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Free Trade, Foreign Relations, and the Anti-Corn-Law League

FROM THE TIME of its formation in 1839 until the suspension of the corn laws by Sir Robert Peel seven years later, the Anti-Corn-Law League agitated, virtually without interruption, for the total and immediate repeal of all laws that restricted by high import duties the import of foreign cereal grains into Great Britain.¹ Headed largely by prominent middle-class northern industrialists and Radicals and centred in the cloth-manufacturing capital of Manchester, the League was perhaps the best financed and organized political pressure group that Great Britain had ever seen. To be sure, as its name implied, the League concentrated its efforts upon the repeal of the corn and provision laws, which for a variety of reasons it liked to claim as its *sole* objective: its own rules prohibited agitation for any other political purpose. Yet the ideology of free trade often seemed to carry with it implications of a broad range of contemporary liberal political and social reform. The members of the League did not regard the issue of free trade as being so narrow as to apply only in British domestic affairs; free trade, by its very nature, seemed to them to encompass aspects of international relations, diplomacy, and military preparedness.

Though the members of the Anti-Corn-Law League consistently maintained that their single objective was the repeal of the corn laws, their interest in commercial policy often led them to discuss the broad outlines of British foreign policy and the general principles upon which

¹ The author wishes to express his appreciation to Professors William Walker of Ohio Wesleyan University, Charles Chatfield of Wittenberg University, and Douglas Bisson of Belmont College for reading and commenting upon drafts of this article. He is also in the debt of Professors Walter Arnstein, Paul W. Schroeder, J.A. Nichols, and Caroline Hibbard of the University of Illinois for their advice and assistance. The essay has benefited from their insightful suggestions at various stages, but the author, of course, remains responsible for any errors or omissions which may remain.

they believed it should be based. Leaguers perceived foreign relations, the prospects for world peace, and the place of the British military through the spectacles of free trade, and they discussed such issues more often than historians have allowed.

This essay explores some of the connections that Anti-Corn-Law Leaguers perceived between the fight for repeal of the corn laws and foreign relations. However naïve their understanding of foreign affairs, and however greatly the extension of British commerce may have coincided with the individual financial interests of League members, Leaguers in their official publications, speeches, and private correspondence clung to the fundamental conviction that the pursuit of free trade was itself the pursuit of peace and international harmony. In addition to the publications and private papers of League members and League archives in Manchester, there is a wealth of printed primary material concerning the League, which published scores of tracts, pamphlets, handbills, circulars, and books. Its own official organs included *The Anti-Corn-Law Circular*, *The Anti-Bread-Tax Circular*, and *The League* in which free-trade ideology, official policy, and widespread activities were reported and explained.

Anti-Corn-Law Leaguers believed that free trade would promote internationalism, remove the material causes of war, advance the spread of Christianity, and, especially, put an end to what they very often called 'aristocratic misrule' in diplomacy and the military. Following principles that Richard Cobden had set down in his earliest pamphlets, Leaguers rejected the twin premises upon which they believed British foreign policy had been based for more than a century: balance of power and intervention abroad. And they co-operated with peace societies. Leaguers resisted military expenditure as being a benefit to the aristocracy, a misdirection of sorely needed capital, and a diversion from urgently needed reform. These themes, the ideology of peace and free trade, aristocratic misrule, 'Cobdenism' in foreign policy, and anti-pathy to a military establishment formed the substance of League opinion on foreign relations and provide the framework for the present discussion.

* * *

Considerable evidence suggests that in the ideology of the Anti-Corn-Law Leaguers, several important connections were made between free trade and peace. The first of these was the confident belief that unrestricted commerce promoted interdependence and internationalism.

In their belief that growth of an international economy would bring about an era of universal peace, members of the League were subscrib-

ing to a liberal tradition concerning foreign relations which began to emerge in the late eighteenth century. This tradition perceived modern commercial and industrial interests as increasingly in conflict with those of traditional landed society and the military institutions associated with it. In his 1986 study, *Liberalism and Naval Strategy*, Bernard Semmel investigates the way in which liberal ideology, together with commercial and industrial interests, helped shape Great Britain's maritime and naval strategy from the Rule of 1756 through the First World War. Semmel identifies the 'Manchester School' as especially prominent among mid-Victorian liberals, who perceived themselves as working for the creation of a new cosmopolitan order based upon free trade, international division of labour, and Christian ethics.² After 1849, free-trade radicals had achieved their goals – repeal of the corn laws and the navigation acts – and had set their sights, according to Semmel, upon a new objective: restructure of British naval strategy to permit the recognition of free ships and free goods in time of war.³

Of naval strategy, the Leaguers had apparently little to say. Theirs was the earlier period, before 1849, of agitation against protectionism, and before free-trade radicals had been dubbed the 'Manchester School' by Benjamin Disraeli. The League's view of foreign relations was neither narrow nor specific; its members believed simply that free trade would directly and materially promote the cause of peace, and they sought on numerous occasions to identify their own particular objective, repeal of the corn laws, with the broader cause of international peace.⁴ In doing

² Bernard Semmel, *Liberalism and Naval Strategy: Ideology, Interest, and Sea Power during the Pax Britannica* (Boston, 1986), pp. 6-10, and 52.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 52-3. Semmel asserts, quite properly, that historians have not yet appreciated the importance that Cobden, Bright, and their followers attached to this goal. According to Semmel, by the mid-nineteenth century Radicals in the Manchester School perceived that 'England's reliance on an outmoded mercantilist strategy that depended on using naval power to halt the trade of the enemy, whether in its own or in neutral vessels, was immoral and opposed to her true interests' (p. 53).

⁴ The interest of free traders in the cause of peace has been recognized by historians, but discussions have tended to be based upon the pacifist-sounding utterances of free traders during various periods in their public lives, especially after the dissolution of the League. The connections between repeal and foreign policy in the ideology of Leaguers has not received, therefore, very much attention, though the foreign-policy views of Richard Cobden and a few other prominent free traders have been studied. Norman McCord gave limited recognition to pacifist sentiment among free traders in *The Anti-Corn-Law League* (London, 1958), pp. 25-30. Helen Bosanquet suggested in her broad study, *Free Trade and Peace in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1924) that during the period of the League there emerged two distinct schools of thought on the issue of internationalism: those who advocated free trade as a means to interdependence and those who supported protection in the belief that economic security could be found only in economic independence. Bosanquet asserted that by 1842 the advocates of free

so, they fostered the creation and growth of the 'Manchester-School' conscience which, in Semmel's view, influenced naval strategy to such a considerable extent later in the century. In the 1830s and 1840s, however, the free traders in the League were concerned with the broad principles of foreign policy rather than geopolitics or naval strategy; they may have helped to frame the dilemmas which later plagued liberals on issues of military preparedness, defence strategy, and foreign relations.⁵

Richard Cobden, the best-known spokesman of the League, was one of its earliest members to recognize the implications for foreign relations contained in the idea of free trade. Cobden asserted that free trade had the capacity to draw nations and peoples together in mutual interdependence, and before the League in January of 1846, he observed: 'I see in the Free Trade principle that which shall act on the moral world as the principle of gravitation in the universe – drawing men together, thrusting aside the antagonism of race and creed and language, and uniting us in the bonds of universal peace.'⁶

In the view of Cobden and many other members of the League, free trade and peace were principles indissolubly linked, each promoting the other. Leaguers were anxious moreover to formulate arguments that would demonstrate to others the direct connections between peace and repeal of the corn laws. At Cobden's suggestion, the League publicist,

trade were urging the widest possible sources of supply in order to prevent interruption of manufacturing in time of war. Bosanquet argued that Cobden took this argument one step further by suggesting that interdependence would actually *promote* peace, and she added that it was the League that did the most to make this idea part of public consciousness; see pp. 22-56 *passim*. William D. Grampp identifies pacifists as one element from which the 'Manchester School' drew its strength in *Manchester School of Economics* (Stanford, 1960), but his study has a focus much broader than the League itself and concentrates on the period *after* 1846; Grampp devotes most of his attention to Cobden in this regard. See also Donald Read, *Cobden and Bright: A Victorian Political Partnership* (New York, 1968), pp. 32-4; William Harbutt Dawson, *Richard Cobden and Foreign Policy* (London, 1926), pp. 84-5; and John MacCunn, *Six Radical Thinkers* (London, 1907), pp. 91-137 *passim*.

⁵ For Semmel's assessment of the Manchester School's influence on naval strategy in the 1850s and after, see *Liberalism and Naval Strategy*, pp. 68-83. For a discussion of these dilemmas, see *ibid.*, pp. 172-81.

⁶ Richard Cobden, *Speeches on Questions of Public Policy*, 15 January 1846 (London, 1908), i. 187. J.A. Hobson believed that Cobden's *England, Ireland, and America* (London, 1835) represented clear evidence that Cobden had worked out a broad line of internationalist thought by 1835; see *Richard Cobden the International Man* (New York, 1919), pp. 26-36. In *Russia and the Eastern Question* (Edinburgh, 1836), pp. 101-2 Cobden wrote: 'besides dictating the disuse of warlike establishments, free trade (for of that beneficent doctrine we are speaking) arms its votaries by its own pacific nature, in that eternal truth, *the more any nation traffics abroad upon free and honest principles, the less it will be in danger of wars*'. Emphasis in original.

W. Cooke Taylor, in 1842 investigated the histories of various 'commercial states' from Antiquity to the nineteenth century in order to determine what effect the 'spirit of monopoly' had had upon foreign relations. Taylor reported his findings in a letter to Cobden in November of that year: 'I find it an invariable rule that free & equitable trade always was a bond of peace & that the spirit of monopoly – particularly when it assumed the shape of territorial aggrandizement, became the frequent source of wars.'⁷

League organs made clear the position of the organization that free traders were the foremost friends of peace and that strengthening the bonds of trade was the surest way to end armed conflict.⁸ The *Anti-Bread-Tax Circular*, for example, published a song, one stanza of which proclaimed:

Free trade, like religion hath doctrines of peace,
Universal and God's vital air;
And throned o'er doomed evil, he hails its increase,
While his enemies only despair.⁹

And *The League* occasionally printed articles and book reviews stressing the pacific principles of free trade and its adherents.¹⁰

⁷ Taylor to Cobden, 29 Nov. 1842, Cobden Papers [West Sussex Public Record Office]. James Wilson, founder of *The Economist*, was one member of the League who did not share the view of Cobden or Taylor that peace and free trade were indissolubly linked. But substantial differences of opinion did not surface until about 1849 when Cobden began agitation for international arbitration treaties. See James Ashley Moncure, 'James Wilson and the "Economist"' (Ph.D. Diss., Columbia, 1960), pp. 180-217. The League president, J.B. Smith, made peace and free trade a prominent theme in his parliamentary campaign at Blackburn in 1837, and even Dr John Bowring told his fellow Leaguers in 1842 that one of the organization's great accomplishments had been to connect trade and peace in the public mind; see 'To the Electors of the Borough of Blackburn', 19 July 1839, J.B. Smith Papers [Manchester Central Reference Library], and 'Weekly Meetings of the League', *A[nti-] B[read-] T[ax] C[ircular]*, 3 Nov. 1842.

⁸ 'Peace', *A[nti-] C[orn-] L[aw] C[ircular]*, 3 Dec. 1840. See also, 'Why is Employment Scarce?', *ACLC*, 10 Sept. 1840, and 'The Case of Mr M'Leod', *ACLC*, 11 March 1841. See also a pamphlet published by the Plymouth Free Trade Association, a local League organization, by the Rev. W.J. Odgers, *The Tendency of Free Trade to Promote Permanent and Universal Peace* (Plymouth, 1846) *passim*.

⁹ 'Song', *ABTC*, 7 March 1843.

¹⁰ 'Free Traders the Friends of Peace', *The League*, 5 July 1845; 'Free Trade and Peace', *The League*, 7 March 1846; 'Review', *The League*, 16 April 1844. *The League* often emphasized that free trade was an immediate solution to the outstanding difficulties with the United States; see 'Religious Aspect of Free Trade', 19 April 1845, and 'The Western States of the American Union', 17 May 1845. On this same theme see Joseph Barker, *Blessings of Free Trade* (n.p., 1846), p. 3.

The belief of Leaguers that free trade promoted universal peace by fostering interdependence and internationalism contained a number of closely related elements. To the League, trade represented the advantageous exchange of abundance according to the various gifts of Providence. According to their view of the principles of natural law and the classical economic theory which was its embodiment, to the extent that commerce was allowed to proceed freely, the economic interests of nations would increasingly become interdependent. This would act to reduce quarrels and break down the political and cultural barriers that separated peoples. The ultimate result would be to bring together the various peoples of the earth in permanent and universal peace.

Variations on this line of argument appeared in League lectures and newspapers almost from the beginning. The *Anti-Corn-Law Circular* quoted the eighteenth-century French *philosophe* and admirer of things British, Baron de Montesquieu, to explain peace as the natural result of free trade: 'Two nations who traffic with each other, become reciprocally dependent; for if one has an interest in buying, the other has an interest in selling, and thus their union is founded on their mutual necessities'.¹¹

Shortly after the Anti-Corn-Law Bazaar of May 1845 – a major event held at Covent Garden Theatre to raise money for the cause of repeal and publicize the League's activities – one prominent Leaguer, W.A. Gardiner, wrote a lengthy poem to commemorate the bazaar and its object. The third portion of the poem, published in the League's official newspaper, outlined Gardiner's perception of the philosophy of free traders, and emphasized the internationalism of the members of the League:

That France is not for France alone,
Nor England for her islemen brave;
That men are of one flesh and bone,
Though born on different sides the wave.
The League would lecture everyman,
Who drives the loom or tills the sod,
To do whate'er, where'er he can,
To equalize the gifts of God.

'Free Trade,' the right to do the best,
With what would seem each nation's own;

¹¹ 'Peace', *ACLCL*, 3 Dec. 1840. See also 'Sidney Smith's Lectures', *ACLCL*, 11 June 1839; 'Future Prospects', *ACLCL*, 31 Dec. 1839; and 'Commerce', *ACLCL*, 10 Dec. 1839.

And to each nation this the test,
What is by each best made or grown.¹²

A few weeks before the bazaar, W.J. Fox, a well-known League member and lecturer, addressed an important League meeting in London and described the mutual dependence of free trade as a matter of both natural law and Divine Providence, stating that God had created in the world a 'harmonized and mutually dependent system' of various climates, natural resources, and industries, and that God had said: 'All these belong to each other! Let their influence be reciprocal: let one minister to another; be the interest of each the interest of all, and let all minister to each; they are one in wisdom and beneficence, and show forth as resplendently as the starry heavens the glory of benevolent Providence.'¹³ *The League* published substantial extracts from Fox's address, observing that insufficient attention had thus far been paid to its 'great truths' and characterizing free trade as a moral issue which transcended all men, all nations, and all ages.¹⁴

In early 1841, the *Anti-Corn-Law Circular* advanced the argument that free trade would transform rival nations into trading partners, which would then be as congenial as neighbouring English counties. The League organ stated that free trade 'would ever put an end to wars. If nations traded with each other, like provinces of one empire, England would be as little likely to go to war with France or America, as Yorkshire is to go to war with Lancashire'.¹⁵

¹² William Atkins Gardiner, *A Rhythmical Notice of the Anti-Corn-Law League Bazaar held at the Covent Garden Theatre, May, 1845* (Manchester, 1845), pp. 1-8.

¹³ 'Religious Aspect of Free Trade', *The League*, 19 May 1845. See 'Commerce', *ACLC*, 10 Dec. 1839; quoting from *Knickerbocker* the article in the League organ concludes: 'But the mere act of visiting different countries will not suffice to gain possession of the things that are desired. These are generally either absolutely provided, or else prepared for use by the people of the country to which they are peculiar; and something is yet to be done in order to effect their transfer from the hands of these people to the hands of the strangers who come in search of them. Speaking in general terms, we may say that there are but two modes of effecting such transfers. One is, taking by force; the other, gaining them by way of exchange for some equivalent which is desirable to the original owners. The first mode takes the name of robbery, or of war, according to circumstances; the latter is simply commerce.'

¹⁴ *Ibid.* See also 'Future Prospects', *ACLC*, 31 Dec. 1839.

¹⁵ 'The Case of Mr M'Leod', *ACLC*, 11 March 1841. Cobden took a similar position; see *ABTC*, 9 May 1843. The secretary of the Edinburgh Anti-Corn-Law Association, George Sinclair, expressed the view that under a system of free trade, war would not merely be immoral and unchristian, it would be completely ruinous to all parties concerned and would require that prompt measures be taken to secure an honourable and immediate peace in the event of the outbreak of hostilities; see 'Nature and the Effects of the Corn Laws', *ACLC*, 7 Jan. 1840. *The*

The position taken by the League newspapers was essentially the same as that which Cobden had been advocating for nearly a decade, when he argued that commercial ties were the strongest ligatures that could bind nations together and that over time trading relationships would render a rupture between two governments 'more impossible'.¹⁶ Cobden elaborated upon his view in a London speech in the autumn of 1843 when he defined free trade for the League and outlined what he then saw as its powerfully pacific implications:

Free Trade! What is it? Why, breaking down the barriers that separate nations; those barriers, behind which nestle the feelings of pride, revenge, hatred and jealousy, which every now and then burst their bounds and deluge whole countries with blood; those feelings which nourish poison of war and conquest, which assert that without conquest we can have no trade, which foster that lust for conquest and dominion which sends forth your warrior chiefs to scatter devastation through other lands, and then calls them back that they may be enthroned securely in your passions, but only to harass and oppress you at home.¹⁷

In the minds of Cobden and the League, free trade would knit together the interests of the nations and of their peoples. The *Bazaar Gazette* of the Anti-Corn-Law League proclaimed in verse the organization's view that free trade was the primary instrument of international peace:

Free Trade will be the link to bind
Each nation with the other;
'Twill harmonize the rights of man
With every fellow brother.¹⁸

League confidently informed its readers that 'Free Trade will render war impossible, and we have therefore a right to ask the advocates of peace to join us in destroying the system of monopoly which has been the most fertile source of the jealousies, strifes, and sanguinary struggles which have led Christian nations to violate the principles of Christianity', in 'Review', *The League*, 16 April 1844. For a discussion of the League's fear that failure to abolish the corn laws was causing deterioration of English foreign relations, see 'Six Hostile Tariffs within Ten Months! True Policy of England', *ABTC*, 20 Oct. 1842.

¹⁶ Cobden, *England, Ireland, and America*, p. 26. Emphasis in original. See also Dawson, *Cobden Foreign Policy*, pp. 131-3.

¹⁷ Richard Cobden, *Speeches*, 28 Sept. 1843, p. 40. In 1838 Cobden wrote from Salzburg to a friend that the trade relationship being established by the *Zollverein* were having the effect of unifying Germany even if under Prussian leadership; see Cobden to William Neild, 30 Sept. 1838, John Rylands University Library MSS 868/3; Fritz Trautz, 'Richard Cobden's Associations with Germany', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, xxxiv (1952), 459-68; and John Morley, *Life of Richard Cobden* (London, 1879), pp. 129-31.

¹⁸ NACLL, *Bazaar Gazette* (Manchester, 1845). See also, 'Anti-Corn-Law Lecture',

A second element in the Leaguers' ideology of peace and free trade was the belief that complete liberty of commerce would have the effect of removing the causes of war by promoting material progress. Members believed that trade itself was the great engine of progress and that material improvements, which naturally proceeded from increased trade, would transform the world. In a speech before the League in January 1843, the Rev. J.W. Massie proclaimed his belief in the importance of increased trade to what he termed the regeneration of the race of man.¹⁹ Leaguers identified material and moral improvement as important sources of national greatness and condemned war as the great stumbling block to progress, interrupting commerce, diverting capital to the production of armaments, and bringing universal harm, turmoil, and local destruction.²⁰

A third element in the ideology of the Leaguers concerning peace was the belief that commerce promoted not only material progress but also the advancement of civilization and the spread of Christianity. Christianity and peace they naturally saw as synonymous. Dr John Bowring, in a speech given to the League at the Drury Lane Theatre in 1843, spoke of the 'mission' of free traders as Christians and British subjects, asserting that Britons in particular had a duty from Providence 'to discharge this great truth to the world, that commerce should be free, (Cheers.) that men were made to love and to serve one another, (Cheers.) to communicate blessings and benefits each to another, and to live in good neighbourhood with each other as friends'.²¹

ACLC, 21 May 1840; Herman Ausubel, *John Bright: Victorian Reformer* (New York, 1966), pp. 15-18; and William Cunningham, *Rise and Decline of the Free Trade Movement* (Cambridge, UK, 1905), pp. 178-89.

¹⁹ 'Weekly Meetings of the League', *ABTC*, 17 Jan. 1843. Massie emphasized trade with the United States in this regard. He linked the causes of morality, material improvement, and popular government and received an enthusiastic vote of thanks from what the League organ described as the second largest meeting of the ACLL held up to that time. Cobden, in an early issue of the League newspaper, praised the improvements which Great Britain's northern towns and cities had experienced and attributed this welcome progress to the growth of foreign commerce; see *ABTC*, 9 May 1843, and 'Operatives', *ACLC*, 28 May 1839. See also, 'Foreign Competition', *ABTC*, 21 April 1841; 'Commerce', *ACLC*, 10 Dec. 1839, reprinted from *Knickerbocker*; 'Seventh Letter from a Member of the Anti-Corn-Law League on the Continent', *ACLC*, 22 Oct. 1840; and untitled, *ABTC*, 9 May 1843 for a report of a speech by Cobden to the seventh Drury Lane Meeting of the ACLL.

²⁰ Cobden, *Russia*, pp. 30-2, 125; Cobden, *England, Ireland, and America*, pp. 10-11; Hobson, *Cobden International Man*, pp. 20-1; and Dawson, *Cobden Foreign Policy*, pp. 103-27 *passim*.

²¹ 'Weekly Meeting of the Anti-Corn-Law League', *ATBC*, 18 April 1843. Bowring's lengthy speech emphasized the peculiar burden and ability of the Anglo-Saxon race to spread the gospel of free trade to other peoples and nations.

As forceful as Dr Bowring's oration may have been to his listeners, it did not go as far as the *Anti-Corn-Law Circular* had done in the fall of 1839, when it explicitly equated free trade with the spread of Christianity, and identified British piety and enterprise as the primary vehicles for the advancement of both :

God never sanctioned artificial laws to restrict the intercourse of nations, or to prevent the communication of the riches of each region to every other. He framed commerce to bring the ends of the earth together; and created trade, that British piety, as well as British enterprise, should carry our bibles to every shore with our goods, and make Christianity reach wherever we sent our cottons and our calicoes. And if ignorant selfishness had not blinded us, we might easily have seen that God knows far better how to multiply our comforts than we can do for ourselves; and that He made it a universal social law, that by self-sacrifice and catholicity of affection we best consult our own interest, and increase by a thousand-fold our riches and our happiness.²²

Four years later, the *Anti-Bread-Tax Circular* put forward the same view, when it reported on a lecture delivered in Gainsboro by the Rev. Roaff of Wigan, in which he argued that the corn laws inhibited the spread of the gospel to other nations and were themselves contrary to the very tenets of Christianity.²³

One Methodist minister who advocated free trade issued a pamphlet in which he argued that unrestricted commerce would aid Christianity in its final triumph, the conversion of the world, and that the furtherance of the former did much to advance the latter. The Rev. William J. Shrewsbury enumerated 'six propositions' directly connecting free trade and Christianity:

- First: Free Trade is implied in the primeval benediction God pronounced on Man;
- Secondly: Free Trade is sanctioned in Sundry other Scriptures of the Old Testament;
- Thirdly: Free Trade is favoured by God's providential arrangements in the Government of the World;
- Fourthly: Free Trade accords with the genius of Christianity;
- Fifthly: Free Trade is promoted by Christian Missions; and

²² Untitled, *ACLC*, 29 Oct. 1839. See also Sidney Smith's first lecture in the *ACLC*, 11 June 1839.

²³ 'Gainsboro', *ABTC*, 29 Aug. 1843. The report was taken from the *Stamford Mercury*. See also 'Review', *The League*, 16 April 1844.

Sixthly: – Free Trade will be exemplified when Christianity gains the final triumphs in the conversion of the world.²⁴

Several prominent League members perceived direct connections between their own Christianity and free trade, which often led them to advocate a more conciliatory foreign policy than had previously been the case. Cobden himself argued that Christianity was a necessity for civilization and progress, and that commerce enhanced the spread of it.²⁵ John Bright was a member of the Peace Society, ‘from conscientious motives’, and his publicly stated belief in the essentially Christian character of pacific principles was reported in the League newspaper.²⁶ Joseph Sturge expressed early and outspoken Christian opposition to the Opium War in China; in early 1840 he went so far as to issue an address to the nation in which he denounced British policy as ‘wholesale carnage’ and called upon his countrymen to join him in opposing the conflict. The leader of the London Peace Society and Sturge’s biographer, Henry Richard, believed that Sturge’s ideals of peace were based upon ‘an instinct of his Christian consciousness to be an essential and irreconcilable antagonism in principle, spirit, and tendency, between a religion of charity and brotherly love and the whole system of malignity and violence which war inevitably develops’.²⁷ For the League’s part, the free-trade movement had a perfect right to claim the assistance and active co-operation of those who desired to promote permanent and universal peace. Leaguers consciously attempted to attract the support of Quakers, members of the Peace Society, and other pacifists on numerous occasions.²⁸

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²⁴ [William J. Shrewsbury,] *Christian Thoughts on Free Trade* (Bacup, 1843), pp. 40–55.

²⁵ Cobden, *England, Ireland, and America*, p. 8. Some people took exception to free-trade principles because they found them inconsistent with Christian charity, but Cobden believed that freedom to buy in the cheapest market and to sell in the dearest meant that one took one’s own abundance and shared it with others by trading. See A.J. Penty, *Protection and the Social Problem* (London, 1926), pp. 58–9.

²⁶ ‘Public Meeting in Sunderland’, *ABTC*, 18 July 1843. Cobden and Bright were puzzled at the time of the Crimean War with what they felt was lack of support from Christians for their position. See Hobson, *Cobden International Man*, pp. 223–34. See also Peter Brock, *Pacifism in Europe to 1914* (Princeton, 1972), pp. 35–56; and Stephen Frick, ‘Joseph Sturge, Henry Richard, and the “Herald of Peace”’: Pacifist Response to the Crimean War’ (Ph.D. Diss., Cornell, 1971), pp. 95–117.

²⁷ Henry Richard, *Memoirs of Joseph Sturge* (London, 1864), pp. 286–9 and 414–15. See also Stephen Hobhouse, *Joseph Sturge: His Life and Work* (London, 1919), pp. 114–30 and Brock, *Pacifism*, pp. 350–6.

²⁸ ‘To Readers and Correspondents’, *ACLC*, 25 Feb. 1841.

The second feature of the Anti-Corn-Law Leaguers' perception of the connection between foreign relations and free trade was the aristocratic domination of both diplomacy and the military, and the extent to which they operated in the interest of the landowning class. Leaguers tended to associate war directly with a protectionist aristocracy, seeing the army and navy as too much a source of place for the younger sons of the nobility, a drain on capital, and a distraction from domestic reform.²⁹

Cobden argued that an important 'source of government patronage & of patrician power' would be reduced if the fondness of aristocratic government for military intervention abroad could somehow be curtailed.³⁰ He asserted that aristocratic diplomats were too willing to defend Britannia's 'honour' to the exclusion of her *real* commercial interests. Views such as these were often reflected in the League's newspaper;³¹ the *Anti-Corn-Law Circular* even warned readers of an 'Unholy Alliance' between bread-taxers and the aristocratic 'war party' in a brief article in late 1840.³²

W.J. Fox, an adamant opponent of 'aristocratic misrule', summed up the view of many in the League who were opposed to the privileges of the aristocracy and their association with the military: 'War is the aristocratical trade; war is the aristocratical passion; war is the aristocratical convenience for bringing forward the junior members of titled

²⁹ W. J. Fox, 'English Wars', pp. 113-29 in *Lectures Addressed Mainly to the Working Classes* (London, 1845-9), pp. 113-29; G.M. Trevelyan, *The Life of John Bright* (London, 1913), p. 273; Cobden to Sturge, 16 Oct. 1852 [Cobden Papers, British Library], Add. MSS 43653. In this letter Cobden reflected on the depictions of the militia which had been utilized by the ACLL and argued that the British aristocracy continued to oppose general disarmament because the younger sons of the nobility benefited from place and position in the military establishment. See also, same to same, 6 Sept. 1848, Add. MSS 43655; and same to same, 14 Sept. 1852, Add. MSS 43653.

³⁰ Cobden to Tait, 4 June 1836, Add. MSS 43665. For discussion of Cobden's view that agitation was the key to reducing military adventurism and aristocratic misrule, as well as the threat which Cobden believed that these posed for democracy, see Edward Hughes, 'The Development of Cobden's Economic Doctrines and His Methods of Propaganda: Some Unpublished Evidence', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, xxii (1938), 407-8.

³¹ Same to same, 14 June 1836, Add. MSS 43665. See also Cobden to Place, 11 May 1838 [Francis Place Papers], Add. MSS 37949; Cobden, *England, Ireland, and America*, pp. 3, 35-56; 'National Honour', *The League*, 10 Aug. 1844. The latter reports on the speech of Thomas Milner Gibson on the subject of the self-interest of the aristocracy in foreign intervention and war at a League meeting on 7 Aug. 1844. See also Dawson, *Cobden Foreign Policy*, pp. 7-8, 249-57.

³² 'Unholy Alliance of the War Party and the Bread-Taxers', *ACLCL*, 22 Oct. 1840. See also Cobden to Sturge, 14 Sept. 1852; and same to same, 16 Oct. 1852, Add. MSS 43653.

families, instead of providing for them out of the family property'.³³ Speaking before a League meeting at the Drury Lane Theatre in April 1843, Fox accused the aristocracy of possessing the army outright and of giving the navy to its children, and he asserted that the past military glories of Great Britain had not been won for the benefit of its people but for its aristocracy.³⁴

In a letter to Cobden, one League Council member, Henry Ashworth, expressed his conviction that free trade would usher in a new era of internationalism and that monarchs had better take notice of such popular movements. Ashworth praised Cobden for 'laying down the fulcrum' (free trade) and 'seizing the lever' (repeal of the corn laws) by which the aristocratic system of exclusion and warfare would be overcome.³⁵ The views of Fox, Ashworth, and others were expressed in the League's newspaper in 1842 when, in a style that is almost certainly Cobden's, the *Anti-Bread-Tax Circular* proclaimed that peace was more likely to be obtained as a result of commerce between peoples than by diplomacy between governments. In a passage, which bears quoting at length, it stated:

The problem of continued commercial prosperity, of universal peace and international harmony is not to be solved by the *abracadabra* of diplomatic finesse, or the jargon of protocols and commercial treaties. To commerce, the fostering care of statesmen and legislators is a withering blight: the protection of national industry means, giving it the cramp. Freedom, perfect and entire, freedom is all that is wanted. Let but the governments of the earth, if they must do anything in the shape of treaty, enter into a common agreement to withdraw all protection to commerce – leave their people alone, and they will have done more to bring about the millennium than the preaching of ten thousand bishops could effect. It is not mountains, and seas, and rivers, that separate and divide the human race into hostile sections! No, it is commercial codes – treaties of peace and reciprocity; laws for the protection of trade. These have always contained within them the seeds of war and misery; remove the barriers which these have raised, and the nations of the earth, like separate bodies, having chemical affinity for each other, would speedily rush together, and, in a common union of interest, would forget their hatreds and animosities.³⁶

³³ W.J. Fox, 'English Wars: Their Causes, Cost, and Consequences', cited in Richard Garnett and Edward Garnett, *Life of W.J. Fox: Public Teacher, and Social Reformer 1786-1864* (London, 1910), pp. 271-2. See also Trevelyan, *Bright*, p. 273.

³⁴ 'Weekly Meeting of the Anti-Corn-Law League', *ABTC*, 4 April 1843.

³⁵ Ashworth to Cobden, 22 July 1846, Add. MSS 43653.

³⁶ 'Review', *ABTC*, 24 March 1842. The pamphlet being considered was Thomas Gisborne, Jr.'s *A Second Letter to the Council of the Anti-Corn-Law League* (Manchester, 1842).

The League, wary of diplomacy in general, asserted that the meddling of governments could only bring mischief. In the *Anti-Bread-Tax Circular* Cobden warned of the chicanery of diplomats,³⁷ and complained that more than a century of aristocratic misgovernment had ‘impregnated all the classes with the haughty and arrogant spirit of their rulers’, and given to the country a ‘warlike disposition’, which searched ‘in vain for cases of insult to *our flag*’.³⁸ Leaguers tended to agree with Cobden that commerce *was* the national interest and that over and over again it had been proved that violence and force could not prevail ultimately over natural market forces.³⁹ In a letter to the London Radical and League member, Francis Place, Cobden expressed his view that interventionist foreign policy was designed to maintain aristocratic control of the military: ‘Nothing can be more mischievous, or better calculated for upholding the aristocratic army & navy, and otherwise obstructing the growth of democratic governments, than this insane advocacy of national interference.’⁴⁰

In similar terms, *The League* advised its readers to beware of appeals to national honour made by the landed classes. Reporting on a speech by Thomas Milner Gibson, the League newspaper warned: ‘It is necessary to watch these people’ because they had an interest in war, and because, in the League’s view, aristocratic governments had much to gain from diverting the national attention from domestic improvement towards foreign affairs.⁴¹ Commending Gibson’s observations, *The*

³⁷ *Ibid.* Cobden’s account of a meeting with the quintessential aristocratic diplomatist of the age, Metternich, in the summer of 1847 reveals much about the view Leaguers such as Cobden had taken of the landowning architects of foreign policy. Cobden described Metternich as giving ‘the impression of high polish rather than native force of character, & his conversation is more subtle than profound ... talks incessantly, perhaps in order to choose his topics’. Finally, Cobden reflected that Metternich was content with superficial remedies never attempting to probe beneath the surface to discover the source of the evils which affect the social system. Diary entry, Vienna, 10 July 1847 in Diary ‘D’, Add. MSS 43674.

³⁸ Cobden, *Russia*, pp. 62-3. See also Cobden to Sturge, 3 Jan. 1848, Add. MSS 43656.

³⁹ Cobden, *England, Ireland, and America*, pp. 3, 35-6.

⁴⁰ Cobden to Place, 11 May 1838, Add. MSS 37949. See also Cobden to Ashworth, 12 April 1842, Add. MSS 43653. Cobden regarded the sons of the aristocracy as central to both the question of repeal of the corn laws and expenditure on the military: ‘This is the difference between the two cases – the Corn-law question affecting the interests of the eldest son, but the expenditure for the army & navy affects the younger sons, who are the more numerous body in the House [of Commons] – In fact I am in danger of being bullied to death by the red coats & blue jackets, & their partizans of the press unless I am well supported by the public out of doors.’ Cobden to Sturge, 6 Sept. 1848, Add. MSS 43656.

⁴¹ ‘National Honour’, *The League*, 10 Aug. 1844. See also, A.J.P. Taylor, *The Troublemakers: Dissent over Foreign Policy 1792-1939* (Bloomington, 1958), pp. 52-3. The idea that war inhibited progress, impinged upon freedom, and

League reported: 'The horrors of such a state must be mitigated to the imagination of those who associate war with high rents, large patronage, and, for some members of their families, with those immense prizes of fortune and title which await successful commanders'.⁴²

The League further warned that a new generation of aristocrats had emerged since 1815, a generation without any notion of the evils and horrors of war, and advised all who favoured progressive reforms and improvements or who had a regard for social well-being to 'prepare to restrain the mad selfishness that would interrupt the peaceful and honourable occupations of commerce, sever entirely the ties, already damaged, of nations whose mutual friendship is the means of mutual prosperity, and throw back the civilization of Europe, perhaps for centuries. In the name of humanity and religion, we repeat, be watchful.'⁴³

* * *

Members of the Anti-Corn-Law League not only expressed misgivings about the control of British diplomacy by the aristocracy, but they also challenged the time-honoured doctrine of balance of power, upon which much British diplomacy had been based. Leaguers rejected altogether the notion that one state could justify intervention in the affairs of another, a position soon to be known as 'Cobdenism' in foreign policy and the third theme in the Anti-Corn-Law League's ideology with regard to foreign relations. To members of the Anti-Corn-Law League, war had too often arisen out of rivalries among the ruling aristocratic houses of Europe. Many Leaguers believed that Great Britain should devote its attention wholly to trade and commerce and give up the aristocratic game of international politics. To them, non-intervention was the logical consequence of the doctrine of free trade, and balance of power was a

diverted attention away from necessary domestic reform was a prominent theme in the speeches and writings of the Leaguers. See Cobden, *England, Ireland, and America*, pp. 10-11; Cobden to Tait, 4 June 1836, Add. MSS 43665; and 'To the Editor of the *Manchester Advertiser*', and 'Objects of the Whigs to Divert Popular Attention to War', in T.P. Thompson, *Exercises, Political and Other* (London, 1842), pp. 184-8. J.B. Smith argued the same thing during the Crimean War; see 'Stockport Reform Association', clipping from *Manchester Examiner*, 25 July 1856 in J.B. Smith Papers.

⁴² *Ibid.* See also Fox, 'English Wars', pp. 113-29 in *Lectures*; 'Evils of War', *The League*, 7 Sept. 1844, reprinted from *Rochdale Spectator*. This article emphasized how monarchs and statesmen gain renown in war and how governments gain patronage, place, and salaries to disperse to the aristocracy in time of war.

⁴³ *Ibid.* See also, 'What is the Use of Parliament? - Have We a Limited Government? - Must We Go to War When the Aristocracy Chuses [*sic*]?' in Thompson, *Exercises*, pp. 258-60. This article appeared originally as a letter, 'To the Editor of the *Bolton Free Press*', 12 Nov. 1840.

false doctrine, a product of senile Whiggery. Both doctrines they rejected as the counterproductive and harmful consequence of 'aristocratic rule'.

'Cobdenism' is an apt term for the League's position on the relationship between foreign policy and free trade, because Cobden was without question the member who most utterly rejected the philosophy of balance of power and military intervention abroad.⁴⁴ In a letter to John Bright, written just after the repeal of the corn laws, Cobden himself reflected that he had gone into public life in order to oppose interventionism:

I began my political life by writing against this system of foreign interference, and every year's experience confirms me in my early impression that it lies at the bottom of much of our misgovernment at Home ... I have always had an instinctive monomania against this system of foreign interference, protocolling, diplomatizing, etc., and I should be glad if you and other Free Trade friends; who have beaten the daily broadsheets into common sense upon another question [repeal of the corn laws], would oppose yourselves to the Palmerstonian system [of intervention], and try to prevent the Foreign Office from undoing the good which the Board of Trade had done to the people.⁴⁵

Cobden argued that whenever balance of power had been invoked to 'prevent derangement of what we now choose to pronounce the just equipoise of the power of Europe', it had failed, and he added 'events have proclaimed, but in vain, how futile must be our attempts to usurp the sceptre of the fates'.⁴⁶ Cobden therefore concluded that strict neutrality or non-intervention was the only reasonable alternative to being dragged into war or getting bogged down in the internal affairs of other states, though he admitted that British public opinion would have to undergo considerable change before such a policy would be widely accepted.⁴⁷

In *Russia and the Eastern Question*, Cobden had asserted that British wars traditionally had been justified by diplomatists under the two stock pretenses of balance of power and protection of commerce. Such justifications, he asserted, were chimerical, adding that such phrases were employed because they appealed to public sentiment by implying a

⁴⁴ See, for example, Morley, *Cobden passim*; Hobson, *Cobden International Man*, esp. pp. 26-34; Dawson, *Cobden Foreign Policy*, pp. 21-4 and *passim*; and Taylor, *Troublemakers*, pp. 50-3.

⁴⁵ Cobden to Bright, Oct. 1846, cited in Dawson, *Cobden Foreign Policy*, p. 97. See also Hughes, 'Cobden Economic Doctrines', pp. 405-7.

⁴⁶ Cobden, *England, Ireland, and America*, pp. 1-3.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-11.

vague sort of equity, while, in fact, disguising attempts by aristocrats to maintain their bloated military institutions.⁴⁸ Cobden based his rejection of the doctrine of balance of power upon three arguments: first, balance of power had never been more than vaguely defined and continued to have no single clearly recognized definition; second, there was no evidence that a balance of international power had ever existed in Europe; and third, no state ever could succeed in dictating laws to or controlling the affairs of all its neighbours. Cobden rejected, therefore, the doctrine of balance of power as 'a mere chimera, a creation of the politician's brain; a phantasm, without definite form or tangible existence, a mere conjunction of syllables, forming words which convey sound without meaning. Yet these words have been echoed by the greatest orators and statesmen of England.'⁴⁹

Cobden further regarded balance of power as 'a pretense for maintaining enormous standing armaments, by land and sea, at a cost of many hundreds of millions of treasure', condemning the doctrine as 'a fallacy, a mistake, an imposture – it is an undescribed, indescribable, incomprehensible nothing; mere words, conveying to the mind not ideas, but like those equally barren syllables which our ancestors put together for the purpose of puzzling themselves about words, in the shape of Prester John, or the *philosopher's stone*'.⁵⁰

Cobden's alternative to the doctrine of balance of power was a policy of non-intervention or strict neutrality in foreign affairs. In his earliest and seminal pamphlet, *England, Ireland and America*, he advocated non-intervention on three grounds: first, every nation has an inherent right to manage its own affairs; second, intervention with military force is a futile method of advancing human progress or prosperity and is often an impediment to these goals; and third, the failed doctrine of balance of power not only could not prevent wars but sometimes even promoted them.⁵¹ To Cobdenites, adoption of a foreign policy based upon non-intervention would let other nations involve themselves in one another's quarrels while Great Britain enhanced its trade and invested the capital, which would otherwise have brought armaments, in industrial improvements, which would increase British productivity and well-being.⁵²

⁴⁸ Cobden, *Russia*, pp. 76-8.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 77-8. Emphasis in original. For Cobden's assessment of how balance of power had been misused by English diplomats and politicians, see pp. 75-6. See also 'National Honour', *The League*, 10 Aug. 1844.

⁵¹ Cobden, *England, Ireland, and America*, pp. 1-36 *passim*.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 28-36. In a letter to his publisher, William Tait, Cobden expressed his belief that non-intervention was the theme of the pamphlet and that the principle

While a great many members of the Anti-Corn-Law League regarded the cause of international peace as indissolubly linked to their own cause of free trade, and though a number of prominent Leaguers expressed an interest in the general conduct and direction of British foreign policy, specific foreign-policy issues generally did not receive much public discussion by the League as a whole. Beyond the single official goal of 'total and immediate repeal', such discussion seemed to threaten unity, fund-raising, and effectiveness, and was most often conducted in broad philosophical terms. Two issues, however, the League found impossible to avoid: the Chinese or Opium War and relations with the United States.

The war against China, fought in the interest of trade in general and of the opium traffic in particular, attracted the criticism of the League, but mostly after the treaty of Nanking was negotiated in 1842. At that time the *Anti-Bread-Tax Circular* commented:

We believe this country has rarely been engaged in a contest more opposed to the feelings of the British people, and less justifiable on any ground of right or sound policy. We hail the return of peace with feelings of unfeigned satisfaction, convinced that the prosecution of the unholy act of aggression can only tend to degrade the British name, and spread ruin and desolation amongst the helpless population against whom our vengeance has been directed.⁵³

It was the League's position that the widespread expectation that the Opium War would help animate Great Britain's relatively dormant trade was likely to prove disappointing for the foreseeable future. J.W. Massie told one League meeting that the war with China would have little effect on trade, and that the trade with China was likely to remain paltry for a long time.⁵⁴ Sturge denounced the conflict altogether, con-

of non-intervention had significance which went well beyond foreign policy: 'There is more in this principle than most people are aware & more than I think it policy to avow – *Non-intervention* will swamp the aristocracy far more certainly than all the direct measures of [Daniel] O'Connell. It will take the life of the system because it "takes the means whereby it lives" as Shylock has it. Pin down the attention of the Country to its own domestic concerns & all reforms will follow. Take away the military and naval list from the middling classes by showing its losses & you will destroy the source of government patronage & of patrician power.' Cobden to Tait, 4 June 1836, Add. MSS 43665. Emphasis in original. See also, same to same, 26 May 1836, Add. MSS 43665; and 'National Honour', *The League*, 10 Aug. 1844.

⁵³ 'Extension of Foreign Trade', *ABTC*, 1 Dec. 1842; see also, 'The Discomforture of the Monopolist', *ABTC*, 10 Jan. 1843.

⁵⁴ 'Weekly Meetings of the League', *ABTC*, 1 Dec. 1842; 'Extension of Foreign Trade', *ABTC*, 17 Jan. 1843.

demning the opium trade as no better than the traffic in slaves, and calling the peace treaty a deep source of British sorrow and shame.⁵⁵

The League took much greater interest in trade and relations with the United States than with Asia. In some respects Leaguers looked upon Anglo-US relations as a potential model of what British foreign and commercial policy could accomplish if it were conducted according to free-trade principles. Cobden had argued in the 1830s that the United States and Great Britain were already bound up together in 'peaceful fetters' by virtue of their mutual commercial interests, and observed that the likelihood of war between them diminished with every succeeding year.⁵⁶ But the Oregon boundary dispute gave the Leaguers pause. Fearful that armed conflict might result if changes were not made in commercial policy, the League expressed the view that *only* the adoption of free trade could anticipate the hideous disaster of a war between the 'great nations' of the 'Anglo-Saxon race', and with great satisfaction quoted the sentiments recently expressed by an American, General M'Duffie, who was reported to have said: 'A system of free-trade, adopted by all nations would bind them together by bonds of common interest and mutual goodwill, which the ambition of rulers could never tear asunder: every nation would rejoice in the prosperity of all nations, as being essential to its own.'⁵⁷

A number of Leaguers were interested in relations with the United States for another reason: they believed that protection promoted the interests of those US states that permitted slavery. Many Leaguers had been opponents of slavery in British colonies before the formation of the Anti-Corn-Law League. George Thompson, a League lecturer, had been a zealous abolitionist in Liverpool, and the MP for Manchester, Mark Philips, made opposition to slavery a part of his platform from the first Manchester parliamentary election.⁵⁸ Sturge, also active in the anti-slavery movement on both sides of the Atlantic, visited the United States on a mission to oppose slavery.⁵⁹ The *Anti-Corn-Law Circular*

⁵⁵ Richard, *Sturge*, pp. 286-90.

⁵⁶ Cobden, *England, Ireland, and America*, p. 26.

⁵⁷ 'The Western States of the American Union', *The League*, 17 May 1845. All capitals in original. The concern of the League in this article was the perception of 'deep-seated feelings of hostility to Great Britain, festering at the heart and centre of the American union', and what was viewed as the growing sentiment for war which the League blamed on the system of monopoly which governed English commerce and policy. The Oregon boundary dispute was not mentioned in this article, but it had been the subject of an earlier article which reported Fox's views, 'Religious Aspects of Free Trade', *The League*, 19 April 1845.

⁵⁸ Archibald Prentice, *History [of the] A[nti-]C[orn-]L[aw] L[eague]* (2 vols., London, 1853), i. 7-8.

⁵⁹ 'Mr Sturge in America – White and Black Slaves', *ABTC*, 29 July 1841.

condemned the corn laws as 'doom[ing] all the free states of America to a vile dependence upon the south, by giving exclusive possession of our market to slave-grown articles, such as cotton, tobacco, and rice, and discouraging the growth of grain, and other products of free labour.'⁶⁰

One other notable aspect of public opinion on foreign relations is the extent to which nineteenth-century British pacifism aligned itself with the free-trade movement during the era of the Anti-Corn-Law League. Many of the most prominent spokesmen for the League, including Ashworth, Bowring, Cobden, Fox, Massie, J.B. Smith, and Sturge, were among those who took considerable interest in peace itself as a logical corollary to the doctrine of free trade.⁶¹ In his contemporary history of the Anti-Corn-Law League, Archibald Prentice, a member of the organization, proclaimed peace as one of the defining characteristics of the new philosophy of free trade, which he believed had begun to emerge in Manchester during the parliamentary elections of 1832.⁶² In the spring of 1839, Sidney Smith, an early lecturer for the League and

⁶⁰ 'Unholy Alliance between the Slaveholders of America and the British Bread-Taxers', *ACLCL*, 25 Feb. 1841; untitled, *ABTC*, 4 Nov. 1841. The League earlier had taken a similar position in 'Slavery and the Corn Law', *ACLCL*, 30 July 1840. Cobden claimed authorship of this article; see Cobden to Sturge, 23 March 1840 [Sturge Papers], Add. MSS 50131. See also, 'Zeal Unguided by Wisdom: The Sugar Monopoly and the Anti-Slavery Society', *The League*, 4 Jan. 1845; and 'The Anti-Slavery Society and the Sugar Question', *The League*, 1 June 1844. Cobden and others had a good deal to say about the Eastern Question before the organization of the League, and several well-known League figures were prominent in the public debates on the conflict in Burma, the Don Pacifico episode in Greece, the French war-panic of 1853, and the Crimean War against Russia, but this was after the dissolution of the Anti-Corn-Law League.

⁶¹ In his discussion of nineteenth-century pacifism Stephen Frick focuses on Peace Congresses in the late 1840s and early 1850s, emphasizing the role of several prominent members of the ACLL in connection with the pacifist daily newspaper, *The Morning Star*, but Frick's discussion is limited to the period after dissolution of the League, see 'Pacifist', pp. 5-44. Christina Phelps (afterwards Grant), in *The Anglo-American Peace Movement in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1930), outlines the 'practical' pacifism of Cobdenites and distinguishes it from that of Quakers. Phelps enumerates the 'allies' of the peace movement and includes manufacturers, businessmen, Nonconformist ministers, Quakers, philanthropists, philosophers, professors, political radicals, free traders, and economic liberals. However, Phelps does not suggest any direct association with the ACLL, and her categories are so broad that a great many under the headings which she identifies could be classed as non-pacifists just as well. Phelps's study is useful in making the point that pacifists drew support from a number of groups, and she indicates that Cobden urged the Peace Society to follow the methods and propaganda of the League and that they did establish a newspaper along lines of the *ACLCL*. See Brock, *Pacifism*, and William Grampp, *Manchester School*; the former discusses the pacifist traditions in separate chapters, and the latter identifies pacifists as one of five groups from which the Manchester School drew its membership and strength.

⁶² Prentice, *History ACLCL*, i. 1-2.

later its secretary, called upon pacifists and other reformers to support freedom of trade as the means to end misery, vice, and crime.⁶³ The League's chairman, George Wilson, became prominent in the peace movement soon after the success of the Anti-Corn-Law League, and continued to regard 'the Free Trade party, whose head-quarters are in Manchester' as the rightful leader of the continuing free-trade struggle against armaments in the late 1840s.⁶⁴

No less than these individual members did the League itself recognize peace as an integral part of the ideology of unrestricted commerce. The *Anti-Corn-Law Circular* frequently claimed peace to be a direct corollary of free trade.⁶⁵ League newspapers also advocated free trade as a specific remedy to the tensions between Great Britain and her ancient foe, France, and between Great Britain and her newest rival, the United States.⁶⁶ In 1844 *The League* twice co-operated with the London Peace Society by publishing the society's petition on behalf of uninterrupted general peace and its memorial to the British government concerning foreign affairs. Moreover, on several occasions the *Anti-Bread-Tax Circular* printed notices for local peace societies.⁶⁷

In the first half of the nineteenth century, there were two main traditions of pacifism in the United Kingdom. The first and best known was the Quaker tradition of personal opposition to all war; the second had a much shorter history, associated primarily with the London Peace Society. The Peace Society had as one of its objects the widest possible dissemination of Christian pacifist sentiment, but by the 1840s it also sought to implement some fairly clearly defined political objectives which it believed would promote peace.⁶⁸ Anti-Corn-Law Leaguers were at least partly interested in both traditions; some of the League's

⁶³ Untitled, *ACLC*, 9 July 1839. This article reports on the second lecture of Sidney Smith.

⁶⁴ Cobden to Wilson, 17 Jan. 1848, G. Wilson Papers [Manchester Central Reference Library]. See also Frick, 'Pacifist', pp. 95-117.

⁶⁵ 'Future Prospects', *ACLC*, 31 Dec. 1839; untitled, *ACLC*, 2 April 1840; 'Why is Employment So Scarce?', *ACLC*, 10 Dec. 1839; and 'Commerce', *ACLC*, 10 Dec. 1839, repr. from *Knickerbocker*. See also the Rev. W.R. Odgers's *Free Trade Peace*, pp. 16-20.

⁶⁶ 'The Bank of England and the Harvest', *ACLC*, 26 Nov. 1839; 'The Case of Mr M'Leod', *ACLC*, 11 March 1841; 'Religious Aspects of Free Trade', *The League*, 19 April 1845; 'Free Trade the Cause of Peace', *The League*, 28 June 1845, repr. from *British Quarterly Review*; 'Free Traders the Friends of Peace', *The League*, 5 July 1845; and 'Free Trade and Peace', *The League*, 7 March 1846.

⁶⁷ 'Notes to Correspondents', *The League*, 16 March 1844, 31 Aug. 1844. See also, 'Facts for the People on Warlike Establishments', *ABTC*, 18 July 1843. In 1850, Cobden commended *The Economist*, a paper started with the aid of Leaguers and edited by Leaguer James Wilson, to Sturge calling it, 'one of the ablest advocates of peace': Cobden to Sturge, 7 Dec. 1850, Add. MSS 50131.

⁶⁸ Brock, *Pacifism*, pp. 331-406 *passim*, esp. p. 386.

most prominent spokesmen, including Bright and Sturge, were themselves Quakers. Cobden and other well-known League figures were clearly interested in the objects of the Peace Society. In a letter to Henry Ashworth in the spring of 1842, Cobden expressed his view that the peace and free-trade movements should combine their efforts, as they represented the same cause. It is apparent from Cobden's letter that he had both traditions in mind:

It has struck me that it would be well to try to engraft our Free Trade agitation upon the Peace movement. They are one and the same cause. It has often been to me a matter of the greatest surprise, that Friends, have not taken up the question of Free Trade as the means – and I believe the only human means – of effecting universal and permanent peace. The efforts of the Peace Societies, however laudable, can never be successful so long as the nations maintain their present system of isolation.⁶⁹

Whether or not the free-trade movement ever succeeded in 'engrafting' onto the peace movement, there is evidence to suggest that the Anti-Corn-Law Leaguers, at least for a time, represented a convergence of the pacifist traditions of the nineteenth century. And there is little question that the ideology of free trade implied to its adherents important connections between free trade and peace.

* * *

The fourth and final theme of Anti-Corn-Law League ideology concerning free trade and foreign relations was its concern with armaments and military forces. Free traders believed, as Cobden put it, that cheapness alone should regulate commerce; that the 'principle of cheapness', the freedom to buy in the cheapest market and to sell in the dearest, was all that was necessary to attract customers. Armaments, they believed, could neither extend nor protect trade; rather the high taxes required to support military budgets impeded it by draining capital from essential improvements in manufacturing.⁷⁰

Leaguers believed that reduced expenditure upon armaments would lower taxes and lessen the burden of the national debt, both of which would contribute to 'cheapness' and the increased competitiveness of British manufactured goods. In *Russia and the Eastern Question* Cobden wrote:

⁶⁹ Cobden to Ashworth, 12 April 1842, Add. MSS 43653.

⁷⁰ Cobden, *Russia*, pp. 96-113. For a discussion of the persistence of this attitude in the 1850s and beyond, see Semmel, *Liberalism and Naval Strategy*, pp. 68-83 *passim*.

Having thus shown that cheapness, and not the cannon or the sword, is the weapon through which alone we possess and can have hope to defend or extend our commerce, – having proved, also that an increase of trade, so far from demanding an augmentation of warlike armaments, furnishes an increased safeguard against the chances of war, – is it not clear that, to diminish the taxes and duties which tend to enhance the cost of our manufactures, by a reduction of our navy and army, is the obvious policy of a ministry which understands and desires to promote the true interests of this commercial nation? Were our army and navy reduced to one-half of their present forces, and the amount saved [then] applied to the abolition of the duties upon cotton, wool, glass, paper, oil, soap, drugs, and the thousand other ingredients of our manufactures, such a step would do more towards protecting and extending the commerce of Great Britain than an augmentation of the naval armaments to fifty times their present strength, even supposing such an increase could be effected with no addition to national burdens.⁷¹

The objections of Leaguers to the military establishment were not limited to its extravagant expenditure on armaments; though that certainly went against their ‘principle of cheapness’. Many Leaguers shared a general antipathy towards the armed forces, seeing in them the means of aristocratic adventurism and intervention in foreign policy, of ‘outdoor relief’ for the younger sons of the landowning class, and of national distraction from vital domestic concerns. An article in the *Anti-Bread-Tax Circular* quoted John Bright denouncing a standing army as being contrary to constitutional freedom itself.⁷²

The Anti-Corn-Law League tract, ‘Questions for the Times’, called the military a boon to the aristocracy and both an inducement to and a result of armed conflict. It defined a standing army as ‘Evidence of a nation’s injustice or fear of the injustice of others – at once the cause and effect of war – a nursery for the bad of the higher ranks; a hospital for the debased of the lower; a general bane in every land – a curse which will disappear, when the so-called Christians of Christendom, become the followers of the Prince of Peace.’⁷³

Leaguers’ most common complaints about the military had to do with its dominance by the landed classes. ‘Aristocratic misrule’ and capital-eating militarism were closely linked in Leaguers’ minds; *The League* portrayed aristocrats as the only class having an interest in warfare. Thomas Milner Gibson warned members to be wary of the deep sensitivity of the landed classes to national honour inasmuch as war increased

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁷² ‘Imperial Parliament’, *ABTC*, 22 Aug. 1843.

⁷³ ‘Questions for the Times’, Manchester Central Reference Library.

their rents, swelled the government patronage at their disposal, and offered prizes and advancement to aristocratic officers. And in his pamphlet, *A Plea for the Poor*, Baptist W. Noel went so far as to call war 'the game of ambitious potentates ... and the horror of commercial communities'.⁷⁴

Bright's disgust with the cost of the army stemmed from his belief that the military budget largely amounted to a system of welfare for the sons of the aristocracy. Many Anti-Corn-Law Leaguers, among them W.J. Fox, shared this view.⁷⁵ As *The League* lamented, war inevitably meant more patronage, more place, and more expense.⁷⁶ In one of his lectures on the causes, costs, and consequences of war, Fox wrote of aristocrats:

They cannot all be put in offices of state; they cannot all be lords of the treasury, or direct plunderers of the treasury by official names, without knowing how to discharge official functions. You cannot put all of them into the Church – not that any ordinary degree of wildness is deemed an objection. Their high blood and breeding cannot be expected to submit to the restraints which decorum imposes in that quarter. And so, the army with its promotions – war, with its chances of cutting the way up to a barony, an earldom or a dukedom, that is what they specially delight in. And thus there is a power biasing them towards plunging the nation into what may be ruin and death to thousands and millions, but which to them is the prospect of obtaining laurels, of being proclaimed heroes in all the newspapers of Europe, of having large properties assigned them in reward for their desolating the land of others, and at last taking their places in the 'hereditary wisdom' of the country, to make laws for keeping their countrymen in peace and quietness.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ 'National Honour', *The League*, 10 Aug. 1844; 'Evils of War', *The League*, 7 Sept. 1844; and Baptist W. Noel, *A Plea for the Poor* (Manchester, 1842), pp. 7-8. See also, 'To the Editor of the *Bolton Free Press*', and 'To the Editor of the *Manchester Advertiser*', in Thompson, *Exercises*, pp. 184-8 and 258-60 respectively.

⁷⁵ 'Evils of War', *The League*, 7 Sept. 1844; and Trevelyan, *Bright*, pp. 182-3. Cobden expressed similar opinions; see Cobden to Sturge, 1 Feb. 1853, Add. MSS 50131; and Cobden to Place, 11 May 1838, Add. MSS 37949.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Fox, 'English Wars', pp. 113-29 in *Lectures*. See esp. pp. 124-5. Many Leaguers continued to regard the military as an instrument of aristocratic misrule even after the repeal of the corn laws. Cobden included the militia in his indictment of extravagant military splendour, calling the militia the 'backbone' of the aristocracy and concluding that no real reduction in the army was possible until the militia could be abolished altogether. See Cobden to Sturge, 14 Sept. 1852, Add. MSS 43653; same to same, 21 Aug. 1852, Add. MSS 43653.

Finally, members of the Anti-Corn-Law League believed that war and the military preparations for it distracted the people and the government from essential domestic concerns, not least the repeal of the corn and provision laws. Cobden believed that the interventionist foreign policy was calculated not only to uphold the military but to obstruct the development of democratic government.⁷⁸ Gibson said 'the country's defence and glory' always overrode all political discontent and put all improvements in abeyance. He complained in *The League* that 'Battles furnish more stimulating reading than meetings for discussion. The remote echo of the cannon's roar drowns the nearest cry for redress of grievances. Just involve us in active hostilities and Ministers would care little about the Post-office question, the Suffrage question, Irish repeal, the Tariff, of Anti-Corn Lawism. Sir Robert Peel would be rid of a world of troubles and difficulties.'⁷⁹

* * *

There is ample evidence to show that Anti-Corn-Law Leaguers genuinely believed that the cause of free trade was also the cause of peace. Something must be said, however, about the nature of this belief, for it reveals a blind spot in the free traders' view of international relations, and their boundless confidence that unrestricted trade would promote internationalism, economic interdependence, and mutual understanding. The connections between peace and free trade were self-evident and required, not argument, but clear perception to be understood. Like many arguments based on presumed self-evidence, theirs was at once a statement of faith and a self-delusion.

Anti-Corn-Law Leaguers sought an international system of trade based upon a British commercial hegemony which most of them took pretty much for granted would last forever. The impatience of some Leaguers, however, suggests that a few were anxious to establish free trade before the United States, France, or Germany reached the industrial maturity to challenge Great Britain's substantial lead in manufacturing and trade. Moreover, members of the League tended to come from the very class of merchants and manufacturers who had the most to gain from sustained British mercantile leadership; it was easy for them *not* to recognize that unrestricted trade could also lead to commercial rivalry, intense manufacturing competition, neo-imperialism, and even international conflicts.

⁷⁸ Cobden to Place, 11 May 1838, Add. MSS 37949.

⁷⁹ 'National Honour', *The League*, 10 Aug. 1844. See also, 'Evils of War', *The League*, 7 Sept. 1844.

Leaguers emphasized the opportunities for co-operation, and enhanced international understanding by cultural and commercial contacts across borders. They perceived material progress as the basis for all progress; they did not foresee that an age of materialism might create a growing sense of relative deprivation which could promote political instability at home and rivalry abroad, not to mention the effects that modernization might have upon their trading partners and colonial customers. Leaguers were not so much politically short-sighted on this score as they were chauvinistic. They equated civilization with their own British values, and free trade's presumed promotion of international understanding with the spread of Christianity, British constitutionalism, and British commercial dominance. And so their perception of the connections between free trade and peace were based as much on wishful thinking as on political economy; they were perhaps engaged less in the promotion of their own class interest than in pursuit of personal interest, in the context of extraordinary ethnocentrism and international naïvety, a naïvety shaped by their perceptions of the landed classes.

Much of the League's ideology and rhetoric on the subject of foreign relations was shaped by their abiding disdain for the protectionist aristocracy. Leaguers opposed monopoly in all its forms, and they perceived the landlord classes as enjoying a political and diplomatic monopoly, which abetted their monopoly in commerce. To free traders, war was a threat to commerce, and military expenditure a drain on capital. Yet war and the preparations for it seemed actually to benefit the ruling class: the military and the Foreign Office were sources of place and patronage, and wartime an opportunity for high rents, prizes, and promotion. The League accused the aristocracy of natural bellicosity, arrogance, narrow class interest, a false sense of national honour, and fundamental blindness to the national interest which, in the League's view, was trade.

But there was a blind spot in the League's own belief that diplomacy, international protocols, and treaties were *contrary* to trade, good relations, and peace itself. Leaguers apparently viewed diplomacy as preparation for foreign interference, and protocols as a means to inhibit commercial progress. They believed it was individuals motivated by self-interest, not nations or governments, that found common interests in trading relations and forged bonds of friendship and understanding. Such a perception was naïve and inconsistent, and perhaps even dangerous.

International relations are necessary between sovereign states. Leaguers, though they were prepared to allow the state to act at home to preserve contracts and to prevent crime, and were willing, even eager,

to depend upon foreign governments to do the same, somehow were less prepared to allow governments to deal with each other. The stability of Europe and the expansion of its commerce and influence throughout the world in the nineteenth century depended in large measure upon a relatively stable international system of states, and increasingly of nation-states. Leaguers depended upon the stability afforded by the European state system for the very commerce that was to bring progress, prosperity, and ultimate peace, but they rejected the concept of an international system of relations between states because of their antipathy for the aristocrats who conducted diplomacy.

Consequently, there was a basic inconsistency in League philosophy on foreign relations. Its apparent willingness to neglect or exclude relations between states and to depend instead on relations between individuals represented a misunderstanding of the foundations of European trade, rejected the premises upon which trade could be safely undertaken, and conceivably posed a philosophical threat to European stability and peace. Their opposition to 'aristocratic misrule' contributed to an unfortunate myopia concerning foreign policy, but the condition was not entirely lasting. It was Cobden himself who with no apparent misgivings undertook the negotiations with France for reciprocal tariff reductions which resulted in the Cobden-Chevalier Treaty of 1860.⁸⁰

Cobden's definite and well-known views on foreign policy undoubtedly influenced many members of the League. In international relations he stood for free trade, non-intervention, and rejection of the balance of power. These principles had led him to enter public life, and were maintained by him before, during, and after the agitations of the Anti-Corn-Law League. Cobden regarded commercial and foreign policy as intimately linked, and the League appears to have shared his view in this regard. In fact, there is ample evidence that elements of 'Cobdenism' in foreign affairs had been advocated well before the Crimean War brought such views to prominence.

In their dislike of military establishments and the cost of armaments, Anti-Corn-Law Leaguers adhered to Cobden's 'principle of cheapness'.

⁸⁰ In the years following repeal of the corn laws, Cobden became even more prominent as a critic of British foreign policy. He championed international arbitration as a method of settling disputes without recourse to war, and he was willing to see negotiation of treaties between governments for this purpose. Cobden supported international peace congresses and reform of maritime law, and his opposition to the Crimean War, along with that of several former members of the League in the House of Commons, was well known and highly controversial. In his 1849 Peace Budget, Cobden proposed retrenchment, especially in the military budget, as a means of curtailing aristocratic power and sabre rattling. See Richard Cobden, *Speeches of Richard Cobden, Esq., M.P., on Peace, Financial Reform, Colonial Reform and other Subjects, Delivered during 1849* (London, 1849) *passim*.

Their opposition to aristocratic misrule made them fearful of an army and navy which operated, in their view, for the benefit of the land-owning class, and was a drain on capital, an unacceptable system of welfare for the nobility, and in itself an invitation to war. Leaguers failed to recognize, however, that government spending on military preparedness could also be a stimulus to the economy. Nor did they perceive that economic penetration abroad might lead to such a degree of economic influence or desire to protect foreign investments and trade as to require elements of political influence in foreign lands. To the League, free trade was the very antithesis of a mercantilist empire and the embodiment of the 'principle of cheapness'. An understanding of Keynesian principles lay far in the future, and equally alien was the concept of an imperialism of free trade.

What Anti-Corn-Law Leaguers did understand was that foreign affairs and commercial policy were linked. They perceived a variety of important connections between peace and free trade, some of which were wishful thinking and most of which were based on narrow and ethnocentric British perceptions. Leaguers had enormous faith in the commercial ties between individuals and preferred to let trade rather than aristocrats dictate foreign policy. To 'aristocratic misrule' they were deeply opposed, and this obsessive preoccupation sometimes blinded them to the realities of foreign relations. Cobdenism rejected the doctrine of balance of power and opposed foreign intervention, while maintaining the need for restrictions on military expenditures and influence. The ideology of free trade was to Anti-Corn-Law Leaguers an ideology of internationalism, which would promote improved relations abroad, prosperity everywhere, and an end to undemocratic rule at home. It was not, however, an ideology that reflected a deep understanding of the essential nature of international relations.

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