

DAVID ZIMMERMAN

THE SOCIETY FOR THE PROTECTION OF SCIENCE
AND LEARNING AND THE POLITICIZATION OF BRITISH
SCIENCE IN THE 1930s

ABSTRACT. The Society for the Protection of Science and Learning was begun in London in 1933, and became a key agency in the international effort to rescue refugee scholars. The SPSL also raised political awareness among British scientists, uniting many voices in the struggle against the Nazi assault on academic freedom. This paper traces the evolution of the Society from 1933 to 1939.

INTRODUCTION

On 13 June 1936, *Nature* hailed the birth of the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning, founded as a permanent successor to the Academic Assistance Council, established some three years earlier.¹ Sir Richard Gregory, editor of *Nature*, welcomed the new organization at the centre of the struggle to protect ‘the vital freedom of thought and investigation without which assuredly our present civilization is doomed’.² This was not the first time, nor would it be the last, that *Nature* put the SPSL and the AAC at the forefront of Britain’s response to right-wing governments in Europe and Asia. The fascist assault on academic freedom produced one of the greatest challenges ever to confront British science; it would soon sweep many from the confines of the academy into the world of political affairs.

During the spring of 1933, many scientists in central and Eastern Europe were displaced from their academic positions. To defend what they believed were fundamental principles of academic freedom, British scientists set out to help their colleagues escape to

¹ The Academic Assistance Council (AAC) became the Society for the Preservation of Science and Learning (SPSL) in 1935. The respective abbreviations will be used for the given periods, but the abbreviation SPSL will be used when referring to both the AAC and SPSL.

² ‘Science and International Policy’, *Nature*, 137 (4 January 1936), 1–3.

Britain and other countries in the West. Their programme soon enlisted scholars of very different political persuasions, who came together to act in concert and to make the public more aware of the fascist threat to human rights. At the same time, they came to assess their own position on Nazi ideology. Anti-Semitism and eugenics were morally indefensible, and rearmament, necessary. While the AAC played no direct adversary role, its members were keenly aware of Nazi oppression, and pressured politicians and civil servants to recognize the threat they posed.

The central role of the AAC/SPSL in the history of academic freedom has not been adequately recognized. In *The Social Function of Science*, published on the eve of the Second World War in 1939, J.D. Bernal analysed the destructive effects of the Nazis on German science, and mentioned specifically the dismissal of German-Jewish academics. However, he said little about the flight of these scholars to other parts of the world, and made little mention of efforts to assist them. For Bernal, to aid scientific refugees was satisfying, but it did nothing to fight fascism. However, it seems that Bernal was either unaware of the SPSL, or disagreed with its tactics, or chose to ignore it. Bernal viewed the leaders of British science as, in the main, apolitical or conservative, and unwilling to support the radical reorganization of science that he believed essential.³

Bernal's influence can be traced in Gary Werskey's collective biography of British socialist scientists, *The Visible College*. Werskey argues that the 1930s saw a small group of young radicals waging ideological war with the conservative scientific establishment. Bernal was one of the scientific heroes engaged in this struggle. To Werskey, the crisis of German academic refugees was a lesser issue, one which provided an opportunity for socialists to 'convert' or 'co-opt' more liberal-minded members of the scientific establishment.⁴ However, Werskey admits that 'when it came to liberal causes, senior scientists of middle opinion were often level with, if not in advance of the scientific Left'. One of his three examples of a 'liberal cause' is the academic refugee crisis. Werskey praises scientists of 'middle opinion', including A.V. Hill, FRS, and Sir Ernest (later Lord) Rutherford, for their work in establishing the AAC.⁵

While Werskey praised Hill's liberal activism in forming the AAC, he earlier suggested that Hill was a conservative, vehemently

³ J.D. Bernal, *The Social Function of Science* (London: Routledge, 1939), 212–221, 393–397.

⁴ Gary Werskey, *The Visible College* (London: Free Association Books, 1988), 239.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 244.

opposed to the engagement of scientists in political action. In this sense, Werskey distorted the message of Hill's 1933 Huxley Memorial Lecture. Hill's concern was that good science not be corrupted by politics, something that was definitely occurring on both the Left and the Right. Yet, Hill's main thesis was not to condemn scientists for being engaged, but to emphasize the dangers the Nazis posed to science. Circumstances, argued Hill, forced scientists to take up the political struggle.

Although Werskey downplays the commonality of interest forged by British scientists in response to the Nazis, we find them – working through the AAC and SPSL – at the centre of the fight. Among the early supporters of the AAC were some of the most senior scientists of the political Left, including Sir Frederick Gowland Hopkins, FRS, head of the Dunn Biochemical Institute at Cambridge and President of the Royal Society, and P.M.S. Blackett, a young champion of the scientific Left, who became an FRS in 1933, and who gave his support to both the AAC and rearmament.⁶ In December 1934, Blackett joined Hill on the Government's new Committee for the Scientific Survey of Air Defence (the 'Tizard Committee').⁷

The significance of the SPSL has also been missed by historians of the 'scientists' movement of the 1930s. William McGucken, for example, fully recognizes the role of fascism in shaping political attitudes among British scientists, but chooses to focus on the institutions of science, rather than on such responsive organizations as the SPSL. More interestingly, José Harris, in her biography of William Beveridge, makes no specific mention of the AAC or SPSL, and just briefly mentions Beveridge's role in dealing with the academic refugee crisis.⁸ It is time to put on record the SPSL's achievements and to recognize its legacy.

THE WORK OF THE SPSL

Between June 1933 and September 1939, the SPSL became part of an international effort to rescue scholars displaced by the Nazis from academic institutions in Europe. In large measure, the Society

⁶ *Ibid.* 154–155, 222.

⁷ See David Zimmerman, *Britain's Shield: Radar and the Defeat of the Luftwaffe* (Stroud: Sutton, 2001).

⁸ William McGucken, *Scientists, Society and the State: The Social Relations Movement in Great Britain, 1931–1947* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1984), 95, 102; José Harris, *William Beveridge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 288–289.

was the brainchild of William Beveridge, Director of the London School of Economics (LSE). Beveridge remained the Society's chief strategist until his departure from the LSE in 1937.

Beveridge first learned of the dismissal of academics from German universities in March 1933, whilst studying in Vienna. He was appalled, and returned home determined to support his German colleagues.⁹ In April, Beveridge established an Academic Assistance Fund at the LSE, which was financed by voluntary contributions by members of his academic staff. However, even with their nearly unanimous support, Beveridge realized that a much larger organization was required if more than a select few scientists were to be helped.¹⁰

Beveridge also believed that for an organization of this kind to succeed, it must gain the support of both the scientific establishment and the wider British public. He therefore began by asking Sir Ernest Rutherford, then head of the Cavendish Laboratory at Cambridge, to serve as president. As Britain's most famous living scientist, Rutherford commanded the respect of senior professors and young scientific workers alike, and enjoyed great influence in the Royal Society. Moreover, the use of his name attracted a broad cross-section of the British public.¹¹ According to Beveridge, persuading him to accept the position was not easy, but Rutherford understood that the cause was too important to ignore.¹²

In May 1933, Beveridge circulated a document announcing the creation of a council to assist refugees which, on 24 May, was signed by academics and public figures, and sent to Britain's leading newspapers. Five Nobel Prize winners signed, including Sir J.J. Thomson, FRS, Rutherford's predecessor at the Cavendish (Nobel in Physics, 1906); Sir Frederick Gowland Hopkins (Nobel in Medicine, 1929); Sir William Bragg, formerly Quain Professor of Physics at University of London (Nobel in Physics, 1915); Sir Charles Scott Sherrington, Waynfleet Professor of Physiology at Oxford (Nobel in Medicine, 1932), and A.V. Hill (Nobel in Medicine, 1922), who then held a Foulerton Research Chair funded by the Royal Society at UCL. Other signatories included the physicist Lord (fourth

⁹ Lord Beveridge, *Power and Influence* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1953), 234–235.

¹⁰ London School of Economics Archive, Beveridge Papers [hereafter BEV] IXa/45 Item 174. WHB, Academic Assistance Fund, 8 June 1934.

¹¹ Bodleian Library [Oxford University], SPSL 24, Records of the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning [hereafter SPSL], Beveridge to Rutherford, 4 May 1933.

¹² Beveridge, *op. cit.* note 9, 236; David Wilson, *Rutherford: Simple Genius* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983), 483–484.

Baron) Rayleigh, FRS, the physiologist J.B.S. Haldane, and the chemist, Robert (later Sir Robert) Robinson, FRS (Nobel in Chemistry, 1947). Beveridge's circular outlined the objectives of the AAC – to act as 'a clearing house and centre of information' and to coordinate activities with counterpart committees in other countries. All those 'concerned for academic freedom and security of learning' were asked to contribute funds, to supplement the meagre university resources available to help displaced scientists and scholars.¹³

By the summer, the AAC was in full swing. Although Rutherford was president and Hill, vice-president, policy-making was left to the two honorary secretaries, Beveridge and C.S. Gibson, FRS, Professor of Chemistry at Guy's Hospital. Full-time staff were hired, including a General Secretary, Walter (later Sir Walter) Adams, an LSE lecturer in history, and Miss Esther Simpson, who became the executive assistant.¹⁴

By 1 August, the AAC had raised £9,690, which included a block grant of £2,500 from the Central Jewish Fund. To vet applications, the Allocation Committee established groups of referees in every discipline. Beveridge was chairman of the Allocation Committee, and grants were awarded according to both merit and need. Scholars with families were offered £250 per annum, while unmarried scholars received £182. Reflecting the early hope that the crisis was only temporary, grants were initially made for one year only.¹⁵

The procedures established in the first few months continued to operate in the years ahead. The greatest change took place during 1934, by which time it had become clear that what was happening in Europe was not an aberration. Then, fund-raising efforts were re-directed towards establishing a number of endowed chairs for the best and the brightest among the refugee scholars. The following year, in a move to secure tax benefits for donors and the Council, it was decided to reconstitute a permanent body – the SPSL.

Through the late 1930s, scholars dismissed from German universities were joined by colleagues from Portugal, Spain, the Soviet Union, Italy, Czechoslovakia, and Austria. They arrived in Britain in a destitute state, often stripped of pensions and assets before being allowed to leave their homes. By November 1937, the SPSL had set up four endowed research fellowships, each at £450 per

¹³ SPSL 1/8. Academic Assistance Council, 22 May 1933.

¹⁴ The Simpson Papers are held in the archives of Leeds University. It is a small collection of six boxes, mostly containing correspondence dated after 1945.

¹⁵ SPSL 1/7. Report on Progress, 1 August 1933.

annum, and was directly or indirectly maintaining eighty scholars. A year later, the SPSL had placed twenty-seven more scholars in permanent positions at British universities, other academic institutions, and industry. Altogether, 127 scholars were permanently placed in Britain.

Still, refugees continued to come. The British universities could not absorb more than a small proportion, nor could the SPSL assist them all. In May 1938, there were, worldwide, at least 814 scholars who had left their own countries and who required assistance. Another 496 remained in Germany, unable or unwilling to leave, but who requested aid from the Society. At least 200 applications were received from Austrian scholars. The international aspect of the problem required cooperation with similar agencies operating in Europe and North America. Of these, the most important were the *Notgemeinschaft Deutscher Wissenschaftler im Ausland*, first based in Zurich, but after 1935, located alongside the SPSL in London; and the American Emergency Committee for Displaced Scholars, based in New York. The former was a ‘mutual assistance organization’ founded by displaced scholars in 1933. Its greatest success came in placing around fifty German academics at the new University of Istanbul. In addition, the American Emergency Committee found work for 161 European academic refugees by June 1938.¹⁶

The SPSL did the lion’s share of the work in providing initial support, even when final placement was the responsibility of another agency. It supported many who eventually found work in the United States of America by providing travel grants, and by matching applicants with opportunities. Most scientists who ended up in more exotic places – including South America, the Middle East, India, and China – owed their positions to the SPSL. By June 1939, some £100,000 had been donated to the Society, and more was raised by British universities, private industry, and by a host of national and international foundations that supported scholars without going through the Society – although in almost all cases, the SPSL was involved in coordinating their efforts.¹⁷ By the outbreak of the war, the SPSL had aided at least 900 scholars.

¹⁶ SPSL 59. Displaced University Teachers, Informal Meeting at Oxford, 13 November 1937; SPSL 1/5. SPSL Annual Report, 1938.

¹⁷ Since the last pre-war report of the SPSL was written in June 1938, and the next one did not appear until 1946, it is almost impossible to determine the exact number of scholars aided prior to the war. The numbers given here are derived from SPSL 1/1–7. AAC and SPSL Annual Reports, 1933–46; and SPSL 59. Displaced University Teachers, Informal Meeting at Oxford, 13 November 1937, and SPSL 20. Walter Adams to Professor M. Greenwood, 4 May 1938. A good breakdown of fundraising to June 1939 is found in SPSL 115. David Gleghorn Thomson, General Secretary, to Sir Herbert Emerson, 29 June 1939.

THE POLITICS OF THE AAC: THE FIRST PHASE, 1933–1935

That historians have overlooked the role of the SPSL in politicizing the British scientific community may be explained in part by the low-key approach the organization took in its first two years. In the first draft of his May 1933 circular, Beveridge included statements criticizing the German Government. However, Rutherford, Robinson, Rayleigh and others argued that the Council had to steer a careful course, so as not to undermine its principal mission of helping displaced academics.¹⁸ Accordingly, Beveridge agreed to drop direct criticism of Germany. There were hurdles to be overcome, and the SPSL risked being added to the list of organizations with which Germans were forbidden by their Government to correspond.

Beveridge was also concerned by the academic situation in Britain. Given the widespread unemployment of the early 1930s, if refugees were perceived as foreign competition, there could be a backlash against them. This happened in some fields, notably medicine and dentistry, where professional associations specifically excluded refugees. Even more worrying was the prospect of arousing latent anti-Semitism. Rutherford reworded one of Beveridge's anti-German passages to read: 'The issue raised at the moment is not a Jewish one alone; many who have suffered or are threatened have no Jewish connection; moreover, the issue is not confined to one country'.¹⁹ Beveridge acquiesced in this change, but was unwilling to downplay the fact that German persecution was predominantly directed at Jews. His reasoning was not altruistic. Like many of his contemporaries, Beveridge felt that an Anglo-Jewish presence on the Executive was necessary in order to 'keep the Jewish community up to the mark of contributing sufficiently'. To this end, he nominated Professor Charles Singer, medical doctor and historian of medicine, as one of the honorary secretaries.²⁰

In dealings with the scientific establishment, Beveridge was extremely cautious. Winning the support of the Royal Society was vital. On 18 May 1933, he explained to Gowland Hopkins his decision to nominate Singer to the Executive: 'The fact that Professor Singer is a Jew ought, I am sure, not to weigh in this matter. He is very well known academically, and the rest of the [AAC] Council is so

¹⁸ SPSL 24. Robinson to Rutherford, 14 May 1933; Rutherford to Beveridge, 11 May 1933; Rutherford to Beveridge, 14 May 1933.

¹⁹ SPSL 24. Rutherford to Beveridge, 11 May 1933.

²⁰ SPSL 24. Beveridge to Rutherford, 16 May 1933.

overwhelmingly non-Jewish as to make it clear that the movement is academic and scientific'.²¹

The Royal Society disagreed. The Society's Council, at a meeting held on the same day as Beveridge's letter was received, rejected the proposal of having a Jewish member on the AAC Executive, and instead suggested Gibson as the second honorary secretary. Apparently, no-one responded to Beveridge directly, but Rutherford was informed, and passed the letters to Beveridge, with a personal note urging him to accept the Royal Society's decision. Beveridge reluctantly did so. His discretion was acknowledged by Gowland Hopkins, who then agreed to sign the circular. The AAC was also offered temporary accommodation at the Royal Society, and given specific permission to mention the Society's support.²²

As distasteful as it was, Beveridge recalled later, the exclusion of Singer was politically necessary.²³ The AAC/SPSL's archives contain a folder with a number of anti-Semitic hate letters sent in response to the first appeal. It is impossible to know whether this is just a selection, or a complete collection, but their virulence leaves little doubt that his fears of anti-Semitism were justified.²⁴ The primary mission of the AAC was not to protest against injustice, but to assist its victims. One could not assist victims while publicly denouncing the reprehensible policies of the German Government. Singer seems to have accepted the Royal Society's logic; he and his wife remained devoted to the AAC, the SPSL and other refugee organizations.

The avoidance of explicit criticism of Germany became a hallmark of the AAC until the end of 1934. Even at the largest single public fund-raising event sponsored by the organization – the famous October 1933 meeting at Albert Hall at which Albert Einstein gave the keynote address – the AAC officially steered clear of controversy.²⁵ This is not to say that all members of the Executive remained silent. A.V. Hill, in his Huxley Memorial Lecture of 1933, began with a classic argument in favour of scientists adhering to the traditions of 'High Science', and warned that the Charter of the Royal Society forswore its members from meddling with politics. The intention was to foster tolerance and reason. Scientists,

²¹ BEV IXa/45. Beveridge to Gowland Hopkins, 18 May 1933.

²² SPSL 24. F.E.S. to Rutherford 18 May 1933; BEV IXa/45; Rutherford to Beveridge, 19 May 1933.

²³ Lord Beveridge, *A Defence of Free Learning* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 3.

²⁴ See the various letters in SPSL 53/3.

²⁵ For the Albert Hall Meeting, see SPSL 9/1.

Hill continued, ‘should remain aloof and detached, not from any sense of superiority, not from any indifference to the common welfare, but as a condition of complete intellectual honesty’.²⁶

Hill realized that the ‘golden age’ of ‘High Science’ – if it had ever existed – had come to an end. He saw that no scientist could remain apolitical in the face of Nazism’s ‘violation of freedom of thought and research’. When extracts of his lecture were published in *Nature*, a German scientist wrote to denounce him. Hill’s rebuttal, which appeared in the same issue, recounted the crimes of the Nazi regime against science, and solicited funds for the Council.²⁷ However, throughout the affair, Hill kept the AAC out of the lime-light.

The AAC’s low political profile belied the extent of its activities. Its work, and the plight of displaced scholars, became widely known among the research community. The Council had three related goals: to promote acceptance of the value of employing refugees by British universities, colleges, and industry; to raise funds to support them; and to ensure that the Government allowed refugees to enter Britain. Before the Executive’s first meeting, Beveridge had received the endorsement of other organizations, including the Association of University Teachers and the British Science Guild.²⁸ On 16 June 1933, in one of his first formal acts on behalf of the AAC, Rutherford wrote to the vice-chancellors of all the British universities, saying, ‘We shall be glad to hear from you if your University is in a position to find openings for any of those recommended men or women’. He also asked for funds.

Most VCs responded positively, if cautiously, to the appeal, by agreeing to allow displaced scholars to use facilities and to teach students. They were, however, reluctant to commit funds. Typical was the response of the University of Leeds:

I need hardly assure you that the University is very sympathetic towards the objects which your council has in view. We have, in fact, already taken steps to render assistance such as your Council seeks to give. We are unlikely to require any financial assistance from your Council ... [but] it is impossible for the University Council to promise any contribution to a central fund for this purpose.²⁹

²⁶ Hill as quoted in Werskey, *op. cit.* note 4. 154.

²⁷ *Nature*, 135 (24 February 1934), 290.

²⁸ SPSL 2/1. R. Douglas Laurie, Association of University Teachers, to Beveridge, 1 June 1933; A. Howard, British Science Guild, to Beveridge, 20 May 1933.

²⁹ SPSL 51. Replies from Vice-Chancellors.

A small number initially refused support. The University of Sheffield blamed the economic malaise. Moreover, its response called upon one of the more persistent anti-Jewish stereotypes – that of the proverbial rich Jews who could, on their own, rescue their German brethren. Thus:

The funds at our disposal are very small indeed and that there is a very strong feeling that our own students – many of whose parents are unemployed – have the first claim upon them.

The opinion has also been strongly expressed that, as there are many rich men of the Jewish religion whose individual incomes are larger than the whole income of the University, it would be appropriate that they be asked to support the teachers in the first instance. At the same time we are very far from being unsympathetic towards the condition of these unfortunate persons, and it is only our poverty and not our will which suggests difficulties.³⁰

At least Sheffield was forthright; others were less open. The University of Durham's College of Medicine gave no explanation for its refusal to provide either money or space for displaced scholars and scientists.³¹

Most universities and colleges did, however, agree to let displaced academics use their facilities free of charge. In the meantime, the Executive decided to approach the academic community as a whole. Following the first circular, many had already pledged support, but in September 1933, a letter was sent to every academic in Britain, explaining the purpose of the organization and appealing for help. The campaign was successful; at least £7,000 was pledged, and considerably more was raised by local refugee committees. This response clearly registered the effect that the refugee crisis was having on British scholars. More difficult to measure, but equally important, was the way in which the AAC's campaign, and the actual presence of displaced scholars, transformed political attitudes. Many British scholars, particularly scientists, knew professionally – and in many cases, personally – those who were losing their positions in Germany. What seems to have motivated scientists most was perhaps best expressed on New Year's Day, 1934, by A.V. Hill in a letter to Beveridge. He wrote: 'It is not that these people will perish as human beings, but that as scholars and scientists they will be heard of no more, since they will have to take up something else in order to live'.³² In 1958, Beveridge wrote to Hill, describing what had occurred in 1933 as 'the spontaneous uprising

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² SPSL 2/1. Hill to Beveridge, 1 January 1934.

of British Universities against learning directed by Hitler and his imitators'.³³ This affected those on the Left, but also their more conservative colleagues. As C.P. Snow recalled in 1960:

People outside of the scientific world got the impression that, as soon as trouble broke, the scientists moved to the Left as one man. That is not true, and yet the impression is not wholly false. More unanimously than any other intellectual group, the scientists were anti-Nazi.³⁴

Rutherford and his peers, Snow continued, welcomed the Jewish refugees and 'went on voting Conservative but [were] getting restive and sympathetic to the Churchill wing'.³⁵

In this context, Socialist scientists came to similar conclusions. Patrick Blackett, wrote Snow, 'was the chosen symbol of scientists on the Left. In fact, he spoke for the younger generation of scientists in the thirties very much as Rutherford spoke for the older'.³⁶ In December 1934, Blackett wrote a note on the state of science in Germany, expressing concern at the extent to which 'science was being used for war preparations', and that 'many eminent scientists had left Germany, science was being used for anti-working class activities, and scientific fact was being deliberately distorted to accord with Nazi teachings'.³⁷ This is what led Blackett, just a few weeks later, to change his views on the morality of military research, and to agree to join the newly constituted Committee for the Scientific Survey of Air Defence.³⁸ There is no evidence that Blackett played a direct role in the AAC before 1935, but a number of German refugees did work in his laboratory. After 1935, Blackett became active in the SPSL, and by early 1936, was a member of the Executive.

Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of support for the AAC's objectives came in the person of Frederick Lindemann, FRS (later Lord Cherwell), who since 1920 had been head of Oxford University's Clarendon Laboratory. To say that Lindemann was the 'odd duck' of British science in the 1930s is an understatement. Politically, he was conservative but, unlike most of his contemporaries,

³³ BEV IXa/45 (1179). Beveridge to Hill, 14 February 1958.

³⁴ C.P. Snow, 'Rutherford and the Cavendish', in John Raymond (ed.), *The Baldwin Age* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1960), 246.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 247.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 248.

³⁷ McGucken, *op. cit.* note 8, 101–102.

³⁸ For more on Blackett's defence research in the 1930s, see David Zimmerman, 'Preparations for War', in Peter Hore (ed.), *Patrick Blackett, Sailor, Scientist and Socialist* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 110–125.

was actively involved in politics. He detested Communists as being either stupid or dishonest in their refusal to recognize that the Soviet Union was a brutal dictatorship. The dislike was mutual. Left-wing scientists considered him ‘an extreme example of the rich capitalist reactionary’.³⁹

Among Lindemann’s flaws was a tendency to make anti-Semitic remarks. His biographers remain divided about his opinion of Jews. He proved, however, a rare example of a person who, in the face of great injustice, could put bigotry to rest. Like his great friend Winston Churchill, Lindemann was among the first to appreciate the danger to Britain posed by Hitler. He was appalled by Hitler’s dismissal of scientists, and did not wait for the AAC to take action. Lindemann was wealthy, had excellent contacts with industry, and knew Germany as well as he did England. In 1933, he approached Imperial Chemical Industries for money to support displaced chemists and physicists. ICI gave £20,000 over the next two years – more than was raised by the AAC in its entire first year of operation. Some twenty scholars were given ICI grants, which paid almost twice as well as those offered by the AAC.

There is no doubt that Lindemann was ambitious for Oxford. He viewed Hitler’s foolishness as an opportunity to transform the Clarendon into a world centre for low temperature physics. Yet, his new Jewish colleagues – notably the physicist Francis (later Sir Francis) Simon – found him a generous man. Lindemann became a keen supporter of the SPSL in the years ahead.⁴⁰

Faced by a common enemy, the ideological gulf between Left and Right was thus dramatically reduced. In the records of the SPSL, there is only occasional mention of the ideological divide that has so preoccupied historians. Socialists and Conservatives agreed that science was above politics. Among those working for the SPSL, there were ideological tensions, but only because the Left did not contribute as well as expected. In May 1938, Walter Adams outlined the situation:

The amount [of money] from definitely left wing sources is negligible. Left wing people on the whole send us cases for assistance, occupy office time in obtaining information for their protests and propaganda and may be written off as liabilities instead of assets. I do not mean that all our individual subscribers are supporters

³⁹ Thomas Wilson, *Churchill and the Prof* (London: Cassel, 1995), 13.

⁴⁰ The Earl of Birkenhead, *The Professor and the Prime Minister* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1962), 97–104; R.F. Harrod, *The Prof* (London: Macmillan, 1959), 107–111. For the history of the ICI grant, see SPSL 16. Adams to Otto M. Schiff, 3 February 1936.

of Mr. Chamberlain, because I know quite a number personally who are even Communists, but their [the Left's] effective financial help is infinitesimal (sic).⁴¹

THE AAC, GOVERNMENT, AND FUNDRAISING OUTSIDE THE ACADEMY

In 1933, the Executive decided not to engage in protests against the persecution of scientists in Europe – a policy designed to appease those outside the academy whose support the AAC needed. This was wise. On 26 May 1933, a representative of the AAC – Beveridge, in all likelihood – met with R.E. Gomme of the Aliens Restrictions Branch of the Ministry of Labour. Gomme reported on a Cabinet decision to grant asylum to ‘fugitives from the Nazi regime in Germany, subject to the customary conditions and provided that they do not enter into competition with British subjects in the labour market’. Gomme added that the Government ‘would examine very sympathetically any application received from the Council for finding posts in this country for displaced Professors’. Scholars of ‘unquestionable repute’, like Einstein, would be welcomed. Applications from lesser known, but well-established scholars would be received favourably if funded by patrons dedicated to that purpose.⁴²

The policy of rejecting any refugee whose employment prevented a British subject from getting a position made the permanent placement of younger, less well-established scientists difficult. However, Gomme left the impression that all applications submitted by the AAC would be approved, if the organization met one condition – he ‘emphasized the necessity of great caution in order to avoid political controversy. The Ministry must be prepared to defend its actions in the face of agitation or criticism’.⁴³

The AAC, like those agencies trying to aid Jewish refugees, found that a lower profile met fewer obstacles.⁴⁴ Gradually, through gentle persuasion, employment restrictions were relaxed. In time, the AAC even became a quasi-government agent, acting as the intermediary between refugee scholars and the Ministry of

⁴¹ SPSL 20. Adams to Greenwood, 4 May 1938.

⁴² SPSL 1/7. Interview with Mr. R.E. Gomme, Aliens Restrictions Branch, Ministry of Labour, 26 May 1933.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ For British Government policy towards Jewish refugees, see Louise London, *Whitehall and the Jews, 1933–1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Labour, the Foreign Office, and the Home Office, and handling applications for work permits and other official documents. The Ministry of Labour designated the AAC as the employer of record for exiled academics working in Britain. In return, the Council agreed to give government 'advice in any instances of doubt and difficulty'.⁴⁵

In June 1935, Sir John Simon, Home Secretary, initiated negotiations with the AAC to remove the conditions attached to the work permits of some eminent German scholars. Gibson and Adams hoped to secure reduced restrictions for three test cases. However, Simon offered much more. In early December, the Home Office agreed to remove conditions on thirty-one German academics, permitting them to seek employment anywhere in Britain – the first step towards naturalization.⁴⁶ During the next four years, many more were granted similar dispensations – this, despite the fact that the Government, under pressure from the medical and dental associations, increased restrictions in those professions, and in some cases, banned German Jewish doctors and dentists from working in Britain altogether.⁴⁷

The success of these efforts stands in sharp contrast to the ACC's almost complete failure to tap foundation and corporate sources. The Pilgrim Trust blamed the economic crisis for its inability to help. The Council won some assistance from the Carnegie and Rockefeller Foundations, but was unsuccessful with industry. In the summer of 1933, Charles Singer and his wife Dorothea distributed 3,000 letters to company directors.⁴⁸ With the exception of a single grant from ICI, corporate funding did not materialize. For the next two years, Beveridge, Rutherford and others continued to lobby corporations; what they learned, was that reluctance to give reflected a fear of reprisal by the German Government. This tended to reinforce the AAC's commitment to a neutral stance. The problem undermined hopes for the Academic Freedom Trust, a major project of the AAC in 1934 and 1935, which was designed to provide funding for up to forty-five scholars, at a salary of £450 for at least five years.⁴⁹ One member of the

⁴⁵ SPSL 113. Gomme to Adams, 22 September 1933. See also Adams to Gomme, 27 November 1933; Gomme to Adams, 28 November 1933; and Adams to Gomme, 3 August 1934.

⁴⁶ SPSL 3. Minutes, Twentieth Meeting of the Executive Committee, 13 June 1935; BEV Ixa/45 (387). E.N. Cooper to Adams, 11 December 1935.

⁴⁷ Snow, *op. cit.* note 34, 51–52

⁴⁸ SPSL 1/7. Report on Progress, 1 August 1933.

⁴⁹ Nuffield College, Oxford, Cherwell Papers, D1/45. Details of the scheme are outlined in Adams to Lindemann, 9 December 1935.

Executive, Lord Eustace Percy, resigned because he objected to the use of the word 'freedom' in the title, fearing it would be seen 'as a direct challenge' to Hitler. He was not appeased when Walter Adams reassured him that nothing had changed, and that the Council was taking extraordinary steps to avoid controversy. This included the rejection of an offer of £1,000 'which would have involved them in a relationship with a campaign which had, at least implicitly, an anti-German purpose'.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, Beveridge and others spent months lobbying bankers. In March 1935, senior representatives agreed to consider the matter, but then rejected Beveridge's appeal. W. Favill Tuke, Chairman of Barclay's, wrote:

I much regret that the general opinion is, that whilst real sympathy is felt for the movement, and the steps which are on foot to help these individuals, it is not a matter to which the Banks feel they can devote their Funds.

I am exceedingly sorry, as I should have liked to do something to help you in this work, had it been possible.⁵¹

Beveridge thought that the City would support the Trust. He was right about the business community taking its cue from the banks; unfortunately, this meant that the trust campaign was only marginally successful. Funds for only four fellowships were secured, and these from a few Anglo-Jewish donations. A fifth fellowship was established in Glasgow by a local committee.⁵²

The bankers' decision had long-term consequences for the SPSL, which remained dependent on three principal sources. About half of its funding came from British-Jewish foundations, private donors, and refugee organizations. The rest came in small donations and annual subscriptions from members. It is impossible to estimate the amount provided by the academic community, although its contributions represented the largest proportion of funds received from predominantly non-Jewish sources. The SPSL would never enjoy the luxury of huge endowments, but by careful management, it did help a remarkable number of academics and their families.

⁵⁰ SPSL 24. Eustace Percy to Adams, 31 October 1934; Adams to Percy, 2 November 1934.

⁵¹ BEV IXa/45 (284). W. Favill Tuke, Barclay's Bank to Beveridge, 29 March 1935. See also SPSL 24, Adams to Rutherford, 28 March 1935.

⁵² SPSL 1/3. SPSL *Annual Report*, 1935.

THE RADICALIZATION OF THE SPSL, 1935–1939

From the end of 1935, the SPSL decided to abandon the AAC's policy of refraining from political controversy, and became increasingly vocal in promoting the cause of academic freedom. Three factors led to this important turn. First, the Society had developed an excellent working relationship with the Government, which no longer demanded that the SPSL avoid controversy. Second, given its failure to win the business community, the SPSL had no corporate sponsors to offend. Third, the German Government increased its persecution of scholars.

The Society's shift in sensibility can be followed in two speeches given by Beveridge at fund-raising events held some seven months apart during 1935. The first was delivered at Oxford on 14 March. That Beveridge was willing to give this speech at all was an indication that a move was underway. In this speech, Beveridge's choice of words blunted his criticism of Germany. He told his audience:

I recognize [the] feeling of German people that we have treated them unjustly and are responsible for their troubles. In a sense they feel that they are only passing on the persecution.

We must live with Germany and get her co-operation and wait for her to return to her old place in European civilization.

It's not easy to do that if we shut our eyes to this lapse from civilization.

Events in Germany are a challenge to our humanity – a challenge to our belief in Science and scholarship and freedom of thought – a challenge to the friends of those things throughout the world. Challenge to us in Britain above all.

Beveridge's language referred to the refugee crisis as 'a challenge not to be taken up by protests. Protests butter no parsnips. It has to be taken by remedial action'. He concluded by imploring his audience to rise up and help so that they could all 'turn a black page of world history into a bright one'.⁵³

Beveridge's second speech, delivered in Birmingham on 13 October, shows a dramatic change. Speaking just after the passage of the Nuremberg laws, Beveridge outlined in detail the way that these new laws were being enforced, and described them as unleashing '*A relentless persecution for which it would be hard to find parallel*'. 'The world', Beveridge warned, 'is not as good, these things – learning, freedom, brotherhood – *are not as safe as we had dreamed that they were*'. (emphasis provided) He concluded:

⁵³ BEV IXa/45 (269). Notes for a speech at Oxford on the AAC, apparently for Beveridge, March 1935.

Shadows of brutality and ignorance [are] returning from the past. The shadow lies not on Germany alone, but across the world. But the shadow looks deepest in Germany today, because in Germany before there was most light. The German people have been one of the great civilizing forces in the world – liberators of the spirit of humanity, liberators from ignorance and fear.⁵⁴

From this point onwards, the SPSL openly criticized the Nazi and fascist regimes. The Executive was no longer satisfied to reach only those who read *The Times* or the *Manchester Guardian*. Nor would private lobbying be its only way of raising funds. Increasingly, the SPSL looked to a broader audience. Significantly, Beveridge's Oxford speech was given in the Assembly Room of the Oxford Town Hall, but his Birmingham speech was given at a large church, and then repeated later in the day to the local Rotary Club.⁵⁵ It was followed less than two weeks later by an even more anti-German speech by A.V. Hill.

These fund-raising engagements became increasingly frequent, culminating, in February 1939, in a national series of nineteen lectures. Speakers included Blackett, Bragg, Sir Samuel Hoare, Sir Norman Angell, and Viscount Samuel. Another notable participant was Max Born, one of the first refugee German scientists. By then a British subject, living in Edinburgh, Born was active in helping others.⁵⁶ The lecture series was the single most successful fund-raising endeavour in the history of the SPSL, and raised more than £10,000.⁵⁷

At the same time, the SPSL also used the radio to spread its message. Beveridge asked the BBC to broadcast an eyewitness account of the March 1935 meeting at Oxford. It is unclear whether this was done, but in 1936, the BBC let the SPSL make a radio appeal as part of its 'Good Cause' segment. In the event, Beveridge's radio talk was far less critical of Germany than others he made. It is not known why he toned down his remarks; one may speculate that the BBC required him to do so. In any case, his plea was

⁵⁴ BEV IXa/45 (374). Notes on Beveridge's speech at Birmingham 13 October 1935 (emphasis added).

⁵⁵ The other speakers were Sir Frederic Kenyon and Professor Gilbert Murray. The meeting was chaired by H.A.L. Fisher. See BEV IXa/45 (268) for a broadsheet advertizing the lecture.

⁵⁶ For Max Born's career, see Nancy Thorndike Greenspan, *The End of the Certain World: The Life and Science of Max Born, the Nobel Physicist who Ignited the Quantum Revolution* (Chichester, England; Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2005).

⁵⁷ BEV IXa/45 (757). Announcement of Born's Lecture, 30 January 1939; BEV IXa/45 (761, List of Speakers for SPSL Appeal, February 1939.

effective; broadcast on 28 February 1937, it succeeded in raising more than £1,000 for the Society.⁵⁸

The same year saw another important development. Early fears of an anti-Jewish backlash, which had contributed to the exclusion of Jews from the Executive, gave way to friendly relations with Anglo-Jewish organizations, which had become the largest contributors, alongside individual Jewish donors and displaced scholars themselves. In 1935, Sir Robert Waley Cohen, a prominent businessman, joined the Executive, which, by 1938, included several other Jewish members, notably Charles Singer, who had been blocked in 1933.⁵⁹

In the spring of 1939, the Friends of the Hebrew University asked the SPSL to sponsor a fund-raising dinner in London to enable that university to add to the forty refugee academics already on its staff. Without hesitation, Adams, Hill, Greenwood, and Gibson accepted. The host of the dinner, held on 29 June, was William Temple, Archbishop of York, who became president of the SPSL following Rutherford's death in 1937. The dinner raised several thousand pounds for the Hebrew University. It is not known whether these funds were used to rescue Jewish scholars before the coming of war made this impossible.⁶⁰

Whether the SPSL led or followed academic opinion can be estimated by considering the most successful British protest against the loss of academic freedom in Germany. One year after Beveridge's admonition to the Left that 'protests butter no parsnips', senior members of the Executive led a campaign to persuade British universities not to participate in the 550th anniversary celebrations of the University of Heidelberg. The celebrations were seen as a political stunt, staged by the Nazis to win international endorsement. Adams enlisted the support of Beveridge, Hill, Gowland Hopkins, and Kenyon, all members of the Executive since 1933. Their efforts spilled into a letter-writing campaign in the *The Times* between 4 and 29 February 1936. Kenyon, Hill, and Hopkins started by writing an article that was a biting indictment of the destruction of Germany's universities. The article appeared in *The Times* on 7

⁵⁸ BEV IXa/45 (261). Beveridge to Sir John Reith, BBC, 28 February 1935; BEV IXa/45 (417). Adams to Beveridge, 15 May 1936; IXa/45 (426). Adams to Beveridge 18 June 1936; IXa/45 (464). Adams to Beveridge, 13 February 1937; IXa/45 (475). Text of Broadcast Appeal, 28 February 1937; IXa/45 (489). Adams to Beveridge, 17 April 1937.

⁵⁹ SPSL 1/1–4. See the SPSL's Annual Reports, 1935–38.

⁶⁰ BEV IXa/45 (769). Adams to Beveridge, 28 April 1939; BEV IXa/45 (767). Letter to I.M. Sieff, 4 May 1939; BEV IXa/45 (836). Invitation to Fund Raising Dinner, 29 June 1939.

February. It was republished in the April 1936 issue of the *Universities Review*. In order to spread the protest internationally, the letters and the article were collected in a book and published in the USA by Viking Press.⁶¹ In the end, not a single British university sent a delegate to Heidelberg – a convincing sign of unity among British scholars and a significant victory for the SPSL in mobilizing academic opinion.

CONCLUSION

In many ways that historians have yet to recognize, the AAC/SPSL became an agent of change, uniting British scientists in defence of the principles of academic freedom. The German universities, which historically had invented these very concepts, had failed to defend them against their enemies. British scholars were determined to help the victims. It is perhaps a testament to the generosity of the British scientific community that, with rare exceptions, there were no complaints about bringing displaced scientists into British universities, even at the deepest moments of the Depression. Prompted by the SPSL's activities, the apolitical elite, conservatives, and the Left joined in what became a moral crusade. Lindemann contained his anti-Semitic remarks, Hill became politically engaged, and Blackett joined in preparations for war.

Those involved in the AAC had to make difficult choices. At first, it was essential to avoid public criticism of the German Government, and to avoid overt aid to persecuted Jews. Only after 1935, when it became clear that its mission could not be compromised, did the Society begin to express its deep condemnation of Hitler. Throughout, the SPSL remained committed to helping scholars. As a 1938 article in *Nature* explained, the Society existed 'not to advertise a particular point of view, but to do an honest job of work in seeing that the ability and experience in science and scholarship are not wasted'. It stood 'for the brotherhood of scientific endeavour, regardless of race creed and politics', and did so 'not by passing pious resolutions or by putting out disguised

⁶¹ SPSL 21. Hill to Adams 3 January 1936; Beveridge, *A Defence*, *op. cit.* note 23, 48–50; A.V. Hill, F. Gowland Hopkins, F.G. Kenyon, 'German Universities', *Heidelberg and the Universities of America* (New York: Viking, 1936), 55–59.

political propaganda, but by trying to help colleagues in their need', lest their voices be silenced forever.⁶²

Overall, the SPSL rescued a generation of European scholars and helped politicize British scholars. At the outbreak of war, however, its work was not complete. During the 1940s, led by its new executive secretary Esther Simpson, the SPSL fought for the freedom of refugee scholars declared enemy aliens and interned by the British Government. At the same time, it aided a new group of refugee scholars who had fled Nazi-occupied Europe. At the end of the war, the Society traced the whereabouts of all scholars who had not managed to escape, assisting those that had survived and informing friends and relatives of the fates of those that had not. Ever since, the SPSL – renamed in 1997 the Council for Assisting Refugee Academics (CARA) – continues to aid refugee scholars and defend academic freedom.⁶³

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Zimmerman is a Professor of History at the University of Victoria, British Columbia. His works include *Britain's Shield: Radar and the The Defeat of the Luftwaffe* (Stroud: Sutton, 2001); *Top Secret Exchange: The Tizard Mission and the Scientific War* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996); and *The Great Naval Battle of Ottawa* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989). He is currently writing a history of the SPSL between 1933 and 1940.

⁶² As quoted in Norman Bentwich, *The Rescue and Achievement of Refugee Scholars* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1953), 96.

⁶³ For the wartime and immediate post-war work of the SPSL, see SPSL1/5. SPSL Annual Report, 1946. For current information on CARA, see the organization's home page at <http://www.academic-refugees.org>.

*Department of History
University of Victoria
V8W 3P4
Victoria, BC
Canada
E-mail: dzimmerm@uvic.ca*