

**U DX396****Papers of Harold Laski****1920-1949****Accession number:** 2016/26

**Biographical Background:** Harold Joseph Laski was born in Manchester in 1893, the second son of Nathan Laski and his wife Sarah Frankenstein. His father was a cotton shipping merchant, a leader of the Jewish community and a Liberal. Harold Laski was educated at Manchester Grammar School and studied eugenics under Karl Pearson at University College for six months in 1911. He met Frida Kerry, a lecturer in eugenics, and they married in that year, just as he began an undergraduate degree in history at Oxford University. Frida Laski lectured in Glasgow and she and Harold Laski were destined to have a distance marriage in its early stages (Dictionary of National Biography; Eastwood, Harold Laski, p.5).

In 1914 Laski was awarded a first class honours degree and the Beit memorial prize. He worked for a while with George Lansbury on the Daily Herald. When the war broke out he failed his medical and in 1916, the year his daughter Diana was born, he was appointed lecturer in modern history at McGill University, Montreal. In 1916 he joined the staff of Harvard University and there associated with Oliver Wendell Holmes and Felix Frankfurter, both of whom went on to be appointed to the Supreme Court. He was friendly with Franklin Delano Roosevelt and there is a letter in the collection from this former United States president. In 1919 Laski was savagely attacked for his sympathy with the Boston police strikers and he turned his back on an American academic career, taking a post at the London School of Economics in 1920 (Dictionary of National Biography; Eastwood, Harold Laski, pp.16-19, 109).

Harold Laski became professor of Political Science in 1926 and held this post at the London School of Economics until his death. He retained an interest in American political thought and excited controversy when he took a Marxist approach to American politics in *The American Democracy* (1948). He is supposed to have seen in America, more acutely than England, the struggle between capital and labour. Laski was a prolific writer of works of political philosophy and political theory. His other works included *Studies in the problem of sovereignty* (1917), *Authority in the modern state* (1919), *A grammar of politics* (1925), *Democracy in Crisis* (1933), *Parliamentary government in England* (1938) and *Reflections on the constitution* (his Simon lectures at Manchester University which were published posthumously in 1951) (Dictionary of National Biography; Eastwood, Harold Laski, ch.5).

Harold Laski was also involved in Labour politics and was friendly with Ramsay MacDonald through the 1920s. In 1923 MacDonald offered him a cabinet post if he would stand for parliament, but he turned down this offer as well as a further offer of a seat in the House of Lords made in 1929. In 1931 he became disillusioned with Labour Party politics and his friendship with MacDonald came to an end. From that date he extended his Marxist philosophy, arguing for the rest of his life that social revolution was inevitable. In 1932 he joined the Socialist League and in 1937 took part in a joint effort with the Communist Party and the Independent Labour Party in an attempt to form a Popular Front against the government of Neville Chamberlain. He was on the executive committee of the Fabian Society through most of the 1920s and 1930s and was a close friend of both Leon Blum and John Strachey of The Left Book Club. Between 1934 and 1945 he served as an alderman on Fulham council and was chairman of the libraries committee. In 1937 he returned to the Labour Party fold, joining the executive committee and he served on this until 1949 (Dictionary of National Biography).

## Hull History Centre: Papers of Harold Laski

During the second world war Laski suffered a nervous breakdown as a result of overwork and over-commitment. Despite this he chaired the Labour Party conference in 1944 and was chair of the National Executive committee from 1945 to 1946. During the 1945 election he undermined the leadership contest of Clement Atlee and the Conservative press (and Winston Churchill) were quick to demonise him. He took out a libel case against one of the papers and this hung over him during a year of travel in 1946, on trips made with Denis Healey, the new International Secretary. He lost the libel case and the costs of £13,000 came out of public donations. Never a healthy man, his health failed further, but he continued to overwork, attending 40 meetings in 30 days during the February 1950 general election. A month later he contracted influenza and died. His influence persisted, through past pupils and friends, like John Saville who helped acquire his papers for the Brynmor Jones Library. In 1954 the Harold Laski Institute of Political Science was opened in India. Frida Laski outlived her husband by over a quarter of a century.

**Custodial history:** Donated by Andrew Mathewson, grandson of H.J. Laski, received by Hull University Archives at Hull History Centre on 22 Feb 2016

**Description:** Research notes, lecture notes, and academic papers written by Harold Laski, also black and white photograph album of the same relating to his last visit to Czechoslovakia in 1947

**Arrangement:** Chronological

**Extent:** 0.16 linear metres

**Related material:** U DES; U DLA; U DP173; U DP216; U DP217; U DX84; U DX241; U DX262; U DX268; U DX320; U DX327

**Access conditions:** Access will be granted to any accredited reader

**Copyright:** Estate of Harold Laski

**Language:** English

Hull History Centre: Papers of Harold Laski

- U DX396/1 Draft. Foreword written by Oliver Wendell Holmes Junior (American Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States) 15 Jun 1920  
Manuscript draft of a foreword for a collection of essays relating to Oliver Wendell Holmes Junior. Note that Holmes references 'the kindness of a friend Mr Harold J. Laski' in compiling the collection.  
1 item
- U DX396/2 File. Lecture Notes and Papers 1932-1946  
Papers relating to the academic work of Harold J. Laski. Contains: manuscript lecture notes written by Laski; typescript list of teaching staff with their age and salary for academic year 1946/47; manuscript paper titled 'The Social Basis of Ethical Principles' written by Laski, submitted to and rejected by 'Mind' and believed to have never been printed as of 1969; manuscript account written by Laski of an interview with Sir Clive [?], 15 Nov 1932; manuscript text of a speech given by Laski at a meeting of the Fabian Society marking their Golden Jubilee.  
Lecture notes on various aspect of political and social theory, including: theory of the state; the American Experiment; international institutions; private enterprise; principles of industrial organisation; bases of international government; relations of states; state and nations; problem of authority; political institutions; dynamics of social change; place of the state in modern society; nature of state power; state and its sovereignty; property; freedom; political thought on English Civil War; Conciliar Movement; political theory to 1600; political theory of Reformation; the encyclopedists; toleration in England; physiocratic school; nature of social revolution; purpose of the state; laissez faire; democracy and planning; American Revolution; introduction to theories of Marxism (state, class struggle, dictatorship of the proletariat); present status of democracy; trade unionism in a planned society; nature of social revolution; English Socialism until 1848; Voltaire; elements of government; French political thought 1715-1815; Russian political ideas; democracy and planning; nature of revolution - the Jacobins; Idealist theory of state; Colonial period of American political theory; struggle for law and legislation; Hume and the birth of the Enlightenment; Conservatism; counter-revolution; local government; European ideas and 1848.  
1 file

Hull History Centre: Papers of Harold Laski

U DX396/3	Note. 'French Political Thought in the Seventeenth Century' Typescript outline structure [for a book?], chapters listed are: introductory; church and state 1610-1660; the influence of the lawyers; absolute monarchy and the raison d'etat; the fronde; Louis XIV and personal monarchy; Bosseut; church and state 1660-1715; the dawn of protest - the Protestants; the dawn of protest - Fenelon; the dawn of protest - Saint-Simon the economists and the idea of an aristocratic revival; the dawn of protest - Bayle and the birth of the critical spirit; conclusion. 1 item	1940s
U DX396/4	Essay. 'Constitutional History II' Manuscript paper written by Harold J. Laski 1 item	1940s
U DX396/5	Photo Album. 'H.J. Laski's Last Visit to Czechoslovakia' Album containing 7 black and white photographs showing Laski meeting with various persons and being shown around a [shoe manufacturers?] whilst in Czechoslovakia 1 volume	1947
U DX396/6	File. 'Sidney Hillman Memorial Lectures 1949' Manuscript lecture notes written by Harold J. Laski entitled 'Trade Unionism in the Modern State'. Lectures consist of individual papers entitled: The historical significance of trade unionism; trade unions and the law; trade unions and politics; the changing functions of trade unions; conclusion. 1 file	1949
U DX396/7	Essay. 'The Changing Significance of Trade Unionism - I' Typescript paper written by Harold J. Laski 1 item	1949
U DX396/8	Essay. 'The Changing Significance of Trade Unionism - I' Manuscript paper written by Harold J. Laski 1 file	29 Mar 1949