

The Radical Internationalism of Konni Zilliacus

Labour MP Konni Zilliacus, who was born on this day in 1894, was an impassioned fighter for socialism and liberation across the world – a fight he believed was necessary to end the scourge of war.



Konni Zilliacus speaking at the World Congress of Partisans for Peace in April 1949. Credit: Keystone-France / Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images

If Konni Zilliacus is remembered in today's Labour movement, it is for his staunch internationalism, which would see him refused a visa to visit both America and the Soviet Union – and his expulsion from Labour within one year of being an MP. These infringements on him were down to his opposition to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and for his vocal support of Josip Broz Tito against Stalin's attempts to slur the Yugoslavian partisan leader as a fascist.

But there was even more to him than this. As a unique figure in Labour history, Zilliacus was an MP who spoke nine languages, an expert in international affairs, and a close follower—and staunch supporter—of socialist causes in the domestic arena, who was not afraid to rock the boat and thought very little of personal consequences when standing his ground for his beliefs.

Fighting for Peace

Zilliacus' life started in the Japanese port city of Kobe, where he was born in 1894 to a Finnish father and an American mother. Through his father's work as a leader in the Finnish independence movement, Konni moved around the world consistently throughout his youth until 1909, when his family settled in England. Considered a top student at the Bedales School in Hampshire, he went on to study at Yale, where in 1915 he graduated first in his class.

In reaction to the slaughter of the First World War and his own experience as an officer in the British interventionist forces seeking to stifle the nascent Soviet Union, Zilliacus joined Labour in 1918, since the party was identified with the opposition to Western military intervention against the young workers' republics and for the emboldening the League of Nations. It was in that great failed experiment that he soon found employment, working in the information section of the League secretariat, as well as in the Labour and Socialist International.

In this role, Zilliacus was key in supporting those working to maintain peace in a world shifting once again towards war. He played a leading role during the 1931 Manchurian Crisis, when Japanese troops occupied vast swathes of Manchuria under the pretence of protecting its economic interests. He served as secretary of the inter-departmental committee responsible for orchestrating collaboration between the League and the Chinese government and—latterly—as a seconded aide to the Chinese delegation in Geneva. Later, he would go on to describe the League's actions in this time as having 'shown clearly to world opinion on which side right and justice lay and who were the villains of the piece'.

However, his enthusiasm for a weak, pacific League waned, as the political situation darkened over Europe. After no protest was registered by the League against the Nazi annexation of Czechoslovakia, Konni resigned in protest, declaring that the League was dead. 'The fight was now at home,' he once wrote, adding that 'I knew there was no hope any longer, that no power on earth could avert war.'

Following his resignation from the world of international diplomacy, Zilliacus burst into Labour circles as a delegate for St Pancras South West at the party's 1939 conference, which saw him contribute to two debates. The first was supportive of the NEC's international policy statement, where he attempted to move an amendment supporting the growing anti-colonial surge across the British Empire, declaring support for Indian independence and pledging for Labour to refuse aiding wars for colonial possessions.

The second debate was a closed debate on the *Daily Herald*, a Labour-supporting paper, which saw him declare it to be 'an organ of the appeasers' due to its failure to reflect official Party policy on the need to prepare for war.

It was this debate that saw him verbally spar with Ernest Bevin, the then-General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union, which saw Bevin declare Zilliacus to have spoken in a 'wicked and dastardly personal' way, alongside references to alleged tricks within his time as a League of Nations official. It was this second debate and Zilliacus' 'victory' over Bevin that would see four delegates ask for his permission to propose him to be their parliamentary candidate for a future election – including his eventual seat of Gateshead.

Throughout the Second World War, Konni worked for the newly founded Ministry of Information, initially as a liaison with Swedish journalists to ensure they followed the British government's censor of information followed. Upon the Soviet Union's entrance into the War, his fluency in nine languages saw him working in the government's Soviet relations team. Alongside being an active Home Guard member, Zilliacus also became a regular *Tribune* contributor under various nom de plumes, including 'Vigilans', 'Our Diplomatic Correspondent', and 'A Labour Candidate'.

Parliamentary Peacemonger

In the 1945 Labour landslide, Zilliacus was elected to represent the people of Gateshead, joining a variety of fellow socialist MPs – from the Keep Left group around Ian Mikardo and Richard Crossman to the pro-Soviet group based around figures such as John Platts-Mills. It did not take long for Zilliacus' parliamentary speeches to reflect his lifelong crusade for peace, beginning with his maiden speech on 23 August 1945 during the debate around the ratification of the United Nations Charter.

In this speech, he discussed his previous activities within the League of Nations, confirming his support for a viable successor to it, as well as his belief that for peace to be secured across Europe, there must be 'a sweeping advance towards socialism'. These beliefs would quickly see Zilliacus begin to rebel against his old conference adversary Bevin, now Foreign Secretary.

This began during the March 1946 defence debate, where he responded to Clement Attlee's comments regarding the inability to separate defence and foreign policy by stating that 'One third of Britain's budget is on defence. I suggest that the price is too high... I think we can render better service to peace by scaling down our armaments to the point where we are solvent and can get on with our Socialist reconstruction.'

Alongside 85 other MPs, he would later vote against the National Service Bill, and supported Crossman and the Keep Left group's radical amendments to the King's Speech in 1946.

However, the defining moment of Zilliacus' stark opposition to the Attlee government's foreign policy was his opposition to the North Atlantic Treaty, which led Konni to make a 25-minute speech from the Commons floor imploring the government to 'find some way before it is too late to come back to the Charter of the United Nations... to be conciliatory and moderate in their attitude, not to be rushed or stampeded into recrimination, not to put their faith into armaments, but in a wise and conciliatory policy'. Zilliacus would join three other Labour MPs and two others in voting against the Treaty, a decision that would ultimately lead to his expulsion from Labour in 1950.

Tito's Man

Another defining feature of Zilliacus' first five years of Parliament was his support for internationalist causes – most significantly for Tito. His enthusiasm for Yugoslav socialism came early in his parliamentary career through his attendance at the country's first post-war elections as a member of a parliamentary delegation. Within this delegation's activities, there was time allotted for each member of the delegation to engage in a one-to-one discussion with Tito himself, which enabled both men to discuss their vision for a world based on socialism and internationalism, as well as laying the foundations for what became a strong friendship for the remainder of both men's lives.

Upon his return to Britain, Konni would become active in the British Yugoslavia Association, which was formed to 'further friendship, mutual understanding and co-operation between the peoples of Great Britain and Yugoslavia', becoming a member of its executive. This was in spite of the subsequent 1948 split between the Soviet Union and socialist Yugoslavia, which led Zilliacus to be internationally denounced for allegedly leading a 'campaign in favour of the Tito gang' and of 'showing a suspicious love for the Belgrade fascists' by the official journal of Cominform. Ironically, it would be these criticisms from pro-Soviet media outlets that would reopen the door for Zilliacus to be readmitted to Labour in 1952 and successfully selected for Manchester Gorton in 1955.

Konni's Return

Upon his re-election to Parliament, Zilliacus was met with a very different situation than the one he left behind, with an emboldened Tory government led by Anthony Eden and a Parliamentary Labour Party split between the socialist Bevanites and the right-wing Gaitskellites. Zilliacus supported many Bevanite causes during his time as Gorton's MP – from the recently launched Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), support for a 'third force' in international politics through the emerging Non-Aligned Movement, and as a founder of the Victory for Socialism (VfS) faction alongside Sydney Silverman and Ian Mikardo.

In VfS, Zilliacus would perform the role of foreign affairs guru, where he led the organisation to

argue for Britain to cease being a nuclear power and in favour of using Britain's diplomatic might to replace both NATO and the Warsaw Pact with an all-European security treaty. This organisation would later be wound up shortly before the 1964 election, where many of its MPs and members saw a Labour Party led by former Bevanite Harold Wilson as an opportunity to generate socialist change in Britain.

Following the election, which saw the election of a Labour government, Konni was met with a strengthened parliamentary left, including ardent Bevanite [Stan Newens](#), the Liverpool socialist councillor Eric Heffer, and the legendary [Michael Foot](#) – now in Aneurin Bevan's former seat of Ebbw Vale. This left organised itself into a cohesive voice for socialist policies within the PLP, from which the Tribune Group was born. Zilliacus joined the group and aided in the creation of its international policy documents, from opposition papers on issues such as the European Economic Community to the Vietnam War.

It was Vietnam that unsurprisingly marked Zilliacus' remaining time as an MP, where Michael Foot, Sydney Silverman, William Warbey, and himself were staunch critics of the Wilson government's closeness to America and its stark lack of opposition to American intervention in Vietnam – from the back benches, but not within the voting lobbies, in fear of the weak Labour government's collapse.

'The Greatest International Socialist of My Time'

Zilliacus would pass away on 6 July 1967, after an extended period of ill health which saw him remove himself from the House of Commons – but not from political life, with him regularly providing correspondence to his constituents in Gorton.

He was best remembered by fellow socialist MP Sydney Silverman as having 'never given up the principles of the United Nations, based on the covenants of the all-inclusive Charter no matter who opposed him whether it was Ernest Bevin, or Wall Street or Stalin. He was completely devoted in the best sense to the socialist causes which are the basis of peace.'