialist and liberal principles, potentially providing a unifying theme for adherents of such ideologies.¹³ This activism was thus in keeping with the 'progressive tradition' that David Blaazer has depicted as a crucial component of forms of popular-front politics.¹⁴ On one level, popular-front politics reflected specific shifts in the Communist Party of Great Britain's (CPGB) policy as it altered from a line of 'class against class' towards a 'united front' politics which

¹⁰ Mary Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York: Random House, 2002), 221–34; Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Belknap, 2010), 66–8; Samuel Moyn, 'Personalism, Community and Origins of Human Rights', in Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, ed., *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 85–106.

¹¹ Mark Mazower, *The Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (London: Penguin, 1998), 7–8; Keith Ewing and Conor Gearty, *The Struggle for Civil Liberties: Political Freedom and the Rule of Law in Britain 1914–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹² For the classic description of this see Arthur Marwick, 'Middle Opinion in the 1930s: Planning, Progress and Political "Agreement"', *English Historical Review*, 79 (1964), 285–99.

¹³ M. Freedman, *Liberalism Divided: A Study in British Political Thought, 1914–1939* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), 294, 326.

¹⁴ David Blaazer, *The Popular Front and the Progressive Tradition: Socialists, Liberals and the Quest for Unity, 1884–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

fused anti-fascist impulses.¹⁵ On another, as Blaazer and Martin Pugh have shown, popular-front politics founded on anti-fascism had a meaning beyond the policies of the CPGB.¹⁶ In place of focusing on CPGB policy, this article will use the term 'popular front' to inspect the fate of the cross-party and ideological alliances that the various organisations under discussion attempted to articulate.

That these groups failed to mobilise effectively around the subject of human rights is perhaps not that surprising. However, it does not mean that they are irrelevant. Samuel Moyn suggests that the failure of human rights to take off in the 1940s is important as this allows scrutiny of the ideological frameworks which limited such developments. As he points out: 'though the origins of the Universal Declaration are worth some attention, more important is to ask why so few people could muster enthusiasm for it'.¹⁷ This article aims to answer this question in relation to NGOs emerging from sections of the British Left. Their failures provide some insights into political culture in the post-war era, as alliances forged during the 1930s and 1940s disintegrated, and tells us about the divisive international climate in which these groups sought to engage.

The British Left: Civil liberties and human rights

Certain common sentiments about rights were emerging from strands of the British Left during the 1930s and 1940s. While definitions of democracy were open for discussion within leftist circles in the 1930s, the necessity of combining socio-economic rights with civil and political rights was well recognised.¹⁸ Indeed, the economic and social planning discussions that took place during the 1930s sought to maximise social advantage and economic expansion, while ensuring the protection of individual liberty.¹⁹ As T. H. Marshall suggested, thinking about rights had been informed by a long-standing national debate about organising a society and government that accommodated socio-economic rights alongside political and civil ones. He argued that this was part of a 250-year evolution of British citizenship.²⁰ Rhetorically speaking, these rights could be found in the activities of representatives

¹⁵ For the Communist Party of Great Britain, see Matthew Worley, *Class Against Class: The Communist Party in Britain between the Wars* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002) and Kevin Morgan, *Against Fascism and War: Ruptures and Continuities in British Communist Policies, 1935–1941* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 39.

¹⁶ Martin Pugh, 'The Liberal Party and the Popular Front', *English Historical Review*, 121 (2006), 1327–50, Lewis Mates, *The Spanish Civil and the British Left: Political Activism and the Popular Front* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007).

¹⁷ Moyn, *Utopia*, 62–3.

¹⁸ Tom Buchanan, 'Anti-Fascism and Democracy in the 1930s', *European History Quarterly*, 32, 1 (2002), 39–58.

¹⁹ Kenneth Lindsay, 'PEP through the 1930s: Organisation, Structure, People' in John Pinder, ed., *Fifty Years of Political and Economic Planning: Looking Forward, 1931–1981* (London: Heinemann Educational, 1981), 9; *The Next Five Years: An Essay in Political Agreement* (London: The Next Five Years Group, 1935), 3.

²⁰ Thomas Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class* (London, 1992: 1st edn, 1950), 7–8.

of 1930s 'middle opinion' and the more radical Left that advocated popular-front politics founded on a shared commitment towards democracy.²¹

British thinking on rights became expressed in a more international way during the Second World War. Linked to the discussion of war aims in late 1939 and early 1940, this occurred most obviously in the *Daily Herald's* month-long debate on a new declaration of the rights of man which inspired the *Sankey Declaration of Rights* (1940) and Wells's *The Rights of Man* (1940). Demonstrative of the mood for planning a new world order, the latter's publication was subtitled *What are we fighting for?* The *Daily Herald* dedicated one page every day throughout February 1940 to answering this question. Within this moment, the rights of man project was aligned with a utopian post-war mood.²² In Ritchie-Calder's words, he and Wells were convinced of the need for a reflection on 'the human liberties for which the war was supposed to be fought' and a 'world definition' to reconstruct social and international relations.²³ The translation of the *Sankey Declaration* into Russian, Italian, Chinese, Greek and Polish, and the responses gained from, among others, Ghandi, Nehru and Joseph Goebbels, were indicative of its protagonists' global aspirations.²⁴ Lord Sankey, who chaired the drafting committee of the Declaration, prepared by reading every declaration of rights and constitution available, to generate as cosmopolitan a document as possible.²⁵

Ritchie-Calder and Wells suggested their work represented a middle ground between the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen (1789), which emphasised civil and political rights, and the Soviet Declaration of the Rights of the Toiling and Exploited Peoples (1918), which stressed socio-economic rights.²⁶ The first point made in Wells's publication was that all people had a right to resources, powers and inventions and were entitled to nourishment, shelter and medical care from birth to death.²⁷ Alongside welfare rights such as education and housing, he included principles such as free speech, the protection of property, freedom from arbitrary detention, and political rights – for example, the right to vote and to freedom of assembly.²⁸ The work was thus presented as a 'liberal socialist' project.²⁹ Although

²¹ Marwick, 'Middle', 285–99.

²² Examples include Harold Laski, *Where Do We Go From Here* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1940); Richard Acland, *Unser Kampf* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1940); see also Nicholas Joicey, 'A Paperback Guide to Progress: Penguin Books 1935–c.1951', *Twentieth Century British History*, 4, 1 (1993), 25–56; Jay Winter, *Dreams of Peace and Freedom: Utopian Moments in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 100, 113.

²³ Peter Ritchie-Calder to Waldemar Kaempffert, 27 Jan. 1940, Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Ritchie-Calder Papers (Hereafter CP), Acc. 12533/3.

²⁴ Marjorie Wells to Ritchie-Calder, 12 June 1943; Herbert Wells to Ritchie-Calder, 10 March 1943; Marjorie Wells to Ritchie-Calder, 15 Oct. 1943; Marjorie Wells to Ritchie-Calder, 7 Aug. 1943, CP, Acc. 12533/2, Peter Ritchie-Calder to Waldemar Kaempffert, 25 March 1940, CP, Acc. 12533/3; Peter Ritchie-Calder, Speech for Human Rights Day, 11 Dec. 1966, Dep. 370, CP, Dep. 370, Acc. 73; H.G. Wells, *The Rights of Man: What are We Fighting for?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1940), 84.

²⁵ Ritchie-Calder to Kaempffert, 25 March 1940, CP, Acc. 12533/3.

²⁶ Wells, *Rights*, Peter Ritchie-Calder to Lord Sankey, 4 April 1940, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Sankey Papers (hereafter SP), mss., eng. hist., c. 518/4.

²⁷ Wells, *Rights*, p. 80.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 80–4.

²⁹ Ritchie-Calder to Kaempffert, 27 Jan. 1940, CP, Acc. 12533/3.

Wells's view of humanity shifted between pessimism and optimism, his contributions to the debate placed him within an idealist tradition.³⁰ They also placed him within a tradition of the British Left. Harold Laski, although less idealistic, asserted the need to establish a socialist state with a liberal ethos, and to some extent shared concerns with the protagonists of the Herald debate.³¹ Laski, who was periodically a member of the NCCL's executive committee, responded to Wells's debate by suggesting that fighting for such rights was 'a cause as high as there is in mankind'.³²

The debate created interest across the Left. Readers from the *New Statesman* and the *Daily Herald* were asked to contribute and discuss the subject in local reading groups and meetings. A mass of correspondence was produced and the newspapers experienced a significant sales bump.³³ With this, the drafting committee claimed to represent the co-operation of thousands of people.³⁴ Indeed, individuals who offered critical but generally supportive opinions on the Declaration represented a large section of the Left. Intellectual input came from the likes of C. E. M. Joad, J. B. Priestley and George Bernard Shaw.³⁵ Scientists such as J. B. S. Haldane chipped in, as did representatives of the major unions.³⁶ Members of women's organisations, peace organisations and religious institutions commented.³⁷ Contributions came in from 120 Federal Union groups.³⁸ In addition, politicians such as Harold Nicolson, Richard Acland and the Labour leadership of Clement Attlee, Arthur Greenwood and Herbert Morrison commented.³⁹

Clear links existed between those debating the rights of man in February 1940 and the defenders of civil liberties in the 1930s. Wells was an early supporter of the NCCL, acting as an observer at the Hunger Marches in 1934, and being a signatory to one of its early letters to the *Manchester Guardian*.⁴⁰ Other notable contributors to the debate included Kingsley Martin, Priestley, Attlee, Acland and Joad, all of whom were involved in the NCCL in various capacities throughout the 1930s. Most clearly, the NCCL's President, the campaigning journalist Henry Nevinson, and its founder and secretary, Ronald Kidd, contributed, rewriting a couple of sections of what would become the Sankey Declaration.⁴¹

³⁰ For Wells's more pessimistic considerations see H. G. Wells, *The Fate of Homo-Sapiens* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1939); for Wells's idealism, see David Boucher, 'British Idealism and the Human Rights Culture', *History of European Ideas*, 27, 1 (2001), 62.

³¹ Isaac Kramnick and Barry Sheerman, *Harold Laski: A Life on the Left* (London: Penguin, 1998), 383.

³² Harold Laski, *The Rights of Man* (London: Macmillan, 1940), 32.

³³ Ritchie-Calder, Diary Extracts, 15 Feb. 1940, 12 Feb. 1940, CP, Acc. 12533/12.

³⁴ Minutes of the drafting committee, 6 April 1940, SP, c. 518/49.

³⁵ Daily Herald, 14 Feb. 1940, 4; Daily Herald, 19 Feb. 1940, 4; Daily Herald, 20 Feb. 1940, 4.

³⁶ Daily Herald, 16 Feb. 1940, 4; Daily Herald, 14 Feb. 1940, 4.

³⁷ Daily Herald, 8 Feb. 1940, 4; Daily Herald, 9 Feb. 1940, 4; Daily Herald, 28 Feb. 1940, 4.

³⁸ Richard Mayne and John Pinder, *Federal Union: A History of Federal Union* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), 23.

³⁹ Daily Herald, 1 March 1940, 8; Daily Herald, 20 Feb. 1940, 4.

⁴⁰ Barry Cox interview with Geoffrey Bing, U DSF 4/1, Manchester Guardian, 24 Feb. 1934, U DCL/47/1.

⁴¹ Ronald Kidd to Daily Herald, 7 Feb. 1940, U DCL 12/4.

A failure to mobilise

It is easy to condemn Wells's aspirations as a utopian dream or, as he put it, 'another Wellsian fantasy'.⁴² Indeed, the author was aware of this and was concerned to gather as many contributors as possible.⁴³ While Wells's ideas on world government were more utopian than many in the 1930s, he was certainly not a solitary voice in seeking global answers to the problems of inter-war Britain.⁴⁴ The Sankey Declaration, and the discussions surrounding it, suggested that a portion of the Left thought that the politics of rights could help create a global socialist world. Wells, the most articulate and convinced adherent of such sentiments, hoped this could be achieved in 'a revolution that need not be an explosion or a coup d'état'.⁴⁵ Yet, while there was broad interest in the discussion, and on the necessity of combining political and civil rights with socio-economic ones, the actual output of the discussion, particularly the publications produced by Wells, lacked a sharpness of focus.⁴⁶

Furthermore, interest in the debate was not turned into a political movement. Ritchie-Calder complained that he had no machine for taking it further.⁴⁷ Despite an overcrowded meeting held in Westminster to shore up backing for the Declaration, he was unsure that this could be channelled into an organisation. He thought that the audience, in the context of the war, was escapist rather than constructive, observing; 'they didn't want peace so much as to be left in peace' and 'would have cheered as vigorously had the subject been not a new world order but seventh day Adventism or the second coming of Christ'.⁴⁸ Sankey's ambitions for a nationwide campaign did not develop as Ritchie-Calder started a new job organising propaganda in the Political Warfare Executive.⁴⁹ Wells also declined invitations to link up with the Federal Union or Acland's Commonwealth Party.⁵⁰ Furthermore, attempts at spreading the debate across America reinforced it as an intellectual project, which a sympathetic *New York Times* journalist thought would ensure the greatest impact on American politics.⁵¹

Significantly, the NCCL, the organisation best positioned to benefit from such discussions, preferred to continue monitoring the state of civil liberties during wartime.⁵² Although the NCCL supported the debate within the *Daily Herald*, its secretary's response was lukewarm. Privately, Kidd considered it 'too woolly to serve

⁴² George Orwell, 'Wells, Hitler and the World State', in George Orwell, *Critical Essays* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1946). For Wells' own assessment see Proceedings of the meeting of the drafting committee, 6 April 1940, SP, c. 518/49.

⁴³ Proceedings of the Minutes of the Drafting Committee, 6 April 1940, SP, c. 518/49.

⁴⁴ Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain Between the Wars* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), 263–6; Freedman, *Liberalism Divided*, 363–65.

⁴⁵ *Daily Herald*, 1 Jan. 1940, 11.

⁴⁶ A. W. Brian Simpson, *Human Rights and the End of Empire: Britain and the Genesis of the European Convention* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 165.

⁴⁷ Ritchie-Calder to Kaempffert, CP, 25 March 1940, Acc. 12533/3.

⁴⁸ Ritchie-Calder to Kaempffert, 25 March 1940, CP, Acc. 12533/5.

⁴⁹ Sankey to Ritchie-Calder, 23 April 1940, SP, Mss. 518/136.

⁵⁰ Mayne and Pinder, *Federal Union*, 23–4.

⁵¹ Waldemar Kaempffert to Peter Ritchie-Calder, 29 Feb. 1940, Acc. 12533/5.

⁵² *Daily Herald*, 20 Feb. 1940, 4.

any useful purpose'.⁵³ While many of the protagonists of the debate appeared alongside the NCCL through the 1930s, its attitude was that the subject was too academic and divorced from the work of protecting liberties.

This view shifted at the end of the war, as the organisation became enthusiastic about expanding its work internationally.⁵⁴ In December 1947, the NCCL newsletter commented that 'we do not apologise for devoting so much attention to Human Rights, as we believe it is a subject of the greatest importance to humanity'; importantly, and in contrast to 1940, it was now a question which 'had ceased to be academic'.⁵⁵ The NCCL supported the provisions of the UN Charter which referred to human rights, although it remained critical of the absence of references to colonial policy, and warned of the danger of leaving world peace to the UN.⁵⁶ Yet, it had become eager to embrace a 'new dimension of civil liberties stretching beyond the rights of a citizen into a broader notion of human rights for humanity'.⁵⁷ It offered to co-ordinate organisations interested in one or other aspects of human rights.⁵⁸ To carry this out it organised an international conference in June 1947 and a National Conference in November 1947, and established a Committee for a World Conference on Human Rights, to provide a transnational umbrella organisation for co-ordinating and arranging further events.⁵⁹ The conferences aimed to discuss the definition of human rights and the role of organisations in their promotion.⁶⁰ Although the rights programmes of the NCCL's conferences focused on discrimination on the grounds of race, sex or faith, they also acknowledged the importance of socio-economic rights.

The end of the war also saw Orwell, Gollancz and Koestler create an international group.⁶¹ This was tentatively named the League for the Freedom and Dignity of Man. Although Orwell was critical of Wells's Rights of Man debate there were similarities between their projects.⁶² In writing that he sought a synthesis of political freedoms and economic planning, Orwell took up the same issues that Wells had discussed in 1940.⁶³ Furthermore, the group attempted to gain an international echo through

⁵³ Ronald Kidd to Henry Nevinston, 29 Jan. 1940, U DCL 12/4.

⁵⁴ Civil Liberties in the New World, NCCL Sub-Committee on the New World, 28 Nov. 1945, U DCL 61/6.

⁵⁵ *Civil Liberty*, 7, 14 (Dec. 1947), U DCL 73/Aa/ (2).

⁵⁶ *Civil Liberty*, 6, 6 (Feb. 1946), pp. 1–2, U DCL 73/Aa/ (2).

⁵⁷ NCCL Annual Report and Balance Sheet (London, 1946–1947), p. 5, U DCL 77/Aa (2).

⁵⁸ *Civil Liberty*, 8, 1 (Jan. 1948), p. 1, U-DCL/73/Aa/ (2); *Civil Liberty*, Vol. 8, No. 3, March 1948, p. 7, U DCL 73/Aa/ (2).

⁵⁹ National Conference on Human Rights, 22–3 Nov. 1947, U DCL 77/5, Minutes of Enlarged Meeting of Provisional International Committee for the Organisation of a World Conference on Human Rights, 13 Nov. 1948, U DCL/77/4.

⁶⁰ *Civil Liberty*, 8, 3 (March 1948), 7, U DCL 73/Aa/ (2), Letter of invitation to International Conference on Human Rights, Feb. 1947, U DCL/59/8.

⁶¹ Arthur Koestler to George Orwell, 9 Jan. 1946, Edinburgh University Library, Special Collections and Archives, Koestler Archive (hereafter KA), MS 2345/2; see also Hugh Wilford, *The CIA, The British Left and The Cold War: Calling The Tune?* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 28.

⁶² George Orwell to Arthur Koestler, 10 Jan. 1946, KA, MS 2345/2. For a detailed account of Wells and Orwell's relationship see John Partington, 'The Pen as Sword: George Orwell, H. G. Wells and Journalistic Patricide', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 39, 1 (2009), 45–56.

⁶³ Arthur Koestler to George Orwell, 9 Jan. 1946, KA, MS 2345/2.

networks with organisations such as the *Amis de la Liberté* and *Esprit* in France, and the anti-fascist *Giustizia e Libertà* in Italy.⁶⁴

In addition, a different collection of left-liberal political figures, led by Victor Gollancz, held various meetings between 1950 and 1951 to form an alternative human rights and civil liberties group. Gollancz arranged for leading figures of left-liberal thought to meet Roger Baldwin, former Director of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and Director of the International League for the Rights of Man.⁶⁵ At the request of the US State Department, Baldwin was visiting thirty-two countries to establish branches of the League and orchestrated, through Gollancz, to have meetings with interested parties.⁶⁶

Yet these projects failed to gain momentum. The NCCL's attempts to organise national and international conferences failed. Material was sent to the UDHR drafting committee, and delegates from UNESCO attended; however, it planned for hundreds of delegates at its international conference, but only sixty-nine were present, representing just fifteen countries and four colonies.⁶⁷ Indicative of the increasingly leftwards lean of the NCCL, delegates attended from Yugoslavia, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and trade unions of the 'liberated zones' within China. Those from America represented the Chicago Council for Civil Liberties, a more radical organisation that had split from the prominent and established ACLU.⁶⁸

On a national level, the NCCL failed to build up networks equivalent to those involved in the *Daily Herald* debate. At its National Conference, it only received delegates from eight Labour Party and two Liberal Party branches.⁶⁹ Attempts to follow up these London conferences with further international meetings also failed. An effort to gather in Czechoslovakia in 1948 went nowhere. In response to this invitation, Roger Baldwin of the ACLU wrote to the NCCL in November 1948, suggesting it was absurd to hold a human rights conference in a country which had become a single party state.⁷⁰ Apparently, this did not concern the NCCL, who were still eager to host a conference there in June and December 1948 and sent L. C. White, its chairman and member of the editorial committee of the *Daily Worker*, to discuss the project.⁷¹ However, the NCCL lost touch with the Czech delegates,

⁶⁴ Arthur Koestler to Victor Gollancz, 20 June 1946, KA, MS 2345/1.

⁶⁵ Civil Liberties Meeting, 25 July 1950, University of Warwick, Modern Record Centre, Gollancz Papers (hereafter GP), MSS 157/3/CL/3/8.

⁶⁶ Victor Gollancz to Jo Grimond, 19 July 1950, GP, MSS. 157/3/7; Victor Gollancz to Norman Bentwich, 31 July 1950, GP, MSS. 157/3/CL/13; Robert Cottrell, *Roger Baldwin and the American Civil Liberties Union* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 330.

⁶⁷ *Civil Liberty*, 7, 9 (July 1947), 1, U DCL 73/Aa/ (2).

⁶⁸ Ibid, 3; I. Lattimer to Elizabeth Allen, 29 June 1946, U DCL 53/3; L. C. White to NCCL Members and affiliated organisations, 30 July 1948.

⁶⁹ National Council for Civil Liberties National Conference on Human Rights, 22–3 Nov. 1947, U DCL 77/5.

⁷⁰ Roger Baldwin to Elizabeth Allen, 16 Nov. 1948, U DCL 53/1.

⁷¹ L. C. White to NCCL Members and affiliated organisations, 30 July 1948, U DCL 78/2 (1); see also E. Allen to I. Lattimer, 13 Dec. 1938, U DCL 53/3.

an attempt to move the event to Belgium failed and it was unable and unwilling to communicate with the American contacts.⁷²

In fact, as will be discussed below, this period was a nadir for the NCCL more generally, as it faced consistent accusations of communist influence from the non-communist Left. Indeed, all the post-war non-NCCL mobilisations mentioned justified their activities by accusing the NCCL of being captured by the CPGB.⁷³ Many of the individuals gathered together by Victor Gollancz were ex-members of the NCCL who had drifted out, or resigned in protest at its activities during the late 1930s and 1940s. Gollancz himself had been an early supporter of the NCCL and advertised its activities in *Left News*, the newsletter of his Left Book Club.⁷⁴ By 1946, however, he wrote that the NCCL had 'made nonsense of its name and objects'.⁷⁵

In addition, Orwell and Koestler's project did not develop. Bertrand Russell pulled out, citing that intellectuals were more likely to rally against the atomic bomb.⁷⁶ Indeed, there were similarities between the public figures involved throughout all of these groups and those campaigning in the early stages of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). Ultimately, funding dried up and Koestler realised that both he and Orwell, living in North Wales and the Inner Hebrides respectively, were ill suited to the day-to-day tasks of running an organisation.⁷⁷

Furthermore, Gollancz's attempts to form a new organisation in the 1950s ended up highlighting ideological differences between liberals and socialists. Gollancz complained, 'it is a thousand pities that people cannot see that there are a hundred and one things on which everyone can unite—all they have to do is leave the hundred and second alone'. Divisions over members' conceptualisations of human rights and concerns about the implications of 'supra-national authority' hindered the project.⁷⁸ Organisational interest in human rights thus stagnated in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Even within the United Nations Association (UNA), which had 80,000 members in the post-war period, there was little enthusiasm for basing activities on human rights.⁷⁹ This attitude had shifted by 1968, when the UNA's Human Rights Year

⁷² Committee for a World Conference on Human Rights, June 1947, U DCL 77/4; Minutes of Enlarged Meeting of Provisional International Committee for the Organisation of a World Conference on Human Rights, 13–14 Nov. 1948, U DCL 77/4; Report, entitled International Conference, can be found in the papers of Angela Tuckett, Working Class Movement Library, Salford, Tuckett Papers, PP/Tuckett/4/B/1 (Hereafter TP).

⁷³ Victor Gollancz to Violet Bonham Carter, 26 July 1950, GP, Mss. 157/3/1/7; Victor Gollancz to Arthur Koestler, 18 June 1946, GP, Mss. 157/3/CL/5/7.

⁷⁴ Victor Gollancz to Henry Nevinston, 30 June 1937, GP, Mss. 157/3/CL/1/s—i.

⁷⁵ Victor Gollancz, *Our Threatened Values* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1946), 30.

⁷⁶ Arthur Koestler to Bertrand Russell, 6 May 1946, Edinburgh University Library, Special Collections and Archives, Koestler Archive (hereafter KA), Ms 2345/2.

⁷⁷ R. Phillips to Arthur Koestler, 19 March 1946, KA, Ms 2345/2.

⁷⁸ Victor Gollancz to Violet Bonham Carter, 26 July 1950, GP, Mss 157/3/CL/3/28 (i); Violet Bonham Carter to Victor Gollancz, 14 July 1950, GP, Mss 157/3/CL/3/1.

⁷⁹ UNESCO to Foreign Office, 20 July 1953, The National Archives (hereafter NA), Kew, Foreign Office Papers (hereafter FO), FO 371/107141; J. E. Jackson FO minutes, 7 July 1952, NA, FO 371/107141; C. Cope Minutes, 9 July 1953, NA, FO 317/112495; J. S. Arthur to J. Somers Cocks, 15 Feb. 1954, NA, FO 371/112495; United Nations Publicity Liaison Group: Human Rights Day 1954, NA, FO 371/112495; D. Ennals to M. P. Buxton, 28 Oct. 1954, NA, FO 137/112495.

Campaign was supported by 170 different organisations, which led to the formation of a UNA Human Rights Committee.⁸⁰

The question that then emerges is: what happened? British activists and thinkers had something to say about rights in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s but were unable to find an organisation able to express this. How can this failure be explained, and what were the implications of this? In attempting to answer these questions two interrelated themes emerge. The first is the ending of the popular-front-style alliances and the second is the recurring difficulty presented by the post-war universalism of human rights. Universalising human rights made them global issues. With this, the subject became an ideological weapon within the Cold War paradigm of international politics.⁸¹ These themes were interrelated as the Cold War presented difficulties for those with historical and cultural links forged during the 1930s. As Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann has recently pointed out, the unifying consensus against Nazi Germany had brought human rights onto the political agenda, yet such a consensus rapidly disintegrated.⁸² Attempting to forge a broad human rights movement proved impossible at this point of disintegration.

The end of popular-front alliances

The breakdown of popular-front networks is a theme that closely relates to the NCCL. Within this time period, it was placed under significant pressure. While formal popular-front policies, as advocated by the CPGB, had ended at the outbreak of the war, and although the Party continued to influence centre-left organisations in the post-war era, the alliances that had typified the civil liberties lobby in the 1930s proved difficult to sustain. Ultimately, the NCCL's post-war difficulties were ideological, political and tactical. It persisted in pursuing a model of politics which no longer seemed relevant or viable.⁸³

Important here was the relationship between the CPGB and the NCCL. There were communists and communist sympathisers working in and around the NCCL from its formation in 1934. However, it appealed far beyond such a group. This proved a more difficult position to occupy during the 1940s. To those studying the CPGB, or concerned with the authorities' approach to civil liberties, the NCCL has often

⁸⁰ Human Rights Year 1968 in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland: Report of the United Kingdom Committee for Human Rights Year, London, British Library of Political and Economic Science, United Nations Association Papers (hereafter UNA), UNA / 14/12; Leah Levin to Frank Field, 22 June 1978, UNA 14/2/4; UNA Human Rights Committee Proposal, Dec. 1977, UNA 14/2/6.

⁸¹ Costas Douzinas, *The End of Human Rights* (Oxford: Hart, 2007), 124; Tony Evans, 'Introduction: Power, Hegemony and the Universalization of Human Rights' in Tony Evans, ed., *Human Rights Fifty Years On* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 10–11.

⁸² Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, 'Genealogies of Human Rights' in Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, ed., *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 14.

⁸³ Bill Jones, *The Russia Complex: The British Labour Party and the Soviet Union* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977), 40.

appeared to conform, generally or entirely, to the communist line.⁸⁴ On the other hand, such perceptions contrast with those who have conducted detailed archival investigations of the NCCL.⁸⁵ A recent account of the NCCL's origins by Janet Clark concludes that the group was not subject to control by the CPGB's leaders.⁸⁶ Those working closely with the NCCL through the 1930s strenuously denied links with the CPGB.⁸⁷

Clark demonstrates the centrality of the NCCL's secretary, Ronald Kidd, to the organisation. Kidd, who had clear cross-party credentials, was largely responsible for his organisation's work. Furthermore, the broad appeal of the organisation, the political make-up of its executive committee, the lack of funding from the CPGB or any other communist body, and the ability of the organisation to take up issues that had little to do with the CPGB can be cited to indicate NCCL independence.⁸⁸ There is also evidence that Kidd opposed various CPGB positions on certain issues. This was acknowledged by the security services from August 1938. From that point on, they were most concerned about a legal 'faction' within the organisation.⁸⁹ A set of lawyers working around the NCCL, which included pro-Soviet legal figures such as Dudley Collard, G. H. C. Bing and John Platts-Mills, were highly suspect. However, there were limits to their influence during the 1930s. According to Platts-Mills, the radical solicitor W. H. Thompson halted these meetings, as they undermined the credibility of the organisation.⁹⁰ While such individuals were not as important as Kidd, they were relied on for legal advice, commenting on publications and issues, and involved in policy discussions. There were thus elements within the NCCL that clearly belonged within a pro-Soviet tradition, and linked to communist politics.

This relationship was not straightforward. For their part, Special Branch and the Home Office, while consistent in outlining sections of the NCCL that resembled a communist front through the 1930s and 1940s, were inconsistent in ascertaining how this worked. At times, Ronald Kidd was depicted as an individual in thrall to the communists, whereas elsewhere he was the individual resisting the machinations of a group of lawyers associated with the CPGB.⁹¹ This was further complicated by the

⁸⁴ Henry Pelling, *The British Communist Party: A Historical Profile* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 2nd edn, 1975), 116; R. Thurlow, 'The Evolution of a Mythical Fifth Column', *Twentieth Century British History*, 10, 4 (1999), 471–98.

⁸⁵ Brian Dyson, *Liberty in Britain 1934–1934: A Diamond Jubilee History of the National Council for Civil Liberties* (London: Civil Liberties Trust, 1994), 64.

⁸⁶ Clark, 'Sincere', 534.

⁸⁷ Barry Cox interview with D. N. Pritt, U DSF 4/1; R. Kidd to R. Chorley, 30 May 1941, U DSF 2/8, See notes by N. Lawson, U DSF 4/1, Sylvia Scaffardi, *Fire Under The Carpet: Working for Civil Liberties in the 1930s* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1986), 110–12; E. M. Forster to R. Kidd, 2 May 1941, Hull History Centre, University of Hull Archives, Liberty Archive (hereafter U DCL), U DCL 62/5, R. Kidd to E. M. Forster, 8 May 1941, U DCL 62/5.

⁸⁸ Clark, 'Sincere', 513–37.

⁸⁹ Special Branch Report, 24 Aug. 1938, HO 45/25464.

⁹⁰ Dyson, *Liberty*, 92.

⁹¹ Special Branch Report, 24 Aug. 1938, HO 45/25464.

view held by both the commissioner of the Metropolitan Police and the commander of Special Branch that anti-fascism was synonymous with communism.⁹²

Nonetheless, communists were happy for the NCCL to represent their civil liberties interests. While the NCCL faced objections from the Labour Party, the Conservative Party and the Liberal Party, at various points in the 1930s and 1940s, it was never criticised by the CPGB. The emergence of the NCCL has also contributed to the demise of the International Labour Defence, a civil liberties organisation of the earlier 1930s, which had been much more closely aligned with the CPGB.⁹³ There were occasions when the two bodies' policy lines deviated, but these were over minutiae rather than overall critique.⁹⁴ There were also members of staff with more obvious links to the CPGB. The papers of Angela Tuckett, a CPGB member and NCCL Legal Secretary between 1940 and 1942, reveal she joined the organisation through contact with D. N. Pritt, and then left them to work for the *Daily Worker*.⁹⁵

For all of this, it would be misleading entirely to characterise the NCCL as a 'front' group during the 1930s. The organisation was able to achieve broad support. This owed much to Kidd's independent reputation. Furthermore, the NCCL's work outside of areas of interest to the CPGB appeared to mark it out as having a broader function than solely acting as a communist stooge. The NCCL operated in a climate receptive of efforts to reach across party doctrines. The NCCL's line, which was that it was happy to work with communists if they sincerely supported the aims and constitution of the NCCL, was sustainable in its initial stages.⁹⁶ Its positions on civil liberties, although aligned with CPGB policies, were never dissimilar to positions being taken by liberals and socialists.⁹⁷ It also avoided more controversial aspects of communist policy, by focusing solely on national civil liberties issues. Individuals such as E. M. Forster, Kingsley Martin, Harold Laski and Dingle Foot were therefore willing to remain in the NCCL as long as it followed the aims of protecting freedom of speech, assembly and propaganda as outlined within its constitution. Even the security services conceded that the group could not be dismissed as simply being a communist front.⁹⁸

⁹² Graham Macklin, 'Fascism, Anti-Fascism and the Police', in Nigel Copsey and David Renton, *British Fascism, the Labour Movement and the State* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 52–4.

⁹³ See Joe Jacobs, *Out of the Ghetto: My Youth in the East End: Communism and Fascism* (London: Calverts, 1978), 141; See also Raphael Samuel, *The Lost World of British Communism* (London: Verso, 2006), 95.

⁹⁴ For example, the NCCL's position on the Public Order Act 1936 differed from that of the CPGB. While the latter criticised the whole ethos of the act, the NCCL only challenged the sections of it referring to the use of political uniforms. Arguably, this position was closer to that of the leadership of the Labour Party than the CPGB. Report on Delegate Conference on Public Order Bill, 5 Dec. 1936, U DCL 1/2, Deputation on the Public Order Bill 1936, U DCL 1/2.

⁹⁵ See Angela Tuckett, 'Biographical Material' and 'Memoirs', Tuckett Papers, PP/Tuckett/2.

⁹⁶ E. M. Forster to R. Kidd, 2 May 1941, U DCL 62/5, R. Kidd to E. M. Forster, 8 May 1941, U DCL 62/5.

⁹⁷ Dingle Foot, *Despotism in Disguise* (London: Liberal Publications, 1937).

⁹⁸ Home Office minutes, 7 Dec. 1935, Report on Activities of the National Council for Civil Liberties, 28 May 1935, HO 45/25462.

Although the NCCL was not without its critics in the 1930s, it was actually much more stable than other popular-front projects before and at the start of the Second World War. While sections of the Left were traumatised by the Nazi–Soviet Pact, this was not initially destabilising to the NCCL. The Labour Party had advised constituency branches not to affiliate with the NCCL from 1939, but this was part of the Labour Party leadership's long-standing concerns over factionalism and preceded the Nazi–Soviet Pact.⁹⁹ There is little evidence of membership disagreement with the NCCL's wartime policy positions until the middle of 1940. Certainly, its conferences at the outbreak of war attracted similar audiences and speakers to those involved during the 1930s. Indeed, the NCCL side-stepped some of the ideological fractures of the Left in 1939 and 1940 by focusing very closely on the civil liberties implications of the war. The organisation's membership grew in the initial phases of the war as the prospect of military mobilisation provoked understandable concerns about individual liberty.¹⁰⁰

Yet the NCCL's politics proved unsustainable. By 1941 it was increasingly harassed for its associations with Soviet apologists, in particular Pritt.¹⁰¹ The NCCL's lack of clear support for the war effort was increasingly noted by its non-communist elements. In particular, a conference and subsequent policy statement on NCCL aims in wartime, issued in 1940, failed to mention the need successfully to prosecute the war. To some, this confirmed an unhelpful proximity to the CPGB's policies. The NCCL's association with communists and pacifists provoked further questioning of its reputation, which led first to a gradual drift of more moderate supporters, and then to a large movement away from the body.¹⁰² The NCCL was also harmed by Labour politicians' entry into the wartime government. Labour Ministers, some of whom had worked with the NCCL in the 1930s, were circulated with hostile Special Branch reports and no longer took an interest.¹⁰³ In the summer of 1941 a former NCCL vice-president announced at the Labour Party conference that the organisation was 'almost entirely under communist control'.¹⁰⁴ This caused further inquiries, protests among the NCCL membership, and hostile media coverage. Such a

⁹⁹ See Recommendations of organisation sub-committee and decisions of NEC relating to the Communist Party, its subsidiary organisations, and other bodies since 1939, Original Statement, 13 July 1939, Labour Archive, Communist Party and Popular Front (uncatalogued). Blaazer, *Popular Front*, 170.

¹⁰⁰ Special Branch Report, 6 Feb. 1940, NA, Home Office Papers (Hereafter), HO 45/25463.

¹⁰¹ One member suggested that they ought to balance out his name on their notepaper by adding that of Rudolph Hess, A. Palmer to NCCL, 15 May 1941, U DCL 32/8.

¹⁰² M. Howell to R. Kidd, 15 April 1941, U DCL/32/8; E. Thurtle to R. Kidd, 11 June 1940, U DCL/32/8; R. Kidd to E. Thurtle, 1 July 1940, U DCL/32/8; Special Branch Report, 6 Feb. 1940, NA, HO 45/25463, Time and Tide, 28 June 1941, press clipping, U DCL/32/8.

¹⁰³ Stephen Brooke, 'Introduction' in Stephen Brooke, ed., *Reform and Reconstruction: Britain after the War: 1945–1951* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 8–9; Home Office Minutes, 22 July 1940, NA, HO 45/25463; Minutes, 1 Aug. 1940, NA, HO 45/25463; Minutes, Sir A. Maxwell, 27 July 1940, NA, HO 45/25463; M. Marcus to H. Morrison, 13 April 1942, NA, HO 45/25463; Home Office Minutes, 24 May 1945, NA, HO 45/2564.

¹⁰⁴ Ronald Kidd to Journalist, 25 June 1941, U DCL 32/8.

position was exacerbated by the death of Kidd in 1942, which appeared to strengthen the communist influence within the organisation.

Most importantly though, a number of policy decisions during and after the war meant that the NCCL compromised its civil liberties credentials. This contributed towards a loss of support from members of the popular front that belonged within a progressive tradition. Both Laski and the *New Statesman* editor Kingsley Martin grew unwilling to co-operate during the 1940s.¹⁰⁵ Such a shift can be seen in considering the NCCL's line of domestic anti-fascism. Elizabeth Allen, Kidd's successor as general secretary, launched an anti-fascist campaign upon taking up leadership of the organisation, which had the full support of the CPGB.¹⁰⁶ Controversially, the organisation objected to the release of the interned Fascist leader Oswald Moseley. This marked an obvious cleavage between the NCCL's anti-Fascist and libertarian positions. Understandably, it lost credibility with various sections of its membership on this issue, having altered its earlier opposition to imprisonment without trial. The remaining Liberal Party elements within the group objected to the line. Although Liberal Party support had diminished through the 1930s, the NCCL continued to benefit from association with the likes of Dingle Foot, Wilfred Roberts and Richard Acland. However, Foot resigned following the NCCL's position on Mosley.¹⁰⁷ He was not alone. Between December 1943 and June 1944, the organisation lost thirty-nine members over the issue.¹⁰⁸ To its critics, the NCCL appeared illegitimate. On the Labour side, Herbert Morrison, the home secretary, pointed out that this represented a colossal U-turn in policy.¹⁰⁹ The NCCL's long-standing insistence that civil liberties concerns were the principal motivations of the organisation looked dubious.¹¹⁰ With this, the NCCL had an even closer association with British communism through the 1940s. At this point it had become unacceptable to the wider network it had worked around during the 1930s.

In the conclusion of an internal report on its international conference, the NCCL considered methods to broaden internationally and nationally. A main difficulty identified was how to develop such a politics at a national level. It suggested that the NCCL required a reorganisation to 'win wide Labour support' and to find ways to deal with the Labour Party through parliamentary work. Not only did such an observation demonstrate the NCCL's specific isolation from the Labour Party in the 1940s, but it is also suggestive of the organisation's inability to communicate

¹⁰⁵ Harold Laski to Ronald Kidd, 16 May 1941, U DCL 32/8; Special Branch Report, 20 May 1941, NA, HO 45/25463; Report, 22 April 1941, NA, Secret Service Files, KV 2/2093; Scaffardi, *Fire Under the Carpet*, 207; Barry Cox interview with D. N. Pritt, U DSF 4/1.

¹⁰⁶ Tony Kushner, *The Persistence of Prejudice: Antisemitism in British Society during the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 171.

¹⁰⁷ *Civil Liberty*, 4, 6 (Dec. 1943), U DCL/73/Aa (ii); Barry Cox interview with Dingle Foot, U DSF 4/1.

¹⁰⁸ Dyson, *Liberty*, 29.

¹⁰⁹ Hansard Parliamentary Debates, v. 345, No. 4, 1 Dec. 1943, 475. Kidd had called internment the most objectionable feature of the Defence Regulations. Ronald Kidd, 'We Must Get Rid of Repression', NCCL Draft Article, U DCL/32/3.

¹¹⁰ Nigel Copsey, *Anti-Fascism in Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), 77.

to a broader constituency.¹¹¹ Indeed, divisions within the NCCL had become so marked following a number of resignations, including that of the NCCL's long-term President E. M. Forster in 1948 (after the NCCL's opposition to the dismissal of communist sympathising civil servants), that the foreign office's information research department, who along with Special Branch monitored the organisation's activities closely, thought the NCCL was close to collapse.¹¹²

All of this placed the NCCL firmly within a pro-Soviet tradition, which appeared particularly unacceptable in reference to civil liberties. NCCL support for the internment of Mosley was added to by further pro-Soviet politics such as glowing reports of liberties behind the Iron Curtain in Czechoslovakia and an unwillingness to criticise Soviet Union policies, particularly in relation to the movement of 'Soviet Brides' in 1948. These further undermined the organisation's credibility to sections of the non-communist Left.¹¹³ In an age during which the Soviet Union was viewed more critically, and where criticisms of totalitarianism were directed as much at communism as fascism, the NCCL could no longer act in between the CPGB and wider sections of the Left.¹¹⁴ Its unwillingness to criticise a Soviet model of 'democracy' did not conform to the growing assessments of communism as a system contravening recognised notions of freedom and democracy.¹¹⁵ Tellingly, countries condemned at the NCCL's human rights conferences were either those with nationalist governments or those from the West. Nationalist (Kuomintang) China, Greece and Spain were attacked over press freedom. The USA, Britain and South Africa were criticised for having discriminatory legislation, while the USA, Greece, Canada, South Africa, Belgium and a host of colonial or mandated territories within the British Empire were chastised for limiting voting rights.¹¹⁶

It is also worth noting that the collapse of popular-front-style alliances was not just about the division between supporters and critics of the Soviet Union within the NCCL. Ideological differences between liberals and socialists meant that Gollancz abandoned his project in April 1951. Violet Bonham Carter and Jo Grimond, both Liberals, were particularly difficult for Gollancz, as they held different conceptualisations of rights. The most contestable points related to the closed shop and the unions, attitudes towards property, and the direction of Labour.¹¹⁷ Gollancz

¹¹¹ International Conference, TP, PP/Tuckett/4/B/1.

¹¹² H. Gee to G. Joy, 30 Sept. 1948, NA, FO 1110/145.

¹¹³ E. M. Forster to Elizabeth Allen, 30 April 1948, U DCL 32/12.

¹¹⁴ See Jonathan Schneer, *Labour's Conscience: The Labour Left 1945–1951* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988); Paul Corthorn, *In the Shadow of the Dictators: The British Left in the 1930s* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006), 214.

¹¹⁵ Lawrence Black, "'The Bitterest of Enemies of Communism': Labour Revisionists, Atlanticism and the Cold War", *Contemporary British History*, 15, 2 (2001), 28. For the NCCL and Soviet Union as a different form of democracy see Elizabeth Allen to D. N. Pritt, 23 March 1953, U DCL 53/1; D. N. Pritt to Elizabeth Allen, 20 March 1953, U DCL 53/3.

¹¹⁶ *Civil Liberty*, 7, 9 (July 1947), 5, U DCL 73/Aa/2.

¹¹⁷ Violet Bonham Carter to Victor Gollancz, 26 July 1950, GP, Mss. 157/3/CL/3/28 (i).

blamed 'too much stupid militancy' on the part of the Liberals, complaining that it was no good trying to get an organisation together if no one cared.¹¹⁸

All of this demonstrated the collapse of these left-liberal alliances. This was not unique to the NCCL; other organisations such as the Haldane Society for Socialist Lawyers and the Socialist Medical Association were under greater scrutiny at this time.¹¹⁹ Indeed, the divisions of the NCCL's membership from the late 1940s had been so marked that foreign office officials commented that it was 'making such little fuss now compared with its prominence in the '30s, that we may as well let sleeping dogs lie'.¹²⁰ While there were attempts from within the Labour Party to undermine and split the Haldane Society of Socialist Lawyers in the immediate post-war period, the NCCL's importance had diminished to the extent that the group was largely ignored.

Such problems were not unique to the British politics of rights and liberties. The French League for the Rights of Man was dogged by infighting from those who had aligned during the 1930s.¹²¹ And in Germany, various organisations split along similar lines in the late 1940s and early 1950s.¹²² This demonstrates the cleavages in democracy in the post-war period. While 'social democracy' and 'popular democracy' appeared to have some unity in opposition to Fascism during the 1930s, by the late 1940s they were competing.¹²³

Universalising rights

In order to understand the difficulties of British NGOs interested in human rights, the collapse of popular-front-style politics and the emergence of the Cold War were both important. Additionally, these related to the problems that the universalising of rights presented. Because human rights have transnational implications, the subject was caught up in the divisions of international politics.¹²⁴ In the context of the Cold War, differences over conceptualisations of rights served to reinforce the ideological distinctions that would be part of the cultural Cold War, rather than transcend such divergences, as had been hoped by the drafters of the UDHR.¹²⁵ Against such a context, individuals such as Koestler and Richard Crossman, who featured in Orwell's discussions, and certain participants in Gollancz's discussions, who had attempted to forge a 'third force' style social democratic vision of human rights, chose liberalism

¹¹⁸ Victor Gollancz to R.W.S. Pollard, 31 July 1950, 31 July 1950, GP, Mss. 157/3/CL/1/11.

¹¹⁹ Jones, *Russia*, 51; John Stewart, *The Battle for Health: A Political History of the Socialist Medical Association, 1930–1951* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999); Minutes by R. Murray, 6 Nov. 1948, NA, FO 1110/145.

¹²⁰ Minutes by R. Murray, 6 Nov. 1948, NA, FO 1110/145.

¹²¹ William Irvine, *Between Justice and Politics: The Ligue Des Droits des Hommes* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 216–19.

¹²² Lora Wildenthal, 'Human Rights Activism in Occupied and Early West Germany: The Case of the German League for Human Rights', *Journal of Modern History*, 80, 3 (2008), 517.

¹²³ Buchanan, 'Anti-Fascism', 39–57.

¹²⁴ Douzinas, *The End*, 124; Evans, 'Introduction', 10–11.

¹²⁵ Peter Coleman, *The Liberal Conspiracy: The Congress for Cultural Freedom and the Struggle for the Mind of Postwar Europe* (London: Free Press, 1989).

over socialism. As a result they aligned with organisations such as the Congress for Cultural Freedom.¹²⁶ Other pro-Soviet elements such as the lawyers D. N. Pritt and John Platts-Mills, members of the NCCL's executive committee, took to the other side by joining up with the International Association of Democratic Lawyers.¹²⁷ The anti-totalitarianism of leftist advocates of a liberal socialism moved them to the liberal camp, whereas groups with historic connections to the Soviet Union sided with the communists. In this polarisation, thinking about global rights had to be accommodated within two sides, neither of which was ideally suited to members of the British Left.

Universalism presented a problem by forcing engagement in a binary Cold War, but it also presented a more conceptual challenge to British thinking about rights. For all the internationalism of these groups, more general leftist imagining of rights traced these through a peculiarly British heritage. Whether found in the popular-front politics of the 1930s, or in attempts to cultivate patriotism in the early phases of the Second World War, these became part of a radical national narrative.¹²⁸ This could be found in contemporary works such as Christopher Hill's *The English Revolution* (1940), A. L. Morton's *A People's History of England* (1939), Jack Lindsay and Edgell Rickwords's *A Handbook for Freedom* (1939) and T. A. Jackson's *Trials of British Freedom* (1940). Later British Marxist historians' works such as Rodney Hilton's *Communism and Liberty* (1950) and Christopher Hill's study of the 'Norman Yoke', which emphasised national traditions of liberty and freedom, reinforced such ideas. It was in relation to these constructions, not to the institutions of the UN, that rights were generally phrased. As Marshall suggested, rights of citizenship altered patterns of social inequality; these were best determined by community membership and asserted through a national welfare state.

Similarly, the NCCL explained its newfound human rights interests by presenting itself in reference to a radical British history. The NCCL framed its versions of human rights differently from that being projected on the international stage. Writing to the leader of the French League for the Rights of Man, Elizabeth Allen, Ronald Kidd's successor as NCCL general secretary, complained that 'their [the ACLU and International League for the Rights of Man] ideas of democracy are very different from ours' and stating her view that civil liberties were perhaps not 'absolute rights but subject to the necessities of the democracy which is being built'.¹²⁹ For all of its initial enthusiasm for human rights work, this relativism seemed out of step with the

¹²⁶ Michael Hochgeschwender, 'A Battle for Ideas: The Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) in Britain, Italy, France and West Germany' in Dominik Geppert, ed., *The Post-War Challenge: Cultural, Social and Political Change in Western Europe, 1945–1958* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 319–39; H. Read to V Gollancz, 7 July 1950, GP, Mss. 157/3/CL/2/24.

¹²⁷ For International Association of Democratic Lawyers see NA, FO 975/59; also FO 371/72722 and FO 1110/269. See also, John Platts-Mills, *Muck, Silk and Socialism: Recollections of a Left-Wing Queen's Council* (Wedmore: Paper Publishing, 2001), 266.

¹²⁸ Miles Taylor, 'Patriotism, History and the Left in Twentieth-Century Britain', *The Historical Journal*, 33 (1990), 979–83; Raphael Samuel, 'British Marxist Historians, 1880–980: Part One', *New Left Review*, 120 (March–April 1988), 21–96.

¹²⁹ Elizabeth Allen to E. Kahn, 28 Sept. 1945, U DCL/59/6.

universalism of the UDHR. Aware that it had framed rights within a national history, such complexity was resolved through arguing that rights were relative.¹³⁰ On one level, this was a slightly clumsy justification for an apparent open-mindedness about one-party states and state-controlled press in the newly forming Eastern bloc. But it also demonstrated the problem of universalism: as British rights were formed in a national context, why should these be imposed upon others?

Even Wells, the arch-cosmopolitan, discovered that the Sankey Declaration reflected a national conceptualisation of rights. Ghandi's and Nehru's critical responses to their debate forced Ritchie-Calder and Wells to conclude that a British expression of rights in the idiom of Western parliamentary democracy had been projected.¹³¹ Orwell and Koestler realised this risk and rejected calling their body *The Magna Carta League*, through fear this would only have meaning within Britain (that said, they also rejected the more cosmopolitan sounding *Renaissance*).¹³² Broadly speaking though, the British Left, in attempting to reimagine rights globally, was fighting against a history it had been inadvertently creating for much of the 1930s and the 1940s.

It may well also be that the subject of human rights was too broad to provide a coherent framework through which to mobilise. Rights are contestable, and these contests were too great for individuals in the post-war era. With this, it was to single issue politics that individuals such as Gollancz, Ritchie-Calder and others looked. Organisations such as War on Want, and OXFAM, which featured individuals concerned with discussions of rights in the 1940s, would extend ideas associated with economic and social rights (albeit in a form that did not utilise the rhetoric of human rights) beyond the nation state.¹³³ Echoing Bertrand Russell's earlier critique of Orwell's organisations, many individuals who attended Gollancz's meeting were involved in CND. It seems that it was easier to mobilise on less controversial and focused problems, which transcended or critiqued Cold War disagreements, rather than broad and ideologically contentious rights politics.

Others would pursue these ideas away from the global and within the nation state. Individuals involved in the *Daily Herald* debate put forward similar ideas in a national context through the 1941 Committee, and the Commonwealth Party.¹³⁴ John Boyd Orr, a member of Wells's drafting committee, considered the British Medical Council's Charter for Health (1943) a 'concrete companion' to the discussion and linked the climate of ideas to the popularity of the Beveridge Report.¹³⁵ While the new social rights being framed in William Beveridge's *Report on Social Insurance and Allied Services* (1942) were related to the inclusion of 'freedom from want' and the 'advancement of social welfare' within the Atlantic Charter, his report largely

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ Ritchie-Calder speech for Human Rights Day, CP, Dep. 370, Acc. 73i.

¹³² Arthur Koestler to George Orwell, 9 Jan. 1946, KA, MS 2345/2.

¹³³ See Matthew Hilton, 'International Aid and Development NGOs in Britain and Human Rights since 1945', paper presented at Human Rights/Social Rights Conference, Potsdam, Dec. 2010.

¹³⁴ Commonwealth Party, Report of the First Annual Conference held in Manchester, 23 April 1943, 1.

¹³⁵ Sir John Boyd Orr to Peter Ritchie-Calder, 2 Jan. 1945, CP, Acc. 12533/9.

stressed that the new provisions stemmed fundamentally from a 'British tradition'.¹³⁶ Understandably, welfare rights, particularly for those on the Left, would be asserted within and through the state.¹³⁷

Those writing about the UDHR's usefulness have stressed that it provided a framework through which NGOs could shape various political and social agendas.¹³⁸ This has evidently been the case for parts of the latter half of the twentieth century. The NCCL described itself as belonging to a global human rights movement by 1968.¹³⁹ However, the framing of rights within national narratives meant the universalism and rights doctrines of Roosevelt's Four Freedoms, the Atlantic Charter, the UN Charter and the UDHR were not key reference points for British organisations, nor the architects of the welfare state. Of course, those debating human rights at the end of the war brought a set of assumptions based on domestic politics to international discussions.¹⁴⁰ That the British Left's efforts at framing rights became less authoritative internationally, while an American vision of rights featuring strong civil and political rights with a relatively meagre commitment to social welfare would dominate thinking on this subject, was demonstrative of the new power structures developing in the post-war era.

Conclusions

In his recent work on human rights at a global level, Samuel Moyn argues that the failure to establish a global human rights movement in the 1940s is important, as is the absence of a clear human rights politics from that period. He argues that there is a need to explain why human rights did not have an ideological function to play in contrast to three decades later.¹⁴¹ In offering suggestions as to why organisations associated with the British Left were unable to mobilise around the subject of human rights, this article has identified some implications that this failure has had on the subject in the post-war era. The loss of the liberal socialist ethos that Ritchie-Calder and Wells had hoped to promote reflected a supposed division between economic and social rights and political and civil rights after 1948. By 1952, the UN had decided to separate civil and political rights from economic and social rights; a split confirmed in the two distinct international covenants of 1966.¹⁴² Furthermore, it was not the organisations of the Left discussed here, but conservative and Catholic groups that were able to engage with the development of the European Convention

¹³⁶ William Beveridge, *Social Insurance and Allied Services* (London: HMSO, 1942), 170–2.

¹³⁷ Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, 'Genealogies of Human Rights' in Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, ed., *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2011), 9–10.

¹³⁸ Hunt, *Inventing*, 208; Korey, *NGOs*, 546.

¹³⁹ *Civil Liberty 1968* (London: NCCL, 1968), 3.

¹⁴⁰ Winter, *Dreams*, 100–1; Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America's Vision for Human Rights* (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap, 2005).

¹⁴¹ Moyn, *Utopia*, 47.

¹⁴² Kennedy, *Parliament*, 183–4. See also <http://untreaty.un.org/cod/avl/ha/iccpr/iccpr.html> (last visited 20 Feb. 2011).

of Human Rights, a document which had a vastly reduced programme of social and economic rights in comparison with those outlined in the UDHR.¹⁴³ Within European human rights frameworks, classical liberal rights continued to have greater protection than socio-economic ones.¹⁴⁴ Accordingly, human rights came to have a meaning associated with liberalisation of trade, collective security, the rule of law and individual rights, along with a modest programme of welfare.

The transformation of the meaning of human rights helps to explain some of the critiques of this subject. It helped create the appearance of the USA as a 'global hegemon' and reaffirmed human rights as a liberal project.¹⁴⁵ This, in turn, contributed to more cynical understandings of human rights history.¹⁴⁶ Linked to this, communitarian criticisms have suggested individual needs have prevailed over the welfare of wider society.¹⁴⁷ Of course, a liberal socialist human rights project would have generated a wealth of criticisms and objections, but these would have been different. Such a narrative is in keeping with works stressing the post-war era as a period of missed opportunities, as Cold War settings limited the capacity for radical change.¹⁴⁸

This is not to say that this international socialist liberal impulse disappeared. It continued in single-issue relief organisations, or in attempts to create institutions for the governance of hunger.¹⁴⁹ However, these efforts were not couched in the language of universal rights and would arguably not be until the 1990s.¹⁵⁰ Similarly, social democratic politics developing across Europe, complete with many new social and economic rights, was framed towards the nation state.¹⁵¹ This is also not to say that Britain did not play a role in defining human rights. Clearly, British officials contributed to the development of human rights in political and judicial sub-fields

¹⁴³ Marco Duranti, 'Recasting Human Rights Discourse After the Second World War: The European Convention and the Conservative Turn', Human Rights/Social Rights Conference, Potsdam, Dec. 2010; See also Moyn, 'Personalism', 101.

¹⁴⁴ Susan Kang, 'The Unsettled Relationship of Economic and Social Rights and the West: A Response to Whelan and Donnelly', *Human Rights Quarterly*, 31, 4 (2009), 1022–25.

¹⁴⁵ Evans, 'Introduction', 5.

¹⁴⁶ For example see Kirsten Sellers, *The Rise and Rise of Human Rights* (Stroud: Sutton, 2002); Jean Bricmont, *Humanitarian Imperialism: Using Human Rights to Sell War* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2006); Korey, NGOs, 476.

¹⁴⁷ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of the American Community* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2000); Mary Glendon, *Rights Talk* (Oxford: Free Press, 1991), x; Douzinas, *The End of Human Rights*, 324.

¹⁴⁸ Geoff Eley, 'When Europe Was New: Liberation and the Making of the Post-War Era' in Monica Riera and Gavin Schaffer, eds, *The Lasting War: Society and Identity in Britain, France and Germany after 1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), 39.

¹⁴⁹ James Vernon, *Hunger: A Modern History* (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap, 2007), 277–8; Matthew Frank, 'The New Morality: Victor Gollancz, "Save Europe Now" and the German refugee crisis, 1945–46', *Twentieth Century British History*, 17, 2 (2006), 230–56.

¹⁵⁰ Paul Gready and Jonathan Ensor, eds, *Reinventing Development? Translating Rights Based Approaches from Theory into Practice* (London: Zed, 2005).

¹⁵¹ Stephan Berger, 'Democracy and Social Democracy', *European History Quarterly*, 32, 1 (2002), 28–9.

in the UN, and in Europe.¹⁵² But this was a different set of actors, with different interests, advocating different sets of rights.¹⁵³ Mikael Rask Madsen has conceptualised the agents of European rights frameworks as ‘legal entrepreneurs’, an elite set of experts able to negotiate a delicate balance between diplomacy and law.¹⁵⁴ This group showed little interest in opening out their discussion to external forces. Foreign office officials objected to UNESCO members attending an NCCL conference, while Ernest Bevin was known to be scornful of the intellectual Left, often those who displayed an interest in human rights.¹⁵⁵ Human rights emerged in a European legal context with a sophisticated set of institutions, but no inventive set of rights.¹⁵⁶ Unlike the civil libertarians of the 1930s, who saw rights and liberties as components of a critique of national and international political institutions, the high-level diplomatic elite were largely interested in rights for export.¹⁵⁷ It is hardly surprising then that human rights in the immediate post-war era have been described as belonging in the conference room rather than in humanitarian networks associated with NGO and social movement activism from the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁵⁸ No wonder then that Mazower has demonstrated there was a good deal of Great Power politics at play in the establishment of the UN’s rights regime.¹⁵⁹

When human rights activism took off among the Left within Britain, the ideas of the 1940s were not wholly resuscitated. The limited expansion of the NCCL’s programme to incorporate social and economic rights in their human rights conferences in the 1940s were fleeting, while the programme of the most successful human rights organisation, Amnesty International, focused on political and civil rights of prisoners in the 1960s, and had little to say about economic and social rights until the 1980s, only adding them to its mission statement in 2001.¹⁶⁰ Furthermore, once the UNA established a Human Rights Committee in the 1970s, it prioritised civil and political rights as, although ‘economic rights had their own importance’, it argued that governments had no obligations to introduce these.¹⁶¹ This was in keeping

¹⁵² Geoffrey Marston, ‘The United Kingdom’s Part in the Preparation of the European Convention on Human Rights, 1950’, *The International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, 43, 4 (1993), 796–826; Duranti, ‘Recasting’.

¹⁵³ Simpson, *Human Rights*, 219–20.

¹⁵⁴ Mikael Rask Madsen, “‘Legal Diplomacy’—Law, Politics, and the Genesis of Post-war European Human Rights”, in Hoffmann, *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century*, 63–4; See also, Mikael Rask Madsen, ‘From Cold War Instrument to Supreme European Court: The European Court of Human Rights at the Crossroads of International and National Law and Politics’, *Law and Social Inquiry*, 32, 1 (2007), 138, 146.

¹⁵⁵ See note by R. Murray, 3 Feb. 1949, FO 1110/145; for Bevan see A. Bullock, *Ernest Bevin, Foreign Secretary, 1945–1951* (London: W. Norton, 1983), 91–4.

¹⁵⁶ Madsen, ‘Diplomacy’, 67.

¹⁵⁷ Simpson, *Human Rights*, 347.

¹⁵⁸ Hoffmann, ‘Genealogies’, 20.

¹⁵⁹ Mark Mazower, ‘The Strange Triumph of Human Rights, 1933–1950’, *Historical Journal*, 47, 2 (2004), 379–98.

¹⁶⁰ Amnesty International website, www.amnesty.org/en/who-we-are/history (last visited 10 Jan. 2010).

¹⁶¹ UNA Seminar on Human Rights, 24/25 June 1977, UNA 4/4/1.

with Maurice Cranston's widely read *What Are Human Rights?* (1973), a work which denied the existence of any universal claims to social and economic rights.¹⁶²

To return to the NCCL member who suggested that the subject of human rights had been approached ten years too early, this would imply that the 1960s was a more important period in which NGOs and social movements started to utilise human rights language to express a wide range of socio-political agendas.¹⁶³ Certainly, there is evidence to suggest that the end of the dominance of Cold War frameworks made human rights meaningful. Amnesty International benefited from appealing to a membership who felt isolated by the politics of the Cold War, while the NCCL underwent a generational shift enabling it to escape characterisation as a communist front body.¹⁶⁴ At this point, it was able to apply the language of human rights more successfully to its activities. Additionally, along with a set of similar NGOs including Amnesty, the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, the mental health charity MIND, and the freedom of speech advocacy group Article 19, the NCCL was able to make use of the European rights frameworks once the UK conceded the right to individual petition to these in 1965.¹⁶⁵

The expansion of a global human rights movement raises a series of other questions about the subject: was this rise then a form of post-material 'new' politics switching to an emphasis on values, identity and global solidarity?¹⁶⁶ Was this, as has been suggested, related to significant cultural changes during the 1960s?¹⁶⁷ How did this relate to the opening up of the UN to allow smaller former colonial nations to project human rights claims outside a Cold War paradigm, and the collapse of older empires more generally?¹⁶⁸ It is also possible that the improvements of communications and mass media were necessary to create a broad, but 'thin' notion of global commonality.¹⁶⁹

The newfound interest in human rights in the 1960s and 1970s is undoubtedly important, but it is equally crucial to note that this did not necessarily mean the return of a liberal socialist agenda that had interested sections of the British Left in the 1930s and 1940s. Creating and then articulating a discourse of rights that could be projected internationally was far more problematic in the 1940s than making use

¹⁶² Maurice Cranston, *What Are Human Rights?* (London: Bodley Head, 1973).

¹⁶³ See, for example, Neil Stammers, *Human Rights and Social Movements* (London: Pluto, 2009), 133–59.

¹⁶⁴ Tom Buchanan, "'The Truth Will Set You Free': The Making of Amnesty International", *Journal of Contemporary History*, 37, 4 (2002), 579; Christopher Moores, 'The Progressive Professionals: The National Council for Civil Liberties and the Politics of Activism in the 1960s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 20, 4 (2009), 538–60.

¹⁶⁵ For the JCWI see Michael Dummett, 'Unjustly Refused' in Helene Curtis and Mimi Sanderson, *The Unsung 1960s: Memoirs of Social Innovation* (London: Whiting and Birch, 2004), 168–82; for NGOs and the European Court of Human Rights, see Carol Harlow and Richard Rawlings, *Pressure Through Law* (London: Routledge, 1992), 254–68.

¹⁶⁶ Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 470–6.

¹⁶⁷ Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), 200.

¹⁶⁸ Roland Burke, 'From Individual Rights to National Development: The First UN international Conference on Human Rights, Tehran, 1968', *Journal of World History*, 19, 3 (2008), 275–97.

¹⁶⁹ Kenneth Cmiel, 'The Emergence of Human Rights Politics in the United States', *The Journal of American History*, 86, 3 (1999), 1231–50.

of existing laws, institutions, rights declarations and conventions to critique existing power structures proved to be in later decades. At the end of the twentieth century, human rights provided a language through which a new generation of activists, many of whom came from the secular Left, were able to phrase their demands. On an international level, reflecting trends of globalisation, transnational NGOs expanded in number and influence through the 1960s and 1970s, and were more able and willing to use human rights as a language which justified transnational actions outside Cold War divisions.¹⁷⁰ This had not been straightforward in the immediate post-war period. Within Britain, the language of human rights helped the ‘thickening’ of old issues such as civil liberties to accommodate the rights claims of new political actors, including women, minorities and those suffering disabilities, who were not always central to British traditions of liberties in the 1940s.¹⁷¹ Although this did not mean a return to the agenda of Wells, it was at this point that NGOs would become key agents in the history of human rights.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ See Glenda Sluga, ‘The Transformation of International Institutions: Global Shock as Cultural Shock’, 224–6; Mark Lawrence, ‘Containing Globalism: The United States and the Developing World in the 1970s’, 212–13; Michael Morgan, ‘The Seventies and the Rebirth of Human Rights’, 240–50, all in Niall Ferguson, Charles Maier, Erez Manela and Daniel Sargent, eds, *The Shock of the Global: The 1970s in Perspective* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Belknap, 2010).

¹⁷¹ Eley, *Forging Democracy*, 473.

¹⁷² Mark Mazower, ‘The End of Civilisation and the Rise of Human Rights: The Mid-Twentieth Century Disjuncture’ in Hoffman, *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century*, 44; Moyn, *Utopia*, 129.