

The Russian Revolution and its Impact on the Left in Britain

1917-1926

In the years following 1917, the aftershocks of the Russian Revolution fundamentally reshaped the politics of the British left. Amidst the turmoil that extended from the end of the First World War in 1918 to the General Strike in 1926, events in Russia seemed, in the eyes of many, to offer new possibilities for political, social and economic change.

Drawing on the TUC Library's extensive collections, this new exhibition documents the attempts of British socialists and trade unionists to interpret, emulate and come to terms with the revolution, revealing the extent to which Russia's socialist experiment challenged accepted notions of internationalism, solidarity and class-consciousness not just at home but overseas.

The TUC (Trades Union Congress) Library was founded in 1922 and moved to London Metropolitan University from Congress House in 1996. It is part of the University's Special Collections, and is a library of international significance.

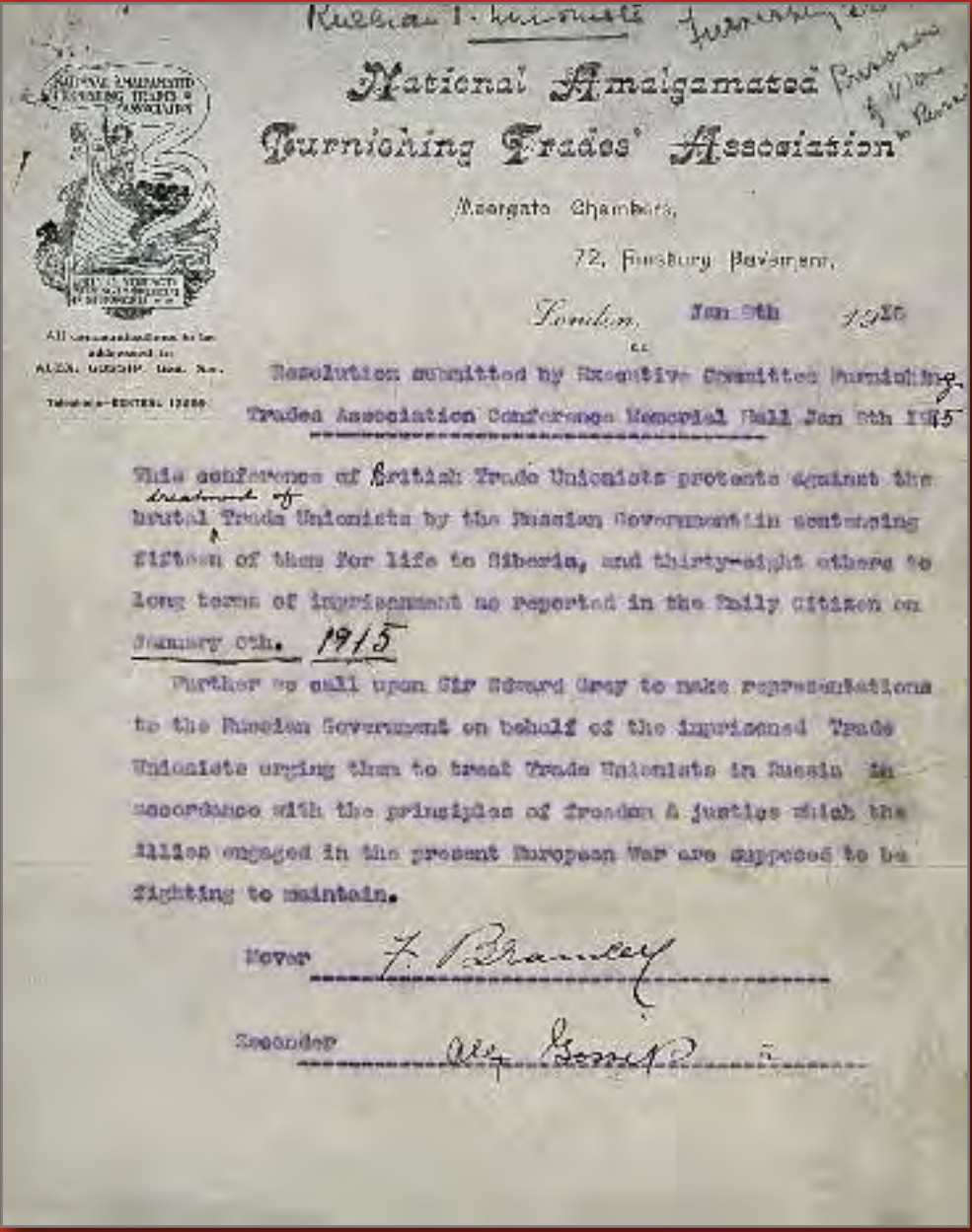


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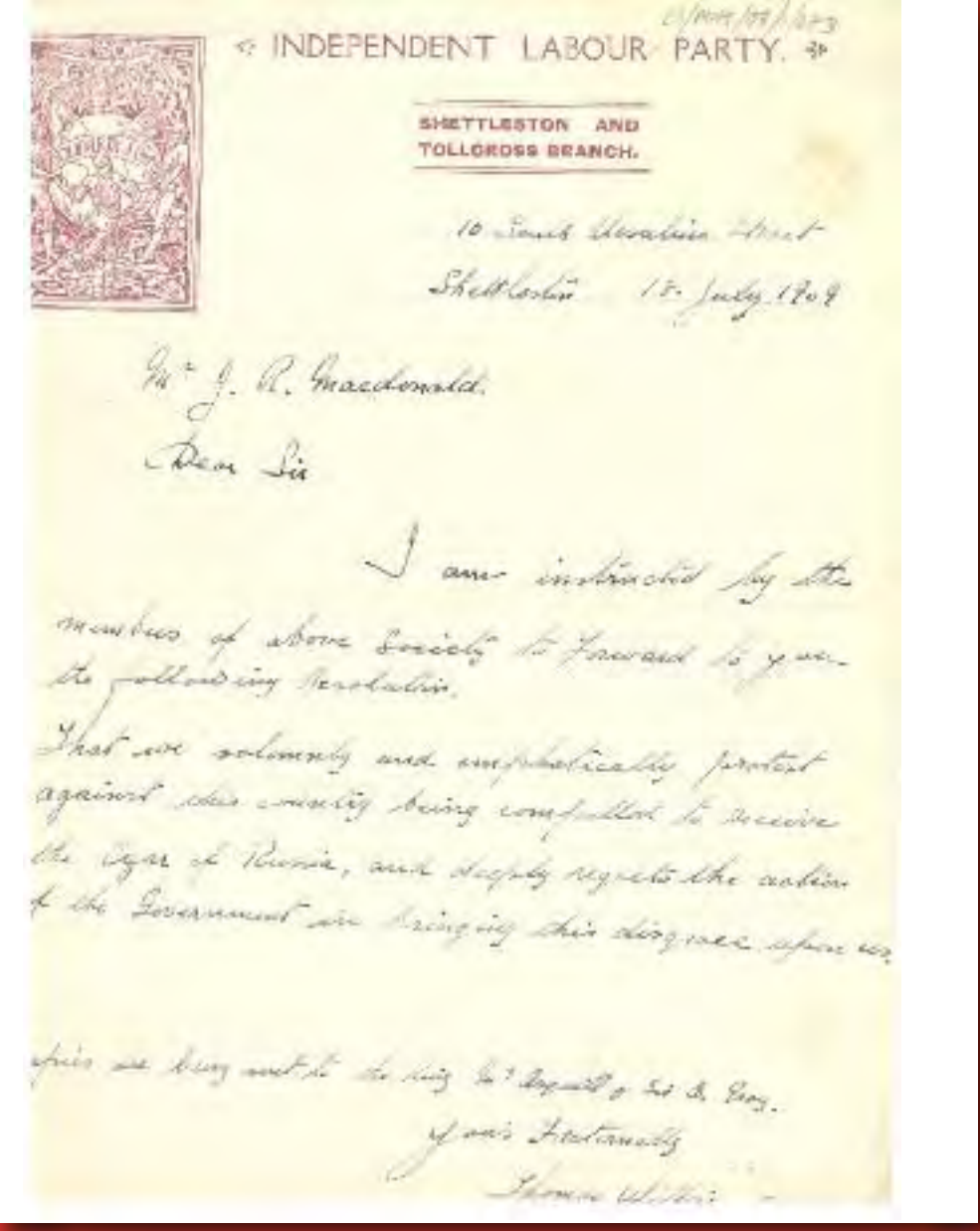
Before the deluge: Anglo-Russian working-class solidarity, 1890-1917



Left: Resolution passed by the National Amalgamated Furnishing Trades Association in support of Russian trade unionists imprisoned and exiled to Siberia, 1915.
Credit: TUC Library, Special Collections, London Metropolitan University

Bottom left: Correspondence between Ramsay MacDonald and the Shettleston and Tollcross branch of the Independent Labour Party, concerning the members' protest against the forthcoming state visit of Tsar Nicholas II, July 1909.
Credit: People's History Museum

Below: Communique from the Second International protesting Nicholas II's European tour, June 1909.
Credit: People's History Museum



Throughout the nineteenth century, hostility to Russia’s autocratic rulers formed an integral part of British working-class internationalism.

In the 1830s, the Chartists forged close links with Polish émigrés, and the insurgents of 1848 crushed by Nicholas I’s ‘Holy Alliance’ were welcomed with open arms by British radicals.

As Russia’s own revolutionary drama began to unfold from the 1870s onwards, its political prisoners and exiles were eulogised by Britain’s liberal and radical newspapers as martyrs to the cause.

In London, Russian revolutionary émigrés associated with socialists such as Keir Hardie, William Morris and Sylvia Pankhurst, and were regularly invited to address working-class meetings across Britain.

By the turn of the century, Russians formed an integral part of London’s cosmopolitan political milieu, frequenting Whitechapel’s International Workingmen’s Educational Club and participating in the theoretical debates that surrounded the rise of the Labour movement. Such contacts set the tone for British socialist responses to the coming revolution.

Collapse of the ancien régime: 1917 as seen from Britain

In February 1917, with Russia exhausted by three years of war, a series of strikes and bread riots in Petrograd led to the collapse of autocratic rule and the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II.

In Britain, the socialist movement greeted the fall of the Romanov dynasty with unanimous enthusiasm, but found itself divided on the way forward and on questions of war and peace. Across the country, meetings passed resolutions conveying fraternal greetings to the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies (one of two competing centres of revolutionary power) and calling for peace in Europe. Others supported the internationally-recognised Provisional Government and shared its determination to pursue the war with Germany to a victorious conclusion.

In August, a TUC delegation visited Petrograd in an attempt to reassure the Provisional Government of Britain's continued support for Russia.

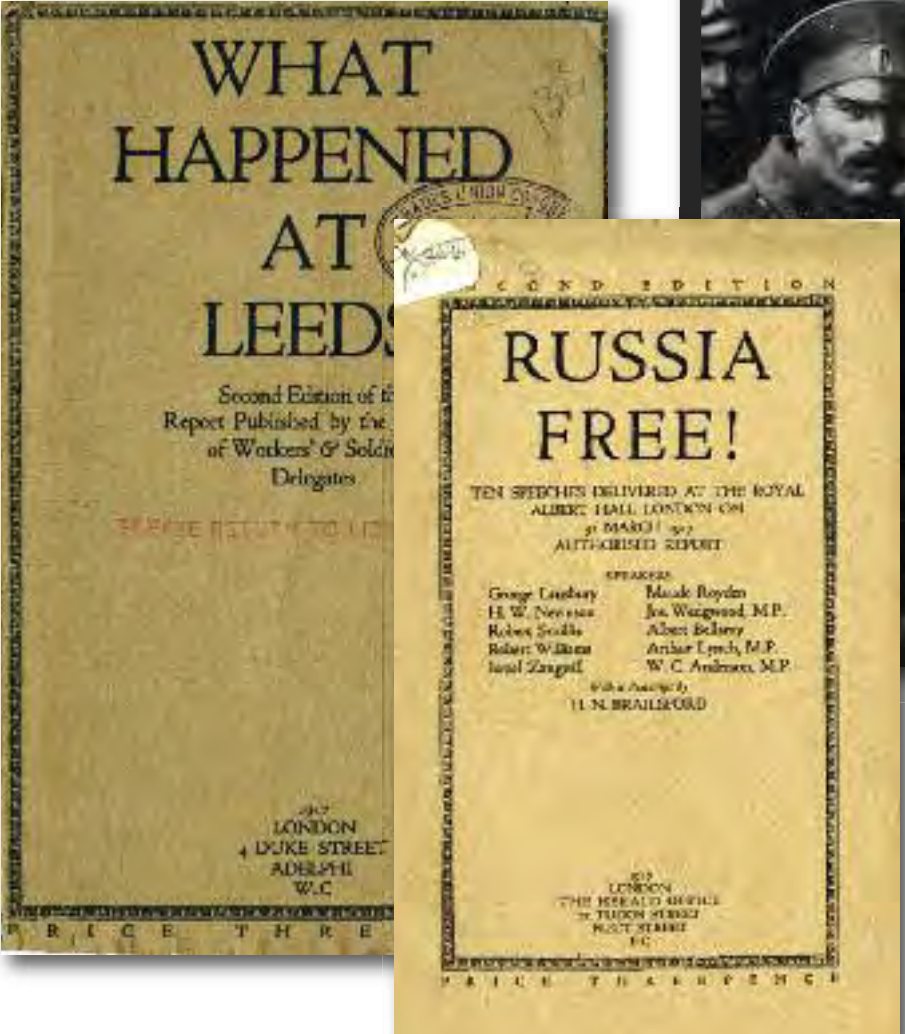


Top right: The Russian Daily News, a newspaper produced by British expats in Petrograd, August 1917.

Middle: Report of a meeting held at the Royal Albert Hall celebrating the collapse of autocratic rule in Russia, March 1917.

Far right: British trade unionists meeting Russian soldiers in Petrograd, August 1917.

Right: Report of the Labour and Socialist Convention held at Leeds, June 1917. Primarily organised by the Independent Labour Party (ILP), the meeting provoked controversy after it passed a resolution calling for the establishment of Russian-style 'soviets' of workers' and soldiers' deputies in Britain.



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Hands Off Russia

1919-1924

In October 1917, the communist Bolshevik faction overthrew the Provisional Government.

The following year, fearing the collapse of the Eastern Front, Allied troops intervened in Russia's nascent civil war in support of the anti-Bolshevik forces. In response, British socialists founded the Hands Off Russia campaign in 1919. By declaring British workers' solidarity with their Russian counterparts and portraying the Allied intervention as part of the international struggle between labour and capital, Hands Off Russia spread like wildfire across Britain.

In August 1919, Sylvia Pankhurst reported that *'a deeply felt sense of solidarity with Communist Russia has been growing steadily amongst the workers. For months past, Hands Off Russia has found its way into the resolution of every labour and Socialist propaganda meeting.'* The campaign continued its activities until Britain's diplomatic recognition of the Soviet Union in 1924, when its executive committee was superseded by the Anglo-Russian Parliamentary Committee.

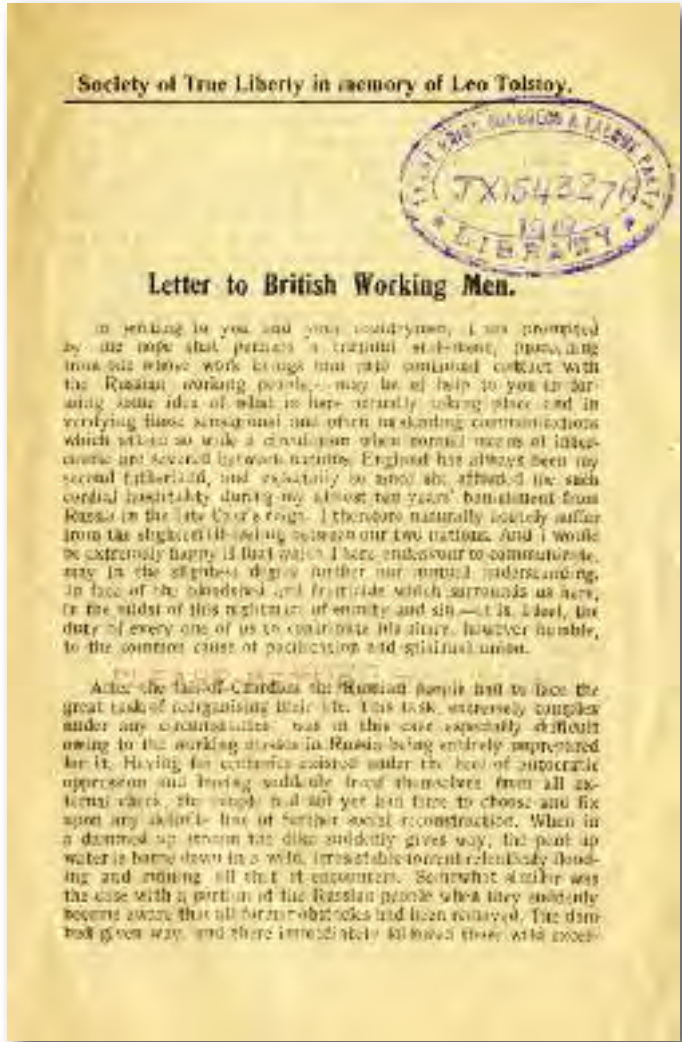
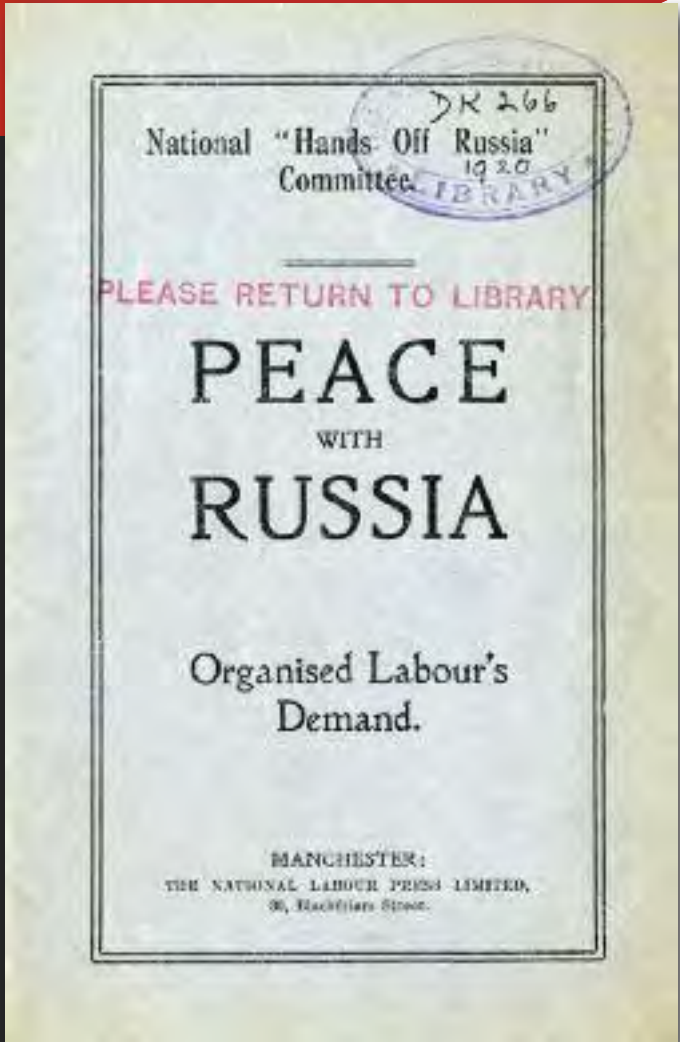
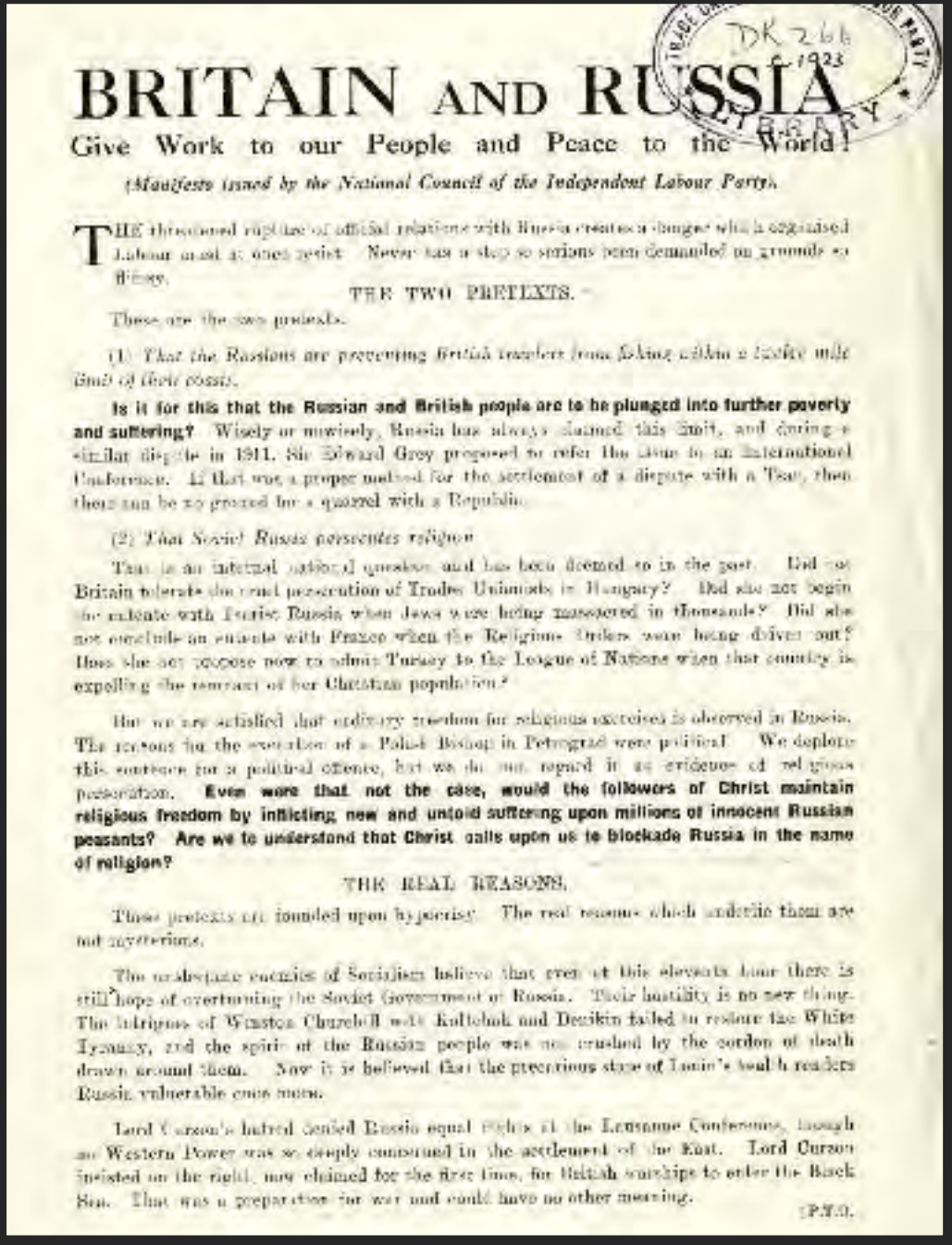
Top right: Front page of The Worker, the official English-language newspaper of the Soviet Red International of Labour Unions (Profintern), May 1923.

Middle: Leaflet published by the ILP on behalf of Hands Off Russia, 1923.

Far right: Pamphlet written in support of Hands Off Russia by Vladimir Chertkov (Leo Tolstoy's former secretary and émigré publisher), 1919.

Right: Pamphlet published by the Hands Off Russia committee, 1920.

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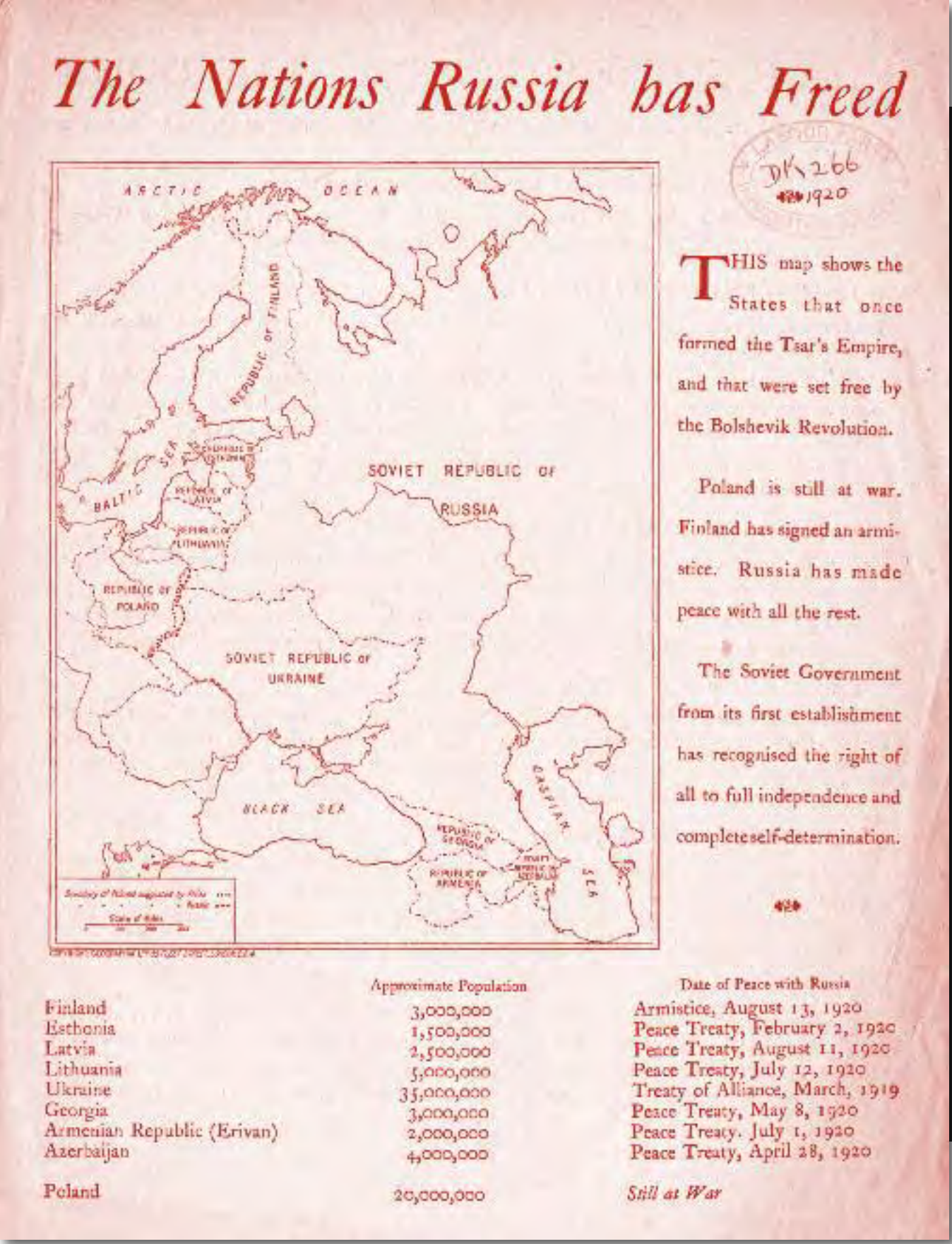
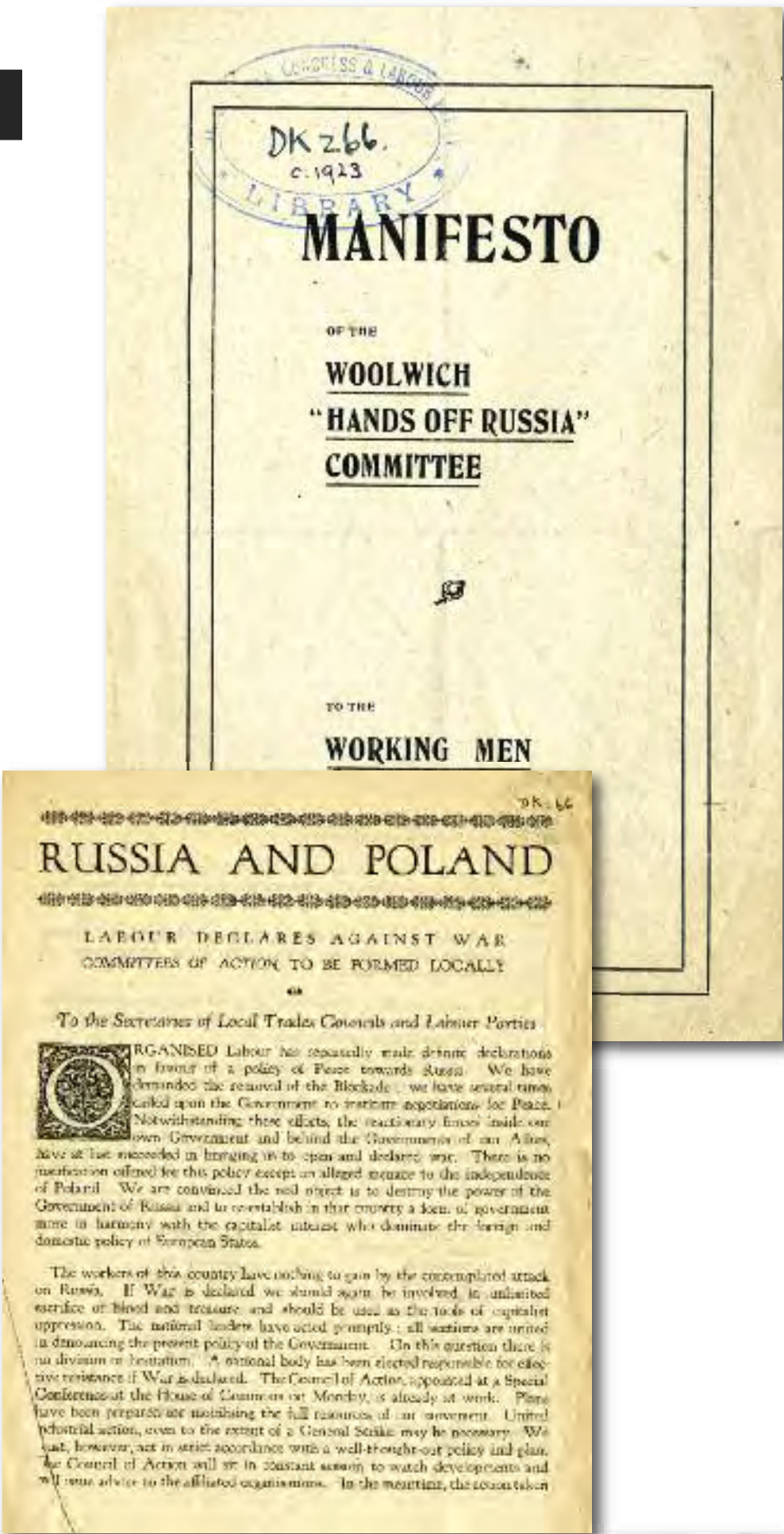


Hands Off Russia

1919-1924

Throughout its five-year history, Hands Off Russia reflected British socialists' fluid geopolitical loyalties and evolving conception of internationalism.

Half a century earlier, the worldview of working-class radicalism had been largely defined by hostility to Russia and support for the Polish national cause. During the 1863 uprising in Warsaw, former Chartists had openly called for war with Russia in defence of Poland. Yet by the summer of 1920, when the prospect of British military intervention in the ongoing Russo-Polish War seemed imminent, the Labour Party and the TUC threatened a general strike. Campaign literature broke from traditional depictions of Russia as an oppressive empire, instead portraying the Soviets as liberators of the former imperial borderlands.



Above: Anti-imperialist leaflet published by the Labour Party in support of the Bolshevik government, 1920.



Above: Appeal to British workers for help in financing a loan to the Soviet Union, Soviet Russia Pictorial, November 1923.

Top right: Manifesto of the Woolwich Hands Off Russia committee, 1923.

Middle right: Leaflet published by the ILP on behalf of Hands Off Russia, 1923.

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The 1920 delegation visit

In the spring of 1920, against the backdrop of a war scare and an ongoing British trade embargo, TUC and Labour delegates visited Soviet Russia for the second time.

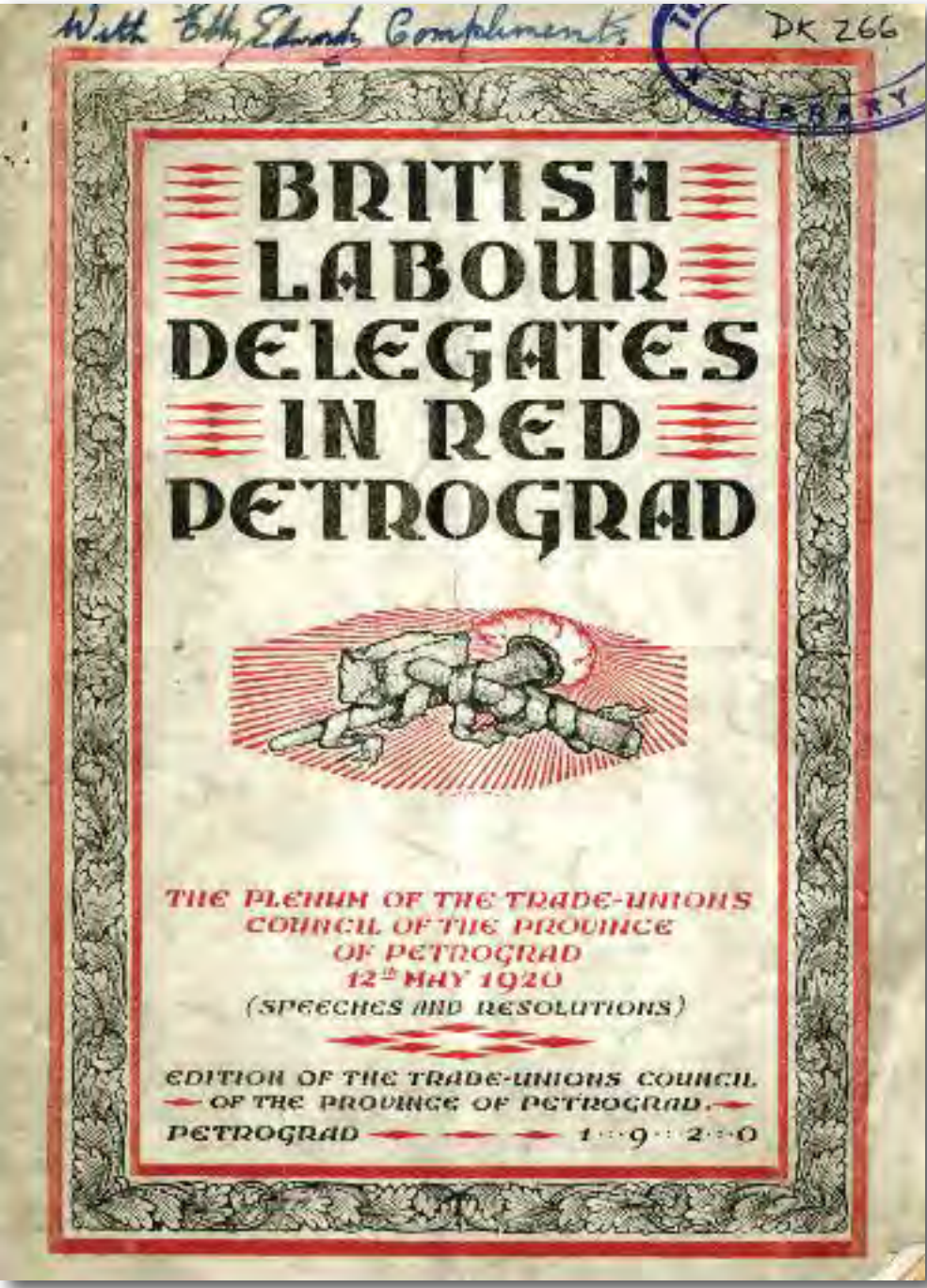
Comprised of steadfast internationalists such as Arthur Purcell and Margaret Bondfield, the 1920



delegation reflected the spirit of the Hands Off Russia campaign. Travelling from Petrograd to the Volga basin via Moscow and Nizhnii Novgorod, the party met with both representatives of the Bolshevik government and a wide variety of opposition figures, including members of the Socialist-Revolutionary Party and the anarchist theoretician

Peter Kropotkin (formerly a well-known political émigré in London).

The delegation's published findings touched upon political and economic questions, public health, women's issues and material conditions in Russia. Although reserved in its praise for the Bolsheviks, their report unequivocally condemned the Allied intervention and blockade as 'criminal folly'.



Above left: Signed photo addressed to Margaret Bondfield from the Bolshevik Anzhelika Balabanova: 'To dear comrade M. Bondfield. Bern 1915 - Moscow 1920. Remember how sad things looked and how bright and hopeful they are now in our free proletarian Russia, cradle of universal socialism.'

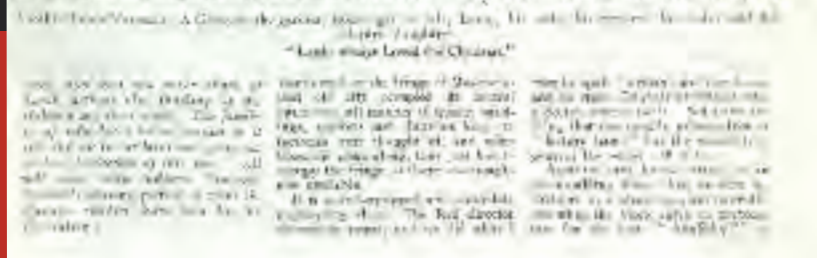
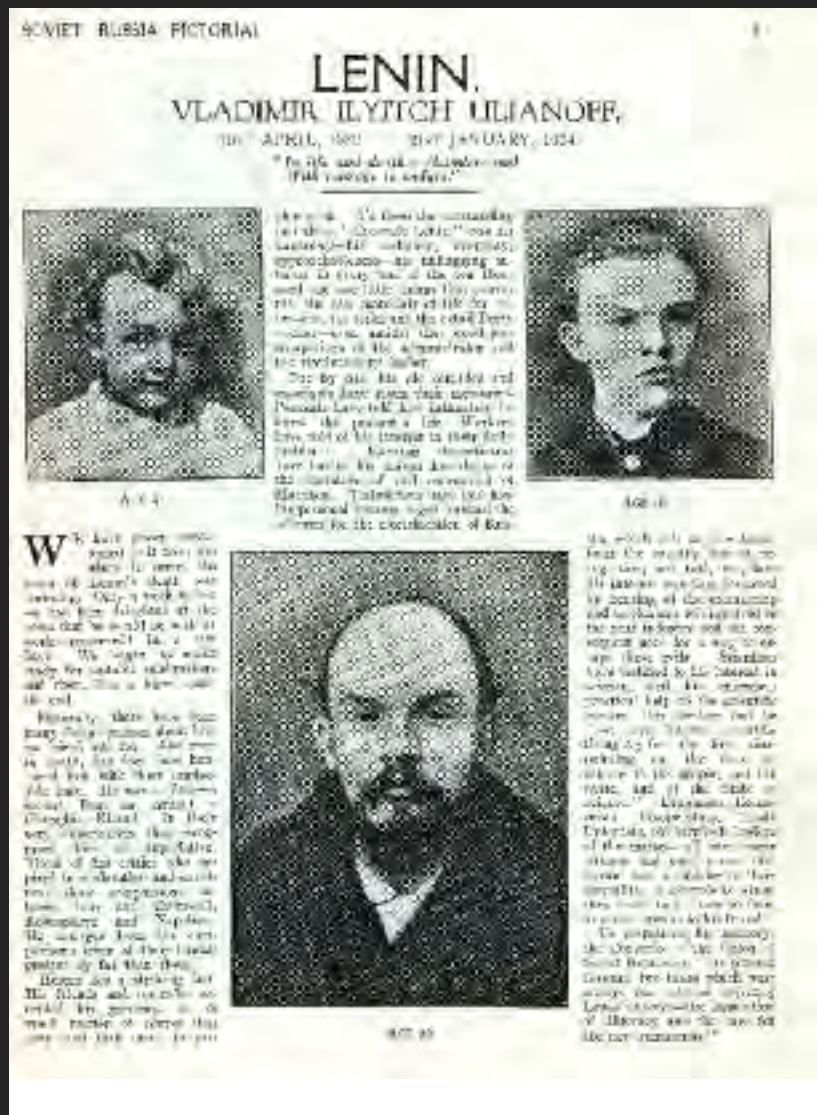
Top right: Take up the hammer with joy, propaganda poster including quote from artist Vladimir Mayakovsky, ROSTA poster, 1920.

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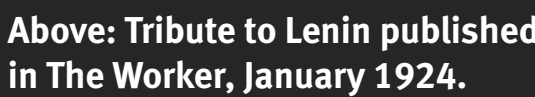


Above: TUC and Labour delegates in Russia, May 1920. Margaret Bondfield is in the centre, and A. A. Purcell eighth from the left.

Left: TUC delegation report, 1920.

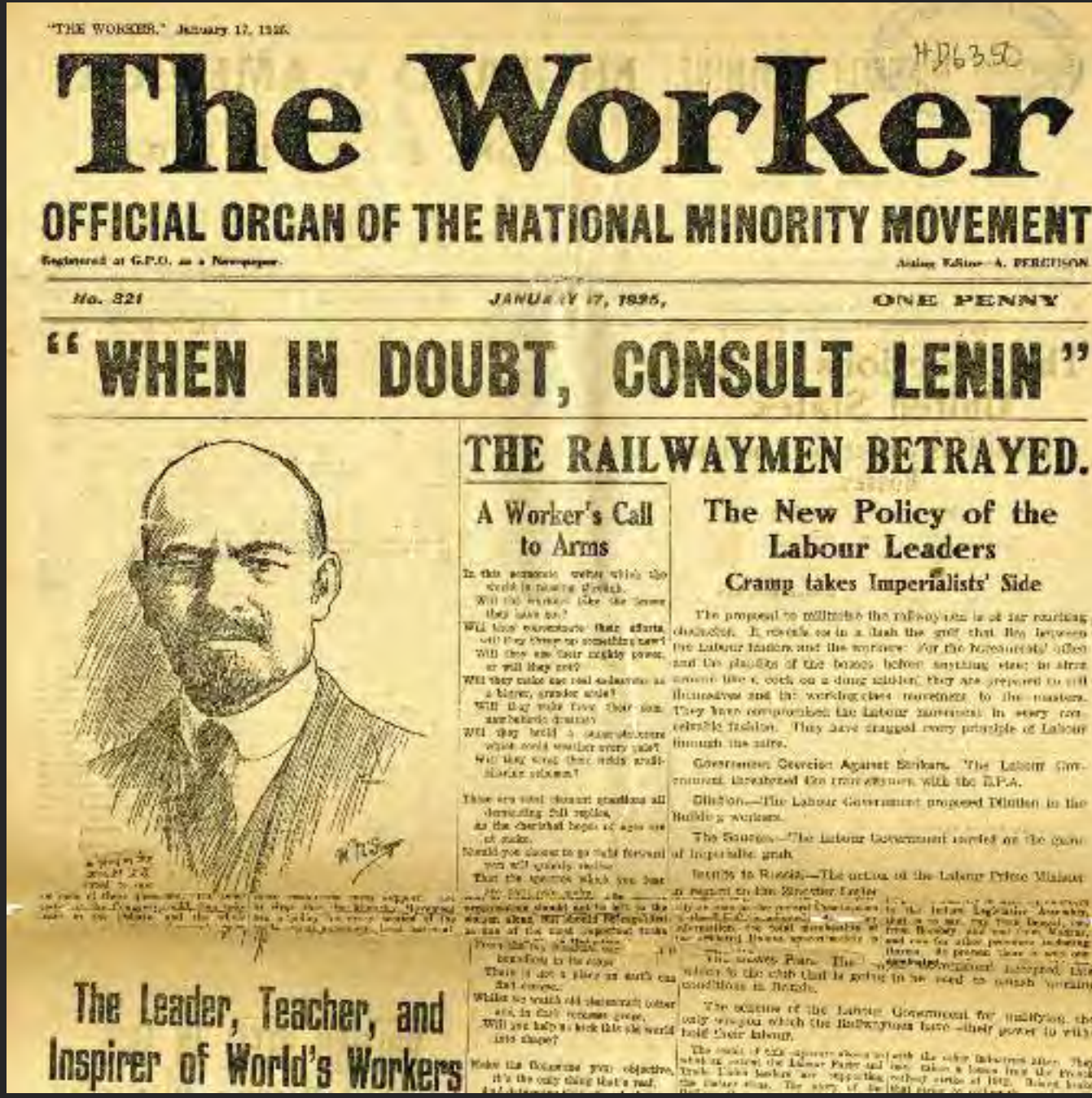


In Britain, news of his death broke the day after the formation of the first ever Labour government, eliciting tributes from all sections of the socialist movement. Although a controversial and divisive figure in his lifetime, Lenin was nonetheless portrayed as the father of the revolution and a supreme intellectual authority for socialists around the world in the days following his death. Through British socialist literature and Soviet publications aimed at English-speaking audiences overseas, the exalted image of Lenin long familiar to Russians was relayed to the British public.



Left top to bottom: Lenin memorial number of Soviet Russia Pictorial, March 1924. and obituary of Lenin .

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Fred Bramley and the 1924 TUC delegation visit



In 1924, the All-Russian Council of Trade Unions invited another TUC delegation to visit the USSR to report back on the situation confronting Soviet trade unionists at the time.

The delegation arrived in November and returned to Britain in late December. Upon arrival in Moscow, the party were granted access to the Comintern's archive in order to prove that the notorious 'Zinoviev letter', published by the Daily Mail a month earlier, was a forgery.

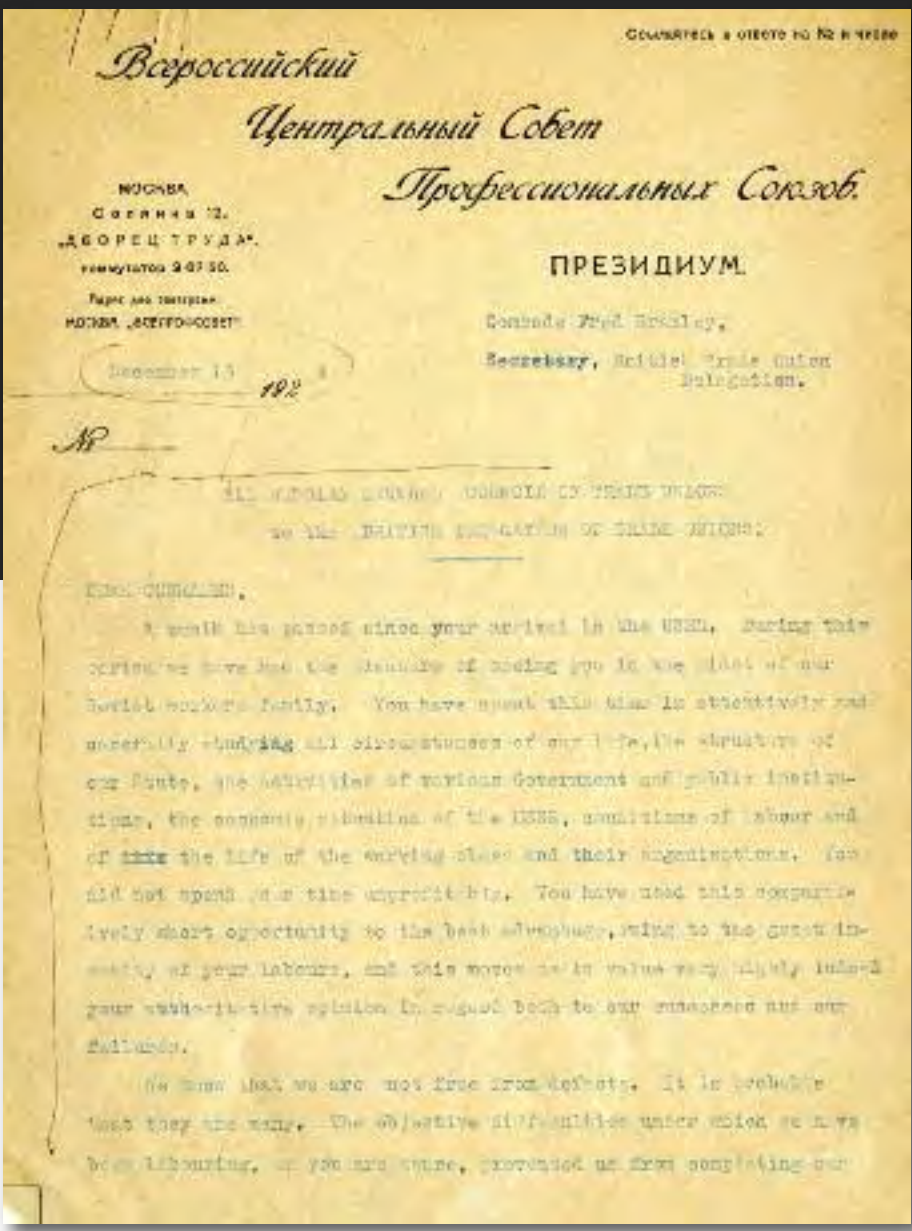
The delegation consisted of several prominent trade unionists of the time, including the dockers' leader Ben Tillett, Arthur Purcell (a veteran of the 1920 delegation) and the TUC's General Secretary Fred Bramley. Bramley's personal papers offer a unique documentary and photographic insight into the delegates' experiences in the USSR.



Top: Members of the delegation at the Baku railway station, Azerbaijan, December 1924. Ben Tillett and Fred Bramley on the left.

Left: Letter to the TUC delegates from David Riazanov, the head of the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow, asking for help in acquiring archival materials from the Bishopsgate Institute in London, December 1924.

Left: Soviet government permit granting Fred Bramley access to state institutions, factories and industrial facilities across the Soviet Union, 20 November 1924.



Right: Arthur Purcell at the Baku railway station, Azerbaijan, December 1924.

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Fred Bramley and the 1924 TUC delegation visit

In September 1924, the TUC Congress in Hull had hosted a Soviet delegation for the first time.

While in Moscow in November, the TUC's own delegates reciprocated this gesture by attending the Sixth Congress of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions (VTsSPS) at the invitation of its chair, Mikhail Tomsky. Their arrival, Bramley later recorded, 'aroused great enthusiasm' amongst the Soviet attendees. Purcell, Bramley and Tillett took turns addressing the audience, each conveying fraternal greetings on behalf of their respective unions. Two days later, they were received by a 100,000-strong

demonstration of Moscow trade unionists who 'gave expression to unreserved enthusiasm and interest in our delegation', exhibiting 'the revolutionary sentiments which now inspire the Russian people'.

These contacts played an important role in subsequent development of Anglo-Soviet labour relations, and led directly to the establishment of a 'unity committee' the following year.

Right: Moscow workers' demonstration in support of the TUC delegation, with members of the delegation standing on the rostrum in the background, November 1924.

Below: Letter to the TUC from a group of Menshevikémigrés (opposed to the Bolsheviks) complaining about the delegation's findings, December 1924.

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The Foreign Delegation of the Social-Democratic Labour Party of Russia has addressed the following open letter to the Executive Committee of the British Labour Party and the General Council of the T.U.C.

After the recent parliamentary elections in Great Britain, a delegation of British Trade Unionists headed by Mr. Purcell went to Moscow to attend the All-Russian Trade Union Congress. As you already know, this delegation did not limit its activity to the trade union field alone, but extended it also to the political realm. It is this political activity which compels us to address the present letter to you.

An inquiry into conditions existing in Soviet Russia on the part of our British comrades could be of enormous benefit not only to the British but to the Russian labour movement, and for that matter to the socialist parties of the whole world which still regard the Russian problem as of serious, urgent, momentary importance. But in order to arrive at a really competent judgment in this matter it is necessary to make a comprehensive study of the situation. This can be done, in the present Russian circumstances, by foreign delegations only in one of the following two ways: Either such delegations must successfully establish actual relations with representatives of the non-bolshevist, socialist parties which are in opposition to the existing regime and are capable of furnishing the delegates all the data concerning the true state of affairs concealed from them by the agents of the Government and by the official press; or the delegates must find the opportunity of living in Soviet Russia during a more or less considerable period of time and as eminent guests, but as private persons keeping in touch, free from the Government's supervision, with the everyday life of the masses of workers and other toilers.

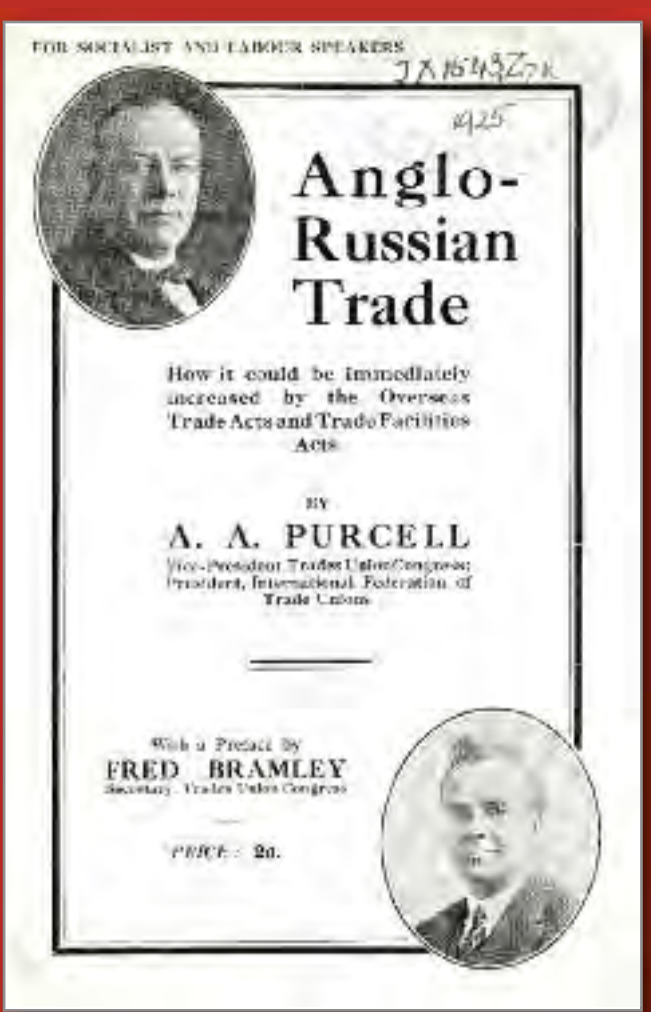
An imperative condition in either case is the presence in the delegation itself of a sufficient number of persons familiar with the country's pre-revolutionary conditions, with its political-social strata, with its language, and having the necessary personal acquaintances and connections.

The British Delegation had none of these qualities. That may be the reason why it chose no one of the two paths indicated here, but a third altogether different path, the inexpediency and inadmissibility of which is obvious to any person who knows even a little of the regime existing in Soviet Russia.

The British Delegation surrendered themselves completely to the Soviet authorities, and unwittingly of course became an instrument of bolshevist propaganda.

Without being alive to the position in which they found themselves, the Delegation assumed the role of a supreme judge in all political questions.

Specifically, they were not even situated so as to meet in Moscow the active leaders of our party living deep "underground" - illegally. That is the reason why the Delegation were compelled to rely on misleading words and data of the agents of the Soviet Government. Besides Communists, the Delegation conversed only with "former Mensheviks", i.e. with persons who had left the Social-Democratic Party



Top: Members of the TUC delegation with their Soviet counterparts in Moscow, November 1924.

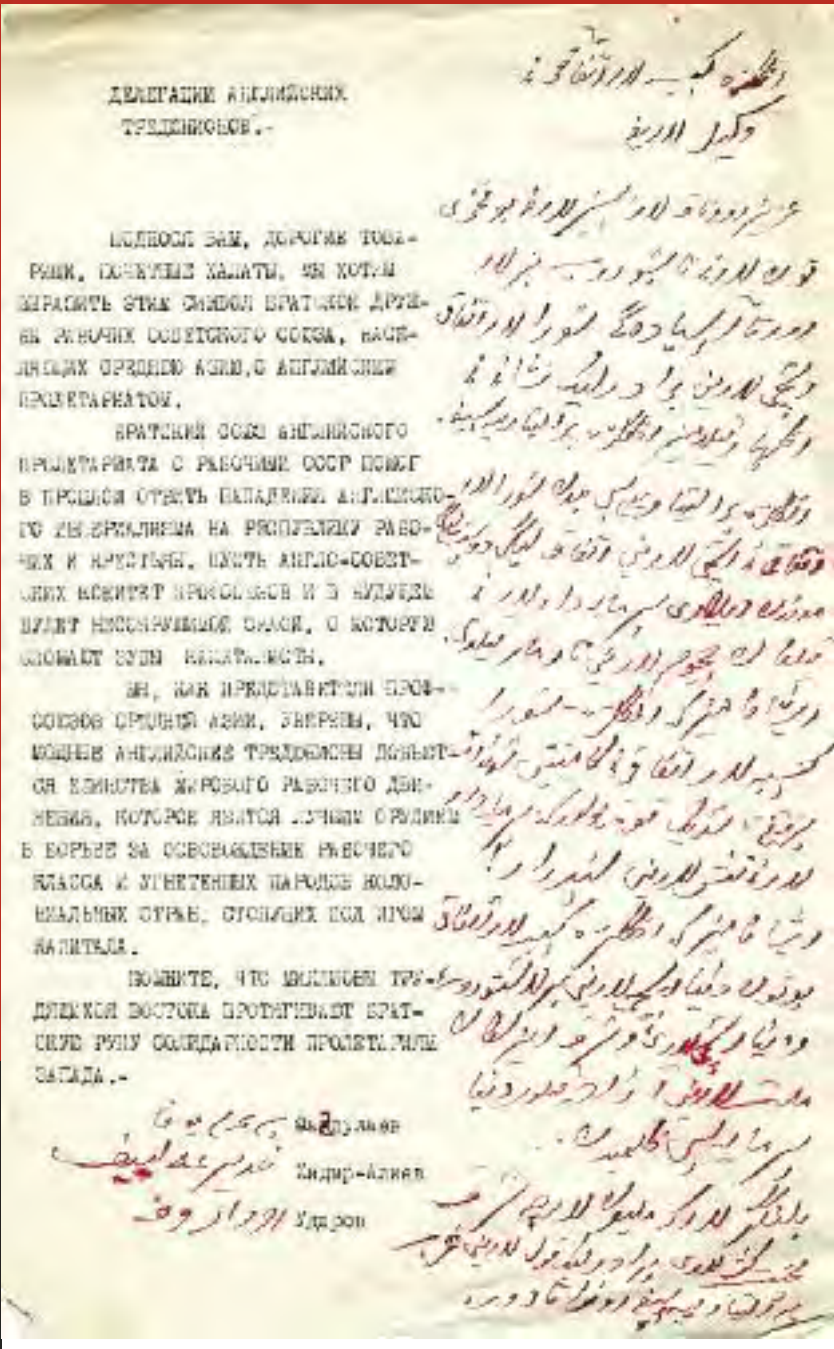
Above: Pamphlet written by Arthur Purcell after the delegation visit, 1925.

Above: Arthur Purcell with a Red Army soldier, November-December 1924 (precise date and location unknown).

Fred Bramley and the 1924 TUC delegation visit



Left: Members of the TUC delegation meeting with the head of the All-Ukrainian Trade Union Council, Fedor Ugarov, November 1924. Ugarov is in the centre, with Fred Bramley directly to his right.



Left: Communiqué from trade unionists in Soviet Central Asia to the 1924 TUC delegation, delivered at the Moscow congress. The first paragraph reads: 'Dear comrades, we bestow upon you these robes of honour as a symbol of the fraternal bonds between the Soviet workers of Central Asia and the English proletariat.'

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After leaving Moscow, the delegation visited the industrial heartlands of Eastern Ukraine, the Don river basin and the Caucasian republics of Azerbaijan and Georgia. Along the way, they came into contact with a wide cross-section of Soviet society.

Visiting factories, oilfields and workers' recreational facilities, the delegates were consistently impressed by the revolutionary government's provision for its citizens' material needs. They concluded that Soviet trade unions, freed from the obligation to protect workers from economic exploitation, were better able to provide for their intellectual and cultural development. Despite conceding that the Soviet Union was undemocratic and illiberal in comparison with Britain, they argued that the state's accomplishments had *'reconciled all but a very small minority to renouncing rights of opposition that are essential to political liberty elsewhere [...] This causes no resistance partly because these rights have been replaced by others of greater value under the Soviet system.'*

Right: Fred Bramley addressing the VTsSPS congress, November 1924.



Below: Members of the TUC delegation in Russia, November-December 1924 (precise date and location unknown).



Gender and revolution: the women's delegation and representations of Russian female workers 1925

In the spring and summer of 1925, a party of four women trade unionists headed by Mary Quaile (then a member of the TUC's General Council) visited the Soviet Union.

The visit came against the backdrop of both worsening working conditions for women and declining female union membership in Britain,

problems that were to some extent mirrored in the USSR during the state capitalist 'New Economic Policy' of the mid-1920s.

For nearly four months, the TUC

delegates travelled between Moscow, Leningrad, Ukraine and the Caucasus, later publishing a wide-ranging report on workplace conditions and social provision for Soviet women. The delegates' admiration for Soviet innovations in childcare, healthcare and women's education attests not only to the common struggle of women around the world for gender equality, but to the ways in which the Soviet Union symbolised that struggle for many in the early twentieth century.

Above: More traditional, patriarchal notions of feminine fragility persisted alongside the heroic image of Soviet women. This leaflet, written by the Anglo-American journalist Percival Phillips, accuses the Bolsheviks of torturing Russian women.

Right: Socialist banner presented to the TUC women's delegation by Soviet workers, 1925. Credit: People's History Museum.

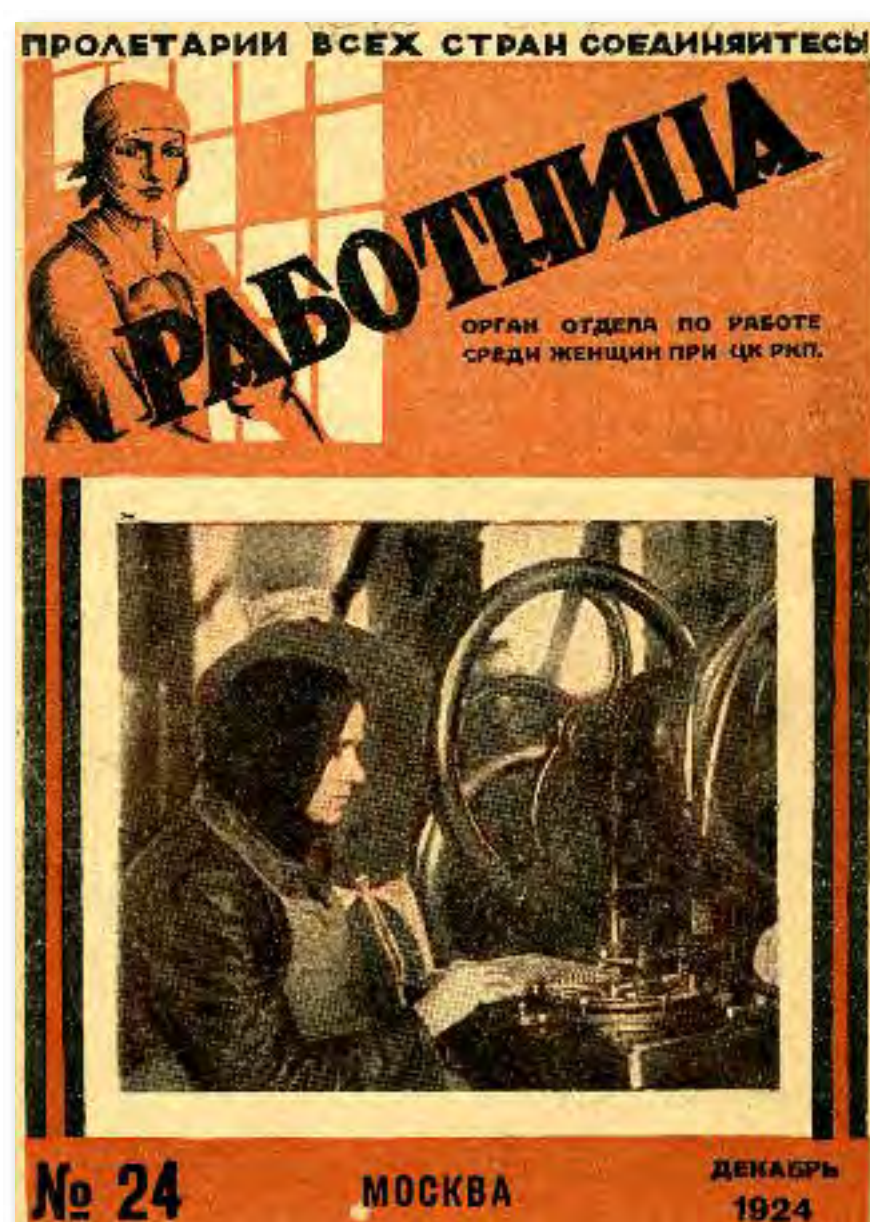
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Top: The TUC women's delegation in the Soviet Union, 1925.

Above: Members of the women's delegation meeting Soviet working women in Moscow, 1925.





Clockwise from top left:

Magazine: Krest'ianka (Peasant Woman): Organ of the Section for Work Amongst Working and Peasant Women of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party, January 1925.

English translation of a Soviet pamphlet on women workers, late 1920s.

Magazine: The Peasant-Woman, December 1924.

Magazine: The Woman Worker, December 1924.

Magazine: The Ukrainian Countrywoman, 1925. The photograph is of Lenin's wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya.

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Gender and revolution

The materials collected by the TUC women's delegation reflected a fascination with Soviet female workers, who were seen as embodying the ideal of emancipated socialist womanhood.

These depictions of women from across the Soviet Union showed the revolutionary government transforming the timeless Russian krest'ianka – the peasant woman – into the modern rabotnitsa, the archetypal proletarian hero. By emphasising the dignity of socialist labour and the enlightening power of the Leninist gospel, representations of Soviet women during the 1920s challenged contemporary gender norms. For many Britons, such images would have recalled the wartime realities of the Home Front, when women began to take on numerous occupations formerly reserved for men.



Report of the TUC women's delegation to the Soviet Union, 1925.

Translating the revolution: Soviet literature in 1920s Britain

The early twentieth century witnessed a fascination with Russian politics, society and culture amongst British intellectuals.

The socialist movement was not exempt from this.

In the years after 1917, interest in both Lenin's writings and those of other leading Bolsheviks increased dramatically in Britain. A wide variety of left-wing organisations worked with Russian speakers such as Andrew Rothstein, the son of a Tsarist-era revolutionary, to translate and publish a variety of Marxist-Leninist tracts.

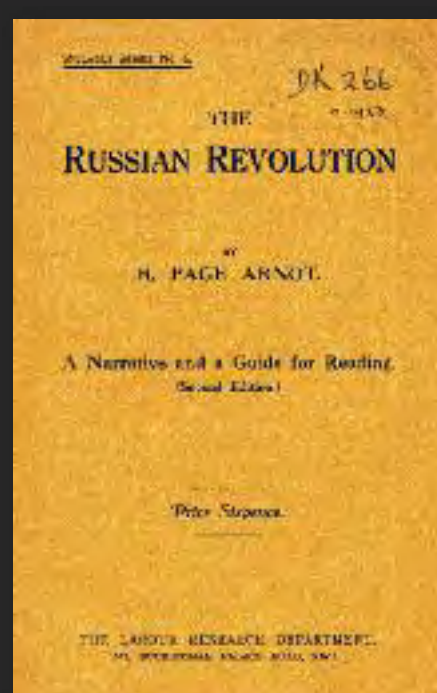
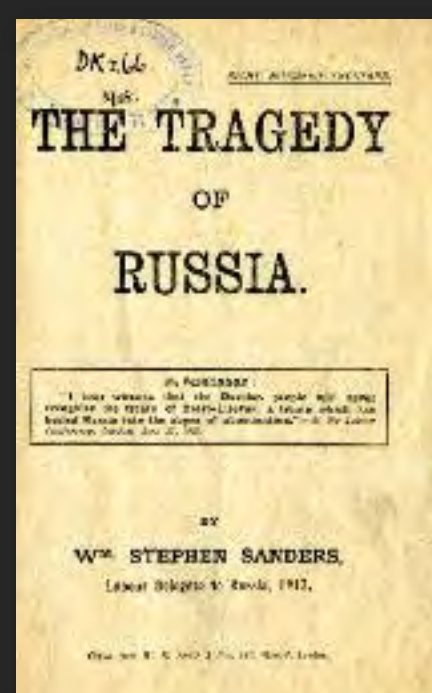
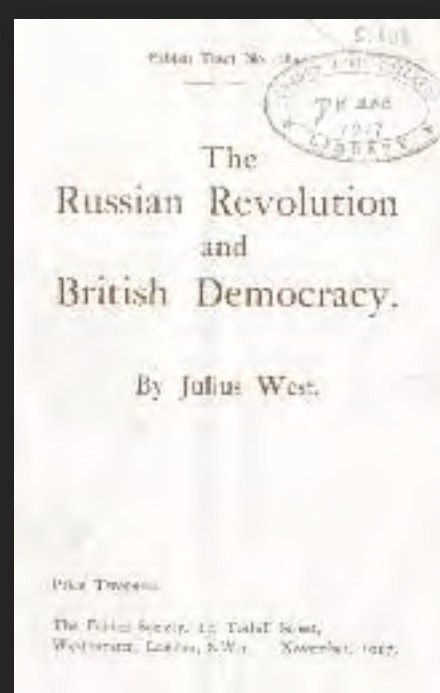
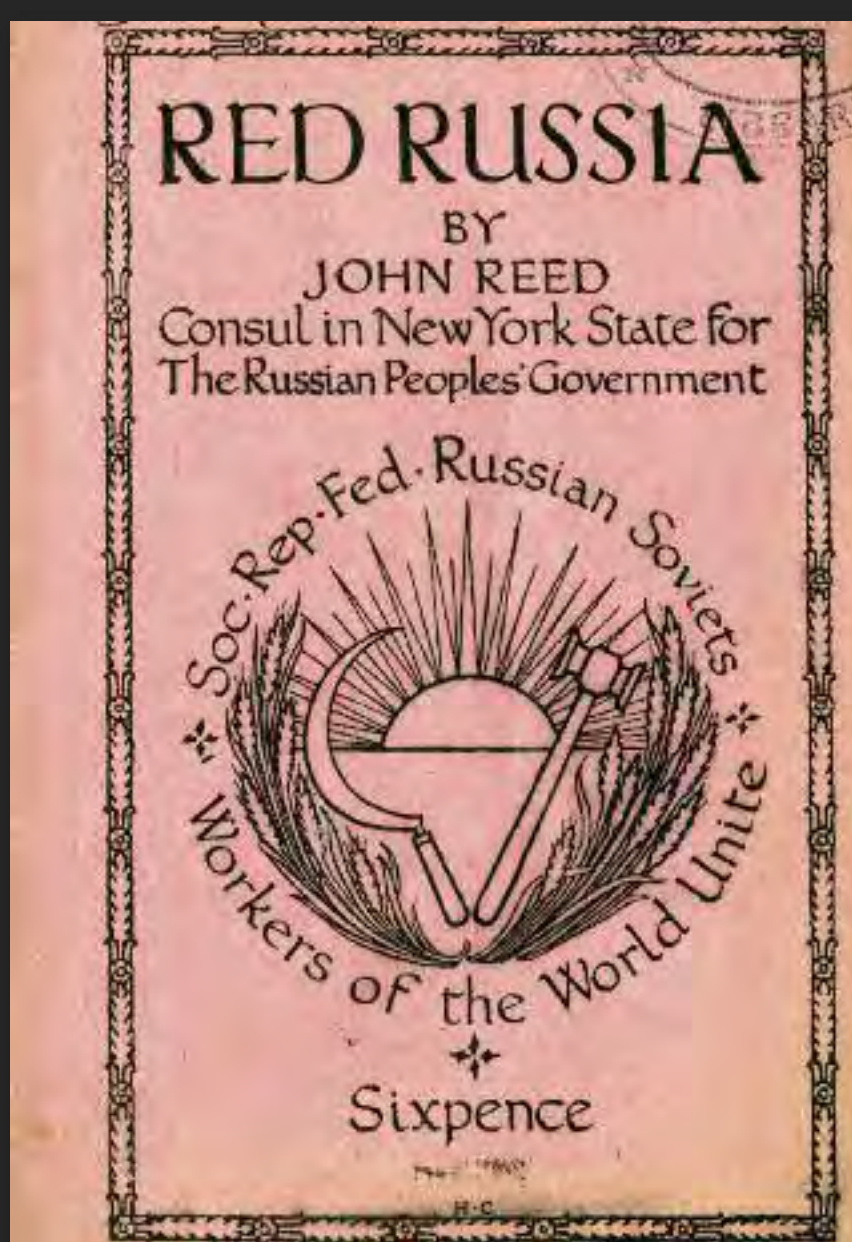
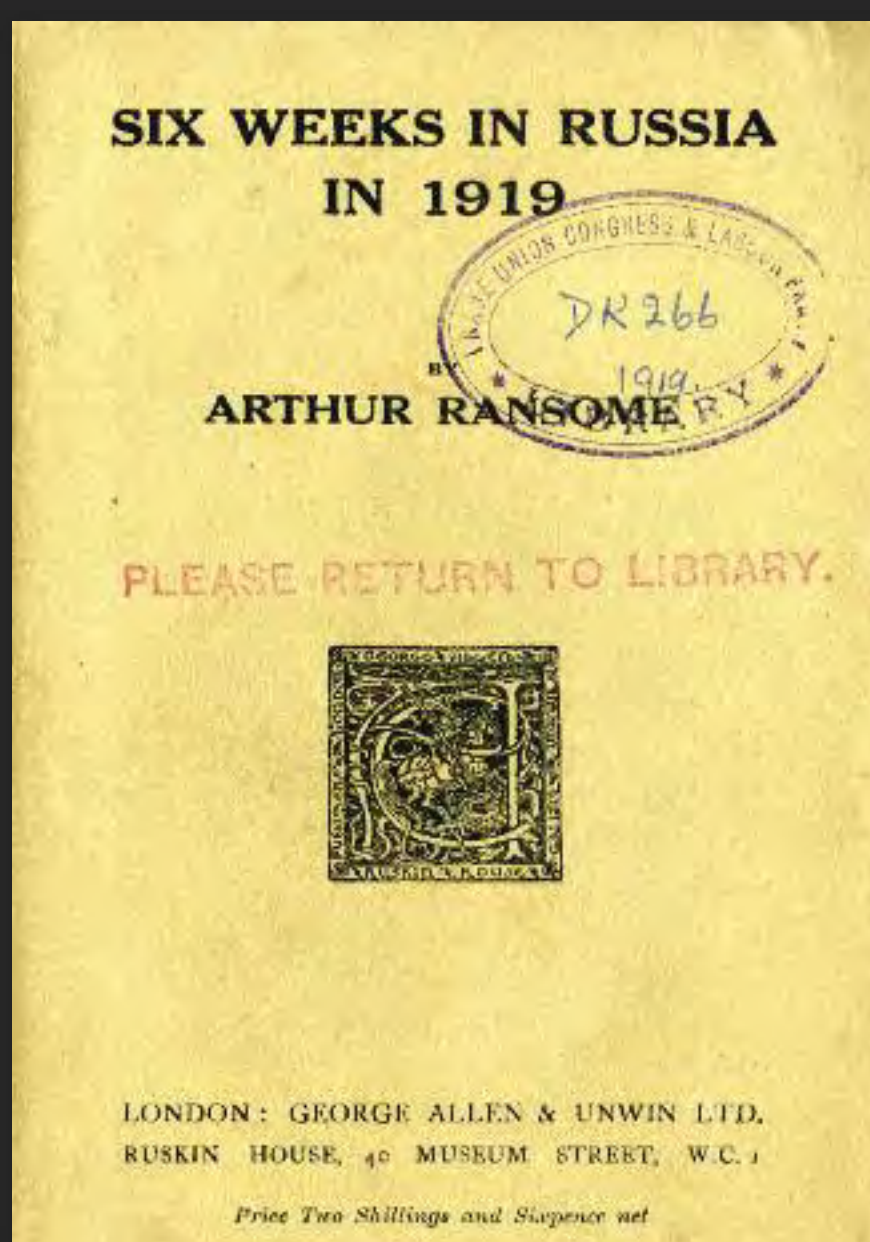
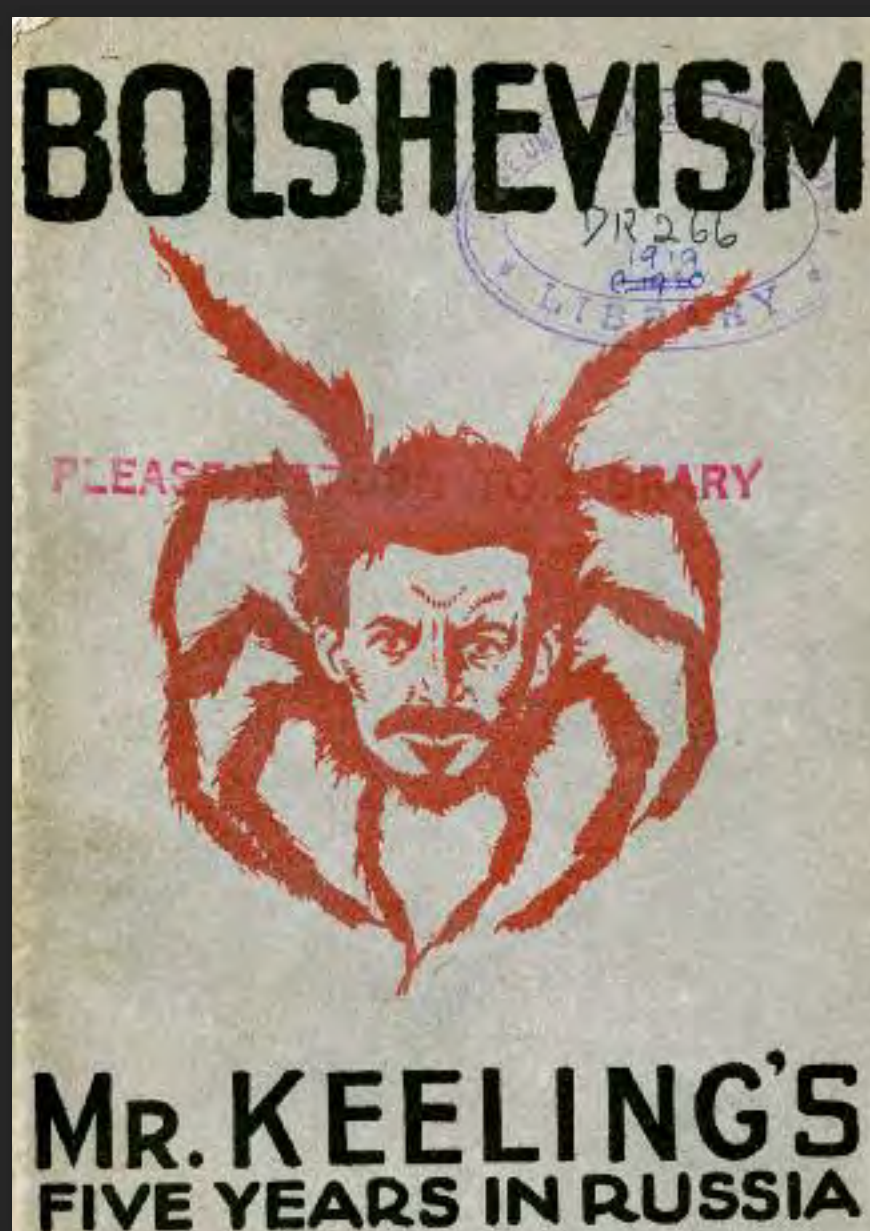
The Soviet authorities likewise endeavoured to satisfy British readers' curiosity. During the 1920s and 1930s, the Moscow-based 'Cooperative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers in the USSR' produced English renditions of Soviet literature aimed at British and American migrants to the Soviet Union, and the Comintern's International Lenin School provided revolutionary training for foreign communists from 1926 onwards.



Above: Communique from the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, March 1917; English-language pamphlets by Lenin, Leon Trotsky and the Soviet diplomat Maxim Litvinov, 1918-1919; an English translation of the Soviet constitution, 1923; and a selection of English-language pamphlets published by the Cooperative Publishing Society for Foreign Workers in the USSR, early 1930s.

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British writers on Soviet Russia



Above: Russian by birth, the historian and Fabian socialist Julius West spent the years 1915-1917 in Russia, working primarily as a journalist. In this Fabian pamphlet written shortly before the October Revolution, he sought to interpret events in Russia for a British audience.

Above: Later the Labour MP for Battersea North, William Stephen Sanders had participated in the 1917 TUC delegation to Russia and had supported the Provisional Government's efforts to continue the war. In 1918,

Above: An admirer of the Bolsheviks and frequent commentator on Russian affairs during the years of war and revolution, Robert Page Arnot helped found the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1920.

By the early 1920s, the Russian Revolution had become a subject of immense public interest and a staple of British literary culture, with journalists, polemicists, political activists and travel writers regularly visiting Russia to see the new socialist state for themselves.

While many were highly critical, depicting the Bolsheviks as bloodthirsty opportunists, others found much to admire in the organisation of socialist society and in the militant idealism of those they encountered. As they passed judgement on Russia's revolutionary experiment for a British audience, these writers engaged in series of broader debates on the merits of revolution, prospects for political change at home, and Britain's place in the world.

Top row left to right: Herbert Keeling lived in Russia during the years of war and revolution, and published an attack on the day-to-day realities of Bolshevik rule in 1919. The front cover of his book depicts Leon Trotsky as a spider.

First published in 1919, the American journalist John Reed's account of the October Revolution, *Ten Days That Shook The World*, quickly became a classic of the modern socialist canon.

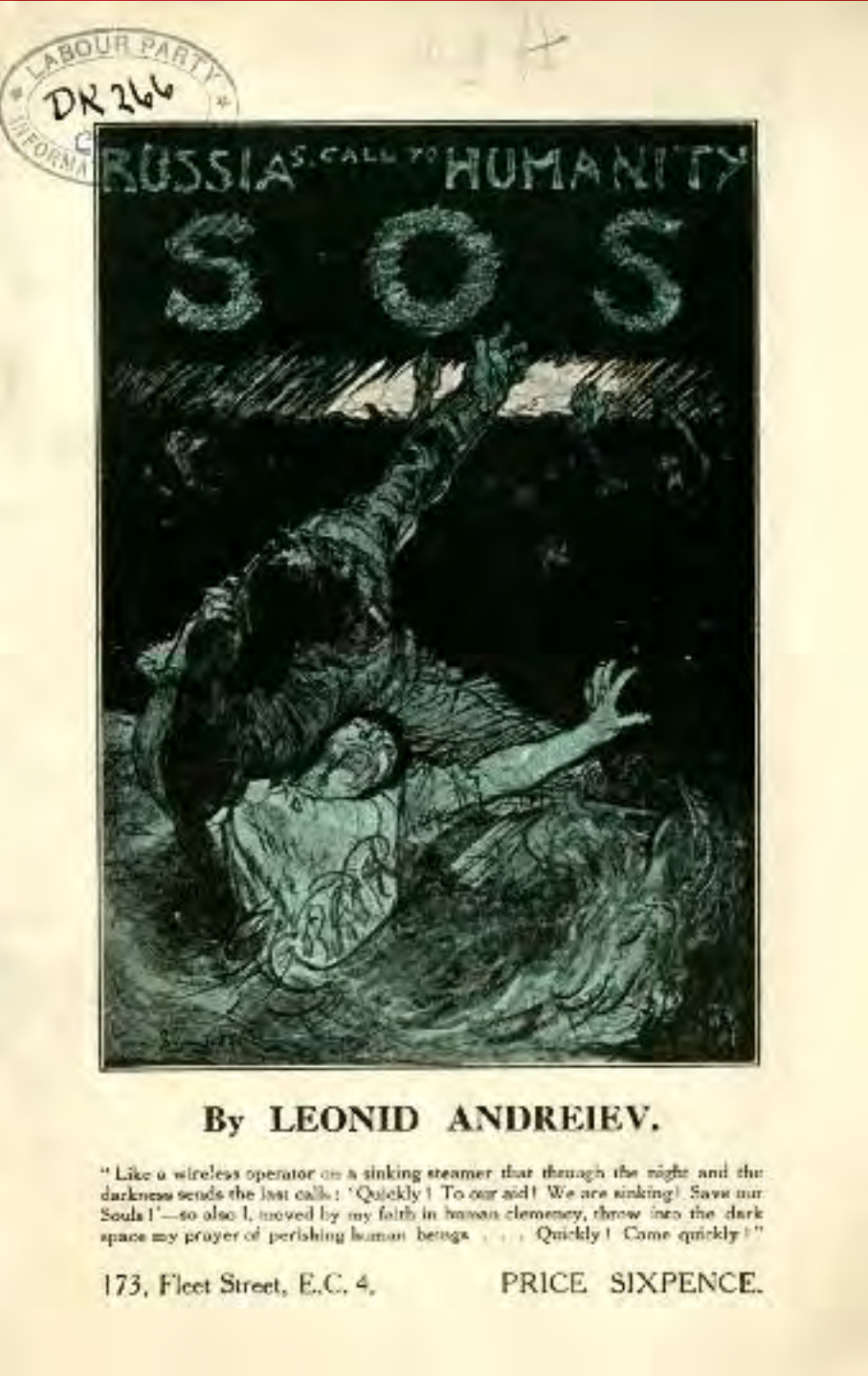
Second row left to right: The British novelist and journalist Arthur Ransome reported from Russia for the *London Daily News* throughout the First World War and the events of 1917. He developed close relationships with the Bolshevik leadership, and later published this defence of the revolutionary government.

In January 1918, Reed was offered the position of Soviet consul in New York - one he never actually took up, owing to Lenin's disapproval of the appointment and the fact that he did not actually return to America for several more months.

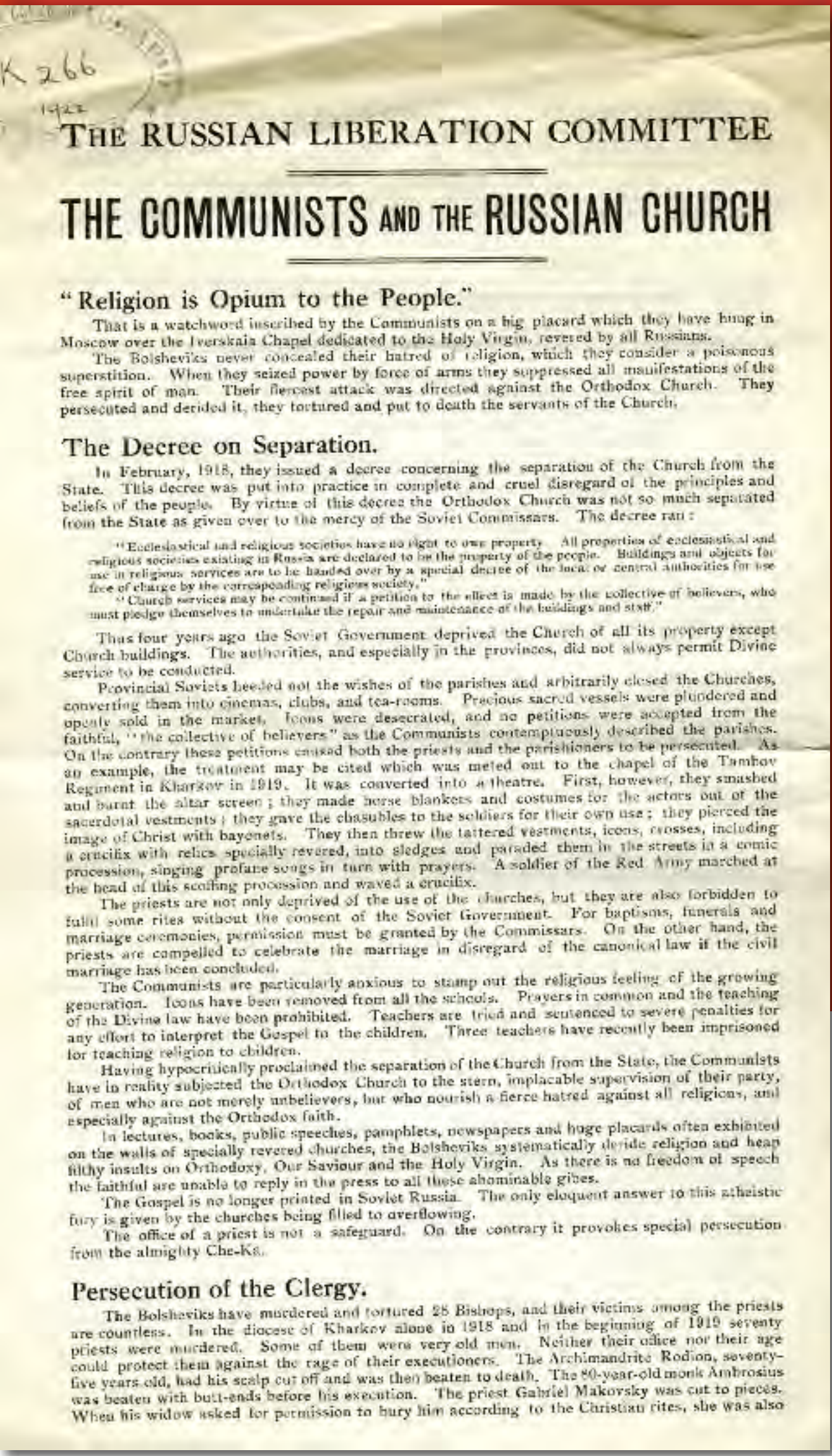
Anti-Bolshevik Russian émigrés in Britain

In the years following the October Revolution, hundreds of thousands of Russians opposed to the Bolsheviks fled Russia for Western Europe.

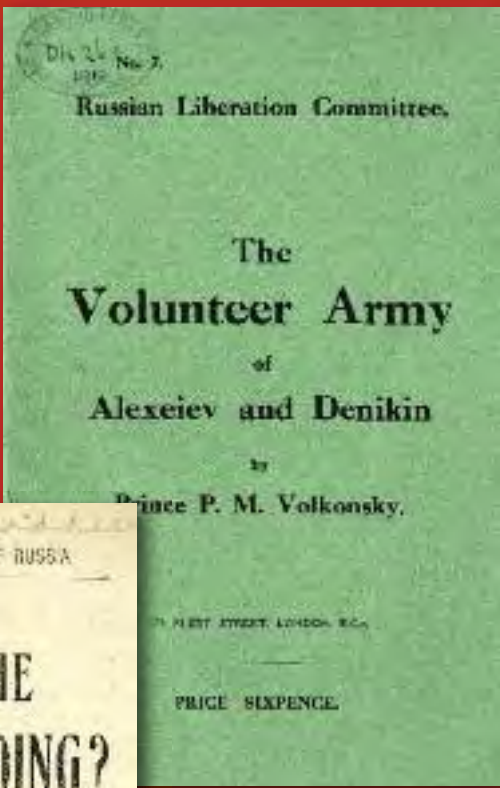
Although the majority settled in France, Germany and across Central Europe, many others came to Britain, where – like their pre-revolutionary counterparts – they sought to enlist public support for their cause. In June 1918, Alexander Kerensky, the head of the second Provisional Government, addressed the Labour Party conference in London and called for Western military intervention against the Soviets. Both socialist émigrés and more conservative groups such as the Russian Liberation Committee published newspapers and pamphlets that detailed instances of political oppression and drew interested Britons’ attention to deteriorating conditions in Russia.



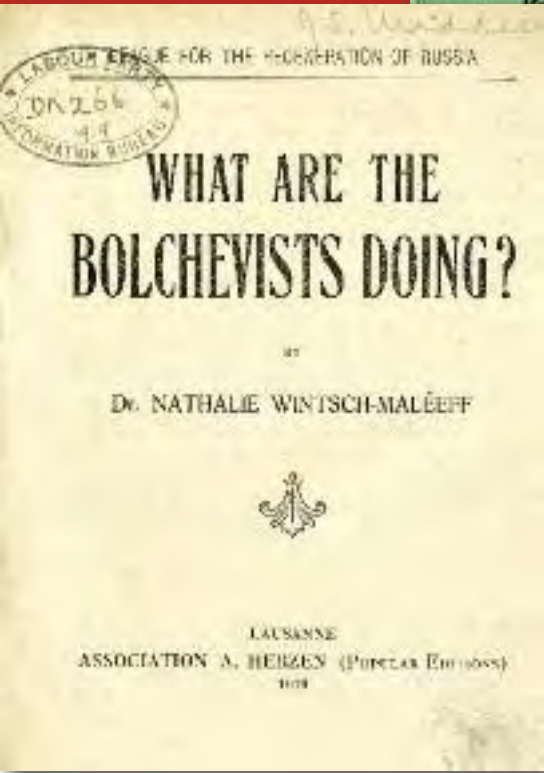
Above: One of the most important figures in the Russian ‘Silver Age’, the writer Leonid Andreiev had supported the February Revolution but opposed the Bolshevik takeover in October. In this 1919 pamphlet, written shortly before his death in emigration in Finland, Andreiev used his celebrity status amongst British readers to appeal for further Allied military intervention against the revolutionary government.



Left: Leaflet detailing the suppression of the Orthodox Church circulated by the Russian Liberation Committee, 1922.



Right: Anti-Bolshevik pamphlet published in 1919 on behalf of the 'League for the Regeneration of Russia', founded by the dissident socialist and former terrorist Boris Savinkov.



Below left: Pamphlet published by the Russian Liberation Committee, 1918.

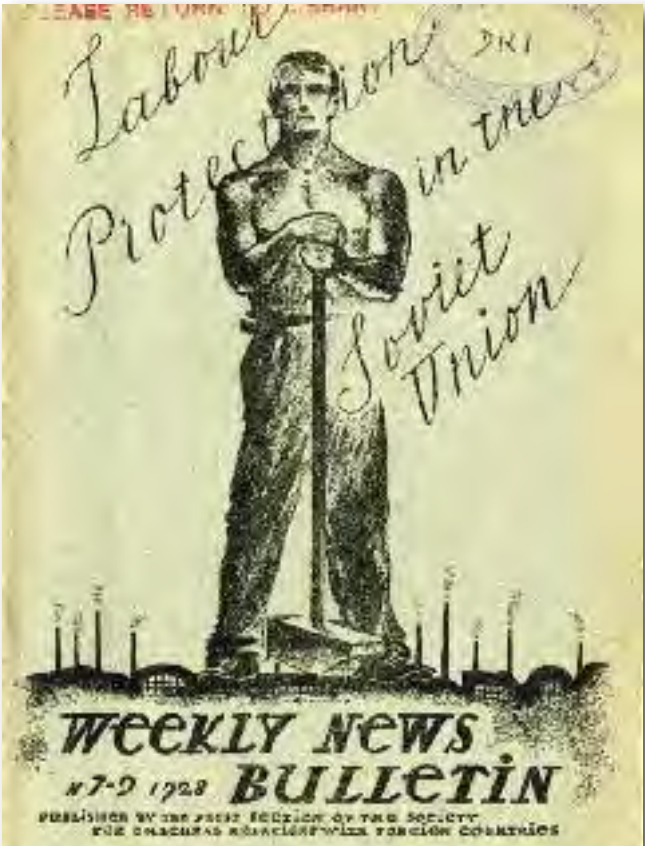
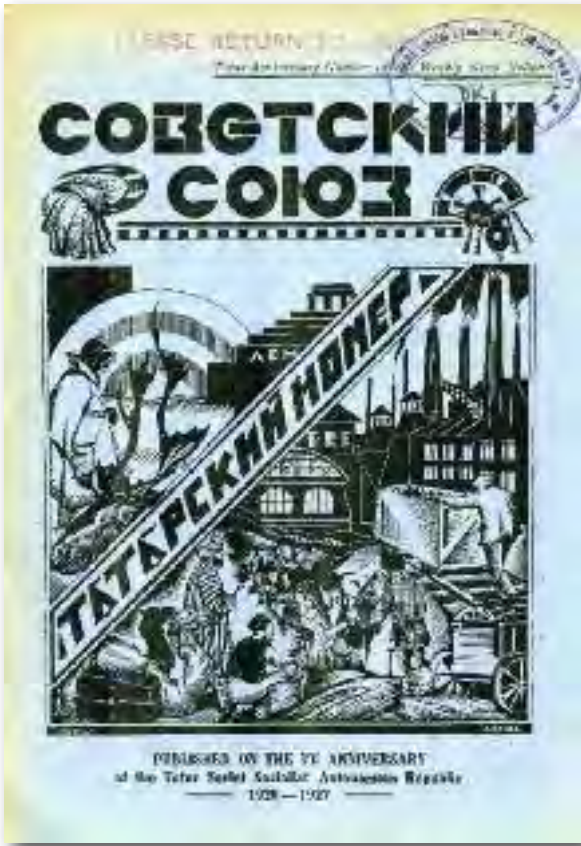
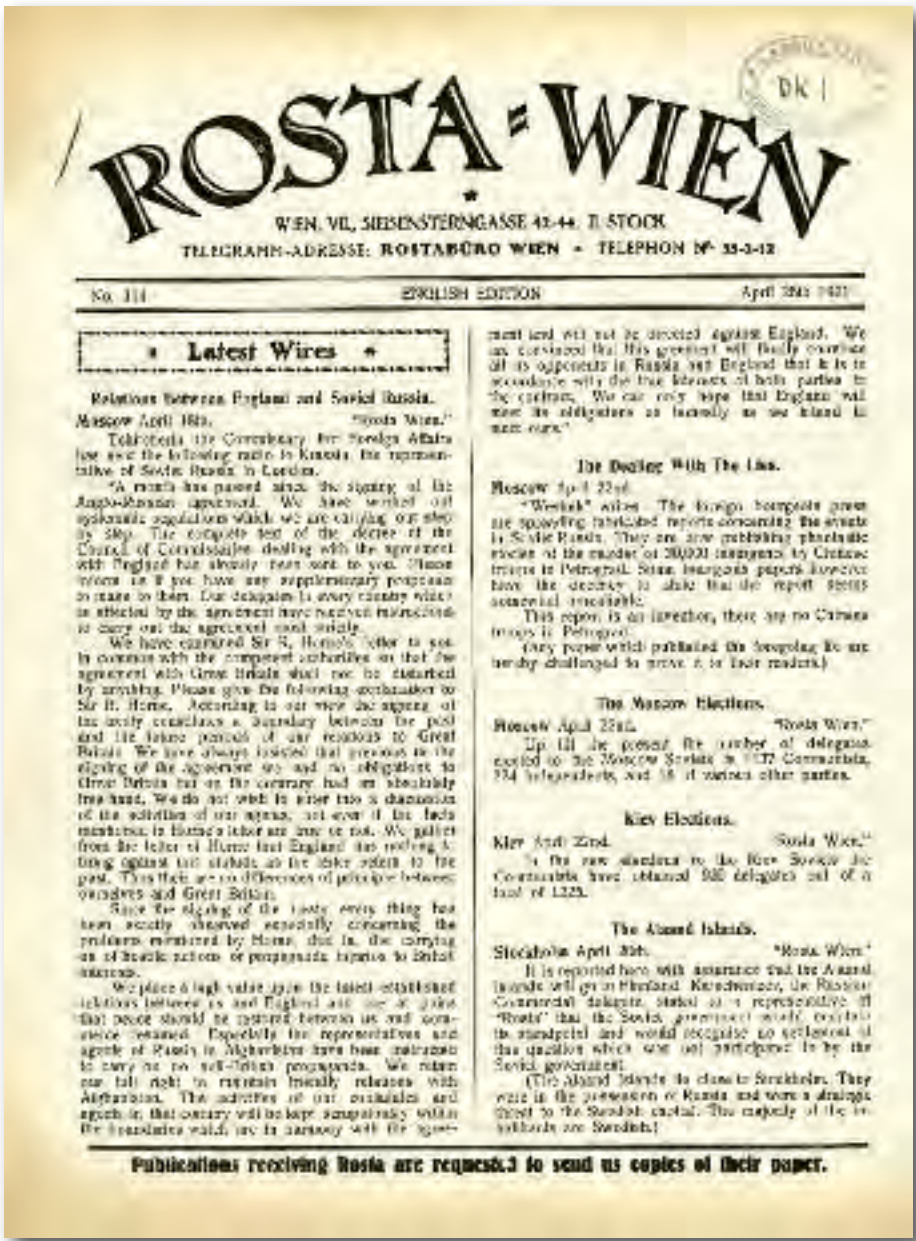
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The information war: Rosta-Wien, Soviet Russia Pictorial and the People's Russian Information Bureau

Intent upon securing diplomatic recognition and fostering working-class solidarity, Russia's revolutionary government also made extensive use of overseas propaganda.

In the immediate aftermath of the October Revolution, sympathetic British organisations such as the People's Russian Information Bureau attempted to influence press coverage of Russian affairs in the Bolsheviks' favour.

From 1920 onwards, the Moscow-funded Viennese news agency Rosta-Wien published information favourable to the Russian government in several European languages, including English. Later on, Soviet organisations such as the Comintern and the Society for Cultural Relations produced English-language literature that helped disseminate positive, inspiring images of Soviet socialism.



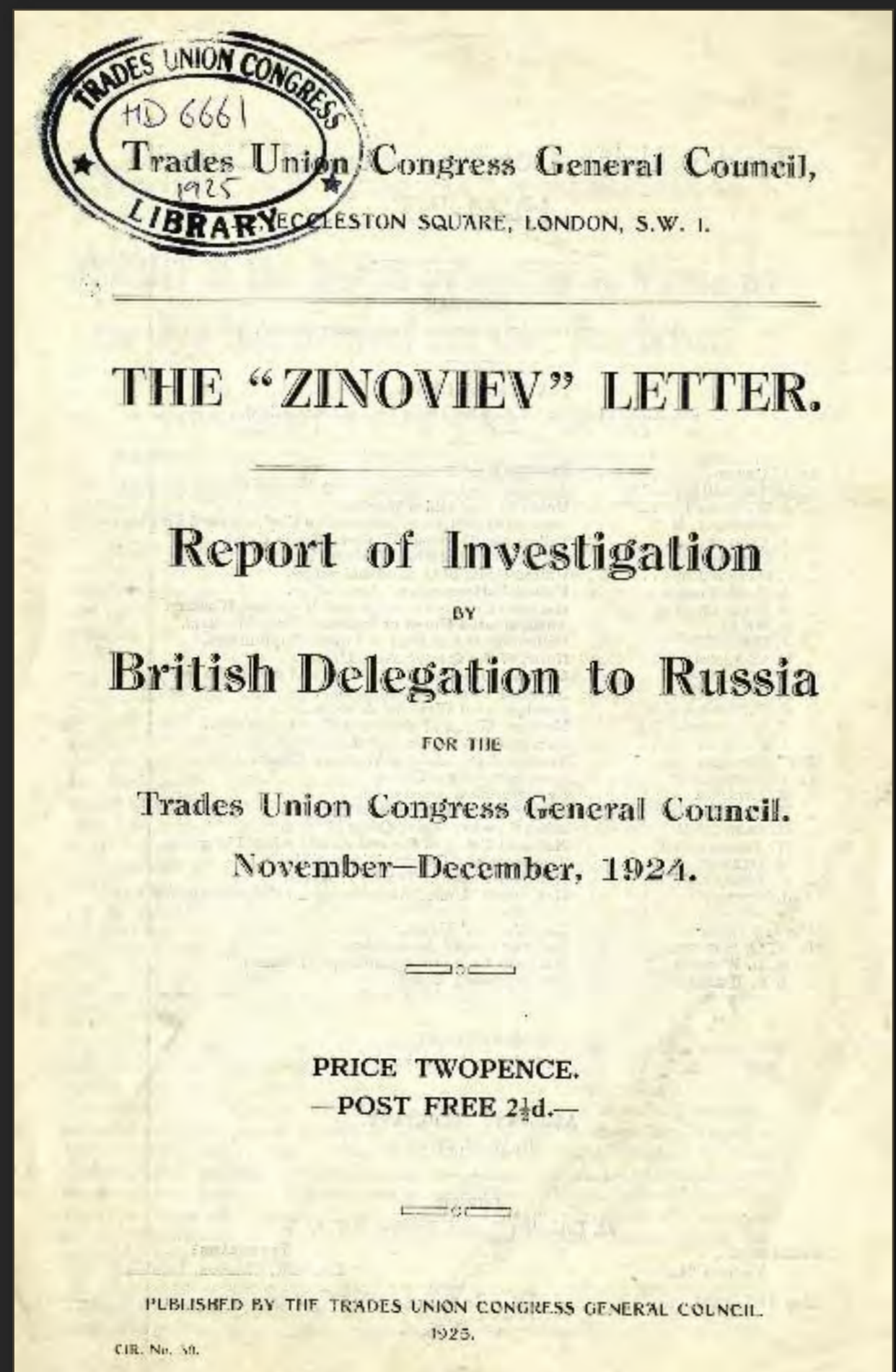
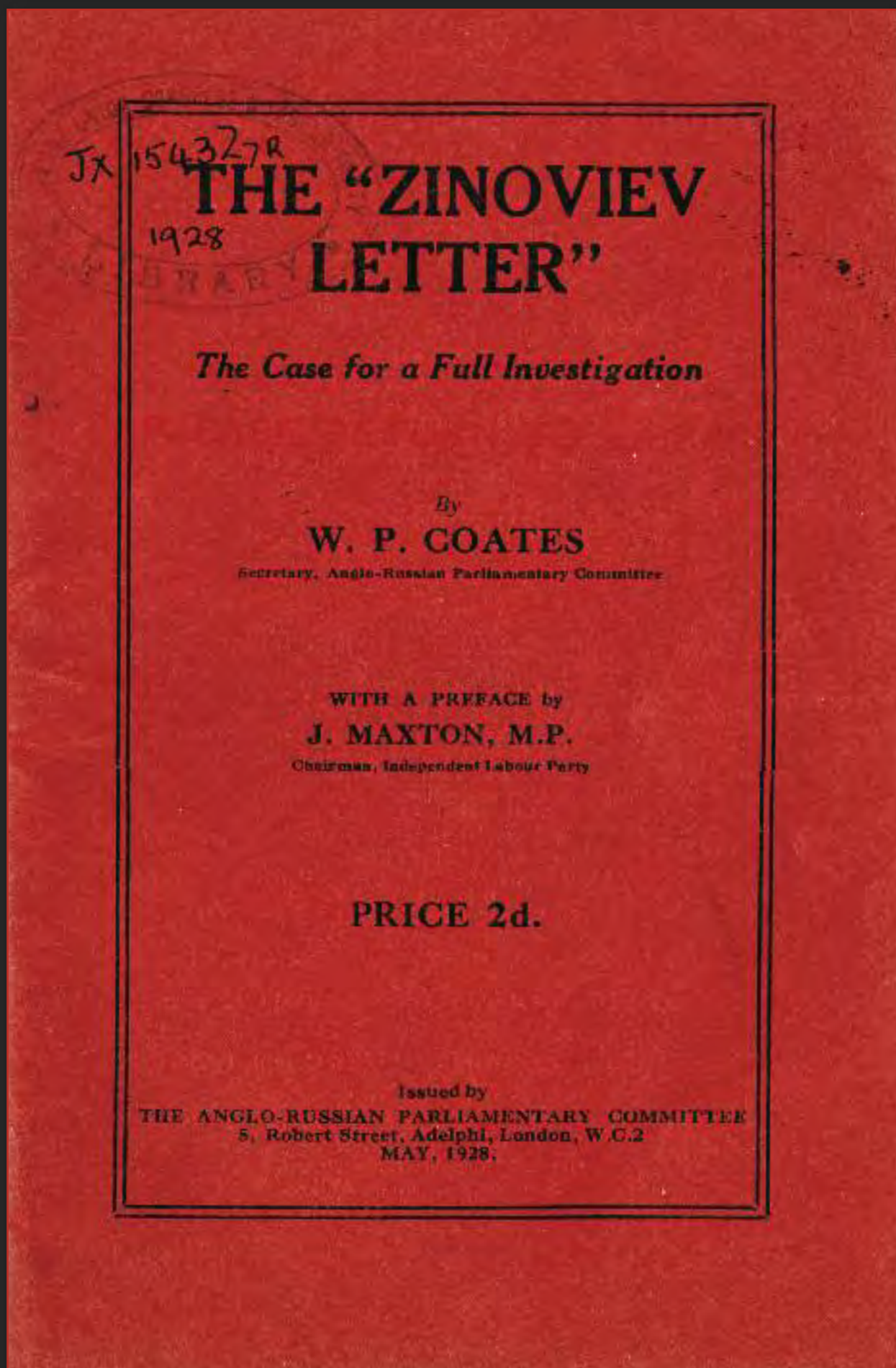
Top left: The English-language Rosta-Wien, April 1921.

Top right: May Day edition of Soviet Russia Pictorial, 1923. Published monthly throughout the early 1920s by the Comintern, this magazine existed to raise funds for famine relief in Russia.

Above: left to right - English-language issues of the Weekly News Bulletin published by the Society for Cultural Relations with the Soviet Union. Established in 1924, the Society for Cultural Relations disseminated information about Soviet scientific and technical accomplishments, art and literature, and helped Britons visit the USSR.

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The Red Scare: from the Zinoviev letter to the ARCOS raid, 1924-1927



In January 1924, the Labour Party under Ramsay MacDonald formed a minority government for the first time, quickly recognising the Soviet Union and beginning negotiations on a second Anglo-Soviet trade agreement.

Under intense political pressure, MacDonald's government collapsed in October the same year. In the midst of the ensuing election campaign, the Daily Mail published a letter purportedly from Grigory Zinoviev, the head of the Comintern, calling on Labour to bring about a revolutionary situation in Britain. Although the Conservative Party won the election decisively, the extent to which the Zinoviev letter actually influenced the vote is unclear. The letter nonetheless became a touchstone for anti-communist sentiment in Britain, and was not conclusively shown to have been a forgery until 1999.

Left: Pamphlet calling for an investigation into the Zinoviev letter, 1928.

Right: In addition to their official published report, the 1924 TUC delegation to the USSR (having been granted access to the Comintern's archive in Moscow) also produced a pamphlet that attempted to prove the Zinoviev letter was a forgery.

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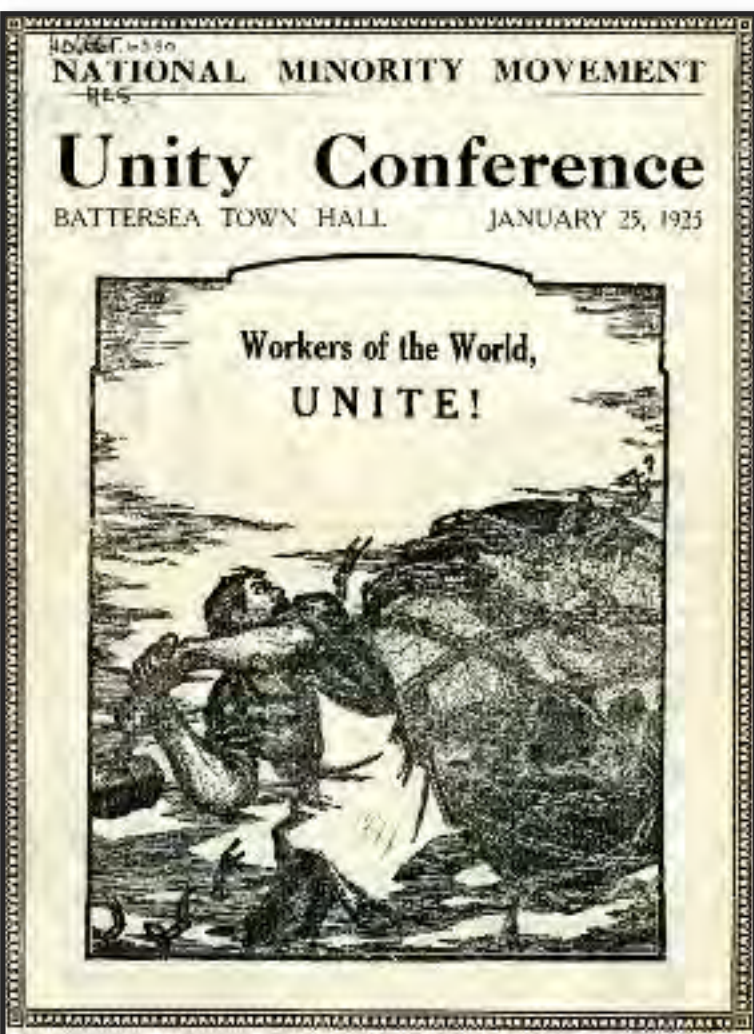
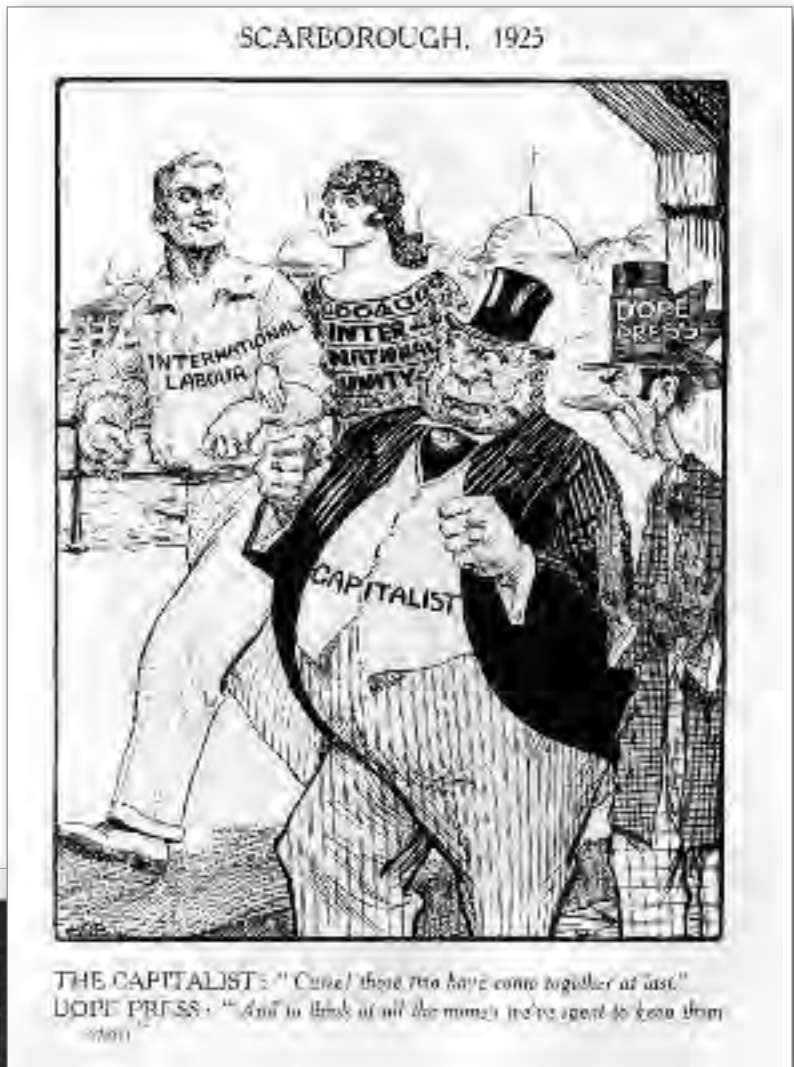
Towards international unity? The Anglo-Russian Joint Advisory Committee, 1925-1927

During the 1920s, the international trade union movement was split between two umbrella organisations: the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU, also known as the ‘Amsterdam International’), and the Soviet-backed Red International of Trade Unions, or Profintern, which was founded in 1921.

Unlike the IFTU, which it repeatedly attacked as irredeemably bourgeois, the Profintern promoted communist agitation within the trade union movement.

To this end, with help from the Communist Party of Great Britain, the Profintern established a British surrogate – the ‘National Minority Movement’ – in 1924.

The National Minority Movement campaigned for unity between the IFTU and Profintern, glossing over the ideological differences between the two and emphasising the fraternal bonds of proletarian internationalism.



Above: Cartoons published in Arthur Purcell's journal Trade Union Unity attacking the IFTU's anti-communist tendency and calling for an Anglo-Russian workers' alliance, 1925-1926.

Left: Poster for the National Minority Movement's Battersea conference, January 1925. The illustration is taken from the front cover of the Comintern's eponymous magazine.

Right: Daily Graphic report on the Russian delegation negotiating the formation of the Anglo-Russian Committee, April 1925.



Towards international unity? The Anglo-Russian Joint Advisory Committee, 1925-1927

Following the success of the 1924 delegation visit, the TUC was also inclined to seek reconciliation between the IFTU and Profintern.

In April 1925, a meeting in London between British and Russian trade unionists led to the formation of the Anglo-Russian Joint Advisory Committee, a working body intended to coordinate negotiations between Amsterdam and Moscow.

Although the TUC's efforts in this respect ultimately amounted to nothing, the Anglo-Russian Committee itself lasted for over two years, during which it served as a forum for contacts between the TUC and the Soviet trade unions. Ideological and strategic differences, however, made such contacts increasingly problematic, with the two sides quarrelling in public during the 1926 General Strike.



Above: Soviet trade unionists attending the TUC conference in Hull, September 1924. Centre front: Mikhail Tomskey, the chair of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions (VTsSPS).

ANGLO-RUSSIAN CONFERENCE AT 32, ECCLESTON SQUARE, TUESDAY, 7th APRIL, 1925.

In reply to the Russian proposals for joint action for the purpose of promoting International Unity by the All-Russian Trade Union Council and the General Council of the British Trades Union Congress, the representatives attending this Conference made the following declarations:-

1. It will be our aim to co-operate with the All-Russian Trade Union Council in every way as may be considered from time to time advisable, for the purpose of promoting International Unity between our respective countries.
2. For this purpose we agree that facilities should be provided for a free exchange of documents between the Trade Union movements of Russia and Great Britain, including the collection of copies of Trade Union, business documents showing the rules and regulations of British Unions, the system of State Insurance and Unemployment Insurance, contributions and benefits, the keeping of Trade Union accounts, system of local and district organisation, methods of appointing Trade Union officials, and other general information or special documents dealing with the structure of Trade Union machinery and the general policy of Trade Union organisation and control.
3. To arrange for an exchange of Memoranda on special subjects of mutual interest to both countries with a view to joint discussions regarding important principles that may be from time to time considered necessary.

- 2 -

opportunities are provided a further extension of contacts may be devised for the purpose of the closest possible mutual aid between the two.

For the purpose of dealing with any questions arising in connection with the objects outlined in paragraphs 1 and 2, a Joint Advisory Council representing the British Trade Union movements should be constituted consisting of the Chairmen and Secretaries of the British Trade Union Council and the British Trades Union Congress General Council.

For the purpose of operating the joint machinery the representatives of the All-Russian Trade Union Council agree to create an Advisory Committee of their Council corresponding

to the International Committee of the British Trades Union Congress General Council.

Above: Memorandum on the establishment of the Anglo-Russian Joint Advisory Committee, April 1925.

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‘Victory to the English miners!’ The 1926 General Strike, ‘Red Money’ and Soviet workers’ solidarity

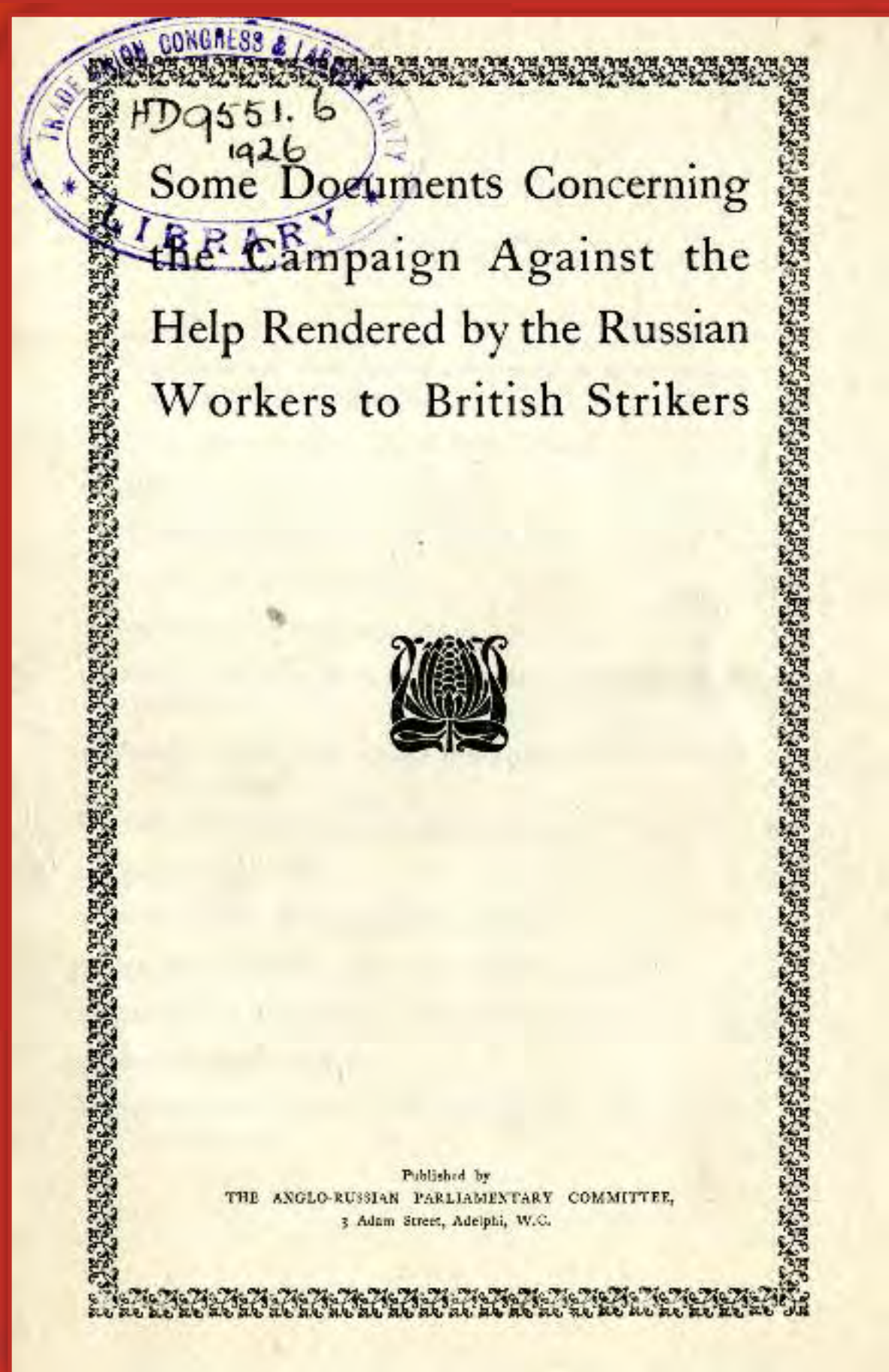
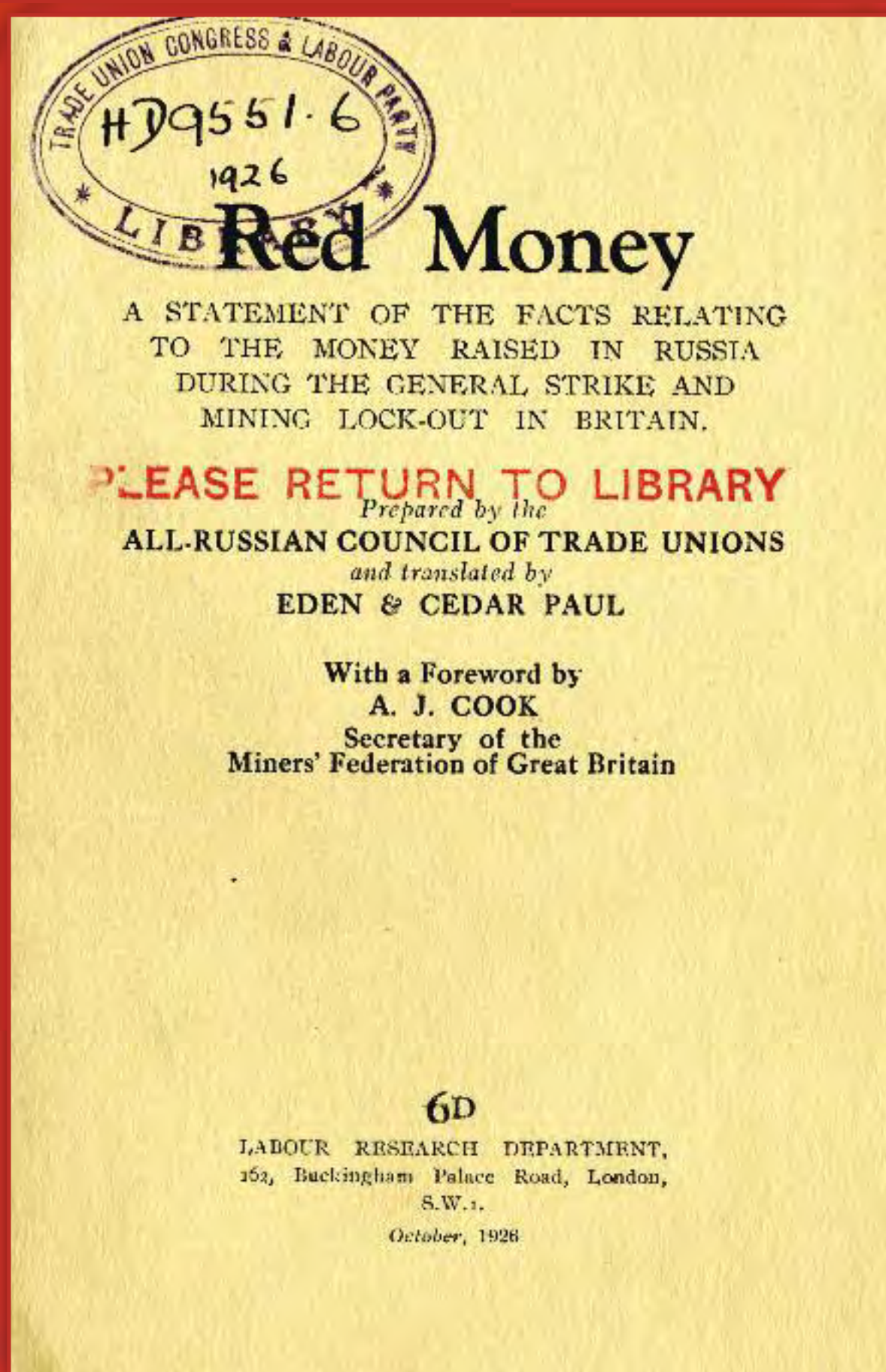


Right: General strike 1926. Pickets at London docks.

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On 3 May 1926, an escalating crisis in the British coal-mining industry led the TUC to declare a national strike.

The strike lasted only ten days, and was afterwards widely regarded as a failure, with most miners returning to longer working hours and reduced wages. In the Soviet Union, however, it attracted widespread attention and generated great enthusiasm. Miners in Ukraine’s Donbass region, the centre of the Soviet coal industry, raised funds for their British counterparts and publicly expressed solidarity with the strikers. Party newspapers such as *Izvestiia* (The News) devoted extensive coverage to events in Britain, declaring the strike ‘one of the greatest historical events in the fight between capital and labour’.



Left: Pamphlets prepared by the Anglo-Russian Parliamentary Committee and VTsSPS refuting allegations of 'Red Money' that appeared in the British press during and immediately after the General Strike, 1926.

'Victory to the English'

The 1926 General Strike,

'Red Money' and Soviet

workers' solidarity

Such expressions of solidarity could not conceal the serious ramifications of the strike's failure for relations between the TUC and the Soviet trade unions.

The decision to end the strike before its demands had been accepted led to accusations from Moscow that the TUC had betrayed British workers. The TUC, in turn, accused its Soviet counterparts of meddling and dictating strategy from Moscow – a charge the latter denied on the grounds that the strike, far from merely being an internal British affair, was of concern to the whole international workers' movement. Mutual resentment was increased by the TUC's refusal to accept a £26,000 donation from the Soviet trade unions. Funds raised directly by Soviet workers for the strikers were accepted by the Miners' Federation, leading to accusations of 'red' money in the right-wing press and an official protest from Stanley Baldwin's Conservative government.

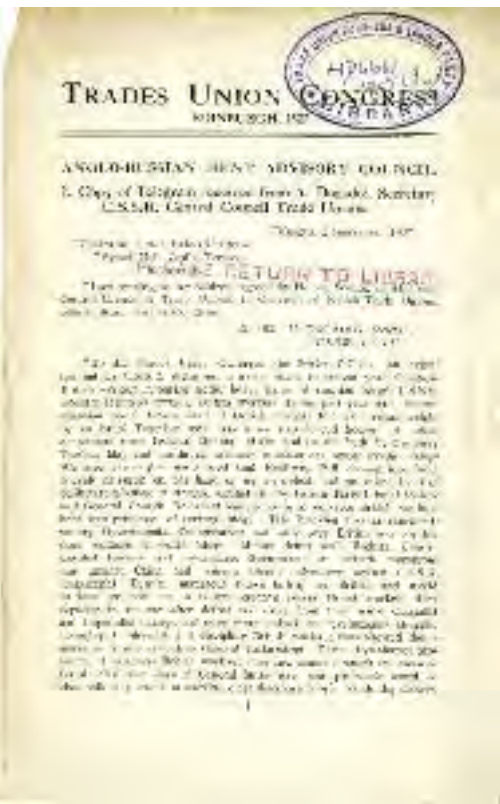
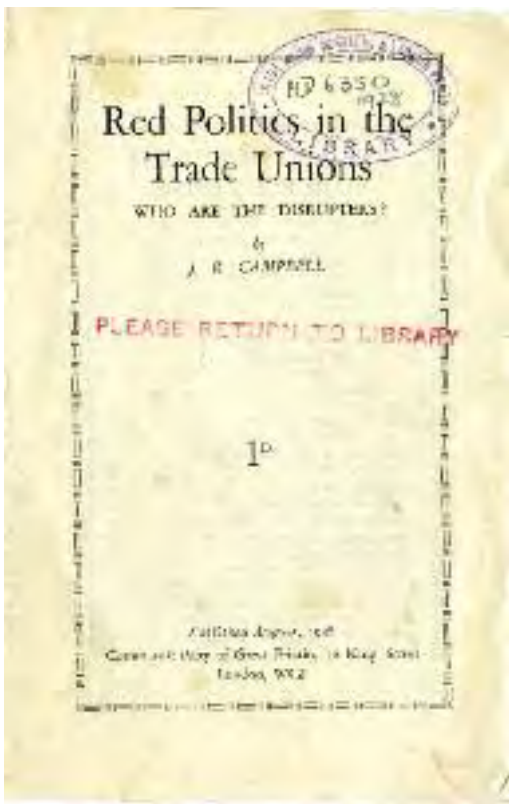
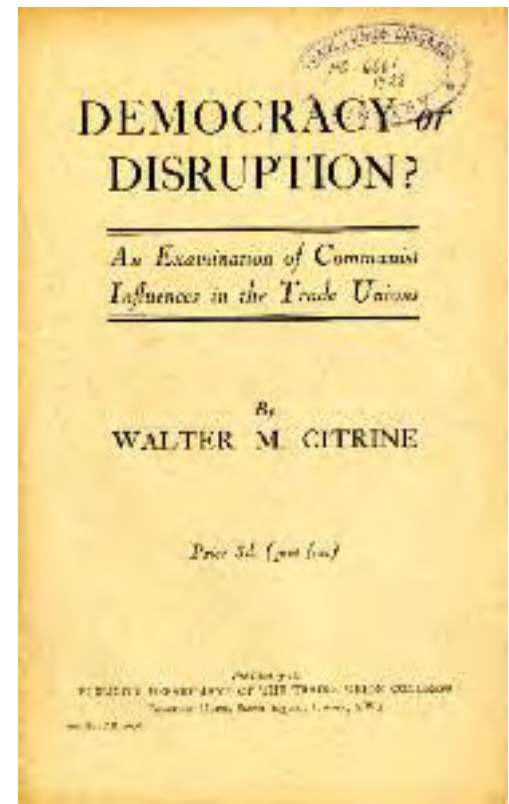
Walter Citrine and the anti-communist turn

During the summer of 1927, the TUC withdrew from the Anglo-Russian Committee and formally broke off relations with the Soviet trade unions.



After the ARCOS raid, the weight of anti-communist sentiment in the country as a whole, and within the leadership of the trade union movement in particular, became irresistible. The TUC's volte-face was overseen by Walter Citrine, who had succeeded the late Fred Bramley as General Secretary of the TUC in 1925.

A convinced anti-communist, Citrine subscribed to a more traditional view of trade unionism as defending the interests of a settled economic class through non-revolutionary means, and later served as President of the IFTU. Relations with the Soviet trade unions were not re-established until 1929, and would never again be as close or cordial.



Above: As General Secretary of the TUC (1926-1946), Walter M. Citrine played a crucial role in British trade unionism's anti-communist turn after the General Strike.

Far left and middle: Pamphlets written by Walter Citrine in an attempt to expose communist influence in Britain's trade unions, together with a response from J. R. Campbell, a communist and the former editor of Workers' Weekly, 1928.

Left: Telegram from the VTsSPS to the TUC on the latter's withdrawal from the Anglo-Russian Joint Advisory Committee, September 1927.

Through the 'red-tinted spectacles'

British reflections on the Soviet experiment

The British labour movement's fascination with the Soviet Union did not come to an end in 1927.



Subsequent decades saw further delegation visits, all accompanied by the same admiring reports and fraternal greetings.

Yet the ideological stakes were never again so high as in the 1920s. The tensions encapsulated in that decade's dalliance with Soviet communism – between revolutionary and democratic conceptions of trade unionism; and between the idealistic internationalism of the TUC's delegates and the traditional vision of a working-class movement hermetically sealed against the excesses of foreign socialist experiments – continue to permeate Labour politics today. Such continuities attest not only to the historical ambiguities of socialist politics in Britain, but to the significance of the Russian Revolution as a global event – one as

contentious and contested now as it was a hundred years ago.

Above: Issue of 'Ukrainian Worker', magazine given to TUC women's delegation 1925.

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Above: Distribution of leaflets, international youth day celebration, 1924.

'The Russians were in deadly earnest; they did not play politics as though it were a game of cricket in which the rules were more important than the result. Here was an experiment which aroused both furious enthusiasm and furious hate [...] It was a positive expression of positive principles which those who affirmed them would die rather than surrender.'

(Harold Laski, British political theorist, 1947)