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The International Work of Margery Fry in the 1930s and '40s

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This article discusses the international work of Margery Fry (1874-1958) not only as a counterpoint to that of Eleanor Rathbone but also because – as Gottlieb has pointed out – the historiography of British foreign policy and the issue of appeasement in the 1930s has consistently ignored the views and involvement of women in the debates which took place.¹ While there has been excellent work by feminist historians on international women's organisations, there has been comparatively less recent analysis of the actions and reactions of individual, influential women in the foreign policy field.² Partly this is because political historians concentrate on the powerful – or at least those with visible power - and Rathbone was one of only a very few women with a seat in parliament in this period. Yet arguably, even Rathbone's role in international policy discussions was somewhat neglected until the publication of Pedersen's and Cohen's biographical studies.³

Despite this lacuna in much of the literature, new research is discovering that influential women in the post-suffrage years possessed a surprising degree of political agency, albeit often away from the front line in politics. Fry was one such woman, arguably one of the pre-eminent examples of her generation. Despite her strongly left-wing views, Fry was highly valued and trusted by civil servants and therefore served upon countless government advisory committees and enquiries. Her existence as a policy advisor has been conceptualised as a 'political life in the shadows'.⁴ However, not all her political life was lived in a clandestine way. An

examination of contemporary newspapers, the records of the pressure groups that Fry was involved in and the personal papers of her and her family, demonstrates her political commitment to anti-Fascist causes and willingness to take public positions on international issues. This article considers three aspects of Fry's international work during the 1930s and '40s: aid to refugees; her attitude towards disarmament and appeasement; and – most significantly - her support for China following the Japanese attack of 1937 in the context of women's agency and the opportunities which existed for political involvement outside formal party politics. Firstly, a few biographical details about Fry are given and a brief discussion of her relationship with Rathbone is presented.

Despite her distinguished career in public service, Margery Fry's life and work has been largely neglected by historians. There is only one full-length biography - published shortly after her death - although she merits an entry in Oldfield's biographical dictionary of women humanitarians.⁵ Fry was born into a large, wealthy Quaker family, the seventh of eight surviving children. Her father was a judge and her uncle ran the eponymous chocolate manufacturing business in Bristol. After being educated mainly at home, she went to Somerville College, Oxford to read Mathematics. While at Somerville she became a close friend of Rathbone's who seems to have been converted her feminism and the cause of women's suffrage. Years later Fry recalled a conversation at Oxford between her and Rathbone during which they had discussed possible future careers and 'bewailed the fact that for women there could be no ambitions'.⁶ In an ideal world Fry would have wanted to become a lawyer like her father or even a member of parliament (MP). Neither career was open to her until she was in her mid-forties and (apart from one abortive attempt to become an MP) she never came close to achieving either ambition.

Instead, after an early career in university administration, she performed humanitarian work during the First World War and then embarked on a career as a professional pressure group activist, most notably with the Howard League for Penal Reform. By the late 1920s, when Fry was for a short period Principal of her Somerville College, she was already a well-known public figure and was making regular appearances on BBC radio. She was also the only woman on the University Grants Committee (UGC) which advised the government on the funding of higher education, a post which gave her enormous influence in British universities. In summary, Fry had recognised expertise in two important fields of public policy: criminal justice and higher education. In the 1930s, following a visit to China as a representative of British Universities, she became additionally prominent in agitation over international issues and in 1937 she was made a Governor of the BBC. She carved out a political career in the realm of civil society, which while not unique to women of her generation, was highly unusual in the extent of public prominence and recognition which she achieved.

As already mentioned, Fry and Rathbone met when they were students together at Somerville in the mid-1890s and they became firm friends. The women had parallel family backgrounds as members of prominent, nonconformist clans, the same interests, and a similar world view regarding a range of political and social issues. Both were members of a social and political discussion group formed by Somerville students and called the 'Associated Prigs' during their college days.⁷ The pair maintained contact after leaving Oxford and Rathbone even offered a job to Fry in the days when the latter was still deciding what career to take on.⁸ They were comrades and allies in the suffrage movement, both devoted to the non-militant National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies and they kept their commitment to – if

not always active involvement in – national and international women’s organisations during the interwar period. But whereas Rathbone pursued a parliamentary - as well as extra-parliamentary - political career Fry’s political activity took place mainly in the realm of pressure groups.

Refugee support

In the interwar period Fry had a strong public profile in both domestic and international political fields. Domestically her prominence was grounded in her educational expertise, knowledge of criminal justice, and media appearances. By the early 1930s she had attained the status of a ‘public intellectual’. As a person of influence, her ideas mattered because she occupied public platforms, most significantly, the BBC. This distinction is notable, because, as Collini points out women’s voices were by no means widely heard at that time.⁹

A consequence of Fry’s visibility as a ‘name’ and an expert was the number of ‘round robin’ letters to the press that she was asked to sign on a wide variety of causes. One such was the public announcement of the formation of the Academic Assistance Council (AAC) to aid refugee academics from Germany in May 1933. The Council was formed at the instigation of Sir William Beveridge following the passage of the Nazi regime’s law for ‘cleansing of the Civil Service’ which brought about the expulsion of Jewish post-holders and the regime’s political opponents from German universities.¹⁰ Beveridge and Lord (Ernest) Rutherford drafted a press statement launching the AAC with the aim of not only raising money for refugee scholars’ maintenance but also endeavouring to persuade British universities to employ them. Of the forty-one signatories to the initial announcement only two were women: Margery Fry and Professor Winifred Cullis, a former president of the

Federation of University Women and the first woman to hold a chair in physiology in Britain.

It is clear that Fry was invited as there was perceived to be a need for 'a woman' to be among the founders of the AAC. Beveridge sent her a letter stating that there '*ought to be* some women signatories'.¹¹ Clearly as the sole woman on the UGC she was an important and influential choice. Fry immediately answered the appeal and sent a donation. However, strangely, Beveridge failed to mention her in his list of initial contributors, citing only Maynard Keynes, Michael Sadler of University College, Oxford, and Emrys Evans of the University of Wales. Beveridge's retrospective account of the Council's foundation is in fact unwittingly revealing where the position of women in universities is concerned. He stated that the signatories were 'collected as men [sic] of academic standing and interest' and then sought to account for the relative absence of Jewish scholars from the list.¹² In other words, he reflected on the ethnic make-up of the AAC's founders, but remained blind to the matter of gender diversity. Of course, the key imperative when constructing publicised appeals was to get names who were known to the general public, and given the nature of this particular initiative, eminence in academia was another prerequisite. Margery met the first criteria handsomely but was in some ways a curious choice in the light of the second. However, although her university career had been entirely administrative in nature and devoid of any formal contribution to scholarship, her importance as a member of the UGC as well as her prominence as a public intellectual must have made her an obvious choice as an eminent representative of her gender.

Fry's practical involvement with the AAC (later renamed the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning, SPSL) was limited by the many other demands

on her time, but she remained committed to its principles. In 1934, after her return from a visit to China, she sent the Council another cheque and suggested that those wishing to help refugee scholars from Germany should consider placing them in Chinese universities.¹³ Thereafter she continued to send money (while apologising that she was of limited use in recruiting other supporters 'as I am chiefly connected with bankrupt societies and with the kind of people who are already giving pretty generously in every direction') and regular apologies for missed meetings.¹⁴ At the beginning of 1938 Fry offered to resign, but was told by the general secretary that the Council wished for her to continue, since her membership demonstrated publicly her full co-operation and (revealingly) that the organisation benefited from association with her name. Fry replied that she was willing to stay on 'in a symbolic capacity'.

In 1940 she exercised political agency in refugee work when she visited Paris in an attempt to help refugee scholars resident in the city move to the UK.¹⁵ In this mission, on behalf of an organisation called 'For Intellectual Liberty', her fluent French and exceptional organisational skills were put to practical use. But writing to her sister, Isabel, Fry expressed her frustration and doubts about the scale of the enterprise:

'It may seem horrible to limit one's efforts, but I believe I'm right simply to go for the "intellectuals" – not because humanly they matter more, but because they both have far more effect in international feeling, & hold more of the keys to the future than the rank & file. And at first I only can go to enquire. I'm as conscious as you can be that this is an absurdly limited thing to undertake...I am in terror that the whole journey will be a wild goose chase... An old thing like me can't do a very big crusade'.¹⁶

Fry seems to have taken the initiative for this mission, and her words imply that her age rather than her gender was the factor most likely to impede success. She was nothing if not practical in her approach to helping the stateless: she took refugees from France and China into her own home in London during the Second World War, as she had previously provided accommodation to Belgians in 1914.

In 1940 Fry was placed on a government committee dealing with interned enemy aliens. Ironically some of the interned individuals were scholars who the SPSL had rescued from Germany. Despite wide acceptance among MPs of the fact that refugees were highly unlikely to be Nazi sympathisers, thousands of them were arrested after the outbreak of war and sent to internment camps or even deported to Canada or Australia. Following severe criticism in the House of Commons – not least from Rathbone – the government reconsidered its policy and established an advisory committee headed by Sir Francis Lindley, a former diplomat and Conservative party candidate to assess internees with a view to releasing those who were guaranteed to be loyal to Britain and could potentially be useful to the war effort.¹⁷ As a result of her membership of this committee Fry was sent by the Home Office to the Isle of Man in 1941 to facilitate the release of communists from internment there, following the United Kingdom's alliance with the Soviet Union.¹⁸

Margery Fry's work for refugees was small scale in comparison with Rathbone's, yet she did as much as she felt able to given her other commitments. From the time of Hitler's accession to power in Germany onwards, Fry lent her name to organisations, sent them money and offered practical help, as she had in the First World War when she had worked in France with people made homeless and destitute by warfare. Moreover, after the outbreak of the Second World War, her

track record as a reliable Whitehall committee woman resulted in her appointment to the Lindley committee.

Disarmament and appeasement

Fry was a prominent part of the public discussion of foreign policy in the 1930s and of the general discourse concerning the most effective method of combating the rise of fascism. The AAC announcement mentioned above was one of many press statements, letters to editors and other circulars Fry was asked to sign. Her name usually appeared alongside other left-of-centre public figures. A study of these published statements and her private letters shows that like many men and women of her time, the events of the 1930s forced Fry to reassess her attitude towards war, pacifism and disarmament. Although a birth right Quaker, Fry was not a pacifist: she abhorred war, yet, from the time of the Abyssinian crisis of 1935 onwards, her conviction that fascist aggression might require a military response grew steadily.

Oldfield claims that Fry renounced absolute pacifism as a result of the rise of fascism.¹⁹ In fact Fry's attitude towards warfare was conflicted and ambivalent well before the 1930s. During her sojourn as a relief worker in First World War France, her proximity to the suffering of civilians caused her to declare, 'if I were a man, I would enlist'.²⁰ After her return to England in early 1918 she moved closer to the anti-war movement. In her new role as a penal reform campaigner, which she had taken on partly as a result of reports of prison conditions from incarcerated conscientious objectors, Fry maintained links with peace organisations, especially the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). During the 1920s Fry occasionally supported peace organisations with money – and even hosted a 'No More War' garden party²¹ - but she does not seem to have been

actively involved in any formal pacifist body, although she did lend her name to a round-robin 'women's appeal for disarmament' in 1927.²² Although she formally submitted her resignation from the Society of Friends in 1932²³ (her membership having been merely nominal for many years) she remained very much part of Quaker social networks, a factor which may account for her name appearing on several pacifist petitions published in the press. In 1932 she signed letters alongside other prominent peace activists, Quakers, and Anglican churchmen urging the British government to table proposals at the World Disarmament Conference that would prohibit certain classes of armaments, including submarines and air weapons.²⁴

However after the accession of Hitler to power in Germany and in the light of the seeming failure of the League of Nations to prevent aggression and enforce collective security, Fry became increasingly concerned about the prospects for disarmament and began to reassess her support for pacifism. By the autumn of 1935 events were prompting her to reconsider - at least in private - the necessity for military action. Fry was well acquainted with the international as well as the national political scene. In 1919 she had lobbied the US president, Woodrow Wilson, on behalf of the International Council of Women and from 1935 to 1939 she travelled annually to Geneva to campaign at the League of Nations Assembly for an international prisoners' charter.²⁵

In common with other activists, Fry reassessed her stance on collective security in the light of the Abyssinian Crisis of 1935. Writing on the very day of Italy's invasion of Abyssinia she admitted to Isabel that she was in a quandary over pacifism and international relations. 'I seem to be driven to saying (in imagination) to the gov[ernmen]t "I think upholding the L[eague] of N[at]ions] by force if need be is *your* right action, but I wouldn't stir a finger to help you with it" - and that seems a

fairly untenable position, doesn't it?'²⁶ Her reaction to events was not dissimilar to that of Kathleen Courtney, Fry's old comrade from the NUWSS executive and from First World War relief work who, as Gottlieb has shown, moved away from pacifism as successive foreign relations crises unfolded during the late 1930s.²⁷ Fry herself had absolutely no illusions concerning the nature of Germany's new government: not only was she well aware of the treatment of Jewish and opposition academics, she was also in touch with activists who made her aware of the misuse of prison detention under fascist regimes. She soon came to realise that democracy might need a more muscular defence than a purely pacifist policy could offer.

Following the apparent capitulation of the British and French governments over Abyssinia, and the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, Fry became a strong advocate of the attempts to unite liberal and left-wing opinion in defence of democracy and in opposition to fascism which became known as the 'popular front' policy. In 1936 she joined the committee of a new organisation, For Intellectual Liberty (FIL) which was 'founded as a rallying point for those intellectual workers who felt that the conditions of the world called for the active defence of peace, liberty, and culture' and in response to a call from a similar French organisation called the 'Comité de Vigilance des Intellectuels Antifascistes'.²⁸ FIL, whose president was Aldous Huxley and whose committee notably also included 'Bloomsbury' figures such as EM Forster and Leonard Woolf, attracted an impressive range of well-known supporters from academia, politics, journalism, literature, and art: in fact from the English intelligentsia in general. It made public statements supporting the Spanish government as well as arguing strongly that the Liberal and Labour parties should sink their differences and co-operate in a popular front. As late as 1939 Margery

was involved in a FIL recruitment drive, visiting Manchester in connection with an appeal by prominent university people in the city.²⁹

Writing from Geneva in the autumn of 1936 Fry exclaimed to Isabel that ‘an anti-Fascist Front Populaire is *essential*’. Once more, circular letters were being put together, but according to Fry, ‘idiotic’ Labour people were obstructing progress by wishing to ‘preen themselves on not being communist!’³⁰ Fry - although she was a Labour Party member at this point (she announced her resignation from the Party in 1939)³¹ – obviously considered herself free to associate with whomever she wished in a broad-based anti-fascist coalition. While once more in Geneva during the League of Nations assembly meeting of 1937, Fry reported that ‘everyone’ there regarded the League as effectively dead, although she acknowledged that the so-called ‘social questions’ which the assembly was discussing were like a ‘life-raft’.³² So perhaps she still harboured some residual optimism for internationalism.

In common with other left-inclined political activists, Fry was dismayed by the British and French government’s non-intervention strategy towards the crisis in Spain, which effectively prevented the Spanish Republic from defending itself, and she took part in demonstrations on the republican government’s behalf. She supported all-party appeals for the Spanish government to have the right to buy arms as well as backing publicly a charitable appeal for the war’s orphans. In January 1939, only months before the final defeat of Republican Spain, she joined other dignitaries, including the former Conservative MP, the Duchess of Atholl, and the Liberal anti-appeaser and Popular Front advocate, Wilfrid Roberts MP, on a march to Downing Street for full recognition of the Spanish republic in international law.³³ Two weeks later Fry presented the views of campaigners to Sir Archibald Sinclair, leader of the Liberal Party, at a Caxton Hall meeting. She argued that ‘party considerations

should be subordinated in the supreme need of saving democracy'. The deputation demanded that elected Spanish government should be entitled to buy arms, British ships trading with Spain should be protected, food should be sent to Republican Spain, and the Italian and German governments should be pressed to withdraw their forces from the country.³⁴

In September 1938 Fry was once more in Geneva lobbying the League of Nations on prison reform while the Munich crisis was unfolding. While the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain held negotiations with Hitler, Europe seemed to be on the brink of war. Writing again to Isabel (in whom, of all her correspondents, she seems to have been most willing to confide her views on international affairs) Fry expressed her consternation and anger at Chamberlain's agreement with Hitler.

People here think the League is absolutely killed – [and] everyone I have spoken to [in Geneva] feels that Eng[land] has capitulated utterly to Hitler not only betrayed *another* small country but made things infinitely worse for our own future. It's like a funeral of all one cares for – [and] it may be absurd, but one has a sense of personal shame into the bargain which is overwhelming. The Soviet woman, Kollontay [sic], whom I've rather hated sometimes, made me cry with her sympathy...³⁵

Fry's agonised reaction to Chamberlain's agreement with Hitler underscores her rejection of the policy of appeasement. Moreover, her view stands in contrast to a statement signed by leading British pacifists at the time, which pledged signatories to 'resist and to organise such opposition as will hasten the end' of any potential war. Interestingly two of Fry's sisters, Joan and Ruth signed this statement, but her name does not appear.³⁶

As in the First World War, much as she valued peace, Fry could not commit herself entirely to pacifism, especially not as the events of the late 1930s unfolded. This attitude was shaped by her as much by her reaction to events in China (discussed below) as it was to the European situation. To some extent, Fry serves as a case study of a path followed by many politically active feminists in the period, and even of public attitudes at large. By 1939 Fry was prominent in pro-Spanish Republic events, and her misgivings about appeasement, which at first had only been expressed privately, were publicly proclaimed.

China

Of greatest personal importance to Fry towards the end of the 1930s was the fate of China, a country she travelled extensively in on behalf of British universities in 1933 and with whose people she identified passionately. While she was more than willing to lend her name to petitions and even attend demonstrations for the Spanish republic, it was the movement in solidarity with China – a country similarly under attack from aggressive invaders – that really engaged her energies in the final years of the interwar period.

It is only relatively recently that historians have shone the spotlight on the pro-Chinese movement in Great Britain. Traditionally its existence has been overshadowed by discussions of the general theme of appeasement and anti-appeasement, and by the phenomenon of the British left's solidarity with Republican Spain. This neglect has been somewhat mitigated in recent years by an article by Perry on British diplomacy with China between 1937 and 1939, and within a wider treatment of the relationship between the British Left and China by Buchanan.³⁷ Until these publications appeared the sole retrospective account of the now largely

forgotten reactions of the British public to the Japanese attack of July 1937 was contained in the pages of *Aid China*, a first-hand, retrospective account by the former China Campaign Committee (CCC) organiser Arthur Clegg.³⁸ While Buchanan makes many references to Fry's work for the CCC, he did not consult her private papers which reveal far more about her involvement than the sources he relied upon. Moreover, perhaps to the surprise of many people today, the Chinese predicament was not a sideshow in the international politics of the late 'thirties, but was an issue that engaged – albeit briefly – considerable attention in the UK.

It certainly engaged Margery Fry's attention. In July 1937 the hostility between Japan and China finally erupted into all-out war when Japanese forces launched an attack near Beijing (one of the areas Fry had visited only four years earlier) following an incident with Chinese soldiers at the so-called Marco Polo Bridge (now Lugou). Although there had been repeated hostilities between China and Japan since the latter's occupation of Manchuria began in 1931, this incident represented the beginning of an escalation and by August 1937 there was full-scale warfare. At the end of October Shanghai (minus the foreign concessions) fell to the Japanese and the Chinese forces in Nanjing surrendered in December. The military action, with its accompanying bombings, casualties and all the attendant horrors of war, was widely reported in the British press, prompting a wave of protest meetings and philanthropic appeals for funds for medical supplies. The CCC, which brought together a wide variety of pro-Chinese individuals and organisations in a popular Front-style coalition, was established in September.³⁹ At this point Fry was not involved in the campaign, probably because she was out of the country that autumn visiting Geneva and touring prisons in south-eastern Europe. However she closely followed events in China from the continent.⁴⁰ After her return from Europe, Fry

joined the CCC as vice-chairman in late 1937 and presided at the meetings that the chairman, the publisher Victor Gollancz, was unable to attend.⁴¹ She remained involved in the campaign until 1946, alternating as chair and vice-chair with Gollancz.

In addition to chairing meetings, Fry's role in the CCC was very much that of propagandist and figurehead. Her name frequently appeared in letters to the press from the Campaign and in newspaper accounts of its public meetings. According to Clegg, the CCC was initially inundated with demands for speakers from churches, trade union branches, peace councils, and local left book clubs.⁴² Fry toured the country seemingly tirelessly to speak on the CCC's behalf. At the beginning of January 1938 she reported to Isabel that she already had 'lots to do with the China campaign'.⁴³ A more detailed, light-hearted account of her experiences addressing meetings can be found in a letter written to a friend in 1941. 'I've been specialising on Rotary Clubs', she told him, mentioning visits to Stafford and St Albans. 'Chelsea said I had to be thanked, but reluctantly, since I'd said some things in criticism of British governments [and] even of British BUSINESS!'⁴⁴

It is perhaps characteristic of Fry that she was so involved in a campaign which mixed political with humanitarian objectives. The CCC had broader aims than might be expected: it not only sought to raise political awareness but also tried to offer humanitarian aid to the war-torn country, much as pro-Spain organisations had been doing for the Spanish Republic since 1936. It also fulfilled Fry's desire for broad-based, coalition-style campaigning: in its early phases it received backing from bodies outside the usual network of left-wing organisations, such as churches and missionary societies. The Lord Mayor of London launched a fund for relief work in China, yet the CCC itself organised the dispatch of weekly consignments of medical

supplies and appealed for gifts of clothing for Chinese war refugees. Politically the Campaign obviously expressed solidarity with the Chinese people and aimed to 'spread the knowledge and [encourage] the appreciation of the Chinese people'.⁴⁵ Press coverage of the Sino-Japanese conflict in the press undoubtedly gave the Chinese cause some momentum in the last weeks of 1937. Early in the following year British newspapers began to print accounts of outrages taking place in Nanjing, giving further reason for British protest and concern.⁴⁶ The CCC urged the British government to co-operate with its League of Nations allies and criticised the sale of war materials to Japan by Britain and the United States. But although fifty-two nations passed a resolution at Geneva, nothing was done to punish Japan, either by the League or by the nine powers with trade concessions in China. So the CCC took up another weapon: it decided to call for a boycott of Japanese goods. This proposal was supported by co-operative societies, who halted the purchase of items from Japan, and by WILPF, which urged individual women as consumers to shun Japanese goods. The CCC even organised public demonstrations such as the 'poster parade' in London's Oxford Street on 'Boycott Day' when a clergyman led a procession of women carrying banners with slogans like 'Let China Live'.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, dockers at ports including Southampton, Glasgow and Liverpool refused to unload Japanese cargoes, and in Middlesbrough union members refused to load scrap iron intended for export to Japan.⁴⁸ CCC officials supported the dockers and more generally sought to educate the British public regarding the Japanese economy. Fry contributed to the debate on the boycott in a speech in which she urged her audience to understand the economic consequences of Japanese aggression for British workers. If Japan – with its tradition of low wages and cheap

labour - was allowed to gain full control of China's immense human and natural resources it would be a disaster for the world economy, she alleged.⁴⁹

Fry also played a part in the CCC's attempts to raise awareness and appreciation of Chinese culture among the British public. A CCC pamphlet mentioned the 'wholesale destruction of 'life, property and centres of education and culture' in China.⁵⁰ The Campaign took care to include Chinese students resident in Britain on its platforms and some meetings even included entertainment from the American singer, Paul Robeson.⁵¹ A series of cultural events were organised to raise both funds and public awareness. An exhibition of Chinese art, much of it from a private collector, was held to raise money for China, and Chinese variety artists performed in the West End. In April 1938 the Unity Theatre (a left-wing theatre in London) held a 'China Week' to raise awareness and support for the Campaign. The following year a troupe of Indonesian dancers visited England and gave benefit performances for China, including one at the headquarters of the English Folk Dance Society, Cecil Sharp House. The dancers even appeared on the embryonic BBC television service: according to Clegg this was due to the influence Fry had as BBC governor, but there is no other evidence to support his contention.⁵² Fry certainly valued such cultural activities as she had long appreciated Chinese art and was fond of dance and drama. Moreover, she saw solidarity with China as not only political but cultural. The preservation of Chinese education and culture - including the country's universities - in the face of a 'war of extermination of the humanities', mattered greatly to Fry.⁵³ She firmly believed that not only was China's newly-established democracy under attack, but also its culture and civilisation.

By the summer of 1938, as the anniversary of the Lugou incident approached, Fry was thoroughly involved in CCC activities. In June she launched an appeal for

funds to pay for ambulances for the International Peace Hospital, which had been recently established in China by a Canadian doctor, Norman Bethune. She told *Manchester Guardian* readers that an ambulance which had been used in Spain would be touring Lancashire 'to win help for the International Peace Hospital Scheme' and requested that they 'give generously'.⁵⁴ Fry then took part in a deputation to the Japanese ambassador in London to protest at the aerial bombing of Canton, accompanied by MPs and CCC officials. At a protest meeting in August held to promote the boycott of Japanese goods, Fry alleged that 'women and children were being bombed in order to demoralise their menfolk fighting at the front'. She also argued that China should be defended for its civilisation and democratic aspirations.

This is a new sort of attack on civilisation. There is no doubt that Japan chose this time to make war on China because she saw that China was getting on her feet and as a nation was becoming a civilised and more or less democratic country. Japan intervened to prevent China from achieving unity. From the first her attack was on the cultural life of China.

This speech also contained one of her favourite themes: higher education.

Mentioning her own visit to China, she claimed that 'the Chinese desired to have universities because they knew only an educated people could form a sound democracy'.⁵⁵ Her linkage of higher education and democracy must have at least in part resulted from her personal experience of the interconnections between the struggles for women's education and suffrage.

In 1939 Fry became embroiled in the fall-out from the so-called 'Tientsin incident'. In April a pro-Japanese Chinese official had been murdered and the

Japanese authorities accused several men who were living in the British Concession at Tientsin (now known as Tianjin). Four months later the British authorities decided to acquiesce with Japan's demands and hand over four men for trial. Fry's response – together with Norman Bentwich of the National Council of Civil Liberties (NCCL) - was to instruct solicitors in London to apply for a writ of habeas corpus. The pair also sent a telegram to the Foreign Secretary, seeking assurances that the government would abide by the law. Fry's action incurred the wrath of a *Daily Mail* editorial, which linked the matter to her role at the BBC.

Miss Margery Fry is a Quaker whose zeal for reforming the prison systems of the world has won respect... She is also a governor of the BBC at a salary of £1000 a year.

Perhaps she forgot this appointment when arranging with Professor Norman Bentwich to interfere with the decision of the Tientsin judicial tribunal to hand over to the Japanese the four Chinese accused of murder.

Miss Fry, no matter how good her motives may seem to her, should remember that the BBC is apt to be regarded abroad... as an official government institution. If she wants to interfere in international affairs she should resign her governorship.⁵⁶

It is doubtful that Fry was at all concerned by criticism from a right-wing newspaper like the *Daily Mail*, but it is worth noting that her BBC governorship did end suddenly only a few weeks later, and she was never to regain it. Nevertheless it is remarkable that her role in supporting the rights of the Chinese suspects brought her such scathing treatment in the British press.

Important though it was to Fry, involvement in the CCC was certainly not without its problems. After the initial interest in China during the winter of 1937-8, public attention began to wander as events in Europe became more threatening to the UK's security. For years after that, the Campaign was a hard slog, even when Japan became officially confirmed as an enemy of the British Empire after Pearl Harbor (although public sympathy was once more with China from that point, developments there tended to be crowded out from the news by events elsewhere). Fry was used to years of hard work for unglamorous campaigns, but more problematic for her was the faction-fighting within the CCC. Clegg recalled that she was intent on preserving the broad-based support for the Campaign, urging that its spokespeople should not alienate the general public by launching personal attacks on government ministers, even after the Munich crisis.⁵⁷ Fry knew full well from her years of committee work the importance of keeping people with potentially conflicting opinions on board. Another difficulty was the Communist influence in the CCC which presented her with a problem, not least because it resulted in Labour politicians tending to keep the Campaign at arm's length. Clegg himself was a Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) member (as were several other employees and activists in the CCC) and there were suspicions that the Communists were holding separate caucus meetings prior to the full Committee gatherings.⁵⁸ Fry's letters repeatedly show her concern over Communist influence, especially in the months between the outbreak of war and the German invasion of the Soviet Union.

Despite the difficulties, Fry continued her work for the CCC until 1946, albeit interrupted by a lengthy visit to the USA in 1942. Her priorities in the CCC centred upon public speaking, educational work, and the maintenance of contacts between British and Chinese universities. In 1941 she worked on a 'wartime home study

course' about China which was offered by the Cooperative Union's education department. Only five days before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor the CCC ran a weekend school, chaired by Fry, on the topic of 'China and the Pacific'. In 1944 she gave talks about China to cooperative societies, trade unionists and members of the Workers Educational Association, among others.⁵⁹ She also maintained contacts with visiting Chinese politicians and academics. For example, in 1941 the son of the former nationalist leader Sun Yat-Sen, who was studying at Oxford University visited Isabel's house in Buckinghamshire to meet Fry.⁶⁰

The British declaration of war on Japan on 8th December 1941 (the day after Pearl Harbor) unsurprisingly revived interest from the British public in China's plight and while there were difficulties in arranging evening meetings in central London during the blitz, the CCC continued to run 'bowl of rice' lunches. Clegg recalled that Fry even invited Anthony Eden to one of the lunches, but that he refused.⁶¹ Perhaps this is another instance of her interest in building broad coalitions of support. In 1942 the British United Aid to China Fund (BUACF) was launched and Fry became a CCC representative on its Council. The Fund, supported by British business, the labour movement and missionary societies, was humanitarian in intention, concentrating on practical aid for Britain's Chinese allies and the education of the British public.

Buchanan claims that BUACF literature was 'naïve and sentimental', but that it did enable the CCC to reach a wider audience than it had managed hitherto. Politics was never far from the surface, however: Buchanan reports suggestions both of undue CCC (presumably meaning, CPGB) influence in the BUACF and of suspicions that the latter was too supportive of Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang (the Chinese Nationalist Party).⁶² This was dangerous political territory for Fry, but her principles remained those of the broad left, and she - perhaps naively - hoped that the

organisations would stay free of political bias. However her suspicions regarding communism resurfaced soon after the end of the War and in 1946 she finally resigned from the position of CCC chair.⁶³

Margery Fry's work for China combined her interests in culture, education, and politics. Moreover, it enhanced her public profile as a – relatively rare – woman who gained the attention of press and public on political matters. Undoubtedly some of the attention, such as that of the *Daily Mail* was negative, but the 'Tientsin incident', which was widely reported in British newspapers, illustrated her willingness and ability to take political action as a leading representative of civil society.

Conclusion

Whereas Eleanor Rathbone became interested in policy in India and worked tirelessly for European refugees, her great friend Margery Fry ultimately demonstrated her greatest passion in international affairs for China. While much of Fry's political work for the last forty years of her life was undertaken in the shadowy world of Whitehall committees, her public positions and activities regarding refugee scholars, Spain, and China in the 1930s and '40s demonstrate that women could and did play a notable role in public discourse on foreign policy. Fry's role can be seen as one in which she interpreted international events for domestic audiences, a job she was well suited to given her years of experience in lobbying ministers and MPs and attempting to influence public opinion on penal reform. She exercised agency by utilising her already-established platform to inform the public on matters dear to her heart and to contribute to debates. She was one of only a handful of women to achieve such a platform at this time.

It is worth noting that Fry's public resistance to fascistic militarism not only brought her the hostility of the *Daily Mail* but also of the Nazi high command. In 1945 the *Mail* revealed that Fry and Rathbone's names were both on a 'blacklist' of 2300 British 'marked men' [sic] allegedly held by Himmler.⁶⁴ This is something of an accolade for both women, as well as for the others on the list. Indeed, Himmler's 'blacklist' is perhaps a fairly accurate inventory of the anti-fascist British men and women who commanded public attention at that time.⁶⁵ Although ostensibly their careers had gone on different paths, one as a member of parliament and the other as a lobbyist and public intellectual, Rathbone and Fry had many things in common, not least their willingness to stand up for what they believed in – above all, human rights and democracy – and their willingness to be utterly outspoken should the need arise. Their shared principles were at least in part ones that they had developed as young women at Somerville College.

¹ Julie V. Gottlieb "'The Women's Movement Took the Wrong Turning': British feminists, pacifism and the politics of appeasement", *Women's History Review* 23/ 3 (2014), 441-62.

² For international women's movements see especially Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: the Making of an International Women's Movement* (Chichester, Princeton University Press, 1997); Marie Sandell, *The Rise of Women's Transnational Activism* (London, IB Tauris, 2015).

³ Susan Pedersen, *Eleanor Rathbone and the Politics of Conscience* (London, Yale University Press 2004); Susan Cohen, *Eleanor Rathbone and the Refugees* (London, Vallentine Mitchell, 2010).

⁴ Anne Logan, 'Political Life in the Shadows: the Post-suffrage Political Career of S. Margery Fry (1874-1958)', *Women's History Review* 23/ 3 (2014), 365-80.

⁵ Enid Huws Jones, *Margery Fry: The Essential Amateur*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1965); Sybil Oldfield, *Doers of the World: British Women Humanitarians 1900-1950*, (London, Continuum, 2001).

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- ⁶ Somerville College Margery Fry Papers (hereafter MFP), 41/4, radio script, 'Eleanor Rathbone', 18 March 1952.
- ⁷ Pauline Adams, *Somerville for Women*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996), 129-30.
- ⁸ MFP 27/3, Eleanor Rathbone to Margery Fry (MF), 7 Aug. 1898.
- ⁹ Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006).
- ¹⁰ William Beveridge, *A Defence of Free Learning*, (London, Oxford University Press, 1959); N. Bentwich, *The Rescue and Achievement of Refugee Scholars 1933-1952* (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1953).
- ¹¹ Bodleian Library, Society for the Protection of Science and Learning archive (hereafter SPSL), Fry file, William Beveridge to MF, 16 May 1933, emphasis added.
- ¹² Beveridge, *Defence of Free Learning*, 3.
- ¹³ SPSL, Fry file, MF to Secretary, 27 April 1934.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.* MF to Secretary, 13 November 1934.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.* Walter Adams to MF, 14 Jan. 1938; MF to secretary, 17 Jan. 1938; MF to Miss Ursell, 4 June 1947.
- ¹⁶ MFP 13/5 MF to Isabel Fry (IF), 19 January 1940.
- ¹⁷ House of Commons Debates, 9 October 1940, cc 365-6. Pedersen, *Eleanor Rathbone*, 314.
- ¹⁸ Institute of Education, London (hereafter IOE), Isabel Fry papers, FY/A19, diary entries dated 30 July & 17 August 1941.
- ¹⁹ Oldfield, *Doers of the World*, 84.
- ²⁰ MFP 32/1, War Journal, 9 Sept. 1915.
- ²¹ MFP 9/2, MF to her mother, 7 July 1924.
- ²² *Manchester Guardian*, 9 Nov. 1927, 11.
- ²³ MFP 26/6, W. F. Nicholson to MF, 8 April 1932.
- ²⁴ *Manchester Guardian*, 14 June 1932, 18; 19 Oct. 1932, 13.
- ²⁵ Anne Logan, 'Feminism and Criminology in Britain, 1900-1950, in *New Perspectives on European Women's Legal History*, ed. Sarah L Kimble and Marion Röwekamp (New York, Routledge, 2017), 272-91.
- ²⁶ MFP 13/2, MF to IF, 3 Oct. 1935, emphasis in the original.
- ²⁷ Gottlieb, 'The Women's movement', 452-4.
- ²⁸ For Intellectual Liberty, *Bulletin 1*, November 1936.

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- ²⁹ *Manchester Guardian*, 16 January 1939, 11.
- ³⁰ MFP 13/3, MF to IF, 9 Oct. 1936.
- ³¹ *Manchester Guardian*, 27 January 1939, 11.
- ³² MFP23/7, MF to family, 28 September 1937
- ³³ *Manchester Guardian*, 9 Jan. 1939, 13. For the involvement of Liberals like Roberts in popular front-style movements, see Martin Pugh 'The Liberal Party and the Popular Front' *English Historical Review*, CXXI, 494, (2006), 1327-1350.
- ³⁴ *Manchester Guardian*, 25 January 1939, 12.
- ³⁵ MFP 13/3, MF to IF, 19 September 1938.
- ³⁶ *Manchester Guardian*, 28 September 1938, 5.
- ³⁷ J.K.J. Perry, 'Powerless and Frustrated: Britain's Relationship with China during the opening years of the Sino-Japanese War, 1937-39', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 22, (2011), 408-30; Tom Buchanan, *East Wind* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012).
- ³⁸ Arthur Clegg, *Aid China* (Beijing, Foreign Language Press, 1989).
- ³⁹ Clegg, *Aid China*, 17; *Manchester Guardian*, 7 October 1937, 19.
- ⁴⁰ MFP 23/7, MF to family, 28 Sept. 1937.
- ⁴¹ Clegg, *Aid China*, 51.
- ⁴² Clegg, *Aid China*, 18.
- ⁴³ MFP 13/3, MF to IF, 9 Jan. 1938.
- ⁴⁴ MFP 23/6, MF to Champion Russell, 21 Mar. 1941.
- ⁴⁵ CCC, *China and the Far East: Facts and Figures* (London, CCC, n.d.).
- ⁴⁶ See, for example, *Manchester Guardian*, 14 February 1938, 13.
- ⁴⁷ *Manchester Guardian*, 10 February 1938, 12.
- ⁴⁸ Clegg, *Aid China*, 27-8.
- ⁴⁹ CCC, *China in World Affairs*, (London, CCC, 1939), 3.
- ⁵⁰ CCC, *China Appeals to You* (London, CCC, c.1938).
- ⁵¹ *Manchester Guardian*, 14 February 1938, 13.
- ⁵² Clegg, *Aid China*, 21-2, 61, 98.

⁵³ Buchanan, *East Wind*, 81.

⁵⁴ *Manchester Guardian*, 6 June 1938, 20.

⁵⁵ *Manchester Guardian*, 16 August 1938, 11.

⁵⁶ *Daily Mail*, 19 August 1939, 8.

⁵⁷ Clegg, *Aid China*, 90.

⁵⁸ Buchanan, *East Wind*, 69.

⁵⁹ MFP 15/4, MF to Agnes Fry, 30 January 1944.

⁶⁰ IOE FY/A18, 31 May 1941.

⁶¹ Clegg, *Aid China*, pp. 132-50.

⁶² Buchanan, *East Wind*, pp.94-6.

⁶³ Clegg, *Aid China*, 164.

⁶⁴ *Daily Mail*, 1 September 1945, 1.

⁶⁵ The *Mail* did not print the full 'blacklist', but out of the names the paper recorded, only seventeen were women. *Ibid.*, 4.