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*'Public Opinion in England Is Seriously Roused': Popular Attitudes and National Stereotypes during the Metropolitan-Vickers Crisis of 1933**

In a wave of arrests beginning on Saturday 11 March 1933, twenty-five Soviet engineers and contractors were taken into custody by the OGPU (the Soviet secret police), accused of sabotage over the damage and destruction of industrial equipment at power stations in Moscow, Chelyabinsk, Zuyevka and Zlatoust, as well as at other sites in Ivanovo and Baku. Twelve were subsequently put on trial for their alleged offences. Alongside the Soviet workers, those arrested included six British citizens working for the Metropolitan-Vickers Company who were the principal focus of the authorities' investigation. Seen as the orchestrators of the plot, they were charged with espionage and bribery as well as direct involvement in the 'wrecking' activities. Allan Monkhouse, head of the company in Moscow, and chief engineer Leslie Thornton were arrested, along with Charles Nordwall, Albert Gregory, John Cushny and William MacDonald. The actions of the Soviet regime caused an international incident that dominated press reports and political debate in Britain throughout the spring and early summer of 1933. As Britain's ambassador to the Soviet Union, Sir Esmond Ovey, commented to Sir Robert Vansittart, permanent under-secretary at the Foreign Office, he had heard 'that public opinion in England is seriously roused'.¹ Vansittart concurred, replying that 'Feeling was widespread that the allegations against these men were grotesque and hysterical'.²

Beyond the diplomatic implications of the affair, the Metropolitan-Vickers case was of particular consequence for economic relations between Britain and the Soviet Union. G.L. Owen, whose account described the crisis as 'perhaps symbolic of the entire Western world's diplomatic conflict with the Soviet Union between the world wars', thought that it was fundamentally 'rooted in economics' and the particularities of Anglo-Soviet trade, a view subsequently echoed by

* The author would like to thank Professor Adrian Bingham for his encouragement and invaluable advice on earlier drafts of this article.

1. *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919–1939—Second Series*, VII: 1929–34 (London, 1958) [hereafter *DBFP*], p. 313, no. 222 (E. Ovey (Moscow) to R. Vansittart, 15 Mar. 1933).

2. *DBFP*, p. 321, no. 234 (Vansittart to Ovey (Moscow), 16 Mar. 1933).

Keith Neilson.³ In October 1932, in the aftermath of the Ottawa Conference that established a system of imperial preference on imports, the National Government served notice that Britain would renounce the 1930 Anglo-Soviet trade agreement to come into effect in April 1933. The timing of the engineers' arrest was therefore particularly suspect: it could be leveraged in negotiations for a new agreement that were resumed after the prisoners' release and then finalised in February 1934. The release also ended Britain's trade embargo against Soviet produce—the Russian Goods (Import Prohibition) Act—as well as the reciprocal Soviet counter-embargo. Economic pragmatism was clearly in evidence; the chairman of Metropolitan-Vickers, Sir Felix Pole, even declared, 'We shall be ready to work for Russia, and I hope we get orders'.⁴

In the Soviet context, the trial of the engineers was a formative moment in the chronology of the Soviet purges, and a test case for the set-piece show trials that characterised the period 1936–38. According to Robert Conquest, it marked the culmination of a preliminary phase in the regime's objective of 'founding a case upon false confessions extracted by terror', and followed other trials that collectively perfected the formula that was used to eradicate Stalin's domestic opposition.⁵ The method had previously been implemented in the Shakhty case of 1928, the trial of the so-called 'Industrial Party' in 1930, and against the remnants of Menshevik opposition in 1931. The Metropolitan-Vickers case shared several common features with these related episodes. The trial was held in the 'October Hall' of the Trade Union House (formerly the Blue Room of what had been the Nobles' Club), the same venue as subsequent trials, and featured a similar cast of characters. Vasilii Ulrikh was president of the court, Andrey Vyshinsky, Soviet foreign minister from 1949 until 1953, acted as the lead prosecutor, and even the defence counsel reappeared in later cases, notably Nikolai Kommodov and Ilya Braude, representing Monkhouse and Thornton respectively in April 1933. It therefore constituted a crucial 'dress rehearsal from which directors and producers could draw a number of lessons, and learn to do better next time' when Stalin moved against countless former comrades.⁶ Moreover, in this scenario Stalin was the central impresario—the chief playwright' in the courtroom 'melodramas'—notwithstanding determined contemporary encomiums defending the transparency of Soviet justice.⁷ Nevertheless, in relative

3. G.L. Owen, 'The Metro-Vickers Crisis: Anglo-Soviet Relations between Trade Agreements, 1932–1934', *Slavonic and East European Review*, xlix (1971), pp. 92–112, at 92; K. Neilson, 'A Cautionary Tale: The Metro-Vickers Incident of 1933', in G. Kennedy and K. Neilson, eds, *Incidents and International Relations: People, Power and Personalities* (Westport, CT, 2002), pp. 87–112. Other studies have parenthetically endorsed this interpretation; for example, A.J. Williams, *Labour and Russia: The Attitude of the Labour Party to the USSR, 1924–1934* (Manchester, 1989), p. 201.

4. *Manchester Guardian*, 3 July 1933.

5. R. Conquest, *The Great Terror: Stalin's Purge of the Thirties* (London, 1973), p. 68.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 737.

7. R.C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928–1941* (London, 1990), p. 171.

terms, and when it is mentioned at all, the Metropolitan-Vickers case has traditionally been subsumed within broader narratives of Stalin's terror.⁸

The case has not fared much better in analyses of Anglo-Soviet relations, where general surveys seldom offer sustained examination.⁹ However, a more dedicated historiography, although somewhat dated, has emerged.¹⁰ Alongside the economic focus addressed by Owen and Neilson, Gordon Morrell's wider study deserves particular consideration.¹¹ It examines the affair's significance across economic relations, diplomacy, legal theory and intelligence networks, but with peripheral consideration of public opinion, and only limited use of press sources (particularly popular newspapers) to explore the British perspective. Indeed, despite its title, Morrell's *Britain Confronts the Stalin Revolution* is more preoccupied with judicial procedure, diplomatic exchanges and the Soviet domestic context than extra-parliamentary views in Britain itself. On this latter point, Steffanie Nanson's research constitutes a more compelling approach. Although her survey of press attitudes does not extend to the formulation of public opinion, the chapter on Metropolitan-Vickers grasps its real significance in an affirmatory sense, reinforcing existing preconceptions about the Soviet Union that had become familiar in the post-revolutionary period.¹²

While the existing literature has largely approached the crisis from the more conventional starting point of diplomatic and economic relations, this article takes its inspiration from the broader definitions of the 'new political history': how people engaged with 'the political' or political culture in a wider sense. To use Lawrence Black's analogy, 'Just as the Church was not the sum of religious history, nor was party or government the sum of politics'. This essentialises a view of politics that encompasses the seemingly apolitical, what Black describes as the 'paradox' of how 'parochial, ephemeral ... liminal or marginal to many Britons, politics was'.¹³ In this context, a study that hinges on newspaper records may appear to constitute a more orthodox examination of political discourse.

8. One notable account even gets the date wrong repeatedly: D. Rayfield, *Stalin and His Hangmen: An Authoritative Portrait of a Tyrant and Those Who Served Him* (London, 2004), pp. 156–60. In his otherwise excellent editorial work with Ivan Maisky's diaries, Gabriel Gorodetsky also makes this error, suggesting the arrests occurred in July 1933 and—even more erroneously—in London: *The Maisky Diaries: Red Ambassador to the Court of St James's, 1932–1943*, ed. G. Gorodetsky, tr. T. Sorokina and O. Ready (New Haven, CT, 2015), p. 6.

9. For example, C. Keeble, *Britain and the Soviet Union, 1917–89* (London, 1990), pp. 113–16.

10. See G.W. Morrell, 'Redefining Intelligence and Intelligence-Gathering: The Industrial Intelligence Centre and the Metro-Vickers Affair, Moscow 1933', *Intelligence and National Security*, ix (1994), pp. 520–33; D. Lammers, 'The Engineers Trial (Moscow, 1933) and Anglo-Soviet Relations', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, lxii (1963), pp. 256–67; G. Udy, *Labour and the Gulag: Russia and the Seduction of the British Left* (London, 2017), pp. 409–25.

11. G.W. Morrell, *Britain Confronts the Stalin Revolution: Anglo-Soviet Relations and the Metro-Vickers Crisis* (Waterloo, ON, 1995).

12. S. Nanson, 'Fleet Street's Dilemma: The British Press and the Soviet Union, 1933–1941' (Univ. of St Andrews Ph.D. thesis, 1997), pp. 31–61.

13. L. Black, *Redefining British Politics: Culture, Consumerism and Participation, 1954–70* (Basingstoke, 2010), pp. 1–2.

However, the article seeks to understand the underlying identities on which narratives of the crisis were constructed, and how these reflected popular perceptions of both Britain and the Soviet Union. Rather than superimposing approved views on a docile public, the press—especially popular newspapers—functioned as an ‘arena’ that conceded agency to readers whose habits and preferences, both cultural and political, shaped the papers’ contents and editorial responses.¹⁴ The popular press could challenge stereotypes one moment and reinforce them the next, not because it was mercurial, but because it was sensitive to changing social and political trends, making these newspapers invaluable historical resources.¹⁵ Even elite newspapers, albeit in an idealised nineteenth-century conceptualisation of press theory, collectively operated as ‘an arena for public discussion’, notably through the use of correspondence columns to provide a remarkably representative forum for public opinion on the topics of the day.¹⁶ Hence, on this basis, the responses of Britons to the Metropolitan-Vickers case can be delineated beyond the more rarefied accounts of Cabinet minutes and diplomatic summaries.

Newspapers and periodicals are essential to this objective. In retrospect, the Metropolitan-Vickers affair can be seen as the last international crisis before the existence of new ways to access public opinion. Opinion polls conducted by the British Institute of Public Opinion were not introduced until 1937, the same year that Mass-Observation began its pioneering social research. In their absence, the press offers the historian the most compelling—perhaps the only—‘window into popular culture’, as Adrian Bingham has described it; ‘a way of exploring the representations and narratives that circulated throughout society’.¹⁷ Sales of national daily newspapers in the mid-1930s exceeded ten million, with an even wider circulation, such that around two-thirds of Britain’s population read a newspaper each day; an immense snapshot of what Britons thought, bought and argued about.¹⁸ Increasing historiographical interest in newspapers as indispensable cultural signifiers should not obscure the fact that contemporaries also thought of the press in these terms. Francis Williams, who worked at the *Daily Herald* before becoming its editor in 1936, subsequently reflected that ‘Newspapers are the mirrors of their times’; they produced current history that represented ‘the way of life of

14. A. Bingham, *Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press in Inter-War Britain* (Oxford, 2004), p. 16.

15. A. Bingham, ‘Ignoring the First Draft of History? Searching for the Popular Press in Studies of Twentieth-Century Britain’, *Media History*, xviii (2012), pp. 311–26, at 320.

16. M. Hampton, *Visions of the Press in Britain, 1850–1950* (Urbana, IL, 2004), p. 9. For a test case of how elite newspapers functioned in this representative sense before the First World War, see D. Vessey, ‘Votes for Women and Public Discourse: Elite Newspapers, Correspondence Columns and Informed Debate in Edwardian Britain’, *Media History*, xxvii (2021), pp. 476–90.

17. A. Bingham, ‘Reading Newspapers: Cultural Histories of the Popular Press in Modern Britain’, *History Compass*, x (2012), pp. 140–50, at 142.

18. J. Curran and J. Seaton, *Power without Responsibility: Press, Broadcasting and the Internet in Britain* (8th edn, London, 2018), p. 45.

the great majority of the people, the kind of things they do and talk about, *the kind of values they set themselves* [my emphasis], the amusements they follow, the sort of things—even when they are silly things—that interest them'.¹⁹ We can therefore use newspapers to understand the popular impulses that drove reactions to the crisis.

Using the press in this way is possible because interest in Soviet affairs was continuous throughout the 1930s, and newspapers evolved definite editorial positions on the Soviet Union. These were not impervious to wider influences, but they were enduring, meaning that the Metropolitan-Vickers case elided with an established framework for conceptualising the Soviet Union. Conservative newspapers, particularly the *Daily Express* and *Daily Mail*, viewed diplomatic recognition of the Bolshevik state with disgust, and therefore saw the crisis as an opportunity to terminate relations. The *Daily Mirror*, part of Lord Rothermere's stable alongside the *Mail*, was also ill-disposed to the Soviet Union, albeit this was partially attenuated by its status as a pictorial paper (in comparative terms, visual spectacle occasionally compressed the available space for news and comment). Similarly, the *Daily Telegraph*, although hostile towards Communism, was slightly less excitable in its execrations, in keeping with its hybrid market position between the popular press and elite newspapers. In contrast, newspapers such as the *News Chronicle*, *Daily Herald* and the *Manchester Guardian*—a regional paper of national importance—while critical of the engineers' arrest, were not blind to the machinations of the British government and accepted the legitimacy of the Bolshevik state. The *Guardian*, for example, in May 1931, pondered whether, once dogmatism had receded on both sides, 'something fine and permanent will be found to have come from the astonishing energy and enthusiasm that have lately been manifest in Russia?' It thought then, as it would do again in March 1933, that economic crisis did not allow Britain 'to play the pharisee' by ostracising Communism.²⁰ This view was shared across enduringly influential periodicals, notably *The Spectator*, *The Economist* and the *New Statesman and Nation*, which were still held up as the foremost 'weekly journals of opinion' by the time of the first Royal Commission on the Press in the late 1940s.²¹

In its appraisal of newspaper responses, this article seeks to revise a misconception that was held by some contemporary observers: that anti-Soviet opinion was orchestrated by the government via an obedient press, thus rendering the public subservient in its engagement with the affair. This claim was intrinsic to the oppositional narratives of pro-Soviet groups. Maurice Dobb, a prominent economist and member of the Communist Party, proposed this argument—the 'manufacture [of] a virtual war-psychosis'—in his pamphlet *The Press and the Moscow Trial*,

19. F. Williams, *Press, Parliament and People* (London, 1946), p. 160.

20. *Manchester Guardian*, 19 May 1931.

21. *Royal Commission on the Press, 1947–1949* (London, 1949), p. 13.

published under the auspices of the Friends of the Soviet Union. Dobb protested that ‘the British Press and Government seized the pretext for the most violent and systematic campaign against Russia that we have witnessed since the days of intervention and civil war’.²² This view has some anecdotal support; for example, William Strang, who as chargé d’affaires at the Moscow embassy deputised for Ovey on the latter’s recall to London, congratulated the Foreign Office’s News Department on working ‘wonders’ with press correspondents, though Reuters had apparently been ‘very wobbly’, necessitating an intervention by the foreign secretary Sir John Simon.²³ Individual journalists also recorded attempted intimidation, as in the case of A.J. Cummings, who covered the trial for the *News Chronicle* and was roused from his hotel bed at 2 a.m. by J.M.K. Vyvyan, the third secretary at the Moscow embassy, to clarify a prior report on the fairness of the Soviet judicial system. Cummings sent Vyvyan packing with a lecture on press freedom.²⁴ Nevertheless, other sources suggest a different interpretation of the government’s role. Vansittart subsequently confided to the Soviet ambassador Ivan Maisky ‘that the press of both countries should act with discretion’ over such incidents, suggesting that newspapers—and thereby public opinion—ran ahead of what the Foreign Office was comfortable with.²⁵ As Nanson suggests, and despite the provocative release of diplomatic communications in two white papers, the government’s robust response formalised the spontaneous press and public reaction.²⁶ In Cummings’s estimation, ‘The attitude of the British Government made intelligible the tempestuous outburst in the British Press and the warlike emotions aroused in the public mind’.²⁷

Vansittart’s remarks to Maisky demonstrate that the undercurrent of public opinion began to exert a greater influence on foreign policy calculations, and that Whitehall was more sensitive to the role of the press as a two-way conduit to an engaged readership. The comparative spontaneity of the Metropolitan-Vickers crisis undermined a co-ordinated attempt to influence newspaper coverage, but the anxiety to manage public opinion became more apparent in the later 1930s, not least over the appeasement of Hitler’s Germany.²⁸ In an Anglo-Soviet context, the force of popular pressure and the attentiveness of policy-makers can be ascertained in fluctuating portrayals of the Soviet Union during Britain’s

22. M. Dobb, *The Press and the Moscow Trial: An Analysis* (London, 1933), pp. 2–3.

23. *DBFP*, pp. 507–8, no. 451 (extract from letter from Strang to Collier, 24 Apr. 1933); Morrell, *Britain Confronts*, p. 83.

24. A.J. Cummings, *The Moscow Trial* (London, 1933), p. 71.

25. *Maisky Diaries*, ed. Gorodetsky, p. 10 (9 Aug. 1934).

26. Nanson, ‘Fleet Street’s Dilemma’, p. 59.

27. Cummings, *Moscow Trial*, p. 13.

28. See R. Cockett, *Twilight of Truth: Chamberlain, Appeasement and the Manipulation of the Press* (London, 1989); F.R. Gannon, *The British Press and Germany, 1936–1939* (Oxford, 1971); G. Hodgson, ‘Sir Nevile Henderson, Appeasement and the Press: Fleet Street and the Build-Up to the Second World War’, *Journalism Studies*, viii (2007), pp. 320–34.

ineffectual negotiations over a shared defence policy in the summer of 1939.²⁹ Hence, popular sentiment could no longer be discounted. Contrary to Neilson's assertion that the incident 'provoked more heat than light' and that policy-makers remained unruffled—an interpretation not suggested by diplomatic cables at the outset of the crisis—if the public were 'seriously roused', then the government had to act accordingly, either by downplaying calls for retaliation or, as in this case, by endorsing moral indignation and implementing severe economic reprisals.³⁰ This therefore commends an approach that attempts to identify patterns in popular opinion, in contrast to studies that have analysed press reaction to the Soviet Union as an end in itself.³¹

In his retrospective account, Cummings saw the Metropolitan-Vickers episode as unleashing 'an emotional typhoon such as had not visited the British Isles for a generation', which poses the related questions of how this sentiment was channelled, and what were its characteristics.³² In this latter sense, narratives of the crisis projected an idealised version of the British character, repurposing common identity motifs to alleviate self-doubt about Britain's vitality in the 1930s. Qualities that seem clichéd or mythologised to the modern gaze undoubtedly underpinned how Britons perceived themselves, as is apparent in the work of the *Punch* cartoonist 'Pont' (Graham Laidler) and his recurring series 'The British Character' (1937–38). Many of the cartoons were facetious—the British fondness for collecting or their habit of driving in the middle of the road—but others attempted an earnest commentary on the essential basis of Britishness. Some qualities were accentuated more frequently than others, notably an emphasis on stoicism; for example, 'Patience in Adversity' depicted this theme using the everyday scene of passengers in a jammed commuter carriage.³³ Britons as intrepid empire-builders also featured regularly, as in 'Imperialism', with sailors raising the Union flag over a rock in a storm, an unironic testament to British indefatigability.³⁴ Perhaps more perceptive, however, were cartoons that discerned an atavistic disposition in the British character. This was done stereotypically—'A Tendency to Cling to the Past' showed a living room cluttered with family

29. See D. Hucker, 'Public Opinion, the Press and the Failed Anglo-Franco-Soviet Negotiations of 1939', *International History Review*, xl (2018), pp. 65–85.

30. Neilson, 'Cautionary Tale', p. 105.

31. See C. Knight, 'The Making of the Soviet Ally in British Wartime Popular Press', *Journalism Studies*, xiv (2013), pp. 476–90; P. Deli, 'The Quality Press and the Soviet Union: A Case Study of the Reactions of the *Manchester Guardian*, the *New Statesman* and *The Times* to Stalin's Great Purges, 1936–38', *Media History*, v (1999), pp. 159–80; P. Deli, 'The Image of the Russian Purges in the *Daily Herald* and the *New Statesman*', *Journal of Contemporary History*, xx (1985), pp. 261–82; T. Shaw, 'The British Popular Press and the Early Cold War', *History*, lxxxiii (1998), pp. 66–85, though Shaw sees his work as a preface to further research on public opinion and the Cold War.

32. Cummings, *Moscow Trial*, p. 11.

33. *Punch*, 1 Dec. 1937.

34. *Punch*, 25 Aug. 1937.

pictures and keepsakes—but nonetheless hinted at a sense of wistfulness that suffused national uncertainty throughout the 1930s.³⁵

The critic and writer Percy Wyndham Lewis also highlighted this tendency in his satirical work *The Mysterious Mr. Bull*, published in 1938. Lewis mocked fidelity to the ‘hollow slogans’ of England’s constitutional history, thus revealing their enduring popular appeal:

Those brave words deriving from the ancient charters of liberty of the English People still decorate our public speech and provide authority for our international action: English ‘Fair play’ is still invoked: English ‘honesty’ is still reckoned an attribute of what is British as it was, in the past, of what was English.³⁶

For Lewis, the average Englishman was a composite character that defied unitary explanation, still less when Englishness morphed into Britishness to create a broader, non-Anglocentric identity. ‘John Bull’ was a superficial caricature, “‘the strong man exhibiting at a fair’ ... with puffed-out chest and jingo eye’ rather than the ‘humane people’ that actually constituted the masses.³⁷ Debilitated by the international crises of the later 1930s, Lewis saw Englishmen as ‘the most helpless creature politically and in most other respects, of any national of a great civilised State’, rendered emotionally inert by the ‘spiritless fatuity’ of an overbearing paternalistic national press.³⁸ His preferred character traits—tolerance, modesty, peacefulness—remained understated and underappreciated.³⁹

Lewis’s critique could have been written about the Metropolitan-Vickers affair, such was the ubiquity of his caricatures—or Pont’s more sincere depictions—in responses to the arrests and trial. As Raphael Samuel suggested in his multi-volume series on national identity, although the 1930s was a period of relative introversion, Britons still conceived of themselves ‘as setting an *example* to other countries’.⁴⁰ Faith in the rule of law, the superiority of representative institutions, and a reputation for industrial excellence, were all impugned by the actions of the Soviet Union, and Britons reacted instinctively in defence of these ideals by absolving the engineers of blame. Whether these characteristics accurately embodied 1930s Britain is less important than their fictitious resonance, what Samuel theorised as ‘components [of] an imaginative underpinning, or disguise, for precepts which are the common currency of political

35. *Punch*, 29 Dec. 1937.

36. P.W. Lewis, *The Mysterious Mr Bull* (London, 1938), p. 13.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 103.

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 93–5.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 287.

40. R. Samuel, ‘Introduction: Exciting to be English’ in R. Samuel, ed., *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, 1: *History and Politics* (London, 1989), pp. xvii–lxvii, at xxvii.

debate'.⁴¹ And precisely because these qualities were imaginary, they could be malleable rather than monolithic, or 'maddeningly flexible', as Peter Mandler has observed.⁴² Individual Britons could be stoic and phlegmatic but also forthright and pugnacious, allegorical amalgams of John Bull and Britannia standing up for the nation on the world stage. All of these potentially competing tropes can be detected in coverage of the crisis and how Britishness was self-constituted. They were not 'disaggregated attributes', to use Paul Langford's phrase, 'but rather a treasured compound' that allowed newspapers and commentators to inscribe their preferred version of the national persona onto the affair.⁴³ This also operated antithetically with accusations of Soviet underhandedness and barbarism, the counterweight to British decency and 'fair play'.

Abstractions of the engineers as the apotheosis of Britishness also implied a meditation on British manhood and the fusion of different conceptions of the masculine ideal. In the public sphere, this encompassed an emphasis on duty and integrity—the 'Victorian valorization of work' associated with the long nineteenth century—but it was also extended to the private sphere in perceptions of the engineers as equally conscientious in their domestic responsibilities despite their employment in the Soviet Union.⁴⁴ This was typical of the period; as Laura King has argued, the patriarchal basis of British society allowed men to retain their status as 'ceremonial' masters of the household while becoming a more active presence in everyday family life. Absence could be 'mutually reinforcing' by accentuating economic authority within the family unit, with repatriation allowing a renewed focus on domestic happiness.⁴⁵ We might even see the assigned gender personas of the Metropolitan-Vickers men as a crossover point between a more combative form of masculinity and the 'inward-looking, private, quiet, "little" Englandism' that, Susan Kingsley Kent suggests, was more characteristic of the later 1930s; a domesticated, 'rather shy and timid sort' that was irreconcilable with the cartoonish John Bull.⁴⁶ Gendered coverage of the crisis also applied to women. The engineers' geographical isolation led newspapers to promote their wives—particularly Mrs Monkhouse and Mrs Thornton (forenames were never provided)—as important actors in the drama, promoting their resilience and fidelity to the domestic ideals of the wife and mother.

41. R. Samuel, 'Introduction: The Figures of National Myth' in R. Samuel, ed., *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, III: *National Fictions* (London, 1989), pp. xi–xxxvi at xix.

42. P. Mandler, *The English National Character: The History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair* (London, 2006), p. 163.

43. P. Langford, *Englishness Identified: Manners and Character, 1650–1850* (Oxford, 2000), p. 313.

44. J. Tosh, 'Masculinities in an Industrializing Society: Britain, 1800–1914', *Journal of British Studies*, xlv (2005), pp. 330–42, at 332.

45. L. King, *Family Men: Fatherhood and Masculinity in Britain, c.1914–1960* (Oxford, 2015), p. 127.

46. S.K. Kent, *Gender and Power in Britain, 1640–1990* (London, 1999), p. 309; Mandler, *English National Character*, p. 164.

This was overwhelmingly the ‘desirable image’ of women communicated by inter-war media representations, despite the achievement of female political enfranchisement.⁴⁷

This article examines how national stereotypes were used in narratives of the Metropolitan-Vickers crisis across three distinct phases. First, in the immediate aftermath of the arrests, when the apparent harassment of hard-working British subjects became an affront to national pride. Secondly, during the trial itself, when the engineers—with some exceptions—were venerated as the quintessence of British masculinity. And thirdly, the period culminating in the repatriation of the engineers, when reaction turned into rumination on the future course of relations with the Soviet Union. As well as the national press and periodicals, the article extends the analysis to counter-arguments released by pro-Soviet groups and other commentators. Although not quite as immediate as newspaper reports, they were still published with impressive speed over the course of 1933, and just as readily, albeit subversively, drew upon national stereotypes to deflect criticism of the Soviet experiment back onto Britain. Ultimately, the article suggests a reading of the Metropolitan-Vickers crisis—a mediated crisis largely contingent on press reports and representations—as a significant reflective totem in wider perceptions of the Soviet Union, and in Britain’s view of itself amid the unpredictability of the 1930s.

I

The facts of the Metropolitan-Vickers case do not themselves signify the underlying controversy of the episode. This was partly deliberate: stifling censorship and the manipulation of foreign journalists restricted the dissemination of information, causing Western audiences without first-hand knowledge to equate Soviet justice with their own systems of rights and legal protections.⁴⁸ This was far from the reality. After their arrests on 11 March, the engineers were interrogated in Moscow’s Lubyanka Prison for varying durations (this point was subsequently disputed at the trial) before—except in the case of MacDonald—being released on bail. Under pressure from their Soviet inquisitors, MacDonald and Thornton both signed incriminating statements admitting to involvement in some of the offences that constituted the indictment. Rather than witness testimony, these confessions, reinforced by MacDonald’s guilty plea, then underpinned the prosecution’s case when the trial began on 12 April. When it concluded on 19 April, Gregory was acquitted, Monkhouse, Nordwall and Cushny were expelled and given three days

47. D. Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: Women between the Wars, 1918–1939* (London, 1989), p. 8.

48. See D. Vessey, ‘First-hand Accounts? Walter Duranty, William Henry Chamberlin and Eugene Lyons as Moscow Correspondents in the 1930s’, *Journalism Studies*, xxiv (2023), pp. 209–25.

to leave Soviet territory, and MacDonald and Thornton received sentences of two and three years, respectively. Both were released from their internment in Sokolniki Prison on 1 July, simultaneous with the termination of the respective economic embargoes and the recommencement of negotiations over a new trade agreement.

Britain's officials drew on their innate prejudices in constructing the Soviet persona, contrasting the regime's leadership as at odds with the uprightness and temperate nature of the British disposition. Thus, Ovey, upon hearing of the arrests, accused the Bolsheviks of fanaticism and governing in a permanent state of 'morbid hysteria'.⁴⁹ This mental conditioning was not confined to the Metropolitan-Vickers case. Strang subsequently wrote that Russian culture 'strikes a barbaric note' and that Bolshevik rule was 'grievous and oppressive to the Western European mind'.⁵⁰ Vansittart's memoirs, which followed the publication of Strang's, further dehumanised the Soviet leadership, reflecting that 'duplicitousness' was ingrained in the Bolsheviks' behaviour, that 'Violence was their creed', and that they were 'dense' and 'raved' indiscriminately at their opponents.⁵¹ These recollections, which extended into his retirement, adumbrated the wider discourse on the identity politics of the crisis, showing the influence of national stereotypes on diplomats, government ministers and newspaper editors as well as the public in defending Britain's perceived pre-eminence.

Perhaps the starkest example of contemporary 'othering' can be found in the views of the Conservative member of parliament Mark Patrick, who had prior experience of the Soviet system after diplomatic service with the Moscow embassy. Concurrently with the trial, Patrick wrote to the *Manchester Guardian* to denounce the proceedings as 'an undisguised ramp', 'sheer propaganda' and 'a complete frame-up' designed to distract from the regime's domestic troubles.⁵² His arguments later coalesced into *Hammer and Sickle*, published in mid-1933. In analysing Bolshevik rule, Patrick included a pseudo-scientific attempt to characterise the Russian people. He thought that the Russian mentality was 'poles apart' from the English, both more 'oriental' than European but also peculiarly distinctive.⁵³ Patrick believed that Russians were devoid of 'common-sense', blamed Communism for the 'devastating lack of a sense of humour', and accused them—both people and regime synonymously—of 'an extraordinary indifference to human suffering'.⁵⁴ Perhaps most tellingly in the context of the Metropolitan-Vickers affair, Patrick depicted the Russian people as amorphously compliant 'in consequence of their passivity and susceptibility to suggestion'. The lesson, he argued, no doubt fortified

49. *DBFP*, p. 316, no. 226 (Ovey (Moscow) to Vansittart, 15 Mar. 1933).

50. W. Strang, *Home and Abroad* (London, 1956), p. 62.

51. R. Vansittart, *The Mist Procession: The Autobiography of Lord Vansittart* (London, 1958), p. 456.

52. *Manchester Guardian*, 17 Apr. 1933.

53. M. Patrick, *Hammer and Sickle* (London, 1933), p. 4.

54. *Ibid.*, pp. 5–10.

by the belief that Britain had triumphed against Soviet antagonism, was 'that Russia will do what she is told to do provided she is told firmly enough, and by someone with a show of force behind him'.⁵⁵

Intuitive assumptions about the Soviet Union, Britishness and the conduct of the engineers were evident in the first phase of press coverage. In reacting to the arrests, the *Observer* commented that 'The British people, ignorant in detail of what takes place abroad, have an instinct for underlying principles and a way of hardening unpleasantly against those who commit injustice upon British subjects'.⁵⁶ The inherent paradox in this assessment—how injustice could be affirmed from a state of ignorance—was never rationalised, but it can be delineated more widely in the presumption that Britain had a right to rule and 'lead the world along the paths of civilisation'. This view from February 1932 belonged to Sir Henry Dobbs, former High Commissioner to Iraq, who saw Britain's superiority as based upon 'her fundamental sanity, generosity and balance'; Britain as conqueror—'Invicta Britannia'—but also conscience to the world.⁵⁷ In respect of the Soviet 'other', Britain's apparent 'sanity' informed bipolar conceptualisations of Anglo-Soviet relations. For the *Daily Mirror*, the 'tyranny' of the Soviet Union in detaining the engineers was 'typical of an alien mentality immune from reason'.⁵⁸ In analogous terms, just as someone would not ask for evidence 'of the lunatic who takes himself for Napoleon', there was little point in doing the same with the Soviet authorities.⁵⁹ The *Mirror* further supported reciprocal confinement of 'Bolsheviks' resident in Britain until the affair had been satisfactorily resolved, a demand shared across the popular press.

The *Daily Mail* was equally indignant at news of the arrests. The Bolshevik character was identified as based in 'evasion, malice, intrigue, and injustice', and the *Mail* distilled notions of the gentlemanly ideal by demanding 'proper satisfaction' from the Soviet regime.⁶⁰ In a similar vein, the *Daily Express* asserted that 'This country expects, and will demand' a strong protest against Soviet oppression, having already observed the futility of treating 'a man-eating tiger [as] a tabby cat'.⁶¹ Elsewhere, *The Times* described the plight of the engineers as 'a grave affront to this country', thought that the charges had been brought 'in a spirit of almost sadistic excitement', and condemned the 'orgy of hatred and suspicion' that had been directed at British subjects.⁶² The *Daily Telegraph* was more even-tempered in its response, yet instinctively defended the engineers' integrity before the facts of the case had begun

55. *Ibid.*, pp. 8–10.

56. *The Observer*, 19 Mar. 1933.

57. *Daily Telegraph*, 19 Feb. 1932.

58. *Daily Mirror*, 20 Mar. 1933.

59. *Daily Mirror*, 18 Mar. 1933.

60. *Daily Mail*, 20 Mar. 1933.

61. *Daily Express*, 16 Mar. 1933; 13 Mar. 1933.

62. *The Times*, 23 Mar. 1933.

to emerge. ‘British engineers’, its leader column claimed, ‘are not in the habit of betraying their employers and their customers by wilfully spoiling the work in which they are engaged’.⁶³ Metropolitan-Vickers, the paper later observed, was ‘a firm of the highest international standing’, and thereby emblematic of Britain’s reputation for industrial excellence.⁶⁴ Countenancing any veracity to the charges was therefore unthinkable.

This mindset was also common in readers’ correspondence during the pre-trial phase of the crisis. E. Sabline, a Russian native, praised the integrity of Metropolitan-Vickers for attempting to secure bail for its imprisoned Soviet employees as well as the engineers. This was, Sabline wrote, ‘in line with the best traditions of British justice’ and a ‘splendid manifestation of British “fair play”’.⁶⁵ Other correspondence in the *Mail* portrayed the engineers as a pre-defined class based on their professionalism and general expertise as industrial specialists: ‘I know the type of men they must be. These men are a few chosen from thousands. They are born engineers, and the machines they love are their life’s work. ... To imagine that the imprisoned men could be guilty of sabotage, is, to British engineers, unthinkable’.⁶⁶ This assumption was a shibboleth speaking to wider expectations of Britain’s industrial greatness, which itself was an act of faith after the economic tribulations of the early 1930s. As the journalist Gareth Jones affirmed in the *Express*, ‘Sabotage and counter-revolution are not British terms. Nothing is further from British mentality than underground plots for subversive purposes’.⁶⁷

Defences of Britishness inevitably led to diametrically flippant conclusions on the Soviet citizenry. On the eve of the trial, the *Mirror*, forgetting its initial excitement about the story, presupposed that ‘Nor are Russian moods as ours are. Seeing red—in every sense—is one of them’, suggesting that Britons remained cool under pressure, the antithesis of Soviet volatility. Other publications also indicted the Soviet workforce. *The Sphere*, a weekly pictorial paper launched in 1900 by Clement King Shorter, subsequent founder of *Tatler* magazine, identified ‘the peasant mentality’ as the cause of performance shortfalls in the Five-Year Plan. ‘Slackness’, the article argued, ‘is typical of the spirit prevailing in Soviet industry’.⁶⁸ From this perspective, instead of sabotage, the crimes ascribed to the engineers were the result of natural indolence in the Russian condition. This presumption was expanded to other reflections on the Soviet worker. After the resolution of the crisis, George Glasgow, the *Contemporary Review*’s regular foreign affairs correspondent, proposed the notion that Russian workmen were quasi-luddites, albeit indiscriminately so with no defined purpose. Wrecking, he believed,

63. *Daily Telegraph*, 20 Mar. 1933.

64. *Daily Telegraph*, 6 Apr. 1933.

65. *The Times*, 27 Mar. 1933.

66. *Daily Mail*, 22 Mar. 1933.

67. *Daily Express*, 3 Apr. 1933.

68. *The Sphere*, 1 Apr. 1933.

occurred 'for no other reason apparently than that they just like to break things. The mere sight of a brand-new piece of complicated machinery induces in them an irresistible desire to hit it with a hammer, just to see what will happen'.⁶⁹ A letter in *The Times* offered the anecdotal view that Soviet rank-and-file workers 'were extraordinarily inefficient and unpractical'.⁷⁰

This 'othering' of the Soviet system and its people was absent from newspapers that were more tolerant of Communism's existence. Instead, they faced the difficult task of criticising the British response without appearing unpatriotic. The *Daily Herald*, as it had in relative isolation immediately after the arrests, called for moderation, imploring the government not to give in to 'mischief-mongers' by implementing an economic embargo.⁷¹ Underlying this broad message, there was also a sense that the *Herald's* internationalist conception of Britishness—outward-facing and broad-minded—had been marginalised. Its leader column criticised the absence 'of a cool handling of a dangerous situation' and the predominance of 'anti-Russian feeling' in responses to the crisis.⁷² The paper's discomfort at the belligerence directed towards the Soviet Union was shared by the *News Chronicle*. With reference to the domestic situation—jobs might be lost in firms dependent on Anglo-Soviet trade during a period of mass unemployment—the *Chronicle* deplored the government's recklessness and 'hectoring attitude'.⁷³ The *New Statesman* added to this disapproval, arguing that the National Government's actions were premature and disproportionate, casting the Soviet regime as the wronged party who could not be blamed 'in objecting to an appearance of yielding to threats'.⁷⁴ Peremptory demands, the *New Statesman* believed, were irrational and unbecoming of Britain.

As the *New Statesman's* concerns reflect, many commentaries on the affair held the rights and safety of British subjects abroad to be inviolate irrespective of local conditions and contrasting national cultures. This was intrinsic to assumptions of British virtue, as *The Spectator* revealed by reacting incredulously to the common proposition 'that it is inconceivable that any Englishman in Russia could ever be guilty of any crime at all'.⁷⁵ Nonetheless, the belief was firmly entrenched in political discourse on the crisis. Walter Runciman, president of the Board of Trade in the National Government, replied to Labour's Stafford Cripps during a Commons debate on the Russian Goods (Import Prohibition) Bill by invoking British untouchability. 'There are certain rights which are inherent to British subjects all over the world, and those rights we are

69. *Contemporary Review*, 1 July 1933.

70. *The Times*, 18 Apr. 1933.

71. *Daily Herald*, 31 Mar. 1933.

72. *Daily Herald*, 5 Apr. 1933.

73. *News Chronicle*, 21 Mar. 1933.

74. *New Statesman and Nation*, 25 Mar. 1933.

75. *The Spectator*, 24 Mar. 1933.

not likely to surrender', Runciman asserted in rejecting Cripps's defence of Soviet sovereignty.⁷⁶ On this basis, the government directly echoed the combative formulation of Britain's foreign policy by Lord Palmerston during the Don Pacifico affair in the mid-nineteenth century; indeed, the reference was made explicitly by the Conservative member of parliament Major John Hills in discrediting Cripps's 'dialectical smoke screen' offered in support of Soviet justice.⁷⁷ Hills's intervention was personally denounced by Vyshinsky during the prosecution's final summation at the trial, part of 'a bitter political tirade', according to A. T. Cholerton, the *Telegraph's* Moscow correspondent.⁷⁸

During the debate in June 1850, Palmerston used the peroration of his speech to challenge the Commons to defy his protection of British subjects and pursuit of the national interest:

[A]s the Roman, in days of old, held himself free from indignity, when he could say *Civis Romanus sum* [I am a Roman citizen]; so also a British subject, in whatever land he may be, shall feel confident that the watchful eye and the strong arm of England, will protect him against injustice and wrong.⁷⁹

This interpretation was reprised almost verbatim by the press in discussing the fate of the Metropolitan-Vickers engineers, reflecting wider assumptions about British infallibility and the justification for 'strong arm' tactics. The *Express*, in fact, contrasted the Don Pacifico exemplar with a contemporary unwillingness to project British might on the world stage. Palmerston's doctrine had 'assured the British people of his time that on them had fallen the mantle of absolute security which Rome in her days of greatness cast over all her citizens'. However, Britain had now 'fallen from that proud height' and succumbed to the provocations of 'Russian barbarians' who insulted the National Government with 'impunity'. By implication, the British people were still indomitable, but their intrepid spirit had been suppressed by the 'spineless' leadership emanating from the Foreign Office.⁸⁰

Don Pacifico and the 'Big Stick' approach provided a different lesson in the periodical press. Following the restraint of *The Economist*, which believed that the government should take care to avoid 'Palmerstonian gestures', and complained that Ovey's 'stiff attitude ... has made us a little ridiculous', the *New Statesman* was more forthright in its criticism of Britain's actions.⁸¹ In the immediate aftermath of the trial, it acknowledged

76. Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates* [hereafter *Hansard*], 5th ser., House of Commons, 5 Apr. 1933, vol. 276, col. 1887.

77. *Ibid.*, col. 1805.

78. *Daily Telegraph*, 17 Apr. 1933.

79. *Hansard*, 3rd ser., House of Commons, 25 June 1850, vol. 112, col. 444.

80. *Daily Express*, 30 Mar. 1933.

81. *The Economist*, 1 Apr. 1933.

the historical resonance of Don Pacifico in the popular outcry against the arrests, but in a lengthy editorial comment derisively observed:

People who quote his [Palmerston's] famous *Civis Romanus sum* speech sometimes forget that the British citizen on whose behalf he so gallantly mobilised the might of Great Britain was a disreputable Portuguese Jew whose very fishy case would ... have been better left in the judgment of the Greek authorities.⁸²

The implication could not have been more jarring: contrary to the instinctive belief in British honourability, the engineers were equally 'fishy' and guilty of undermining Soviet industrial development. Even more disreputable, however, was the government's response, which constituted an 'arrogant effort' to dictate terms to the Soviet regime. 'Palmerstonianism', the paper argued, 'jeopardises the almost certain release of the prisoners for the sake of a cock-crow over the Soviet Government'. Indignation about the fate of the engineers was conceded, but equivocation was woven throughout the piece to underscore greater faith in the Soviet experiment. Indeed, the confessions of MacDonald and Thornton were regarded as 'a very curious problem' that—without adequate explanation—cast doubt on their innocence.⁸³

The *New Statesman* had one further criticism in reserve: that notions of British justice and propriety did not withstand scrutiny of its own rule beyond the metropole. Imperial oppression, in short, invalidated claims to superiority against the Soviet 'other'. The paper stated explicitly that 'To see Russian methods outdone it is unnecessary to go farther than India, where rule by Ordinance upholds the repression of opinion by daily acts of violence'. In evidence, it cited the Meerut Conspiracy Case, where stringent sentences, including transportation, had been given to trade unionists who had organised a railway strike allegedly at the instigation of the Communist International (Comintern). The highhandedness illustrated by this example, the editorial concluded, could equally provoke 'an excellent excuse for Palmerstonian methods', offering a timely reminder of the dangers of inflaming public opinion in defence of British exceptionalism.⁸⁴ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Meerut case, and the general thrust of the *New Statesman's* indictment, were repeated by more overtly pro-Soviet groups, such as the Friends of the Soviet Union. It had been founded in 1930 in parallel with other international organisations such as the Friends of Soviet Russia in the United States, and was overseen by the International Association of Friends of the Soviet Union, initiated by the Comintern in 1927. In the pamphlet *Spies, Wreckers and Grafters: The Truth about the Moscow Trial*, published after the verdict,

82. *New Statesman and Nation*, 22 Apr. 1933.

83. *Ibid.*

84. *Ibid.*

the National Government was denounced for its 'lies', accused of being 'utterly indifferent to the plight of the prisoners', and condemned for inciting the affair. The pamphlet ended with a call to arms: 'Declare Solidarity with the Workers' Republic! Condemn the wreckers! Condemn the war-making Government! Defend the Soviet Union!'⁸⁵

Pro-Soviet elements also sought historical precedent in rejecting 'Palmerstonianism' and special treatment for British subjects. W.P. Coates served as secretary of the Anglo-Russian Parliamentary Committee throughout this period. In his historical account of Anglo-Soviet relations (co-written with his wife Zelda), published in 1943, Coates argued that respect for the laws and customs of foreign states was a basic tenet of international fraternity. Citing the reasoning of George Canning from February 1823, Coates reaffirmed the doctrine that:

It is one of the most important principles of the Law of Nations that a stranger visiting a foreign country, virtually binds himself to a temporary and qualified allegiance to its laws and submits to their observance, however unwise such laws may appear to be to him, however harsh and oppressive they really are, and however they may be at variance with his own notions of political liberty...⁸⁶

Coates's reference to Canning reprised the argument of Labour's Aneurin Bevan, who had started the episode of historical one-upmanship by quoting the former Foreign Secretary during the parliamentary debate on the embargo bill. He also spoke for his own version of the national character in criticising the government's response:

If hon. Members think that Englishmen are going to imperil their lives for a stupid principle of that kind—that any Englishman going abroad, if he is arrested, must be immediately released without trial—they are under a grave misunderstanding of the temperament of our people. Our people will not stand for it.⁸⁷

Despite the different interpretations of Britain's role on the world stage—belligerence versus courteousness—both perspectives saw Britishness as a manifestation of historical continuity. In this there are comparisons with the arguments of the 1890s on Britain's imperial role, let alone the respective disagreements of Canning's and Palmerston's eras. That the positions were ultimately irreconcilable—just as in these earlier disputes—emphasises the ferocity of popular reaction (despite Bevan's claims to the contrary), and how uncertainty about Britain's sense of itself during the early 1930s pervaded wider responses to the Metropolitan-Vickers crisis. History, in other words, acted as a comfort

85. *Spies, Wreckers and Grafters: The Truth about the Moscow Trial* (London, 1933), pp. 13–15.

86. W.P. Coates and Z.K. Coates, *A History of Anglo-Soviet Relations* (London, 1943), p. 470.

87. *Hansard*, 5th ser., House of Commons, 5 Apr. 1933, vol. 276, col. 1840.

blanket, deployed in the service of opposing projections of the national persona. As Cummings lamented later in the year, anticipating the subsequent judgement of Wyndham Lewis, 'our arrogant conception of British integrity abroad' had become engrained in the British character: 'We are still at heart a nation of stiff little Palmerstons'.⁸⁸ The past, real or mythologised, acted as both inspiration and restraint on the present.

As this tendency to historicise demonstrates, dichotomous representations of Britishness were evident in the pre-trial phase of the crisis, further challenging the idea that press manipulation was orchestrated by the government. However, there was a broader attempt to influence public opinion through the release of correspondence between embassy officials and the Foreign Office. An initial white paper covered the period after the arrests from 12 to 17 March, with a second volume extending publication until 7 April.⁸⁹ Interestingly, certain details were altered for public consumption. Ovey's dispatches were predominantly sent to Vansittart at the Foreign Office, but his name was replaced with Sir John Simon's to convey the impression that the Foreign Secretary was in command of the crisis.⁹⁰ In reality, Simon was out of the country visiting Geneva for the Disarmament Conference between 9 and 22 March. This dissimulation was indicative of the documents' underlying purpose, with the cables selected, reordered and edited—removing more indelicate outbursts such as the threat to terminate diplomatic relations—to emphasise the disreputable actions of the Soviet authorities and the judiciousness of the British response. Furthermore, the release of the white papers highlights how the government's conduct during the affair was influenced by the need to fortify public opinion behind mediated narratives of Britain's self-image. These already existed—the press needed no encouragement—but the diplomatic telegrams allowed a veiled empiricism to be lent to popular indictments of the Soviet Union.

In turn, the white papers provoked a riposte from the Anglo-Russian Parliamentary Committee. Its own pamphlet reprised ostensibly verbatim conversations between Maxim Litvinov, Soviet Commissar for Foreign Affairs, and Ovey published in a 'Red Paper' on 16 April. Inviting the reader to adopt the Soviet perspective reversed national stereotypes; Ovey came across as overbearing with Litvinov appearing disciplined and temperate, patiently explaining the preferential treatment afforded the prisoners by expediting their interrogations.⁹¹ This assessment was confirmed by the *Manchester Guardian*, which viewed Britain's protests

88. Cummings, *Moscow Trial*, p. 30.

89. *Correspondence Relating to the Arrest of Employees of the Metropolitan-Vickers Company at Moscow* (London, 1933); *Further Correspondence Relating to the Arrest of Employees of the Metropolitan-Vickers Company at Moscow* (London, 1933).

90. The original format is reproduced by E.L. Woodward and R. Butler in their work editing *Documents on British Foreign Policy*.

91. *The Moscow Trial: U.S.S.R. Does Not Spell Mexico* (London, 1933), p. 4.

as ‘menacing’ and animated by ‘recklessness’.⁹² This was not British ‘fair play’; instead, a subsequent leader argued, having ‘acknowledged Russia as an equal ... we cannot now make exceptional claims’ that infringed on Soviet independence and integrity.⁹³

The *Guardian*’s view rested on a further calculation about Britishness; if Britain did aspire to set an example to the world, it could afford to be magnanimous in its dealings with other states. In other words, turning the other cheek was a sign of maturity rather than weakness. As *The Spectator* insisted, ‘the more completely the Soviet Government puts itself in the wrong the more necessary it is that our own Government should keep itself in the right’. Accommodation meant finding ‘a way of living in the same world as Russia under as reasonable arrangements as we can devise’.⁹⁴ But the engineers’ impending trial made it difficult to sustain more impartial abstractions of the national character. By focusing British attention on a more directly confrontational setting, the trial became a test of strength. Indeed, notwithstanding scepticism about the openness of Soviet justice, the courtroom spectacle offered an opportunity to assign and affirm British resolve in response to Soviet deceit and misrepresentation.

II

With the opening of the trial on 12 April, wider notions of Britishness became intertwined with the individual characters of the six engineers. In press depictions, they were no longer hapless victims caught up in senseless Soviet tyranny, but were empowered with a collective agency to make a stand against the injustices of the case. This required projecting prevailing stereotypes of nationality and masculinity onto the men, and rationalising their absence when conformity was lacking. This process was most apparent in characterisations of Allan Monkhouse, as leader of the Metropolitan-Vickers concern in the Soviet Union. In the *Express*, Gareth Jones, who himself conformed to preconceptions about intrepid journalists for his concurrent exposé of famine conditions, praised Monkhouse’s ‘frank, open bearing, his friendly welcome, and the honest conscientious impression which he made’. Above all, he commanded respect for ‘the calm way in which he takes his troubles’ and for maintaining a duty of care towards his subordinates.⁹⁵ He was, according to the *Guardian*, ‘a typical North Country Englishman, strong and unhysterical’; a ‘*chestny chelovek*’ (‘honest fellow’) in Soviet terms, analogous to the qualities that were often associated with Stanley Baldwin’s political leadership: ‘stolid, affable, fair-minded’ and patriotic, albeit with more bravado than

92. *Manchester Guardian*, 5 Apr. 1933.

93. *Manchester Guardian*, 6 Apr. 1933.

94. *The Spectator*, 7 Apr. 1933.

95. *Daily Express*, 3 Apr. 1933.

'Honest Stan'.⁹⁶ Cummings offered the interesting analogy that Monkhouse would be equally in command whether repairing turbines, resisting the OGPU, or leading 'a platoon in a forlorn hope'.⁹⁷ The *Telegraph's* A.T. Cholerton, like Cummings one of the few British journalists who witnessed the trial in person, thought Monkhouse 'a splendid type of Englishman in early middle-age'. He observed signs of stress—'careworn and prematurely grey'—but these were set against Monkhouse's 'dignified' bearing, 'his mouth set grimly' at the task in hand.⁹⁸

Two particular episodes were used to symbolise Monkhouse's general character. The court heard how during his arrest—and despite the presence of around eighty OGPU officers—Monkhouse remained phlegmatic and asked to take a bath before being transported to prison. As he subsequently explained, '[I]t occurred to me to play for time, to think things over, before leaving the house ... This bath gave me time to remember a few instructions I had to give before being taken away to prison'.⁹⁹ The intention behind Monkhouse's anecdote is clear: he remained unflappable in the face of Soviet antagonism. He also held his reserve until provocation made this indecorous. In a planned intervention at the start of one of the trial days, 'Monkhouse leapt to his feet and shouted, "I wish to state that this trial is a frame-up based on the evidence of terrorised Soviet engineers"'. This show of audacity was framed in typically heroic terms: 'Its effect on the court was electrifying. ... The prisoners appeared galvanised'.¹⁰⁰ As these episodes reveal, the best characteristics of Britishness could be adapted to Monkhouse's actual behaviour. Forbearance in maintaining calm despite intolerable pressure could be admired, while resistance could be equally lauded for its fighting spirit—standing upright with squared shoulders and clenched fists as Monkhouse did during his final statement.¹⁰¹

As Monkhouse's case demonstrates, British masculinity could be affirmed across various physical and emotional stereotypes. Thus, in Cholerton's court reports, Gregory had a 'face full of fight' despite his 'littler' stature. In contrast, there was 'burly Cushny' who was 'built like a Rigger player, and hard to tire', alongside the 'thin, pale and calm' appearance of Nordwall.¹⁰² Correspondents had particular fun with Gregory who, despite featuring less prominently than the other engineers, was more pugnacious in his defence. The *Guardian's* account portrayed him as 'short and bucolic-looking, with rather fierce blue

96. *Manchester Guardian*, 15 Mar. 1933; S. Nicholas, 'The Construction of a National Identity: Stanley Baldwin, "Englishness" and the Mass Media in Inter-War Britain', in M. Francis and I. Zweiniger-Bargielowska, eds, *The Conservatives and British Society, 1880–1990* (Cardiff, 1996), pp. 127–46, at 140.

97. Cummings, *Moscow Trial*, p. 209.

98. *Daily Telegraph*, 13 Apr. 1933.

99. A. Monkhouse, *Moscow, 1911–1933* (London, 1933), p. 291.

100. *The Observer*, 16 Apr. 1933.

101. *Manchester Guardian*, 19 Apr. 1933.

102. *Daily Telegraph*, 13 Apr. 1933.

eyes and a distinguished bearing'.¹⁰³ In Cummings's reports, Gregory was always 'the fiery Welsh engineer' who 'glared' at the Soviet prosecutors as only 'a man of dauntless courage' and unquestioning belief in his innocence could.¹⁰⁴ Crucially, these four, with Monkhouse at their head, created a more defiant impression in their exchanges with Vyshinsky and the Soviet defendants. In the *Observer*, they were praised for their 'cool, curt confident answers and firm emphatic denials', showing the emphasis on performative aspects of the case as opposed to the ostensible facts.¹⁰⁵ However, this inevitably led to a degree of segregation from the remaining two engineers, Thornton and MacDonald, who for various reasons were unable to play the part expected of them by the watching press.

As the focus of the prosecution's case, not least due to their respective confessions, the behaviour of Thornton and MacDonald either had to be rehabilitated (robust self-defence could achieve this), rationalised (by emphasising the merciless nature of Soviet internment and interrogation) or repudiated. This final option was problematic—the men remained, after all, British citizens—and so press coverage fluctuated between discouragement at the absence of more unflinching conduct, and a need to explain apparent character defects. Court summaries consistently lamented the timidity of Thornton's performance. The *Observer* noted that 'Throughout the trial Mr. Thornton has been weak and nervous, giving the impression of exhaustion. ... Mr. Thornton was never able strongly and convincingly to present his case'.¹⁰⁶ This was reinforced by the subsequent release of the trial proceedings. On multiple occasions, Thornton was unable to counter-attack against Vyshinsky's questioning. The following exchange from the evening session of 12 April is typical of the evasiveness that baffled Western observers and seemingly confirmed the veracity of his signed statement admitting culpability:

Vyshinsky: ... 'Do you admit that engineer Gussev was your and MacDonald's agent in the Zlatoust district as you deposed?' You replied: 'Yes, I think it is right.' Do you confirm this?

Thornton: No.

Vyshinsky: Why did you say it then?

Thornton: I do not say that I was forced to say it.

Vyshinsky: Then permit me to ask—did you say it.

Thornton: Yes, I did.

Vyshinsky: That is to say, what is written in the records is actually what you said?

Thornton: Yes, that is what I said.

Vyshinsky: Did you speak the truth or was it an untruth?

103. *Manchester Guardian*, 15 Apr. 1933.

104. *News Chronicle*, 17 Apr. 1933.

105. *The Observer*, 16 Apr. 1933.

106. *Ibid.*

Thornton: In this case it was an untruth.

Vyshinsky: Do you usually speak the truth or not?

Thornton: In this case I did not speak the truth, I was excited.

Vyshinsky: That is to say, when you are excited you don't speak the truth?

Thornton: Yes.

Vyshinsky: You are not excited now?

Thornton: No, I am not excited.

Vyshinsky: That is to say, you are now speaking the truth?

Thornton: Now, I am speaking the truth.

Vyshinsky: Why then did you write this and not something else? You said: 'I think, it is right.' You did not affirm, but you thought. I ask why, when you were excited, you thought precisely this and not something else? Were you forced to do it?

Thornton: No.

Vyshinsky: You said this voluntarily?

Thornton: Voluntarily.

Vyshinsky: Perhaps some special methods were applied to you?

Thornton: No.

Vyshinsky: Were you tortured?

Thornton: No.

Vyshinsky: Third degree?

Thornton: No.

Vyshinsky: I have no more questions.¹⁰⁷

Cholerton thought Thornton appeared 'exhausted', speculating that his 'nervous system functions defectively, so that he sometimes seems numb' and unable to resist his Soviet interlocutors, though it is notable that a medical hypothesis was advanced for this lack of assertiveness.¹⁰⁸ The toll of imprisonment provided an obvious justification for these character defects, but could not explain why the other engineers emerged with their honour unblemished. On the eve of the verdict, it was left to Thornton's wife, writing in the *Express*, to defend her husband's reputation. Thornton was, she wrote, a consistent source of reassurance whose commitment to his work could not be questioned: 'He only lives for his pipes and tubes and improvements. Such a madly keen engineer. So ambitious. Always dreaming machinery. Three hours was all he allowed himself on Sunday away from work, and no spare time on other days'. 'Mental overstrain', she thought, had been exacerbated by being away from 'his beloved machinery', rehumanising her husband as a dutiful, uncomplicated engineer overcome by the extraordinary circumstances of his experience.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷. *Wrecking Activities at Power Stations in the Soviet Union: The Case of N.P. Vitvitsky, V.A. Gussev, A.W. Gregory, Y.I. Zivert, N.G. Zorin, M.D. Krasheninnikov, M.L. Kotlyarevsky, A.S. Kutuzova, J. Cushny, V.P. Lebedev, A.T. Lobanov, W.L. MacDonald, A. Monkhouse, C. Nordwall, P.Y. Oleinik, L.A. Sukhoruchkin, L.C. Thornton, V.A. Sokolov, Heard Before the Special Session of the Supreme Court of the U.S.S.R. in Moscow, April 12–19, 1933* (London, 1933), pp. 127–8.

¹⁰⁸. *Daily Telegraph*, 17 Apr. 1933.

¹⁰⁹. *Daily Express*, 19 Apr. 1933.

MacDonald's irresolute character posed an even greater challenge in the light of his guilty plea. Initial descriptions of his appearance and demeanour marked him out as separate from the other engineers. Cummings thought he was 'a young-looking, pale-faced man, with sharp, somewhat haggard, features, and a short-pointed beard grown recently in prison'.¹¹⁰ In *The Observer*, he was described as displaying an 'indifferent, absent manner [with a] low, weak, hardly audible voice, pale, thin face'.¹¹¹ Cholerton was more reproachful, portraying MacDonald as 'a terribly sensitive type' and a 'tortured soul', somehow preternaturally unfortunate and despondent.¹¹² This 'othering' was made explicit by the *Daily Herald*. Whereas the other Britons demonstrated 'that capacity for self-reliance and self-control which may be summed-up in the word—worldliness', MacDonald was a 'a man apart', the 'mystery man' of the contingent whose lethargy during the trial defied more vigorous national stereotypes.¹¹³ MacDonald was certainly physically different in one respect; a childhood accident caused an injury and left him unable to walk without dragging his left leg. Yet this disability could service malicious characterisations of the Soviets rather than isolating MacDonald as un-British. On the front page of the *Mirror*, a gaunt looking MacDonald was featured alongside an interview with his mother who claimed, 'They have picked on Bill for this dreadful treatment because he was the youngest and physically the weakest'. The family's short messages to MacDonald were characteristic of British reserve and stoicism: 'Chin up, Bill. Love to our stout fellah'.¹¹⁴ In short, MacDonald's separation could be framed as the outcome of artificial circumstances rather than an inherent deviation from an idealised national character.

MacDonald also offered one notable example of resistance that served this narrative. On the second day of the trial, he temporarily reversed his guilty plea. Observing events, Strang described MacDonald as speaking with 'more firmness' than his normal contributions, but in dramatic scenes, a recess was called, and after the trial resumed, MacDonald returned to meek acquiescence and acceptance of his guilt.¹¹⁵ He had, in fact, been threatened with the execution of his housekeeper, Mrs Ryabova, as MacDonald subsequently confirmed in conversations with embassy officials.¹¹⁶ Without this knowledge, the press speculated about other underhand methods; the *Mail* even theorised that hallucinogenic 'Tibetan' drugs had been used leaving MacDonald 'in the psychic power' of the OGPU, but this was an isolated view.¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, it suggests

110. *News Chronicle*, 15 Apr. 1933.

111. *The Observer*, 16 Apr. 1933.

112. *Daily Telegraph*, 13–15 Apr. 1933.

113. *Daily Herald*, 19 Apr. 1933.

114. *Daily Mirror*, 18 Apr. 1933.

115. *DBFP*, pp. 456–7, no. 395 (Strang (Moscow) to J. Simon, 13 Apr. 1933).

116. *DBFP*, p. 544, no. 491 (Strang (Moscow) to J. Simon, 14 May 1933).

117. *Daily Mail*, 15 Apr. 1933.

a deep-seated need to explain weakness or aberrant behaviour, and in turn the almost mythic power of ideas about British infallibility. As such, MacDonald had to be exonerated, as *The Times's* leader attempted after the verdict: 'They kept him in their hands up to and throughout the trial. When produced in Court after a month's treatment he was a physical and mental wreck, scarcely aware of what he was doing'.¹¹⁸

As the concerns about Thornton and MacDonald demonstrate, there were occasions when the façade of British self-assurance cracked, and a different narrative of the engineers' conduct can be identified. Cholerton's criticism of Thornton on 17 April was part of a wider demand for a more dynamic performance from the Britons:

There are moments when I think that our men do not realise fully the tragic reality of these criminal proceedings. They do not possess [*sic*] the slick eloquence of the Russians in a dramatic situation, and—because the interpreters are hopeless—they will mostly answer these subtle prosecutors in Russian instead of speaking to the world in their native English.¹¹⁹

This betrayed a lack of confidence—notably framed in relative terms—that the men were capable of conforming to expectations about the British character.

In private, these doubts went beyond the lack of resilience displayed by Thornton and MacDonald. In a lengthy memorandum dated 16 April, Strang recorded his frustrations with the Britons' defence that 'left a bad impression on observers'. Thornton was routinely 'mercilessly handled' by Vyshinsky, and Strang thought his general demeanour 'deplorable' and perhaps suggestive of 'a guilty conscience'. Even Monkhouse was not exempt from criticism, Strang arguing that his leadership had not encouraged the engineers to behave 'as men enjoying the full support of a Government which has committed itself to a declaration of their innocence'. Mitigating circumstances were highlighted—they were 'technical men' defending themselves in a foreign language without effective counsel—but the self-doubt is appreciable in Strang's account.¹²⁰ In sections of the periodical press, a largely unspoken possibility was raised. Specifically in respect of MacDonald, *The Spectator* thought that his alleged guilt 'cannot be completely excluded' notwithstanding the draconian Soviet legal code. To know definitely would require a better understanding of MacDonald's 'temperament', which returned the focus to his individual mental frailty.¹²¹ *The Economist* was even more explicit: 'Is not the superficially obvious explanation also the simplest? ... that the verdicts represent the genuine judgment of the Court on the basis

118. *The Times*, 20 Apr. 1933.

119. *Daily Telegraph*, 17 Apr. 1933.

120. *DBFP*, pp. 475–6, no. 411 (Strang (Moscow) to J. Simon, 16 Apr. 1933).

121. *The Spectator*, 21 Apr. 1933.

of the evidence before it?' The confessions of MacDonald and Thornton remained an inconvenient truth that could not be discounted:

[W]e must observe that, after all, the only two out of the six who have been sentenced to anything worse than immediate expulsion from Russia have contradicted themselves, and contradicted their four companions, at different stages of the proceedings; and that one of them has admitted guilt at least once, and the other almost without a break.¹²²

H.N. Brailsford, who had visited the Soviet Union twice in the 1920s, was in full agreement in his article in *Reynold's Illustrated News*. 'Was ever the power of a great Empire used to save a less sympathetic pair?', he asked the paper's readers. Thornton and MacDonald had both admitted their guilt, accused their fellow engineers, and had lied about their treatment by Soviet captors. In reality they had enjoyed 'comfortable cells, good food, books, and even tobacco'.¹²³ These views were not commonplace, especially in the commercial press, but they suggest a more open debate than was conceded by pro-Soviet groups throughout the crisis.

Where there was greater unanimity was in caricatures of the Soviet protagonists in the trial. This was particularly true of the indigenous contingent of accused engineers and technicians, and almost universally followed the same derogatory pattern. Thus, Cholerton in the *Telegraph* reported to his British readers that 'Dolgov is an insignificant little creature, with no chin, but a sarcastic, cunning smile'.¹²⁴ Similarly, Oleinik was 'an ugly, squat monster with grey skin, fishy eyes, bestial jaw, and short square head on a bull neck, the chief villain of the piece'.¹²⁵ These descriptions were not isolated examples; the *Sunday Times* saw Gusev, the prosecution's main witness, as 'a shambling creature ... one of the most incapable looking fellows I ever saw'.¹²⁶ In the *Express*, they were written by Ian Fleming, then in Moscow producing syndicated wire reports for Reuters, but seemingly writing for the paper under an exclusive arrangement with his own byline. Fleming's sketches were stereotypically pernicious; Kotliarevski, for example, was made to seem lecherous as well as stupid: 'a blue-jowled, saturnine young man with bottle shoulders and a vacuous expression. His eyes strayed consistently ... to the beautiful American girl seated at the typists' table, employed by the court to take down the British evidence'.¹²⁷ Fascinating though this might appear as a foretaste of James Bond's fictional antagonists,

122. *The Economist*, 22 Apr. 1933.

123. *Reynold's Illustrated News*, 23 Apr. 1933.

124. *Daily Telegraph*, 15 Apr. 1933.

125. *Daily Telegraph*, 17 Apr. 1933.

126. *Sunday Times*, 16 Apr. 1933.

127. *Daily Express*, 15 Apr. 1933.

Fleming was merely conforming with broader characterisations of the principal actors in the Metropolitan-Vickers case.

The *News Chronicle*, where Cummings communicated a more even-tempered account of the trial, was the only exception to this pattern. Cummings emphasised the essential humanity of the Soviet citizenry, remarking that he had 'been treated with perfect friendliness by all Russians whom I have met—non-official as well as official'.¹²⁸ His depiction of the trial's opening further showed Soviet reaction to be measured and disciplined rather than excitable or irrational:

[T]he opening stages of the trial have been a model of calmness and correctness. There have been no demonstrations inside or outside the court building. During the reading of the indictment, which lasted for more than three hours, I heard not a single ejaculation or muttered comment.¹²⁹

Cummings remained open-minded, but his observations on the trial nevertheless rested on a fundamental premise about British integrity: 'I have also come to the conclusion, incidentally, that even Russians who know England well do not fully understand how foreign is sabotage in the material sense of the word to the whole British psychology'.¹³⁰ In this respect, the actual record of the trial, and certainly the verdicts, were anticlimactic; indeed, in some quarters, the fate of the engineers simply reaffirmed a shared faith in British exceptionalism. As the *Express's* leader column proclaimed, 'Your cause is the cause of all your fellow-country-men. The outrage to which you have been subjected is an outrage on the whole British nation'. Its readers were reassured, the paper believed, by the dignity of the engineers' example. They had 'held an outpost against the forces of tyranny, dishonesty, and reaction. We, who are of the same blood as you, will not forget'.¹³¹ Just as the outcome of the trial was largely predetermined, so, it could be said, was British reaction to it.

III

A sense that British reaction was immutable can be seen in the celebrations to mark the engineers' homecoming. In the popular press, there was a perceptible need to proclaim victory regardless of circumstance. The *Express* thought that 'In the eyes of the world they have sustained their honour and advanced the reputation of their country. We shall be proud to give them the welcome that heroes earn'.¹³² Certainly, there does seem to have been an outburst of spontaneous acclaim, no doubt fostered

128. *News Chronicle*, 12 Apr. 1933.

129. *News Chronicle*, 13 Apr. 1933.

130. *News Chronicle*, 19 Apr. 1933.

131. *Daily Express*, 19 Apr. 1933.

132. *Daily Express*, 21 Apr. 1933.

by the saturation of media coverage. Repatriation was repackaged as public spectacle. Crowds thronged the platforms of Liverpool Street Station to greet the deportees, with 'movietone vans, cinema photographers, four great arc lamps, and a labyrinth of cables preparing to let the whole world see how London welcomed the men who had been through such an ordeal'.¹³³ The *Telegraph* detected a manifest 'national sympathy'; families and railwaymen lined the tracks to express their support. Despite the crowd of thousands, J.L. Hodson, writing in the *Chronicle*, thought the reception 'not overdone. Quite English'.¹³⁴ Reports about the engineers' reaction to the welcome also reverted to stereotype. It would surely have been reassuring to read in *The Times* that 'they did not think so much fuss ought to be made of them, because they had merely done their duty'.¹³⁵ These scenes were replicated after the release of Thornton and MacDonald: 'The warmth and publicity of their welcome was rather an ordeal, and they blinked in the glare of the arc lights that were trained on them, a glare that intensified their pallor'.¹³⁶ There was no hint that the engineers' conduct during the trial might have abrogated the constructed identity of honourable men embodying the best characteristics of Britishness abroad.

A number of newspapers had already dispatched correspondents to meet the Britons on the Soviet border and accompany them on their return journey via Warsaw, Berlin and the Hook of Holland. The *Express* sent Sefton Delmer whose account emphasised the solidarity within the group. Their thoughts were not of liberty but of the imprisoned Thornton and MacDonald for whom they 'drank a solemn toast', an overt testament to their sense of honour and collective responsibility.¹³⁷ In the *Mail*, F.W. Memory's report stressed the men's courage and dignity, but also how the Soviet system had stretched their resolve almost to breaking point. Cushny, 'the man who as a pilot of the R.A.F. faced during the war untold perils with a light heart and laughing face', now visibly bore the toll 'of the Ogpu inquisition and the farce of the trial'. Even Gregory, the incarnation of 'Celtic spirit', was 'silent'.¹³⁸ In both cases, the hardships of the experience correspondingly amplified Soviet tyranny and the men's stoicism in enduring the trauma.

Alongside these tributes to the men's character on their return to Britain, the press promoted their immediate switch to domestic duty, a message that signalled equal devotion to home as well as vocation. The front page of the *Mirror* featured several photographs, notably Monkhouse smiling with his wife and playing with his son and the family's

133. *Manchester Guardian*, 24 Apr. 1933.

134. *News Chronicle*, 24 Apr. 1933.

135. *The Times*, 24 Apr. 1933.

136. *Manchester Guardian*, 6 July 1933.

137. *Daily Express*, 24 Apr. 1933.

138. *Daily Mail*, 22 Apr. 1933.

dog. Cushny and his wife were also seen enjoying breakfast.¹³⁹ There was particular fascination with Nordwall's wife Riva, a Soviet citizen, who had received special dispensation to leave the Soviet Union with her husband. Noting her 'nervous' state on arrival at Liverpool Street, reports also highlighted how Nordwall remained protective and 'kept his arm about her'.¹⁴⁰ When asked by Hodson what his immediate plans were, Monkhouse replied, 'I want quietness, and if I can't get it at home, then I'll just pack a picnic basket, take the car, and we'll disappear. But first I must go and see Mrs. Thornton'.¹⁴¹ This final remark again drew attention to Monkhouse's overriding sense of duty. When the *Mail* checked in with the men in mid-July after the resolution of the affair, these dual strands of domesticity and dedication were again accentuated. Monkhouse was busy cultivating a 'delightful rose garden', while Thornton was planning a family holiday when his two children ended their school term.¹⁴² Nordwall, meanwhile, had been tracked down by *Reynolds's Illustrated News* to the quaint village of Ferring-by-Sea in Sussex where he was helping his wife adjust to life in England. She was herself clear—sternly insistent—that her domestic responsibilities came first: 'My duty is to be there where my husband works'.¹⁴³ With Cushny and Gregory retained by Metropolitan-Vickers in other roles, only MacDonald stood slightly apart, spending time at the family home in Sheffield reading and relaxing.

This emphasis on domestic duty had also run throughout the affair via coverage of the engineers' wives. As with the men, they became representatives of their gender by embodying the best qualities of British womanhood, remaining attentive without transgressing into the political realm. The press conferred on Monkhouse's wife comparable character assessments to her husband: in parallel with Monkhouse's leadership role, she took on the same responsibility for the men's relatives in Britain. The *Express* highlighted how she had been 'acting as adviser and helper to the other distraught wives', and as the trial got underway, the *Chronicle* reported: 'Tall and self-possessed, she showed little sign of the strain imposed by a desperately trying day'.¹⁴⁴ Thornton's wife received similar approval for her forbearance, maintaining the roles of wife and mother despite the emotional strain of the trial:

It has been like living in a hell. I can find no other word to describe it. Sleep has fled from me; every minute has seemed an hour. I do not think I can stand it much longer. Great as the strain has been for me, I have at least had the comfort of my son. That has meant a lot.¹⁴⁵

139. *Daily Mirror*, 24 Apr. 1933.

140. *Daily Express*, 24 Apr. 1933.

141. *News Chronicle*, 24 Apr. 1933.

142. *Daily Mail*, 19 July 1933.

143. *Reynolds's Illustrated News*, 14 May 1933.

144. *Daily Express*, 3 Apr. 1933; *News Chronicle*, 13 Apr. 1933.

145. *Daily Mail*, 13 Apr. 1933.

When the *Chronicle* reported her collapse after the verdict and sentencing, there was a sense that this was the inevitable consequence of ‘rapidly changing emotions’ that did not detract from but instead reinforced her commitment to her husband, sacrificing her own wellbeing out of anxiety for his.¹⁴⁶

Like other aspects of MacDonald’s character, his bachelor status distinguished him from the other engineers. This made it even more surprising when the *Herald* unearthed a previously secret fiancée, allowing him also to be integrated into prevailing narratives of domesticity. The *Herald’s* interview with Winifred Walters, an assistant restaurant manageress from Sheffield, replicated coverage of the other wives by underlining her commitment to the relationship: ‘While praying that he may be quickly released from prison she carries about with her a passport ready to dash to Russia at a moment’s notice if she is given permission to see him’. Walters’s mother added that her daughter could never have stood in the way of “‘Mac’s” professional recognition’, and ‘she refused to budge her faith in him’.¹⁴⁷ The subsequent release of MacDonald and Thornton presented the press with a happy ending to resolve the story. Thornton, in particular, could be appreciated as a husband and father, greeting his wife by leaping ‘down from the train and round a platform stall to catch her in his arms ... gave her one kiss and murmured—“Darling!”’.¹⁴⁸

In attesting their innocence, Thornton and MacDonald allowed narratives of British exceptionalism to be maintained in the popular consciousness. The *Telegraph* sent a correspondent to the Polish border to meet the released pair and transcribe a statement about their behaviour throughout the case. MacDonald remained somewhat cryptic but nevertheless articulated the duress caused by the Soviet authorities:

I was assailed as probably no prisoner was ever assailed. ... Picture yourself in a crowd, hostile, and alone, there in the witness box, having been kept away from my friends for days. I looked round, and everywhere I found eyes staring at me. It was unnerving. Especially so after my long confinement before the trial. I prefer to leave it at that.¹⁴⁹

This reaffirmed the inhumanity of the Soviet security apparatus, thereby enhancing MacDonald’s absolution in the minds of the British public. Thornton reinforced this perception, observing that ‘Macdonald has suffered probably more than I have done. He is a cripple, and in not such good health as I have enjoyed’, again using MacDonald’s disability to palliate unease about his less than defiant defence. Thornton bore no ill will, however, informing the *Telegraph’s* readers that ‘During our

146. *News Chronicle*, 20 Apr. 1933.

147. *Daily Herald*, 21 Apr. 1933.

148. *Daily Express*, 5 July 1933.

149. *Daily Telegraph*, 4 July 1933.

confinement after the trial we got on splendidly together in our little cell. I could not have wished for a better pal', before turning his thoughts to his waiting wife.¹⁵⁰ Like the other released engineers, there seemed to be a conscious reversion to expected type once freedom from Soviet control had been secured.

Any lessons learned in the aftermath of the Metropolitan-Vickers affair depended on one's existing beliefs about the national character. In May, *The Times* ran a special investigation that included personal testimony from Monkhouse and Cushny. In announcing the series, the paper's leader column suggested that the Britons emerged having 'lost nothing of their honour'.¹⁵¹ The third article on the OGPU's interrogation methods and Thornton's treatment highlighted his resistance under intense pressure, therefore partially exculpating his signed confessions. This defence was reinforced by a further biographical note; Thornton's work ethic was emphasised, alongside his reluctance to take holidays. An additional anecdote—of his suffering a life-threatening electric shock of 1,500 volts in 1928—ended with Thornton back at work two days later.¹⁵² The investigation's findings were much to the distaste of the *New Statesman*, which thought it absurd for *The Times* to suggest that Britons were constitutionally incapable of acting as spies, further dispelling the idea that Britain was somehow unique in how it comported itself on the world stage.¹⁵³

Other publications processed the case into existing narratives of anti-Bolshevism, albeit these often transgressed into a general 'othering' of the Russian character. The *Saturday Review*, under the disputatious ownership of Lucy, Lady Houston, thought that 'To succeed with the Russians, as with the Turks, you must "treat 'em rough," for, like all uncivilised peoples, they mistake civility for weakness'.¹⁵⁴ With slightly greater courtesy, George Glasgow believed that the affair was 'produced by the incompatible temperament of the Russian and the British people', while J.D. Gregory in the *English Review* detected 'a hiatus between the ordinary Oriental and Western standards of living and doing business'.¹⁵⁵ Similar ideas had already been disseminated by Winston Churchill in the *Mail*, who took the view that 'The sanctity of an individual life, the rights of a private citizen against the State are conceptions altogether beneath Communist mentality. The Bolsheviks take the traditional Asiatic view that subjects exist only to obey their rulers', casting the regime as apart from the norms of European civilisation. Upholding the link to

150. Ibid.

151. *The Times*, 22 May 1933.

152. *The Times*, 24 May 1933.

153. *New Statesman and Nation*, 27 May 1933.

154. *Saturday Review*, 15 July 1933. For the *Saturday Review*, see D. Vessey, 'Anti-Bolshevism and the Periodical Press in Interwar Britain: The Case of the *Saturday Review*, 1933–6', *Historical Research*, xcvi (2023), pp. 103–23.

155. *Contemporary Review*, 1 July 1933; *English Review*, Sept. 1933.

Palmerston, Churchill saw the engineers as made of ‘tougher fibre’ than their Soviet counterparts:

Whatever complaint there may be about the weakness of Britain in these modern days, the average Englishman, Scotsman, or Welshman hears echoing voices from the past. He cannot believe his country will desert him. He cannot forget that her heart is warm and her arm is long. ‘*Civis Romanus sum!*’ leaps to his lips. ... A few of the engineers break down under the strain. Let those who have not felt it judge them indulgently. But most of them behaved as their countrymen would expect.¹⁵⁶

This view was shared by other publications. *Truth*, for example, thought that Britons abroad would ‘feel gratified that their Government will act energetically in their defence’.¹⁵⁷ Nevertheless, as Churchill seemed to concede, pride in the past belied concern for the present and the continued pre-eminence of the British people.

A different conclusion was reached in the *News Chronicle*. While the paper shared a concern not ‘to condone in any way the Asiatic cruelties which have stained the record of the Russian revolution’, it sought a more constructive basis for Anglo-Soviet relations, ridiculing the effectiveness of economic retaliation: ‘we shall not convince a single Russian that there is a God by refusing to sell him an agricultural implement’.¹⁵⁸ David Low made this point with greater acerbity in a cartoon for the *Evening Standard*. ‘Counsel for the Defence’ depicted the British ‘embargo’ steamroller circling the Moscow courthouse followed by the ‘meaningless noise’ created by the ‘Chronic Russia-Haters Band’.¹⁵⁹ This argument was combined with magnanimity in the *Guardian*, a sense that Britain was better than the vindictive response represented by threats and trade embargoes. Britain had to set an example: ‘If we are to teach the Russians not to employ the “third degree” and extorted “confessions” in their judicial procedure, we should be sure that we are not merely cutting ourselves with knives and worsening the whole atmosphere of international life’.¹⁶⁰ To the end, then, the press saw the Metropolitan-Vickers case as a forum where different ideas of Britishness—maturity and altruism in this instance—vied for prominence and public attention.

IV

The resolution of the crisis in July 1933 did not discontinue its symbolic importance as a contested space for arguments about the national character. Retrospective accounts, which followed over succeeding months,

156. *Daily Mail*, 20 Apr. 1933.

157. *Truth*, 26 Apr. 1933.

158. *News Chronicle*, 3 July 1933.

159. *Evening Standard*, 18 Apr. 1933.

160. *Manchester Guardian*, 20 Apr. 1933.

all sought to project their own version of Britishness onto the dispute, with corresponding implications for Soviet identity. On behalf of the Anglo-Russian Parliamentary Committee, W.P. Coates compiled *The Moscow Trial*, based on excerpts from the trial proceedings. The text also reproduced an article from the *New Leader* by D.N. Pritt KC, one of the period's foremost apologists for the Soviet project. Soviet justice, Pritt believed, demonstrated the regime's superior tolerance and impartiality compared with Western alternatives. He wrote that 'The foreign observer gets the impression of an informal, friendly, and even easy-going trial, conducted without heat and with the real co-operation of all concerned, and with a real desire to arrive at the truth'.¹⁶¹ The Committee subsequently released an abridged transcript of the trial, which, since the verbatim report ran to nearly 800 pages, allowed the pro-Soviet case to be made with greater economy, selectivity and impact.¹⁶²

Other legal experts took a different view. George Keeton, reader in Law at University College, London, offered a more critical appraisal of Soviet justice as well as the underlying characteristics of the Soviet citizenry. 'An Oriental engineer', Keeton thought, could not be equated to Western counterparts, and he assigned 'gross carelessness and incompetence among Russian engineers, and among Russian employees who are not engineers'.¹⁶³ He also found the obsequiousness of the Soviet defendants at the trial distasteful and fundamentally unconvincing, writing that 'If they appeared in a play, a dramatic critic would object to them on the ground that in real life people do not speak or behave like that'.¹⁶⁴ Nevertheless, Keeton was inclined to see the trial as consistent with the principles of Soviet law and consequently not a miscarriage of justice against the engineers. It would 'not satisfy English tests'—a reassuring confirmation of British superiority—but 'did not amount to a denial of justice'.¹⁶⁵

When Monkhouse released his account of the case and his wider career in the Soviet Union, there was also a temperate pragmatism to his conclusions. The book was published by Victor Gollancz, founder of the Left Book Club, reflecting its sympathetic nature and Monkhouse's reluctance to show 'bitterness at the unfairness and ingratitude of the Moscow verdict'.¹⁶⁶ Above all, it was an exercise in magnanimity. The trial may have been unjust, but Monkhouse did not repudiate the Soviet project in overarching terms, nor attack the Bolshevik leadership, believing that they 'are acting sincerely and in accordance with their convictions, and are neither seeking personal power nor self-enrichment'.¹⁶⁷ In remarks to

161. W.P. Coates, *The Moscow Trial, April, 1933* (London, 1933), p. 12.

162. *The Moscow Trial: Authentic Report* (London, 1933).

163. G.W. Keeton, *The Problem of the Moscow Trial* (London, 1933), p. 9.

164. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

165. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

166. Monkhouse, *Moscow*, p. 11.

167. *Ibid.*, p. 347.

the Manchester Rotary Club, he claimed any 'soreness' at the experience had been forgotten, and advocated the resumption of normal economic relations as expeditiously as possible.¹⁶⁸ Indeed, well into 1934, Monkhouse continued to use his platform to defend the Soviet Union's record, becoming a specialist speaker on the Soviet system as a by-product of his public renown.¹⁶⁹

As pro-Soviet voices reflected on the crisis, they repurposed commonly accepted notions of British ascendancy to subvert anti-Bolshevist sentiment. Maurice Dobb, on behalf of the Friends of the Soviet Union, mischievously diminished British exceptionalism to refute allegations against the OGPU. How credible was it, Dobb pondered, that 'English gentlemen'—no doubt a knowing invocation of stereotype—'succumbed to the invention of elaborate stories incriminating themselves and their fellows, writing out these statements in their own handwriting, after a few hours' interrogation'?¹⁷⁰ If Britons were beyond such manipulation, the engineers must by extension have been guilty of the accusations against them. Even Cummings's account of the trial, which maintained a degree of critical distance from the patriotic implications of the case, was written in a climate where national stereotypes abounded. The *Chronicle's* review of the book cast Cummings as 'Of good old Devon stock, he stands a valiant champion of England. Of philosophic Liberal tradition, he stands an equally valiant champion of world co-operation'.¹⁷¹ In tandem with the *Chronicle* itself, Cummings made sense of the affair and of Britain's international standing by laying claim to the essential basis of the national persona.

The Metropolitan-Vickers case demonstrates how Britons thought about themselves and their place in the world relative to the Soviet 'other' in the 1930s. The detention of British subjects abroad, an act which prompted reflections on the '*Civis Romanus sum*' heyday of diplomatic intervention, provoked a popular outcry that—even in more equanimous quarters—was critical of the Soviet Union and its destabilisation of Anglo-Soviet relations. Yet this 'emotional typhoon' could call into question the national character as well as mobilising patriotic sentiment. By using the crisis to affirm who they were, Britons revealed an urgent need to defend traditional characteristics of duty, industriousness, integrity and stoicism—however imagined these may have been—from external inquisition. In doing so, we can observe a degree of vulnerability about whether these qualities were still deemed emblematic of the British people. The engineers became symbols onto which were projected a wider discourse on the British psyche: what Britain had stood for in the past; its discomfort about being eclipsed in the present; and what implications

168. *Manchester Guardian*, 14 July 1933.

169. *Manchester Guardian*, 24 Mar. 1934; 1 May 1934.

170. Dobb, *Press and the Moscow Trial*, pp. 11–12.

171. *News Chronicle*, 14 July 1933.

this might have for the future. This was a contested debate; indeed, Britishness had to be pliable to endure the introversion and self-doubt engendered by the crises of the 1930s. In this context, the actual facts of the case were of secondary importance to how they could serve wider evaluations of Britain's history and contemporary authority, a consideration that operated inversely for groups attempting to defend the integrity of the Soviet regime.

These divides were reflected in the responses and narratives of the press; indeed, cumulatively the press constructed the crisis in largely symbolic terms. Popular right-wing newspapers such as the *Daily Express* were disposed to defend the engineers' honour regardless of evidence to the contrary, an instinctive reflex against the admission of British fallibility. Left-wing papers or those with a more radical tradition, notably the *Daily Herald* and *News Chronicle*, conceded a degree of legitimacy in the actions of the Soviet regime, not in a vindicative capacity, but because Britishness meant acting with restraint and sagacity, and because they believed that Communism had a right to exist in a climate of internationalism and mutual understanding. Even elite newspapers, which were usually more pragmatic in their coverage of the affair, not least in questioning the good sense of placing proscriptions on trade during a period of economic depression, still resorted to national stereotypes in translating the case for British audiences. More universally still, the daily and periodical press alike saw the Soviet order as fundamentally different from—and often inferior to—the British mentality, a difference of race and character as much as politics and society. In the aftermath of the crisis, one correspondent to the *Express* thought that 'Russia was "up against" all for which England stands—God, liberty, honour'.¹⁷² Many Britons would no doubt have agreed. But this did not necessarily constitute contented self-confidence. Throughout the Metropolitan-Vickers crisis, the constant public need to articulate varied assumptions about the British character—sometimes assertive and commanding; other times reserved and resilient—reveals hesitation alongside bullishness. As so often throughout the history of Anglo-Soviet relations, when Britons were moved to indict or rationalise Bolshevik rule, they also made sense of their own disposition and place in the world.

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¹⁷². *Daily Express*, 26 Apr. 1933.