

BRITAIN'S POPULAR FRONT? THE CASE OF THE TYNESIDE FOODSHIP CAMPAIGN, 1938–1939★

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Though historians have generally regarded the British popular front (1935–9) as a failure, it has been suggested that the project had untapped potential. Most significantly, the geographically widespread and socially and politically diverse campaigns in support of the Spanish Republic in its struggle against a military rebellion (1936–9) have been characterized as a de facto popular front. This article examines this claim by concentrating on one campaign in one locality. The Tyneside foodship campaign involved many from a wide variety of social and political backgrounds including those who were 'non-political'. Though appearing to constitute a de facto popular front, the campaign message was consistently worded in solely humanitarian terms by the main organizers. This had a wide range of implications for the politics of the campaign and therefore the extent to which it can be regarded as a de facto popular front. Other grass roots campaigns in the north east region that appeared to be popular fronts shared the same essential characteristics as the Tyneside foodship campaign. The evidence suggests that these campaigns only managed to achieve this semblance of a popular front precisely because the majority of those from conservative or non-political backgrounds perceived the campaigns as humanitarian. Thus they did not share (either from the outset or after becoming 'politicized') what could be deemed a 'popular front outlook'; an abhorrence of fascism and a critique of Chamberlain's supposed pro-fascist foreign policy.

The popular front strategy was a means of combating the increasing threat of fascism by combining all 'progressive' and 'democratic' forces (from Communists to Liberals and even 'progressive' Conservatives) against it. Hitler's seizure of power in Germany in January 1933 had sent shock-waves through the left, a significant proportion of which ascribed the event to the internecine conflict between German Communists and Socialists. This conflict had been deliberately encouraged by the previous Communist strategy, the sectarian 'class against class' or 'third period', which, from 1928, had demanded that Communists regard the 'social fascist' Social Democrats as their greatest enemies. The popular front, which marked a sharp change of direction for the Communist Party, was pioneered in France where an indigenous fascist threat led to

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its emergence as a practical strategy by October 1934. In summer 1935, the 'Dimitrov resolution', which was passed at the Seventh World Communist Congress, brought the international Communist movement into line with developments in France. The strategy seemed initially successful as popular front governments were elected in Spain and France in February and May 1936.

In the British context, anti-fascists perceived the National Government's appeasement policies of the late thirties as pro-fascist. It was therefore necessary to force a reversal in government policy or, better still, replace it with a popular front government. Under the leadership of Labour, but including Liberals and possibly other anti-appeasers, such a government would commit Britain to building an alliance with France, Russia, the United States and other democracies, which would halt fascist expansionism. However, the British popular front movement has generally been regarded as a failure by historians. Though Labour youth and student sections and a handful of Labour MPs supported the strategy, the Labour leadership would not countenance working with Communists under any circumstances and the majority of the trade union leaders agreed. There was resistance to aligning with liberals too, especially in Labour strongholds like the north east of England. In the aftermath of the Munich settlement, when Chamberlain brokered an agreement allowing Nazi Germany to take a large portion of Czechoslovakia on the pretext that it was largely populated by Germans, Labour showed itself prepared to align with dissident Conservatives. However, talks between them came to nothing. The *Liberal News Chronicle* supported the Co-operative newspaper *Reynold's News'* campaign for a United Peace Alliance (in effect a popular front) in March 1938. In May 1938 the Liberal Party also backed the proposal but this did not translate into action at grassroots level. In the north east, for example, Liberals remained far keener to maintain an anti-Labour alliance with Conservatives than a 'progressive' alliance with Labour. By the time of Cripps' campaign for a popular front inside the Labour Party in 1939 even those who had been previously supportive, the Co-Operative Party and the Liberals, were either opposed or even more lukewarm to the idea.¹

An attempt to rescue the British popular front from ignominy has been made by highlighting the large numbers of people who collected money and food for medical aid and provisions for the beleaguered Spanish Republic. It was under attack from a rebellion of its own army, which, breaking out on 18 July 1936, was supported by both Hitler and Mussolini. Indeed, Jim Fyrrth went as far as to claim that what he deemed the 'Aid Spain movement' became 'the most widespread and representative mass movement in Britain since the mid-nineteenth-century days of Chartism and the Anti-Corn Law Leagues, and the most outstanding example of international solidarity in British history'.² More specifically related to the popular front, Fyrrth asserted that 'The Aid for Spain Campaign was the nearest thing to a People's Front that came about in Britain'.³ Implicit in this claim, and Fyrrth's general treatment of the 'Aid Spain' campaigns, which he was also consistently keen to point out had a 'people's front character', is the idea that there was real potential in the British popular front project.⁴ This was because something similar came about 'unofficially', as a large number of people from very diverse social and political backgrounds came together in 'Aid Spain' campaigning work. This is an important claim, and has not received the attention that it deserves from historians of the topic.⁵

It seems incumbent on anyone depicting the 'Aid Spain' campaigns as a *de facto* popular front to demonstrate that those both from the right of the political spectrum and the

members of 'non-political' groups involved in them, subscribed to the basic popular front aims. In other words, it is necessary to show that these people were, at the very least, acting (in their own minds and not just in effect), against fascism and for 'democracy'. This is, of course, not to argue that they should show evidence of embracing a Marxist analysis of the causes of fascism and war. It is reasonable, however, to expect evidence of a general desire to oppose fascism more forcefully and a basic critique of appeasement; a desire, at the least, to see the Chamberlain government take a stand against fascist aggression rather than appear to pander to it. This definition of a 'popular front outlook', informed by David Blaazer's work on the subject, is the widest tenable in a British context and is designed to allow Jim Fyrrth's claim as much leeway as possible.⁶ If this 'popular front outlook' did not obviously characterize the attitudes of those involved at the outset, then there should be evidence of it emerging during or immediately after the campaigns ended, as a result of the politicization process which any campaign claiming to have a political impact must have on at least a good proportion of those participating in it. If this can be shown, a compelling case for the existence of an effective *de facto* popular front at grass roots level can be made.

As the foodship campaigns (which sprang up all over Britain from late 1938 as a response to the refugee crisis in Republican Spain engendered by the increasing loss of territory to Franco's forces) were an important element of the grass roots 'Aid Spain' campaigns, it is reasonable to choose one for a case study in order to scrutinise Fyrrth's claim.⁷ There are three reasons for concentrating on the Tyneside campaign, which was representative of this particular set of campaigns.⁸ Firstly, the campaign received a large amount of detailed press coverage and consequently there is an extensive base of information that does not exist for many of the other 'Aid Spain' campaigns at grass roots level.⁹ This abundance of information was probably because the foodship campaign was, of all the various 'Aid Spain' campaigns in the north east of England, the widest reaching and most co-ordinated activity that occurred ostensibly in aid of the Spanish Republic. Thirdly, is the timing; the campaign occurred in the wake of the Munich settlement in October 1938, which suggested, with by-elections at Oxford and Bridgwater in which 'popular front' candidates did well, new potential for the project.¹⁰

The successes of the Tyneside foodship campaign

The Tyneside foodship campaign was certainly 'popular'. Many more north-east towns and villages saw activity in the Tyneside foodship campaign, which began in early December 1938, than had occurred in any of the other 'Aid Spain' campaigns. At its peak, in February 1939, the campaign's Newcastle-based central co-ordinating committee boasted 120 sub-committees throughout Durham and Northumberland.¹¹ This popularity was reflected in its success (on its own terms). Noting that Tyneside was 'particularly well-run', *Spanish Relief* described the £4500 raised as a great deal from a depressed area.¹² The Duchess of Atholl, prominently involved in the national campaign, had not heard of a 'parallel number of committees' anywhere else in the country.¹³ The *North Mail* described the campaign as 'one of the North's greatest efforts'.¹⁴ The high level of activity around the Tyneside foodship and the total amount raised suggests that the cause was a popular one. But did it constitute something akin to a popular front?

Some evidence suggests that there is a case for the Tyneside foodship campaign being regarded as a *de facto* popular front. Firstly, the impetus for sending a foodship originally came from the Tyneside Joint Peace Council (TJPC), which was an anti-fascist, anti-appeasement popular front organization.¹⁵ At a TJPC conference on 29 October 1938, a commission established to consider methods of raising material assistance for China and Spain was instructed to give special attention to the question of organising a foodship.¹⁶ Secondly, in terms of the political and social diversity of those involved, the Tyneside foodship campaign certainly looked like a popular front. Its two presidents, for example, were the politically very dissimilar figures of Viscount Ridley and the Labour left winger C. P. Trevelyan.¹⁷ The campaign's patrons included north-east Labour MPs, the Liberal MP Wilfred Roberts (for North Cumberland), trade union officials, Labour councillors, several mayors, the Conservative lord mayor of Newcastle, local businessmen, clergy and other prominent people in the region.¹⁸ 'Every shade of political opinion' was represented at the only large public meeting that the campaign held, in Newcastle City Hall on 22 January 1939.¹⁹ It was addressed by two Conservatives, a Labour MP, a member of the Council of Action for Peace and Reconstruction (CAPR) and Frank Graham, a Communist and ex-International Brigade member. A list of names urging Wearsiders to support Tyneside's effort also gave the impression of a popular front.²⁰ This diversity was true of the other foodships. For example, Liverpool foodship patrons included the bishop and dean of Liverpool and a Conservative JP.²¹ The Yorkshire foodship's patrons included Conservative and Labour MPs, several bishops and other clergy as well as J. B. Priestley.²²

Like the lists of patrons and supporters, the political affiliations and social class of the individuals in the central organising committee suggested that the campaign was a *de facto* popular front. Thomas Tindle Anderson (junior), the campaign's honorary secretary, was the single most important individual. Anderson was a 'well known personality' in South Shields and 'a social worker of energy and ability'.²³ A grammar school teacher with a conservative, middle-class background, he was involved in a great deal of public work, both social and charitable. The campaign's organizing secretary, R. G. Purcell, was chairperson of Newcastle branch of the General and Municipal Worker's union, TJPC secretary and secretary of Newcastle CAPR branch by December 1938.²⁴ Frieda Bacon, another central organizer, was also a CAPR member.²⁵

This diversity was also reflected in the composition of the sub-committees. Those co-operating in the campaign on the left included members of Labour Parties, miners' lodges, other trade unions, Co-operative guilds, the National Unemployed Workers' Movement and book club groups.²⁶ Ex-International Brigade members, who included many Communists, were prominent in the campaign.²⁷ Direct evidence of Liberal involvement is harder to find, but CAPR members were involved, as was the League of Nations Union (LNU), which included Liberals and Conservatives amongst its membership.²⁸ At least one identifiable Conservative was involved in the sub-committees. In addition, there was involvement from those who were generally considered 'non-political', including members of the clergy in several areas.²⁹ Other ostensibly 'non-political' bodies were involved, such as women's sections of the British Legion and the Town's Women's Guild. Corbridge boys club collected in their locality.³⁰

Those donating to the appeal were equally diverse in terms of class, political and religious affiliation, again suggesting a popular front. Donors to the Felling appeal

included the Labour League of Youth and Ex-Servicemen's Association branches, the Free Church Council, an Independent (which could have meant a Liberal or Conservative) councillor and Heworth miners' lodge.³¹ Messages of support and donations to the South Shields foodship committee came from the South Shields Labour MP and both the Liberal and National Liberal Prospective Parliamentary Candidates (PPC). The Tyne Dock Town's Women's Guild, unemployed people and children were all generous donors in the town.³² Several Women's Institute groups (which could be deemed 'conservative' with a small, if not a capital, 'c') also donated to the campaign.³³

The terms in which the campaign was framed

However, it is unsatisfactory to say that, simply because the Tyneside foodship and many of the other 'Aid Spain' campaigns appeared to be popular fronts in action, that is what they must have been. It is necessary to determine why these people organized together; what, if anything, united them? This is a difficult task. Apart from those it has been possible to interview who can reveal how they perceived the political situation and why they participated in the 'Aid Spain' campaigns, there is very little direct evidence. What can be observed, though, is how the campaigners presented the conflict in their propaganda and inferences can be made from this.

In the evidence it is very clear that the main campaign organizers consistently played down the politics of the conflict in Spain. In the initial appeal in early December 1938 a campaign organizer, G. Middleton, whilst conceding that the food was intended for 'women and children on Spanish government territory' to prevent famine, emphasized that the campaign had 'no political object'.³⁴ This message was consistently reiterated by T. T. Anderson.³⁵ Political neutrality was even more explicit in early January 1939, when Anderson wrote: 'We are not concerned with the rights and wrongs of the present conflict in Spain'.³⁶ The sole purpose of the foodship was to relieve the suffering of innocent victims of the conflict, and in order to do this the help of those of all political and religious creeds was requested. In mid-January 1939 Anderson responded in the press to recurrent questions which met foodship collectors on the doorstep. To refute the allegation that the aid was helping the Republic as it was going solely to Republican civilians, Anderson cited findings from a LNU report of October 1938. Republican territory was experiencing particular problems due to an influx of refugees from Nationalist Spain which had increased the population by twenty per cent. Conditions in Nationalist Spain were entirely different. 'Surely', Anderson argued, 'it would be unreasonable to treat both sides alike when the needs are different'.³⁷ This implied that had their needs been the same, both sides would have received foodship aid; certainly no political distinction was drawn between the two sides. Another central organizer, Purcell, also claimed the fund was 'purely humanitarian'.³⁸ The foodship was not in any way presented as a way of combating Franco and fascism by the central organizers of the campaign, who were consistently clear that it was 'non-political in aims'.³⁹

The degree to which the sub-committees followed the central committee in the way they framed the campaign was striking. The only real difference was that some spoke of ending the starvation of the 'Spanish people' (presumably referring to those in the Republic, although it is uncertain whether they actually thought aid would go to both sides) whilst others were more explicit in specifying those in the Republican sector.⁴⁰

The only sub-committee that partly erred from this non-political stance was Gateshead where the Labour Party was the driving force. A front-page article in the Gateshead Labour Party newspaper urging support for the foodship condemned the 'criminal and farcical non-intervention'. Even here, though, politics was muted by humanitarianism. Beginning with the words 'Women and children are starving in Spain', the article concentrated on the humanitarian effort.⁴¹ Whilst the article equated the role of International Brigade volunteers and those who worked for humanitarian relief, there was no real mention of the arms issue and how to alter the government's appeasement policy, nor even of the need to do this.

The only other evidence that counters the emphasis on the non-political, humanitarian basis of the campaign was provided by some of the speakers at the main foodship public meeting. The key figure in this context was the Duchess of Atholl, who spoke at a delegate meeting of foodship volunteers and at the public meeting in Newcastle, both on 22 January 1939. Atholl's utterances provide an example of someone who knew that they should be representing the campaign as a humanitarian one, but who wanted to make it more political. Thus the overall message was a somewhat confusing one for the audience as Atholl flitted between politics and humanitarianism and back.⁴² Due to the relatively poor reporting of political meetings at this time, it is difficult to assess who else, other than Atholl, brought politics, in the form of pro-Republic rhetoric, to the platform. Frank Graham did (though he did not mention the arms question) but this is known only because the draft of a speech he gave has survived. Of course, the very presence of an International Brigade fighter suggests partisanship and politics, though it could have been argued that such a person was speaking purely because they had seen the humanitarian suffering first hand. More significantly, the political content of Graham's foodship speech was very toned-down when compared to another speech that he gave to a Labour-organized 'Save Spain' meeting a few days later.⁴³ It is quite conceivable that other speakers at the public meeting also talked of the campaign in political terms to a greater or lesser extent, although this cannot be demonstrated. What is clear is that apart from these two meetings, all of the day-to-day campaign organizers consistently steered well clear of politics. Their oft-repeated humanitarian message must have had far more impact on the populace than the slightly confusing political rhetoric that, exceptionally, surfaced (albeit uttered by some prominent individuals).

Of course, other individuals depicted the foodship as a means of supporting the Republic against fascism. These people, though, were generally easily identifiable as Communists or other leftists, who already held these political views. However, only a handful did this and even then the politics were sometimes muted. For example, an ex-International Brigade member from South Shields, William Norris, writing of those who had fought (with two dying) in Spain from the town, supported the 'non-political' foodship claiming, somewhat cryptically, that 'Food for Spain now means freedom for Britain tomorrow'.⁴⁴ Implicit was the idea that a fascist victory in Spain would threaten Britain, but a person unfamiliar with the issues could be forgiven for misinterpreting the comment. Finally, the Tyneside foodship was not aberrant in framing the appeal in humanitarian terms. A circular from the Eastern Counties Foodship Committee explained how they should establish the campaign: prominent local people 'of different vocations and points of view' should be approached for their support and then three or four of 'the most respected' should sign an appeal to the local press 'couched in

humanitarian, not political terms'.⁴⁵ This was what occurred on Tyneside. In fact, the Tyneside campaign's propaganda served 'as a lead to many committees'.⁴⁶

A shared 'popular front outlook'?

As noted at the outset, in deciding whether the foodship campaigns constituted a *de facto* popular front, it is vital to determine whether those involved from the right of the political spectrum and the 'non-political' individuals either had a 'popular front outlook' or adopted one due to their involvement in the campaign. Certainly, it is clear that some of the individuals on the campaign's central committee were anti-fascist and anti-appeasement, and therefore did have this 'popular front outlook'. Purcell was important in the TJPC and a member of the CAPR, many of whose members were involved in the TJPC and who also lent their support to Cripps' popular front campaign in 1939.⁴⁷ Though there is no direct evidence of his attitude to Spain, it is likely that his involvement in the TJPC informed his decision to help organize the foodship campaign. The same can be said of Frieda Bacon, also of the CAPR, who had also been active in the TJPC from 1936.⁴⁸ However, Anderson, the least obviously 'political' of those in the central organisation, appears to have approached the issue with the same kind of motives that led to his charity and social work. In other words, his motives were characterized more by benevolent humanitarianism rather than a political analysis of the situation in Spain. The only remotely 'political' organization he was associated with was the LNU. The LNU attracted members from across the political spectrum who agreed on the desirability of the League of Nations but, apart from this, did not share even a broadly similar understanding of the international situation.⁴⁹ Quakerism informed Anderson's attitude to Spain and his concerns about the wider international situation at the time of the foodship campaign.⁵⁰ He supported the National Peace Council's petition for a new international peace conference and stressed the need to address Germany's economic problems, implicitly endorsing the Munich settlement and clearly not supporting the need to oppose fascism more vigorously.⁵¹

In addition, Anderson's behaviour after the foodship campaign ended suggests that he had not been politicized by his involvement in it. His secretaryship of the Tyneside and District Spanish Refugee Ship (what the foodship campaign became when the Republic fell), could just as easily have been inspired by humanitarianism as anti-fascism. The same can be said of his support for a shop opened by Tyneside Friends of China.⁵² Anderson's intervention on the issue of conscription in May 1939 revealed that he had not adopted a more 'political' attitude. He and seven others were keen to see that 'every effort shall be made to guarantee the strict observance of the conscience clause', but were explicit that they had no 'corporate view' on the 'rights and wrongs' of conscription and no desire to 'obstruct' it.⁵³ This, again, was classic Quakerism, and echoed statements Anderson had made about the conflict in Spain. Not surprisingly, Anderson's name does not emerge in relation to the Cripps-led popular front agitation, or indeed to any other 'political' agitation in 1939. That the most high-profile and active individual in the foodship campaign was not obviously politicized by his involvement is significant as it appears that Anderson was, as will be shown, representative of the campaign as a whole.

Thus the campaign's central committee cannot be perceived as a popular front. Whilst it encompassed people of differing classes and backgrounds, they were not united in

sharing a common 'political' analysis of the Spanish conflict. When the appeal was couched in humanitarian terms by members of the central committee it is likely that, for Anderson at least, this was how the situation was perceived, rather than this being a tactic to maximize the fund-raising potential of the project. This is quite surprising given that the project was a TJPC initiative, as is the fact that the most prominent Labour left or Communist members of the TJPC do not seem to have been involved at all in the foodship campaign. It is conceivable that this was because they were too obviously 'political'.⁵⁴

Did the sub-committees represent popular fronts in microcosm? It can be safely assumed that the Labour and Communist campaign organisers in the sub-committees had a 'political' motive: many of those on the left previously mentioned were active and vocal anti-fascists throughout this period.⁵⁵ It is likely that most, if not all, of those involved in the CAPR shared this anti-fascist perspective. However, the same cannot be said of the Conservatives in the sub-committees, which has significant implications regarding the validity of Fyrth's claim. Firstly, there is direct evidence of only one Conservative involved in a sub-committee; the chairperson of Jarrow Conservative Association, C. V. H. Vincent. Vincent seemed fairly progressive: for example, he moved a resolution at Conservative Party conference in 1936 urging government help for Jarrow. He was also a playwright and one of his plays, 'Ten 'till Three', was burned in Germany as the censor thought it contained 'unflattering references' to Hitler.⁵⁶ However, he was not anti-fascist before the foodship. At the time of Anthony Eden's resignation, in February 1938, he thought that there had never been 'a greater opportunity of cementing European peace than today and such peace could only be ensured by speedy friendship with Italy'.⁵⁷ Moreover, his active involvement in the campaign was not evidence of his conversion to an anti-fascist, anti-Chamberlain point of view brought about by exposure to anti-fascist propaganda around the conflict in Spain. Midway through the campaign Vincent himself moved a motion conveying Jarrow Conservative Association's 'loyal Christmas greetings' to Chamberlain.⁵⁸ It is likely that Vincent instead saw the campaign very much in the same terms as Jarrow Conservatives saw the 1936 Jarrow March; as a non-political, non-partisan effort for solely humanitarian ends.⁵⁹ This is not surprising, given that this was precisely how all the main organizers framed (and some actually saw) the campaign.

Unfortunately, little can be said about the attitudes of several of the campaign's other high-profile Conservative supporters apart from that fact that there were only a few of them.⁶⁰ One Conservative actively supporting the campaign and the Republic, was Michael Weaver. At the Newcastle foodship public meeting in January 1939 he said that he had gone to Spain, in November 1938 a Franco supporter but, after visiting both sides, he had returned pro-Republic.⁶¹ However, his political conversion appeared to have happened in Spain, not after involvement in 'Aid Spain' campaigns with a humanitarian basis. It is also uncertain precisely why Weaver had changed sides. It does not follow that because he was now pro-Republic he was anti-fascist *per se*. He may have shared the motives of fellow Conservative, the misnamed 'Red' Duchess of Atholl, who saw a Franco victory a serious threat to the British Empire.⁶² Being anti-Franco or anti-Hitler because they imperilled British imperial interests was very different from opposing fascism on ideological grounds. In other words, there was a wide gulf between anti-fascists who opposed the idea of fascism and those who opposed fascism because of the perceived threat to 'British interests' that its practical application in a specific country

happened to entail.⁶³ However, for the purposes of this discussion, a potential popular front supporter is anyone who revealed an anti-fascist attitude, regardless of the thinking that lay behind their anti-fascism. Even given this very wide definition, there is no evidence that any Conservative in the north east was involved in the Tyneside foodship campaign because of their anti-fascist and anti-appeasement politics. Nor do any of the prominent Conservatives supporting the campaign seem to have been converted to anti-fascism by their involvement. No high-profile north east Conservative (Atholl and Weaver were not from the region) had a good word to say about the Republic and this did not change with the Tyneside foodship campaign. Indeed, at the very time the campaign was in full swing, Alfred Denville MP 'deplored the over-keen interest taken in the Spanish civil war and suggested that there was plenty to occupy us at home'.⁶⁴ The same arguments apply to the representatives of the 'non political' Town's Women's Guilds and the various churches. The most obvious assumption is that they saw the issue in the terms in which it was presented: as a 'non-political', benevolent, humanitarian cause.

The only evidence of rank-and-file Conservative attitudes to the 'Aid Spain' campaigns comes from contemporaries. Whilst Fred Jackson noted that 'even the Conservative Party weren't hostile' to the campaigns, there is little positive evidence of Conservatives collecting for these committees.⁶⁵ Len Edmonson, an Independent Labour Party activist, was fairly sure that there were no Conservatives involved in 'Aid Spain' activity and Charlie Woods, a prominent local Communist, concurred.⁶⁶ People like Vincent must have been exceptional cases, though some LNU members involved may have been Conservatives too. Overall, the 'Aid Spain' campaigns were supported by a handful of largely prominent national Conservatives like the Duchess of Atholl who were not representative of even a significant minority element of grass roots Conservative opinion. Most Conservatives did not support the 'Aid Spain' campaigns, let alone oppose appeasement.⁶⁷

Many of the same observations apply to the organizations that mounted individual fund-raising efforts for the campaign. Most significant in this context are the Women's Institutes (WI) and women's sections of the Royal British Legion (RBL), which organized fund-raising events for the foodship and possibly co-operated in some sub-committees. These organizations were important because both were ostensibly 'non-political' bodies. There were fears in the labour movement, however, that the WI was really a bastion of conservatism and this was especially true of the north east as the Conservative associations themselves were fairly weak.⁶⁸ Pauline Lynn argued that the RBL was, like the WI, 'another ostensibly non-political organisation which arguably won support for the Conservative party'.⁶⁹ Until the time of the Tyneside foodship regular press reports on the activities of individual WI branches reveal no indication that any great interest was taken by them in the Spanish conflict, nor, indeed, in any other 'political' matters, save one or two branches which were involved with the LNU.⁷⁰ Again, whilst there were several hundred WI branches in the region, there is only direct evidence of five that donated. In addition, there is also no indication that this was for a 'political' motive. It appears that the foodship fitted in well with other humanitarian charity causes, such as hospitals, that the WI collected for.

WI branch activities after the foodship campaign ended suggest that it had had no identifiable political impact. Normal charitable activities were resumed and there is little indication of greater political awareness and engagement in most WIs. There were only

a handful of incidences indicating possible increased interest in politics and the international situation. Nedderton WI heard a lecture on the League of Nations in June 1939, and there was a 'talk on Spain' to Cleadon WI in July 1939.⁷¹ The content of the talk on Spain was not disclosed and members of all the major political parties still paid lip-service to the League of Nations, so it was hardly controversial. This supports the claim that the foodship campaign was regarded merely as another deserving charity and not as a political project; nor did it have a political effect on these ostensibly 'non-political' organizations.

Though prominent Conservative and 'non-political' individuals or groups do not appear to have been politicized by their involvement, it is conceivable that individual campaigners, who went on door-to-door collections for the sub-committees, were. Jim Fyrth claimed that political arguments were essential to collecting and other campaigning activities and that this changed people's political consciousness.⁷² Though ostensibly reasonable, this claim is also problematic. There is no reason to believe that Anderson's aforementioned humanitarian replies to questions that collectors frequently met with on the doorstep were not repeated by actual collectors when asked about the partisanship of the campaign. Thus, it was far likelier that a novice collector, unaware of, or unmoved by, the politics of the Spanish situation would merely ask for help for starving (and innocent) Spanish women and children, rather than being forced into a 'political' discussion on the doorstep about the rights and wrongs of Franco and fascism. Despite the Spanish civil war being an ostensibly highly 'political' topic, politics did not have to enter the discussion if the collector did not wish it to. Thus collectors were unlikely to be inadvertently politicized by being thrust reluctantly into political debates with prospective donors. A collector could, of course, choose a more robust and political defence of the foodship and therefore the Republic, but they were surely far more likely to do that if they already regarded the issue in a 'political' manner. But, if they followed the lead of the central organizers who were politically motivated but who depicted the foodship as non-political, then this would not have happened. Of course, this is not to suggest that no one was politicized by involvement in this campaign, but these were surely the exception rather than the rule. Moreover, because fund-raisers could avoid political discussion on the doorsteps, the potential for politicizing donors to the campaign was also minimized.

Humanitarianism and politics

Though, of course, it might be argued that there is no strict division between politics and humanitarianism, those keenest to defend the achievement of the 'popular front' 'Aid Spain' campaigns were quick to counter the claim that they were humanitarian rather than politically based. Thus, Jim Fyrth and others employed several arguments relating to humanitarian motives characterizing the attitudes of those collecting for 'Spain', and in doing so they were implicitly recognizing that there was a valid and important distinction between humanitarianism and 'politics', one that needed to be addressed. Firstly, Fyrth contended that: 'To collect, or even give food or money for Spain became a political act as well as a humanitarian one, because the collection was probably organised by people of left sympathies on behalf of people with a left-wing government opposed by the British government and abused by most of the Conservative media'.⁷³ Though some of

the Tyneside campaign's activists did have 'left wing sympathies' of some description, others did not. Moreover, the manner in which the foodship campaign was framed suggested that it was intended to feed those who happened to find themselves in that 'left-wing government's territory'. It was not a fund to aid the Republican government itself, though, of course, the food would indirectly help the government's struggle. (Although by late 1938, nothing short of overwhelming British and French military intervention on the side of the Republic would have saved it, something that was never going to happen).⁷⁴ And even if the collection had been organized by 'left wing' people for a 'left-wing government', if these people had said the money was for a humanitarian fund then the act of collecting for that fund would in no sense become political, as the politics would be an inconsequential side issue. A person collecting for the blind is still performing a humanitarian act even if they are organized by a person of 'left sympathies' and have 'left sympathies' themselves. The act no more becomes political if either or both the donor and the blind beneficiary also have 'left-wing sympathies'.

Secondly, Fyrth claimed that the idea of saving Spain from fascism (the political aspect) and the humanitarian aspect 'were rarely separate in the minds of those taking part'.⁷⁵ This seems mere wishful thinking. Despite having been involved himself, Fyrth cannot know what the majority involved in these type of campaigns thought.⁷⁶ The foodship campaign was presented as a humanitarian effort and this at least gives us some idea of why many people became involved. Of course, those acting on political motives were also likely to have been actuated by the human suffering, but the reverse does not follow. Mike Squires took this argument one step further by contending that those donating showed sympathy with the plight of the hungry in Spain and 'at the same time, although not always in a conscious way, registered their abhorrence of fascism, and their support of democracy'.⁷⁷ If the people themselves were not conscious anti-fascists, it is not tenable, sixty years later, to speculate on their sub-conscious thoughts. If the campaign had been expressed in political, anti-fascist terms it would be reasonably certain that donors were anti-fascist. This was not the case and the proportion of those wishing to express anti-fascist sentiment against those donating to help starving and, perhaps more importantly, innocent women and children (i.e. a humanitarian reason) can only be speculated at. Of course, many who gave to the fund would have been both anti-Franco and anti-fascist. It is quite conceivable, given the results of contemporary public opinion polls, that the majority were. The important point here is that most of these people must have been anti-fascist anyway. The foodship campaign had not 'converted' them to this stance; they had not been politicized by it, partly because many in the campaign had not intended that they be politicized by it.

Another argument Fyrth employed was that the 'Aid Spain' campaigns were seen by the Labour leadership as 'backdoor' popular fronts which were making Communists respectable.⁷⁸ There is little doubt that the Labour leadership did feel threatened by these grass roots campaign committees, and for precisely the reason Fyrth gave: that they brought Labour Party members into contact with Communists and others. However, this is tempered by the fact that the threat does not appear to have been deemed great enough to actually expel Labour Party members for their involvement (in the north east, at least).⁷⁹ Moreover, the Labour Party leadership, often out of touch with the grass roots in this period, once again allowed its fear of communism to cloud its judgement.⁸⁰ These humanitarian 'Aid Spain' campaigns did not, for the most part, make Communists

respectable, simply because politics were not discussed. In fact, it is likely that most of those involved in the foodship campaign were not even aware they were rubbing shoulders with Communists. For example, in the foodship appeal issued by Sunderland dignitaries, though Frank Graham's name appeared, there was no indication that he was a Communist or even, for that matter, an ex-International Brigade member.⁸¹ If Communists were appreciated in these sub-committees, then it was as individuals, not as Communists and they themselves recognized this. The Communist Hymie Lee, commenting on the north east situation in March 1939, complained that: 'in all the mass activity we are hiding the face of the party. Communists are working everywhere but they don't show that they are Communists'.⁸² Communists only achieved an apparent air of respectability because the fact that they were Communists was not made public knowledge. Communist involvement in activity of this kind was very unlikely to generate political benefits for the party.

This last point leads into another argument suggesting that the 'Aid Spain' campaigns were political: that some of those who were politicized by them joined the Communist Party (CPGB). Noreen Branson argued that Communists had begun to understand 'that if you can lead people into action on some issue on which they feel strongly, the very experience itself can bring about a change in their ideas [...] whereas you seldom convert anyone to socialism by preaching from the sidelines'.⁸³ This claim seems reasonable but raises the question: if the humanitarian 'Aid Spain' campaigns were so successful for the CPGB, why did the Tyneside foodship (and the other foodship campaigns going on throughout the country concurrently) bring no direct benefit to the party in the form of new recruits? Andrew Thorpe noted, on a national level, that CPGB membership 'shot up' between September and December 1938 and then hit a 'plateau' between January and July 1939. This, Thorpe commented, backs up other analyses of the CPGB that indicate after 'a period of rapid expansion, the popular front had run out of steam'.⁸⁴ Although the Tyneside campaign began in December, it really peaked in February 1939. Thus, new Communist recruits would be expected in February and March, rather than at the very beginning of the campaign, before Communists involved had had a chance to make their presence felt. A plateau might be expected after the Republic fell in April, but not in the months before. Yet, far from increasing in early 1939, Communist membership in the north east actually decreased by fifty (a ten per cent decline).⁸⁵ With an already low membership, this was nothing short of disastrous for the district. And this came at the very same time as the largest and most co-ordinated 'popular front style' campaign in the region, in the form of the Tyneside foodship, was in full swing. No wonder, then, that at the same time as Lee complained that the regional party had no profile despite its activity, he added that: 'there is no feeling about the party growing'.⁸⁶ The two observations appeared causally linked. Communists had been active but anonymous in the foodship campaign and, not surprisingly, they had little or no success in converting people to 'socialism'.

The 'petition campaign'

Another aspect of the politicization question is the extent to which those involved in the foodship campaign became involved in Cripps' popular front 'Petition campaign', which began as funds for the first Tyneside foodship were being collected and, more

significantly, continued after the foodship campaigns ended. Certainly, at least one regional Cripps supporter saw some significance in the 'Aid Spain' campaigns. Arthur Blenkinsop (a Newcastle Labour PPC), announcing his support for Cripps' memorandum, argued that those who had campaigned with political and non-political organizations in the past few months on the Spanish foodship and other campaigns 'understand how effective such co-operation can be'.⁸⁷ Yet Blenkinsop's name did not figure prominently in the foodship campaign. Conversely, those whose names are connected with the foodship campaign generally did not figure as supporters of Cripps. As noted before, T. T. Anderson does not appear to have been involved with the Cripps campaign. (If he had, it is likely that, as a high profile figure, this would have emerged in the sources). In fact, the only names that do come up in relation to both campaigns were, predictably, those of left wingers like Trevelyan.

This point is particularly important regarding the role of Liberals. Apart from the CAPR (a very small and unorthodox 'liberal' organization), and the indeterminate number of Liberals who collected for the campaign as individuals, only one name of a prominent Liberal emerged, that of Raymond Jones (South Shields Liberal PPC), who sent a message of support to the foodship. Jones also expressed pro-Republic anti-Franco views and attacked government foreign policy on the public platform in accordance with his party policy, but he did not support any of the popular front initiatives.⁸⁸ Other South Shields Liberals expressed degrees of sympathy with the Spanish Republic but did not become prominently involved in the foodship campaign, let alone Cripps' campaign.⁸⁹ Fyrth claimed that 'Aid Spain' activists were prominent in support of 'people's front' candidates at the Bridgwater and Oxford by-elections in autumn 1938 and Atholl's by-election against appeasement in December.⁹⁰ Yet he did not name any individuals, thereby making no attempt to show that they had been brought over to the popular front by their involvement in humanitarian 'Aid Spain' campaigning. In the north east, those who supported the popular front in 1938 were largely left wingers who would have supported it regardless of their involvement in 'Aid Spain' campaigns.⁹¹

The Tyneside foodship compared

The arguments employed for the Tyneside foodship apply equally to most of the other 'Aid Spain' campaigns in the north east. The campaign to support a hostel for Basque refugee children in Tynemouth was the most obviously humanitarian. Four thousand children came to Britain when the Franco offensive on Euskadi between April and August 1937 produced large numbers of civilian refugees. The Basque Children's Committee (BCC) was formed, in early May 1937, from the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief (NJCSR, an umbrella body formed to co-ordinate 'Aid Spain' activity) and the Salvation Army, TUC, Quakers and the Catholic Church.⁹² The campaign to provide funds for the Basque refugee hostel in Tynemouth had the appearance of a popular front in terms of those involved but was consistently depicted as a purely humanitarian campaign, partly due to the wishes of the Basque government. The involvement of the Catholic Church in housing large numbers of Basque children in the north east helped ensure that the politics of the conflict in Spain were not mentioned.⁹³ This was the only campaign that the anti-popular front, left-wing Independent Labour Party (ILP) was involved in with other organizations and individuals. Len Edmonson

noted that, within this and other campaigns, 'none of it [politics] was ever raised then. It didn't interfere with any of the local activity on behalf of aid for Spain'.⁹⁴ This lack of politics explains why the rivalries between the British left parties, which worsened considerably with the Spanish Communist suppression of the POUM (an anti-Stalinist, Marxist party) and subsequent persecution of ILP men associated with it in Spain, did not lead to conflict between the ILP and CPGB members on the hostel's management committee. It also explains why more conservative elements were easily incorporated into this and other 'Aid Spain' campaigns. Even the Communist Woods noted that people on the management committee were 'actuated by the humanitarian nature of the appeal'.⁹⁵

The Spanish Medical Aid Committee was established by Socialist and Communist doctors in August 1936 and this stimulated the formation of local Spanish Medical Aid Committees. There is evidence of at least seventeen of these committees in the north east and they differed significantly in terms of their composition and the way they framed their message.⁹⁶ Some, such as the united front Blaydon committee, depicted the issue in political terms, as the 'struggle of Spanish democracy against Fascist intervention'.⁹⁷ However, the four that appeared to be popular fronts in microcosm all depicted the issue in humanitarian terms.⁹⁸ A Newcastle committee appeal in late October 1936, for example, called for medical supplies and clothes for 'the sufferers among the civilian population'.⁹⁹ Thus, the arguments employed for the Tyneside foodship apply equally to the popular front Spanish Medical Aid Committees.

On 23 February 1937 the crew of the *SS Linaria*, all of whom were from the north east, refused to take a cargo of nitrates from Boston (Massachusetts) to Seville, a Franco-held port. The motivation behind this action was clearly political, at least for the elected leader of the strike committee, Alex Robson, who was an active North Shields Communist.¹⁰⁰ From the outset, though, the crew represented its action in two subtly but significantly different ways. The crew's written protest, handed to the captain, 'vigorously' protested against 'being made a party by the fascists to their suppression of the people of Spain'.¹⁰¹ Yet, the quote that Robson supplied the press with at the same time (which got equal coverage to the text of their protest resolution), did not mention fascism specifically, and implied that their concern was more a humanitarian one, in that they had no wish to send likely war materials to a war zone because of the possibility of it being used on civilians.¹⁰² This had implications for the politics of the campaign committee that was organized to help defend the crewmen in court after they were deported from America. Like the foodship campaign, the *Linaria* Defence Committee took on the appearance of a popular front: its president was R. A. Anderson, an Independent member of Tynemouth council and the fund's treasurer was the Reverend John Patton of North Shields.¹⁰³ Naturally, given the political affiliation of Robson, the CPGB (in the form of Tom O'Byrne), was also involved in the *Linaria* Defence Committee.¹⁰⁴

The available evidence suggests that after the crew's initial anti-Franco protest resolution, this anti-fascist dimension was played down.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, at a Defence Committee fund-raising meeting in mid-April, R. A. Anderson, like his namesake T. T. during the foodship campaign, said that he was 'not concerned so much with the rights and wrongs of the crew of the ship [...] as with ensuring the men had funds when they returned to Liverpool for the court case'.¹⁰⁶ An appeal issued by the Defence Committee to the press at the same time implied that the maintenance of non-intervention was as, if not more,

important a concern than a desire to oppose fascism.¹⁰⁷ This is the only evidence about the way the appeal was worded but it suggests that the explicit anti-fascist politics of the action were played down and that the meetings held by the Linaria Defence Committee were largely fund raising events rather than propaganda exercises.¹⁰⁸ This picture is reinforced by considering the way the case was presented in court, which was reported in more detail in the press. Here, again, there was an ultimately successful attempt to remove the anti-fascist politics from the crews' action. One of the crew's main lines of defence in court suggested that they had only been concerned to uphold non-intervention, implying that had the cargo been for a Republican port, they would equally have objected (as the Republic was subject to the same restrictions).¹⁰⁹ Their case was eventually won by the argument that the crew had the right to refuse to enter a war zone. Again, there was nothing overtly anti-fascist in that.¹¹⁰ Though the evidence regarding this campaign is a little more circumspect than that on the other campaigns, on balance it still seems likely that there was room for involvement in it from those who agreed with non-intervention in Spain, and therefore did not share a 'popular front outlook' with people such as the strike leader and Communist Robson. Certainly the main figure in the Defence Committee's campaign, like his namesake in the foodship campaign, was, by his own admission, 'not concerned' with 'the rights and wrongs' of the crew's action. And, again like T. T., he did not appear to be involved in other more political 'Aid Spain' or popular front activity after the Defence Committee was wound up. Yet, even had this not been the case, the campaign was small in terms of the numbers involved, the number and size of its fund-raising public meetings and its overall duration. So, even if a case with more evidence could be made for it being justly regarded as a *de facto* popular front, this would merely make the Linaria Defence Committee campaign a not particularly important, exceptional case.¹¹¹

The CPGB, which organized volunteers to fight for the Republic in the International Brigades, ran a campaign to support the volunteers and their dependants. The International Brigade Dependants' Aid campaign, which was established nationally in February 1937, was the only 'Aid Spain' campaign that could not be properly de-politicized, no matter how much some tried. It was limited in terms of those involved to the CPGB, with some support from the Labour left, the labour movement more generally in terms of donations to the fund, and CAPR members. There was no evidence of large numbers of the 'non-political' clergy or those to the right of the labour movement (apart from the CAPR) becoming involved in this campaign, unlike some of the other 'Aid Spain' campaigns, and this was no coincidence.¹¹²

In short, all the 'Aid Spain' campaigns and Spanish Medical Aid Committees in the north east that took on the appearance of popular fronts (with perhaps the Linaria Defence Committee as an exception) sacrificed the politics of the situation in Spain and focused instead on a humanitarian campaigning message. With only a couple of exceptions, none of the north-east 'Aid Spain' campaigns that appeared to be popular fronts organized meetings with 'speakers from all parties supporting the Republic' and they did not campaign against non-intervention.¹¹³ In fact, it seems that these 'Aid Spain' campaigns only achieved the semblance of a popular front at all precisely because the issue was not depicted as a 'political' one.

Comparing the north east 'Aid Spain' campaigns with those in other regions is difficult as there are few detailed studies of the phenomena, though as Tyneside was

representative of the other foodship campaigns, there is little reason to believe that the campaigns in the north east were not representative of what occurred in other regions. Hywel Francis claimed that an 'informal' popular front founded entirely around 'Spain' emerged in South Wales from late 1936 but that it 'was only in South Wales that such a broad front had any success at all, and even here it was temporary, brittle and short-lived'.¹¹⁴ However, whilst there was widespread co-operation in Welsh Spanish Medical Aid Committees, the basis of the appeal was 'always humanitarian rather than political'.¹¹⁵

Francis did not explore the implications that humanitarianism had for the popular front and seemed, like Fyrth, Branson and Squires, content to claim that any organization that contained members of different political parties was a *de facto* popular front. In this highly unsatisfactory definition, all charities could be defined as popular fronts, or at least as possessing the characteristics of popular fronts. On the other hand, Peter Drake, in his study of Birmingham, argued that the potential of popular front activity arising from 'Aid Spain' campaigns was non-existent. The response of the Conservative mayor to support the Basque refugees neutralized the question and it did not become a rallying point for Liberals and socialists.¹¹⁶

The evidence of the Tyneside foodship campaign and the other 'Aid Spain' campaigns in the north east supports Tom Buchanan's assertion that, whilst consisting of broad coalitions of individuals and institutions, both within and without the labour movement and taking on the appearance of a popular front, 'Aid Spain' at local level was not a 'political project'.¹¹⁷ Moreover, Buchanan added, the 'actual level of politicisation in these coalitions was very limited, not least due to the sheer, exhausting amount of practical work required'.¹¹⁸ Yet there could have been politicization, despite (or even because of) the amount of work required, if those in control of these campaigns had decided to present them in an explicitly political manner. In general though, the north-east 'Aid Spain' campaigns support Buchanan's claim that 'there is no evidence that humanitarian work for Spain on a Popular Front basis translated into effective political action'.¹¹⁹

Conclusions

There is, of course, no impenetrable barrier between politics and humanitarianism in practical terms (though many commentators, including Woods, Fyrth, Francis, Squires, James Klugman and Ellen Wilkinson, quoted below, implicitly if not explicitly, perceived a distinction between the two).¹²⁰ Indeed, in its widest sense, 'political' could be used to describe almost any human thought or action, but this definition does not further an understanding of the nature and impact of the supposedly popular front 'Aid Spain' campaigns. Fyrth claimed that these campaigns had a palpable political impact; that they contributed significantly to the Labour electoral landslide in 1945.¹²¹ Yet surely any palpable political impact would reveal evidence of itself before war fundamentally altered the political landscape. Politicisation can, of course, occur in the oddest of circumstances for the strangest of reasons. Yet the rhetoric campaigners employ to frame their campaigns can serve to maximize or minimize the potential for politicisation. It is thus no surprise, given the rhetoric the main Tyneside foodship campaigners used, that there

is as yet no evidence of the campaign having had a politicising impact. Neither did the 'non-political' groups and individuals involved display any increased participation in explicit political activity during and immediately after the campaign ended. A handful of prominent Conservatives supported the campaign and, at the same time, openly supported the policy of their government that had contributed significantly to creating and maintaining the situation in Spain. None of the Conservatives and non-political individuals or groups in the campaign became involved in the Cripps popular front campaign, which was a resounding failure in the region. The regional CPGB, which had been the most vocal and energetic of the Republic's supporters and actively involved in the foodship, actually declined in size at the very same time as the campaign was in full-swing. If the foodship campaign had had a political effect on its participants, this effect is neither evident, nor did it necessarily act to the advantage of the left. And it certainly did not benefit the popular front in the short and medium term.

Had the 'Aid Spain' campaigns for food and medical supplies adopted an anti-fascist message, and had the response still been as popular and socially and politically diverse as it was with the Tyneside foodship, then historians who subscribe to the 'popular front' conception of the campaigns would have had a good case for claiming these campaigns as a success for that strategy. As it was, these campaigns were framed in almost exclusively humanitarian, non-political, terms and consequently attracted many, including leading figures, who were not politically motivated. Ellen Wilkinson's comment on the national BCC equally applied to other humanitarian 'Aid Spain' campaigns: 'No one has shifted their political or religious affiliations by a hair-breadth by working on that committee, but on big humanitarian issues, British people have somehow learned to co-operate'.¹²²

If these humanitarian campaigns are the only thing that supporters of the popular front strategy could point to in its defence, then it was a failure. This very considerable part of 'Aid Spain' had not helped 'awaken the British people to the nature of fascism'.¹²³ Still less had it helped convert people to socialism or communism. What was true of the north east presumably stood for the country as a whole. However, this is not to say that the 'political' demonstrations mounted by the CPGB for arms to the Republic, the campaigns it helped organise that were framed in explicitly political terms, the support the Republic received in the pages of the *Daily Worker* and the fact that the CPGB organized the International Brigade, did not bring them recruits. Rather, it is to argue that much Communist activity in this very wide and diverse 'movement', did not bring either them, anti-fascism, or 'socialism' much reward.¹²⁴

In the north east, it was only in the humanitarian 'Aid Spain' campaigns that the vast diversity in political affiliation and social class of those involved can be observed, precisely because they were humanitarian. Thus the *de facto* popular front based around campaigns exemplified by the Tyneside foodship was little more than an illusion. If these humanitarian campaigns, almost completely bleached of politics, were the 'closest thing to a popular front in Britain', the case of the north east leads to the conclusion that a British popular front was never a viable project in the 1930s. It therefore seems likely that most of the headway Labour made before 1945 either occurred after the outbreak of war, or was due to developments other than the 'popular front' 'Aid Spain' campaigns before 1939.¹²⁵ It is clear that these predominantly humanitarian, non-political and therefore largely non-politicizing campaigns had only a minimal impact.

References

* I would like to thank the interviewees, Professor Martin Pugh, Lucy Grimshaw and Peter Mates.

¹ L. H. Mates, 'The United Front and the Popular Front in the North East of England, 1936-1939', PhD, University of Newcastle, 2002.

² J. Fyrth, *The Signal Was Spain. The Aid Spain Movement in Britain, 1936-39*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1986, p. 21.

³ Ibid., p. 22. Fyrth preferred the term 'People's Front', but it is synonymous with popular front. Orwell wrote that Communists preferred this title as it gave the popular front 'a spuriously democratic appeal'. J. Fyrth (ed.), *Britain, Fascism and the Popular Front*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1985, p. 6 and 'Spilling the Spanish Beans', in George Orwell, *Orwell in Spain*, London, Penguin, 2001, p. 217.

⁴ Fyrth, *Signal*, pp. 46-7 and 244.

⁵ The greatest attention to this question is given in a debate between Tom Buchanan and Jim Fyrth in the *History Workshop Journal*, 1991-3, and even here this particular aspect is only a small part of a far wider-ranging exchange of views. Apart from that, Pimlott's work deals almost solely with developments at national level and ignores this line of enquiry, as does Tom Buchanan's book, which deals with other aspects of grassroots activities. The same stands for other important works on the popular front in Britain. (T. Buchanan, 'Britain's Popular Front?: Aid Spain and the British Labour Movement', *History Workshop Journal*, 31, 1991, pp. 60-72; J. Fyrth, 'The Aid Spain Movement in Britain, 1936-39', *History Workshop Journal*, 35, 1993, pp. 153-64; B. Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977; T. Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War and the British Labour Movement*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991; R. Eatwell, 'The Labour Party and the Popular Front Movement in Britain in the 1930s', DPhil, University of Oxford, 1975; C. Bryant, *Stafford Cripps. The First Modern Chancellor*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1997; S. Burgess, *Stafford Cripps. A Political Life*, London, Gollancz, 1999; P. Clarke, *The Cripps Version: The Life of Sir Stafford Cripps, 1889-1952*, London, Allen Lane, 2002; J. Callaghan, *Rajani Palme Dutt. A Study in British Stalinism*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1993; J. Campbell, *Nye Bevan and the Mirage of British Socialism*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987; M. Foot, *Aneurin Bevan, 1897-1945*, Vol. 1, London, Granada, 1982; J. Jupp, *The Radical Left in Britain, 1931-1941*, London, Frank Cass, 1982; D. Carlton, 'Eden, Blum and the Origins of Non-Intervention', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 6, 3, 1971, pp. 40-55; R. Douglas, 'Chamberlain and Eden, 1937-38', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 13, 1, 1978, pp. 97-116; C. Fleay & M. L. Sanders, 'The Labour Spain Committee: Labour Party Policy and the Spanish Civil War', *Historical Journal*, 28, 1, 1985, pp. 187-97; J. Haslam, 'The Comintern and the Origins of the Popular Front, 1934-5', *Historical Journal*, 22, 3, 1979, pp. 673-91; J. Joll, 'The Frente Populaire after thirty years', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1, 2, 1966, pp. 27-42; D. Little, 'Red Scare, 1936: Anti-Bolshevism and the origins of British non-intervention in the Spanish Civil War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 23, 1988, pp. 291-311; A. Thorpe, 'Comintern "control" of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920-1943', *English Historical Review*, 63, 452, 1998, pp. 637-62.)

⁶ Certainly, this definition would include a large proportion of the population, but only the kind of people that the popular front aimed at mobilizing politically against the Chamberlain government. David Blaazer, *The Popular Front and the Progressive Tradition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992.

⁷ The Tyneside foodship was the fourth from Britain. By late January 1939, ships had already gone from London, Merseyside and Yorkshire (and there were a further seventeen in preparation). There were, according to Fyrth, a total of twenty-nine British foodships. *North Mail*, 23 January 1939 and Fyrth, 'Aid Spain Movement', p. 156.

⁸ This article is not, therefore, 'history from above', an accusation that Fyrth made of Buchanan's study (Fyrth, 'Aid Spain Movement', p. 155).

⁹ Though, unfortunately, there appear to be no records left by any of the Tyneside foodship organizing committees themselves.

¹⁰ Vernon Barlett took Bridgwater from the Conservatives on a 'progressive' anti-appeasement platform. See R. Eatwell, 'Munich, Public Opinion, and Popular Front', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 6, 4, 1971, pp. 122-39 and C. Cook and J. Ramsden, *By Elections in British Politics*, UCL Press, London, 1997, pp. 112-29.

- 11 *North Mail* 7 February 1939.
- 12 *Spanish Relief*, March 1939.
- 13 Tyneside had 110 sub-committees at the time. *Newcastle Journal*, 23 January 1939.
- 14 *North Mail*, 23 January 1939.
- 15 The TJPC, established in 1936, involved Communists, Labour Party members and Liberals in the form of members of Lloyd George's CAPR. TJPC meetings opposed appeasement and supported the Spanish Republic, though pacifism crept in occasionally. The CAPR was established by Lloyd George in summer 1935 to promote his 'new deal' proposals to tackle unemployment and promote peace. Though professing to be 'non-party', the CAPR aimed to secure a parliament pledged to a policy based on the proposals. Mares, 'United Front', pp. 35-40.
- 16 *Sunday Sun*, 30 October 1938.
- 17 The Ridleys had been a powerful Conservative family in the region for three centuries. N. McCord, 'Some aspects of north east England in the nineteenth century', *Northern History*, 8, 1972, pp. 73-88. For more on Trevelyan in the 1930s see Mares, 'United Front', *passim*.
- 18 *Shields Gazette*, 12 December 1938; Gateshead Labour Herald, December 1938 and *Spanish Relief*, December 1938.
- 19 *Newcastle Journal*, 23 January 1939.
- 20 Graham wrongly dated the appeal to some time in 1937. F. Graham, *The Battle of Jarama*, Frank Graham, Newcastle, 1987, p. 34.
- 21 Jack Coward, *Back From the Dead*, Merseyside Writers, Liverpool, 1985, n.p.m.
- 22 British Library of Political and Economic Sciences, London, Woodcraft Folk Papers, YMA/WF/204. Letter from Mrs F. Wood (joint secretary of Yorkshire foodshop council).
- 23 *Shields Gazette*, 6 January 1939.
- 24 Mares, 'United Front', p. 35.
- 25 *North Mail*, 24 January 1939.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 19 December 1938.
- 27 Enid Ramshaw, a Communist who had served in Spain as a nurse, supported the foodshop. *Railway Review*, 17 February 1939.
- 28 See D. S. Bim, *The League of Nations Union*, 1918-45, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1981.
- 29 Of course, some members of the clergy (other than Catholics) were overly 'political'. For example, Rev. Lewis MacLachlan was chairperson of the CAPR's Northern Area Council. *North Mail*, 22 July 1937.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 19 December 1938; 10 and 13 January 1939; *Hexham Courant*, 14 January 1939 and *Sunday Sun*, 22 January 1939.
- 31 *Heslop's Local Advertiser*, 17 February 1939.
- 32 *Shields Gazette*, 6 January 1939 and 3 February 1939.
- 33 They were Chopwell, Nedderton, West Rainton, Newbottle (Houghton) and Delves Lane (Consett). *Blaydon Courier*, 24 February 1939; 3 March 1939; *North Mail*, 11 and 17 January 1939, 24 February 1939.
- 34 *North Mail*, 6 December 1938.
- 35 *Shields Gazette*, 12 December 1938.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 3 January 1939.
- 37 *North Mail*, 19 January 1939.
- 38 *Shields Gazette*, 22 January 1939.
- 39 *Ibid.*
- 40 Felling sub-committee appeal was an example of the former, Jarrow of the latter. *Heslop's Local Advertiser*, 17 February 1939 and *Shields Gazette*, 17 January 1939.
- 41 Gateshead Labour Herald, December 1938.
- 42 *Newcastle Journal*, 23 January 1939.
- 43 The second of the three speeches in the collection was more political, but it is uncertain to whom it was addressed. Marx Memorial Library (MML), London, Box A12/Gr/8 and Box B-4M/6; notes for three Frank Graham speeches and bill advertising a 'Save Spain' meeting.
- 44 *Shields Gazette*, 30 December 1938.
- 45 Fyth, *Signal*, p. 259.
- 46 MML, Box B-7B/4; NJCSR letter, n.d.

⁴⁷ Mates, 'United Front', pp. 192-221.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 35.

⁴⁹ For example, John Eppstein, a Catholic member of the LNU national executive, spoke openly in Newcastle in favour of Franco. *Newcastle Journal*, 7 September 1936 and Birn, *League*, p. 188.

⁵⁰ Anderson was, from July 1937, treasurer of the South Shields Society of Friends fund for Spain. He appealed to the government to make a fresh grant to the Friends Service Council to help Spanish refugees when the Tyneside foodship campaign was in full swing. *North Mail*, 7 July 1937 and 19 January 1939. For a recent study of Quaker theology see Pink Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis of the Theology of Quakers. The Silent Revolution*, Lampeter, Edwin Mellen Press, 1996.

⁵¹ *Shields Gazette*, 15 February 1939. Thus this campaign cannot be regarded as a popular front one: both fascists and Chamberlain supporters desired peace, so neither anti-fascism nor a critique of Chamberlain's foreign policy were uniting factors.

⁵² It was debatable whether the Japanese regime attacking China was fascist or not. It was certainly seen as such by some on the left, though others regarded it as 'militarist' or 'imperialist'. *North Mail*, 4 July 1939.

⁵³ *Shields Gazette*, 12 May 1939.

⁵⁴ Namely Labour left winger Henry Bolton and Communist Nell Badsey. Or perhaps they were too busy; Bolton, supporting Cripps' Petition Campaign, and Badsey running the Basque children's hostel in Tynemouth. Mates, 'United Front', pp. 192-221, 241-76.

⁵⁵ There was no obvious ILP involvement in the Tyneside foodship campaign.

⁵⁶ *Shields Gazette*, 9 June 1939.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 7 March 1938.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 16 December 1938.

⁵⁹ Mates, 'United Front', p. 33.

⁶⁰ There is no evidence of Ridley's attitude to the conflict in Spain either before or after the foodship. Herbert Pilkington (South Shields National Liberal PPC), who had supported the campaign, announced his support for the government including its foreign policy in March 1938, but there is nothing on him after this time. Durham Record Office, D/HE/34, Cuthbert Headlam Diary, 2 March 1938.

⁶¹ *North Mail*, 23 January 1939 and *Newcastle Journal*, 23 January 1939.

⁶² In 1935 Atholl was a right wing rebel who resigned the Conservative whip over the India Bill. She was converted to support for the Republic after reading *Mein Kampf*, although she remained reactionary on domestic issues. In May 1936 the 'Red Duchess' argued against the raising of the school leaving age as the British export industry needed 'small hands' to work their machines. *Hansard* (Commons), vol. 312, 26 May 1936, col. 1885 and vol. 317, 5 November 1936, cols 337-44.

⁶³ There was another dimension to this which Orwell pointed out when discussing the popular front in Spain: 'For even when the worker and the bourgeois are both fighting against Fascism, they are not fighting for the same things; the bourgeois is fighting for bourgeois democracy, i.e. capitalism; the worker, in so far as he understands the issue, for Socialism' [my emphasis]. Orwell 'Spanish Beans', p. 217.

⁶⁴ *North Mail*, 26 January 1939. A Catholic, Denville, was not the only north east Conservative openly and consistently to support Franco. Most, however, remained 'neutral', supporting the government's non-intervention policy (which effectively aided the rebels and severely disadvantaged the government). Mates, 'United Front', pp. 232-3.

⁶⁵ Fred Jackson (b. Sunderland, 1911; name altered), Tape-recorded Interview with Lewis Mates, 21 October 1994.

⁶⁶ Len Edinonson (b. Gateshead, 1913), Tape-recorded Interview with Lewis Mates, 4 May 1999; MML, BoxB-4/M/1, Charlie Woods letter to Jim Fyrth, 18 February 1985.

⁶⁷ For more detail see Mates, 'United Front', pp. 231-9.

⁶⁸ Consett DLP, for one, expressed concern at the pernicious influence of WIs. *Durham County Advertiser*, 11 December 1936.

⁶⁹ P. Lynn, 'The impact of women. The shaping of political allegiance in County Durham, 1918-1945', *The Local Historian*, 23, 3, 1998, p. 166.

⁷⁰ For example, Shiney Row WI voted unanimously to become an associate body of the LNU. There were some isolated examples of WIs showing political interest. Pitlington WI heard a lecture on Spain in May 1937. There was a talk on a 'Russia visit' at Cambo WI. This could have been due to the

- presence of Lady Trevelyan (who was on the Northumbrian Federation of WIs executive), Sleaford WI also received a talk on Russia. In contrast, Leamside & West Rainton WI had a talk on Nazi Germany. In none of these cases was any idea given in the reports of what was said. *North Mail*, 27 April 1937, 5 July 1938, 20 April 1939; *Sunday Sun*, 30 October 1938; *Durham Chronicle*, 14 May and 17 December 1937.
- ⁷¹ *North Mail*, 20 June and 18 July 1939.
- ⁷² Fyrth, 'Aid Spain Movement', *History Workshop Journal*, 35, 1993, pp. 162-3.
- ⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 162. The very fact that the appeal was for the 'people of Spain' suggests a politically neutral humanitarianism.
- ⁷⁴ Ultimately, arms were always vital if the Republic was to defeat Franco's forces. This would have entailed a political campaign against the government's 'non-intervention' policy, possibly backed up by industrial direct action. There was, of course, no way that such a campaign could be depicted as 'non-political'. The amount of support such a call would have yielded is debatable, but Orwell, for one, argued that an appeal to the working class to support 'revolutionary' (rather than 'democratic') Spain would have received more working class support than the 'Aid Spain' campaigns did. There is some evidence that even the moderate north-east labour movement supported industrial direct action (and that for 'democratic' Spain), despite the national leadership's complete rejection of such tactics. But it is beyond the realms of possibility that Viscount Ridley, for example, would have supported such a campaign. (Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia in Orwell in Spain*, p. 188 and Mates, 'United Front', pp. 187-9.)
- ⁷⁵ Fyrth, 'Aid Spain Movement', p. 162. The two do seem to have existed in the mind of the Duchess of Atholl, as we have seen, but the humanitarian comments were for tactical reasons. Atholl definitely desired a Republic victory and must have seen foodships as a way of promoting this.
- ⁷⁶ The same point applies to Fyrth's claim that 'very many of those involved in Aid Spain felt that they were also building a "People's Front from below"'. *Ibid.*, p. 161.
- ⁷⁷ M. Squires, *The Aid to Spain Movement in Battersea, 1936-1939*, London, Elmfield Publications, 1994, pp. 40.
- ⁷⁸ Fyrth, 'Aid Spain Movement', p. 160.
- ⁷⁹ Mates, 'United Front', pp. 130-1.
- ⁸⁰ Perhaps the most salient example of the selective deafness that characterized the national leadership's attitudes in this period is the massive demand from the grass roots for a special conference in 1938 on Spain and the wider international situation (there was to be no Labour Party conference that year). Almost the entire north-east labour movement demanded one, and this was reflected throughout the country. Yet the leadership stubbornly refused to organize this conference. *Ibid.*, pp. 185-7.
- ⁸¹ Graham, *Jamaica*, p. 34.
- ⁸² MML, Microfilm, CPGB Central Committee Minutes, 19 March 1939.
- ⁸³ N. Branson, 'Myths from Right and Left', in Fyrth, *Fascism*, p. 127.
- ⁸⁴ A. Thorpe, 'The Membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920-1945', *Historical Journal*, 43, 3, 2000, p. 783.
- ⁸⁵ CPGB Central Committee Minutes, 19 March 1939.
- ⁸⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁷ *Tribune*, 27 January 1939.
- ⁸⁸ Mates, 'United Front', pp. 160-221.
- ⁸⁹ *Shields Gazette*, 24 October 1936; 23 April 1938; 6 January 1939 and *North Mail*, 24 October 1936.
- ⁹⁰ Fyrth, 'Aid Spain Movement', p. 161.
- ⁹¹ Mates, 'United Front', pp. 160-91.
- ⁹² The TUC had come in as Communists were excluded from the BCC. Fyrth, 'Aid Spain Movement', *History Workshop Journal*, 35, 1993, p. 157.
- ⁹³ Mates, 'United Front', p. 274.
- ⁹⁴ Len Edmonson, interview, 19 June 1998.
- ⁹⁵ Woods was thus yet another commentator who accepted a practical distinction between politics and humanitarianism. Even here, though, Woods wrote that 'Communists to Liberals' were involved, but did not mention Conservatives. MML, BoxB-4/M/1, Charlie Woods letter to Jim Fyrth, 18 February 1985.

⁹⁶ Six appear to have been entirely official labour movement organizations. Three others took on the appearance of united fronts. (There is insufficient information on a further four to determine how they were constituted). North east is defined here as what is now County Durham, Tyne and Wear and Northumberland, but not Teesside. Mates, 'United Front', pp. 41-3, 129-33, 274.

⁹⁷ *Blaydon Courier*, 16 January 1937.

⁹⁸ These were Newcastle, North Shields, Sunderland and Seaham Spanish Medical Aid Committees. Mates, 'United Front', pp. 41-3, 129-33, 274.

⁹⁹ *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, 27 Oct. 1936. Franco-supporting Catholics also neglected to mention who the aid was for. In a letter calling for donations to the *Catholic Universe's* Medical Fund for Spain, G. Keenan merely claimed that the funds would help the 'sick and wounded in Spain', not specifying on which side. *Newcastle Journal*, 2 January 1937.

¹⁰⁰ *North Mail*, 24 February 1937, 5 March 1937 and A. Robson, *Spike: Alec 'Spike' Robson 1895-1979: Class Fighter*, North Tyneside TUC, North Shields, 1987, p. 11.

¹⁰¹ *North Mail*, 24 February 1937.

¹⁰² Robson was quoted as saying: 'We do not want to help to deliver nitrate because we do not want to be a party to the killing of women and children by bombs and shells'. This is misquoted in Watson and Corcoran as: 'We do not want to deliver the nitrates because we do not want to be a party to the killing of women and children by fascist shells'. The crucial change here was the insertion of the word 'fascist'. *Ibid.*, 22 February 1937.

¹⁰³ Another clergyman and a Moderate member of Tynemouth council appeared on the platform of a meeting organized by the Defence Committee. *North Mail*, 19 April 1937.

¹⁰⁴ MLHA, CP/CENT/PERS/5/05, Tom O'Byrne autobiography.

¹⁰⁵ Unfortunately, there is little evidence of the terms in which this campaign was framed. Only three meetings relating to support of the *Linaria* men appear to have been held in the north east and the reports on these lack detail. *Shields Gazette*, 13 March, 19 and 27 April 1937.

¹⁰⁶ *North Mail*, 19 April 1937.

¹⁰⁷ The crew, it claimed, 'were convinced that what they were asked to do was to effectively support the Spanish rebels, and we believe that they were right in this conviction'. In addition to the motivation about the need to maintain non-intervention there was a secondary motivation as the crew did not wish to enter a war zone (Buchanan, *Spanish Civil War*, p. 212).

¹⁰⁸ At least two labour movement organizations in the north east, Darlington DLP and Woodhorn lodge (NMA), received circulars from the *Linaria* Defence Committee and both donated to it. In the Woodhorn lodge minute book, the circular is referred to as requesting financial assistance for the court case, DRO, D/X922/4, Darlington DLP Minutes, 28 April, 25 and 31 May 1937; and Northumberland Record Office, 3793/44, Woodhorn Lodge Minutes, 5 May 1937.

¹⁰⁹ *North Mail*, 4 and 5 May 1937. Robson had used the 'supporting non-intervention' argument before the court case as well. Buchanan, *Spanish Civil War*, p. 212.

¹¹⁰ *North Mail*, 4 and 5 May, 7 June 1937.

¹¹¹ This is not to say that the strike itself was not important. Given the almost total lack of strikes for political ends in Britain, it was incredibly significant. But the campaign that followed it was not important, and perhaps this was partly precisely because so little had been made at the time of the overtly political motivation of the strike leader, and presumably most of the strikers. (Of the nineteen who struck, two signed back on the ship when the strike was over and the other seventeen were deported. The proportion of those who merely did not wish to enter a war zone is unclear).

¹¹² Mates, 'United Front', pp. 41-3, 129-33, 274.

¹¹³ Fyrth, 'Aid Spain Movement', p. 161.

¹¹⁴ H. Francis, *Miners Against Fascism. Wales and the Spanish Civil War*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1984, p. 112.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹¹⁶ P. D. Drake, 'Labour and Spain: British Labour's response to the Spanish Civil War with particular reference to the labour movement in Birmingham', M.Litt. Thesis, University of Birmingham, 1977, p. 167.

¹¹⁷ Buchanan, 'Britain's Popular Front?', *History Workshop Journal*, 31, 1991, p. 71.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ 'Popular front basis' here presumably meant 'politically diverse'. Buchanan, *Spanish Civil War*, p. 139.

¹²⁰ Klugman claimed that there were three levels of support for the Republic. The highest level was fighting in the International Brigade. There was a middle level of political action against non-intervention. The third level was one of 'extraordinarily broad' support for the Republic on the basis of foodships, medicines etc., which 'involved people of all political opinions, including many, many Tories, people of all religions. It was an extremely broad, *humanitarian* movement' [my emphasis]. J. Klugman, 'The Crisis of the Thirties: a View From the Left', in J. Clark, M. Heinemann, D. Margolies & C. Snee, *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the 30s*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1979, p. 19.

¹²¹ Fyrth, 'Aid Spain Movement', pp. 162-3.

¹²² *Sunday Sun*, 20 December 1936.

¹²³ Fyrth, 'Aid Spain Movement', p. 162.

¹²⁴ Thus, and contrary to Dylan Murphy's claim, the 'Aid-for-Spain movement' does in fact provide part of the explanation for the failure of the CPGB to emerge as a mass working class party. Yet, due to the peculiarities of British political culture, even had the CPGB adopted a completely different strategy to the popular front in this period, it was still highly unlikely to have emerged as a mass party. D. L. Murphy, 'The Communist Party of Great Britain and its Struggle Against Fascism, 1933-9', PhD, University of Huddersfield, 1999, p. 320.

¹²⁵ The former option was supported by Andrew Thorpe who claimed that the consequences of the Second World War produced the 'factors which enabled Labour to win parliamentary majorities'. A. Thorpe, *The British General Election of 1931*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991, p. 273.

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