

THE FRENCH COMMUNIST PARTY
AND THE COMING OF THE ITALO-ETHIOPIAN WAR

A THESIS

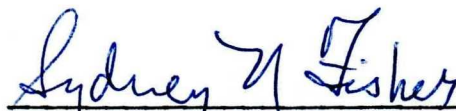
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James Evan Williams, B.S.

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Approved by



Adviser

Department of History

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CHAPTER I
THE DIPLOMATIC BACKGROUND

When, on May 9, 1936, the Italian government formally proclaimed the annexation of Ethiopia,* it marked more than the passing of the last, major, independent African state; it signified the de facto demise of the League of Nations as a credible instrument of international arbitration. Much of the blame for the League's failure to resolve the Italo-Ethiopian crisis of 1935-1936 rests upon the French government.

Although the policy which was followed by France proved to be singularly unsuccessful, it appears, in retrospect, that there was at least one alternative policy which could have provided France a greater measure of security; and security, after all, was France's chief concern following World War I. That policy, one of firm adherence to the League of Nations, was advocated most forcefully within the country by the French Communist Party. However, before examining the motives of the Parti Communiste Française

*In Europe, at that time, the term "Abyssinia" was more frequently used when referring to Ethiopia; however, both terms were used interchangeably.

(PCF), as well as the extent to which they supported their policy, it would be well to review the background of the Italo-Ethiopian crisis itself.

The crisis of 1935-1936 traces its heritage to the great scramble for African colonies which took place in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The possession of a colony in Africa became, in the period between about 1880 and 1910, a criterion of greatness among the powers of western Europe. Whether or not the subjugated territory was an economic asset mattered little at that time.

In 1879, the Italian colonial possessions in Africa consisted of the port of Assab on the Red Sea.¹ Twelve years later Assab was part of the Italian colony of Eritrea encompassing approximately 50,000 square miles. Five hundred miles to the southeast was another newly acquired territory, Italian Somaliland. Extending westward between these two colonies was the independent kingdom of Ethiopia. The Italian desire to dominate Ethiopia did not appear suddenly in the 1930's; it dates from fifty years earlier. When Menelik II, in his struggle with rival chieftains,

¹J.D. Fage and Roland Oliver, A Short History of Africa (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1966), pp. 181-189.

sought aid from the Italians, he received not only arms but a distasteful lesson in European diplomacy. In 1889, Menelik signed the Treaty of Uccialli, the most important provision of which was that Ethiopia would conduct her foreign relations through the Italian government. Prime Minister Crispi interpreted the Italian text of the treaty to mean that Ethiopia had agreed to become a protectorate of Italy.² It is interesting to note, in light of their policies in 1935-36, that Britain acquiesced to the Italian claim while it was France who supported Menelik when he denounced the Italian assertion of a protectorate.³

Italy's attempt, in 1895-96, to force Ethiopia to accept the Italian interpretation of the Treaty of Uccialli was to have serious long-term consequences. On March 1, 1896, at Aduwa, in northern Ethiopia, the Italians suffered a resounding defeat at the hands of the Ethiopians. The fact that the Italians were badly outnumbered did not lessen the impact upon Italy's imperial pretensions nor upon Crispi's political career. More significantly, this humiliating defeat

²George Baer, The Coming of the Italo-Ethiopian War (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 2-3.

³René Albrecht-Carrié, A Diplomatic History of Europe Since the Congress of Vienna (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), p. 216.

of a European nation by a poorly developed, non-western, country left a residue of disgrace which future Italian Governments felt had to be avenged in order to restore national pride. For Ethiopia, however, Aduwa provided at least a brief respite from colonial pressure.

For several years prior to Aduwa, France had been providing munitions to Ethiopia. This was not done because she was interested in the country's freedom per se, but because she was trying to counter Italian colonial expansion in east Africa. In addition, France wanted to protect the Djibouti-Addis Ababa railway concession which was acquired in 1893. Half a century later Italian intervention in Ethiopia would not seem quite as detrimental to France's national interest. In fact, within a decade of the debacle at Aduwa France was joining with Italy and Britain in a pact to define the colonial interests of each with regard to Ethiopia. In the Tripartite Treaty of December 13, 1906, France, as well as Britain, "recognized, and officially accepted the paramount colonial importance of Ethiopia for Italy."⁴ Italy's desire for Abyssinia was clearly not abating. Nevertheless, in the years immediately preceding the First World War, Italy was forced to

⁴Baer, p. 6.

control her colonial ambitions in east Africa. This was due in part to France's countervailing interests in Ethiopia, especially those associated with the Djibouti-Addis Ababa railway, as well as Italy's failure to obtain German support for her claims.

The war which engulfed Europe from 1914-1918 granted Ethiopia a respite from the Italian threat at the very time when Menelik's death and the ensuing civil war would have made the country the most vulnerable to outside intervention. Yet, it was the long-term effects of World War I which were to have such serious implications for the freedom of Ethiopia. As will be seen, many of the factors involved in the Italo-Ethiopian crisis of 1935-1936 need to be examined in the light of the political and psychological changes wrought by the Great War.

One of the promises which came due at the end of the war was the one made to Italy in order to induce her to intervene on the side of the Allies. Article 13 of the Treaty of London (1915) promised that Italy would receive territorial indemnification in Africa if Britain or France enlarged their holdings by the acquisition of former German colonies.⁵ The difficulty with Article 13 was its lack of

⁵Maxwell H.H. Macartney and Paul Cremona, Italy's Foreign and Colonial Policy, 1914-1937 (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 47.

specificity in trying to provide for postwar developments. What was recognized, however, was Italy's right to have the frontiers of Eritrea and Somaliland revised in her favor. Thus, Italian expansion in east Africa was to be officially sanctioned by Britain and France, as well as the fourth signatory, Russia. What remained to be agreed upon after the war was the specific locale and extent of Italy's compensation. While Britain and France attempted to confine postwar negotiations to the frontiers between their colonies and those of Italy,⁶ the latter envisioned more extensive changes. Perhaps the most audacious claim made by Italy, while she was attempting to gain her compensation under Article 13, was for the cession to her of the French-owned Djibouti-Addis Ababa railway and the colony of French Somaliland.⁷ Italy's claims were rejected by France both in 1915 and during the Paris negotiations of 1919.⁸ Without discussing the shortcomings and merits of the mandate system, it is sufficient to say that the hypocrisy of the British and

⁶Treaty of London, 1915, Article 13, quoted in Macartney and Cremona, pp. 44-48.

⁷Macartney and Cremona, p. 68.

⁸Baer, pp. 11-13.

French in assuring themselves of the benefits of Germany's former colonial empire, while denying the Italians a commensurate share of the spoils, served only to embitter the Italian government.

Although Italy was temporarily prevented from acquiring the additional territory which she desired in east Africa, she did not cease to seek means by which her influence in that part of the continent could be enhanced. Since the two colonies of Eritrea and Somaliland, which Italy already held, were not contiguous, it is hardly surprising that a way would be sought to connect them. During the Paris negotiations of 1919, Tittoni, the Italian foreign minister, suggested that Britain and France urge the Abyssinian government to grant Italy a concession for a railway to connect Italy's two east African colonies.⁹ The Italian request was noteworthy because the proposed route would have passed to the west of Addis Ababa. Clearly, such a route, two hundred miles further west than necessary, would greatly facilitate the exploitation of the Ethiopian highlands. Although Italy's proposal was coupled with a pledge to support Britain's wish to build a dam

⁹Baer, pp. 11-13.

on Lake Tana, it was supported by neither Britain nor France.¹⁰ The chief reasons for this was that both countries wanted to preserve their own influence in Ethiopia as much as possible.

When the decade of the nineteen-twenties opened, Italy was a country which had been frustrated in her attempts to secure what she considered just compensation for the sacrifices made during wartime. The resentment caused by these setbacks remained alive within the Italian foreign office, which made frequent overtures to France and Britain for support in gaining economic concessions in Ethiopia. While little or nothing resulted at that time, despite Italy's persistence, two events did take place in the early 1920's which were to have paramount importance in the years that followed.

In October, 1922, Benito Mussolini, leader of the Italian Fascists, came to power as a nation-wide seizure of municipal governments culminated in the "March on Rome." The impact of Mussolini upon Italy's foreign policy was to be great, and for Ethiopia tragic.

¹⁰Gaetano Salvemini, Prelude to World War II (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1954), p. 74.

In the 1920's, Mussolini "was essentially a believer in slow expansion based on the maintenance of the traditional alignment with Britain."¹¹ The crucial point is that Mussolini was pursuing an expansionist foreign policy. Implicit in a dynamic imperialism such as that envisioned by Il Duce was the revision of the post-war settlement at Versailles. Herein lay the basis for a clash between the policies of France and Italy. Whereas Italy was to adopt an ever more active foreign policy, that of France was firmly rooted in the maintenance of the status quo ante bellum. As one historian put it:

the decisive obstacle to co-operation between France and Italy lay in the fact that Italy. . . was a dissatisfied country and could not be attracted to France by mere guarantees of the established order. She was out for change. . . and many of the changes which she desired could be effected only by far-reaching French concessions.¹²

It should be noted that during the decade following the war opposition to modification of the Versailles Treaty was evinced most strongly by the French Right. The Left returned

¹¹H. Stuart Hughes, "The Early Diplomacy of Italian Fascism, 1922-1932," in The Diplomats, 1919-1939, ed. Gordon A. Craig and Felix Gilbert (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), p. 229.

¹²Arnold Wolfers, Britain and France between Two Wars (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1940), p. 143.

to the pacifism which it had espoused prior to 1914.¹³

Included in the latter group was the recently organized French Communist Party. It is not surprising then, since Center-Right coalitions held power in France during most of the 1920's, that a generally hard-line, nationalistic, policy was followed toward Italy's colonial ambitions. This was especially true in the years 1922-24, 1926-29, when Raymond Poincaré was premier.¹⁴

It should not be inferred from the above that, during 1924-26, when a Left-Center coalition was in power, the French were amenable to making territorial concessions to Italy. Thus, although relatively cordial relations prevailed during the brief era of Locarno, this was also a time when the French government renewed its intention to contain Italy's expansionist aims in east Africa.

The event which demonstrated this resolve occurred in 1925, when Britain agreed to support Italian wishes for a sphere of influence in western Ethiopia. In exchange, Italy was to back Britain in the latter's negotiations for Turkish

¹³David Thomson, Democracy in France since 1870 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 129-130.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 201-205.

recognition of the mandate over Iraq.¹⁵ When France was informed of the conclusion of the pact, a protest was immediately lodged with Britain and Italy. Unfortunately, despite the fact that France was voicing support for Ethiopia, the reason for her doing so was based upon self-interest. France alleged that the Anglo-Italian accord violated the treaty of 1906, which had guaranteed all three signatories equal rights in Ethiopia.¹⁶ By 1925, however, there were more reliable guarantors of Ethiopia's sovereignty than France.

In September, 1923, there occurred an event whose import could hardly have been foreseen: Ethiopia was admitted to the League of Nations. Supporting Ethiopia's admission was France, which hoped thereby to gain influence in Addis Ababa; opposing her admittance, initially, on the grounds of widespread slavery, was Britain.¹⁷ The positions of these two countries and the strength of their commitments were to be quite different after the events of the early 1930's.

Had Ethiopia not been admitted to the League it is probable that the Italian takeover in 1935-1936 would not

¹⁵Baer, pp. 14-16.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁷Franklin D. Laurens, France and the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis, 1935-1936 (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), p. 13.

have led to the rift in Franco-Italian relations which followed. Furthermore, if Ethiopia's membership had not forced the League to take action in 1935, and thus reveal its impotence, there is at least the possibility that the League of Nations could have presented a more united front against Hitler within Europe. Such post facto observations are not meant to imply that the resolution of the Ethiopia crisis would have deterred Hitler in any way, but merely that circumstances might have been less favorable for Germany had the Ethiopian crisis not undermined France's security system.

In August, 1928, a twenty year treaty of "Friendship and Arbitration" was concluded between Italy and Ethiopia.¹⁸ From 1928 to 1935 was to be a short twenty years. In August, 1930, yet another treaty with Ethiopia was signed. This time Britain and France joined Italy and Ethiopia in signing a pact to regulate the sale of arms to Ethiopia. The stated purpose of this agreement was to keep weapons out of the hands of chieftains who were not loyal to the government in Addis Ababa. The fact that such limitations would tend to make Ethiopia more dependent upon foreign powers for aid,

¹⁸Baer, p. 20.

while weakening her vis-à-vis these same countries could not have escaped notice within the foreign ministries of Europe. As is evident, in the years prior to the crisis, there was a plethora of treaties, but a lamentable lack of candor on the part of the signatories.

By 1930, this lengthy series of treaties and informal agreements had accustomed France and the other European powers to disregard the sovereignty of Ethiopia when their own colonial interests were involved. Within France, however, during the early 1930's, a series of foreign and domestic events began to alter the traditional outlook of many Frenchmen, so that by 1935 the foreign policy positions of most French parties had been significantly modified.

CHAPTER II

THE SITUATION IN FRANCE PRIOR TO THE ROME AGREEMENTS

As has been mentioned above, the chief foreign policy concern of France following World War I was national security. This anxiety was a direct result of the dreadful losses suffered by France: one million three hundred thousand dead and over half a million maimed.¹ This was a staggering blow to a nation which was well aware that its birth-rate was insufficient even to maintain a stable population, much less to compensate for such depopulation.² As if the War itself had not done enough to disillusion France, the Wilsonian settlement, which had been forced upon France at Versailles, began to disintegrate almost immediately as the United States Senate refused to help guarantee European security.

France, largely as a result of this failure to secure binding commitments for her security, began to construct a defensive framework of treaties reminiscent of the pre-war

¹J.P.T. Bury, France, 1814-1940 (New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1962), p. 252.

²René Rémond, Atlas Historique de la France Contemporaine, 1800-1965 (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1966), pp. 28-30.

alliances. All of France's military and diplomatic defenses were ultimately meant to keep Germany in check. These formal and informal alliances brought various unexpected and unwonted pressures upon the French government during the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis.

In view of France's policy, in 1935-1936, of trying to salvage Franco-Italian relations at the expense of Ethiopia and the League, it is very interesting to note that the sentiment of France's allies was overwhelming in favor of Ethiopia. Admittedly, the motives were often openly self-serving, as in the case of the Little Entente, which was strongly opposed to a strengthening of Franco-Italian relations because they wanted French protection from Italy.³ Britain backed Ethiopia, but was mainly interested in preserving the League of Nations for future use in Europe.⁴ Then, there was Russia.

Because of her potential military strength and her geographical location, Russia would seem to be an ideal ally against a resurgent Germany. Yet, there were serious ideological problems. France, under Clemenceau, had opposed the

³Wolfers, p. 143.

⁴The Times (London), October, 1935, passim.

Russian Revolution to the point of urging military support for the anti-Bolsheviks as long as two years after the November Revolution.⁵ Although de jure recognition of the Soviet regime was finally granted in 1924 by the Radical-Socialist government of Edouard Herriot, the French Right retained, in 1935, a deep distrust of Russia. By the 1930's, however, considerations of national security had begun to outweigh blind animosity. In November, 1932, a Franco-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact was signed, but it was not until after Hitler came to power in Germany that Russia and France made a serious effort to strengthen their relations.⁶ This came about chiefly because of the Soviet re-evaluation of the fascist threat which seemed to be developing in western Europe. As a result, during 1934, negotiations took place which culminated in the Franco-Soviet Mutual Assistance Treaty of May 1935. Although the Treaty was not ratified by the French until the following year, it still represented a step in the French moderates' search for protection from the

⁵J. Hampden Jackson, Clemenceau and the Third Republic (New York: Collier, 1962), pp. 151-152.

⁶Max Beloff, The Foreign Policy of Soviet Russia, 1929-1941, Vol. I: 1929-1936 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), pp. 23-24.

⁷Adam B. Ulam, Expansion and Coexistence: The History of Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917-1967 (New York: Praeger, 1968), pp. 195-196.

growing German threat.

There was another important aspect to the relationship between France and Russia. That was the link between the two countries provided by the Communist Party. In a sense, Russia was the only ally of France which, in theory at least, had an entire political party within France to act as her liaison. As will be shown below, there were several factors which acted to modify this assumption. In addition to France's treaty commitments there were other external and domestic influences which should be taken into account before considering the actual outbreak of the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis.

Although the world-wide depression of the 1930's affected France later than it did the rest of Europe and was less severe, it, nevertheless, increased the malaise of the working class.⁸ Most of these workers gave their political allegiance to the parties of the Left, including to a large degree the Communist Party. A very important result of this situation was that during the period of the Abyssinian affair the constituency of the Communist Party was more concerned with the domestic

⁸Jesse R. Pitts, "Continuity and Change in Bourgeois France," In Search of France, Stanley Hoffmann et.al. (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), pp. 264-265.

problem of their own welfare than would have been the case otherwise.

A major consideration within France, and one which was related to the problem of national security, was the domestic fascist threat. Tracing their heritage from the nineteenth century monarchists, the fascists or crypto-fascists in France were often organized into armed leagues, many of which adhered to the extreme anti-Parliamentary doctrine of Charles Maurras' Action Française.

These enemies of the Republic thought they saw their chance to overthrow the regime in the wake of the Stavisky scandal of 1933. The fascist rioting of February 6, 1934, left the Republic intact, but it exacerbated the ideological polarization which was already apparent in the interaction of foreign and domestic affairs.¹⁰

The demonstrations and counter-demonstrations which took place in Paris during February, 1934, brought France to the brink of civil war. Yet, the so-called "Government of National Union" which was formed to restore confidence in

⁹Bury, pp. 273-275.

¹⁰Thomson, pp. 182-183.

the Third Republic failed to include either Communists or Socialists. As a result of their mutual exclusion from, and their opposition to, the Government the two parties of the Left began to draw closer together during late 1934 and early 1935.¹¹ Although both parties were often seeking similar ends their deeply-rooted distrust of each other made outright co-operation very unpalatable prior to mid-1935.

Maurice Thorez, the Secretary of the Central Committee of the French Communist Party since 1932, had consistently minimized the threat of fascism and had concentrated his energies against the Socialists as much as against the Right.¹² His attitude typified that of the leadership of the PCF prior to late 1934. Jacques Doriot, a leading French Communist who advocated co-operation with the Socialists before such a policy was officially sanctioned was expelled from the Party in June, 1934.¹³ It was the continuing vociferous

¹¹Le Populaire, November-December, 1934; L'Humanité, November, 1934, February-March, 1935. Le Populaire was the official organ of the French Socialist Party, Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière (S.F.I.O.). L'Humanité was the official publication of the Parti Communiste Française. Each of these newspapers was the chief means of disseminating the current policy of their respective parties.

¹²Daniel R. Brower, The New Jacobins: The French Communist Party and the Popular Front (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), pp. 52-55.

¹³Ibid., p. 61.

belligerence of the French Right that began to drive the Communists and Socialists closer together only a few months after Doriot's expulsion.

Since the major domestic issue and the chief foreign policy problem were both manifestations of the fascist threat it was not surprising that the French Communists took a firm stand against fascist encroachments abroad. Thus, when the Italians began to mount a full-fledged diplomatic and military assault against Ethiopia it was quite natural that the PCF should attempt to counter it.

The beginning of the Italo-Ethiopian crisis is usually dated from the clash between Italian and Ethiopian troops which took place at Walwal¹⁴ in southeastern Ethiopia on December 5, 1934. Ironically, when this incident occurred, the Ethiopians were acting as an escort for a British surveying team which was attempting to prevent Italo-Ethiopian friction by delineating the boundary between Ethiopia and Italian Somaliland.¹⁵ The Walwal incident itself would probably have been resolveable had Mussolini not wished to

¹⁴Other frequent spellings were Oual Oual, Ualual, and Wal Wal.

¹⁵Baer, pp. 44-51; The Times (London), December 10, 1934.

use it as a pretext for fomenting trouble with Ethiopia.¹⁶

Prior to Walwal there was no concerted effort on the part of the Communists¹⁷ to denounce Italian aims in east Africa, although they did recognize the threat posed by Italy. They certainly, however, avoided excessive optimism such as that shown by the British in the London Times prior to Walwal. Despite the movement of Italian troops toward the frontier of Ethiopia, which was "made necessary [sic]" by the disquieting rumours suggesting that Italy was preparing to attack her neighbour," the Times, at least, believed that "The exchange of assurances of peaceful intentions between the two Governments should put an end to the rumours of tension."¹⁸

After these "rumours of tension" materialized at Walwal on December 5, the French and British both continued to temporize; the British said that the boundary between Ethiopia and Italian Somaliland "has never been demarcated on the ground."¹⁹ True, but Walwal was fifty miles inside the unofficial border. Le Temps, whose "Bulletin de Jour" was

¹⁶Baer, pp. 40-44; Macartney and Cremona, p. 302.

¹⁷Unless otherwise stated, "Communists" will refer to the French Communists.

¹⁸The Times, October 1, 1934.

¹⁹Ibid., December 19, 1934.

a mouthpiece for the Quai d'Orsay when Center-Right governments were in power,²⁰ also belittled the frontier incident which took place in Italian Somaliland as having little importance attached to it by official circles of the French Government.²¹ This tolerance was hardly surprising coming from a newspaper which the preceding year had praised Mussolini's regime as being "a fine and 'modern' one."²² Likewise, in view of their ideological differences, the condemnation of Italy by the Communists was not unexpected. A major difference was that the Communists were outside the Government and could not shape foreign policy directly. The importance of French foreign policy in the burgeoning Italo-Ethiopian dispute became evident at the beginning of 1935 when a series of meetings took place in Rome between the French foreign minister, Pierre Laval, and Mussolini. The Rome Agreements were to cast a pall over all subsequent events in the crisis.

²⁰Charles A. Micaud, The French Right and Nazi Germany, 1933-39: A Study of Public Opinion (Durham: Duke University Press, 1943), p. 8.

²¹Le Temps, December 9, 1934.

²²Eugene Weber, Action Française: Royalism and Reaction in Twentieth Century France (Stanford University Press, 1962), p. 287.

CHAPTER III

THE ROME AGREEMENTS: PRELUDE TO COMPLICITY

In 1935, between January 5th and 7th, Foreign Minister Laval met four times with Mussolini.¹ Out of these meetings there emerged four public agreements and an equal number which remained secret. Two of these four secret sections were "exchanges of letters, proclaiming French disinterest in the economic sphere in Ethiopia."² A secret letter of January 7, stated, in part:

the French Government does not look in Abyssinia for satisfaction of any interests other than those economic interests relating to the traffic of the Jibuti-Addis Ababa railway in the zone defined in the annex thereto. Nevertheless, the French Government does not by this renounce the rights which its subjects and protected persons enjoy under the Franco-Abyssinian Treaty of January 10, 1908, nor the concessions which it has obtained over parts of Abyssinia situated outside the zone mentioned above, nor the renewal of the aforesaid concessions.³

As can be seen, even after these relatively minimal French interests had been provided for, a great deal of freedom of action remained to Mussolini. According to the later

¹Le Temps, January 5-10, 1935.

²D.C. Watt, "The Secret Laval-Mussolini Agreement of 1935 on Ethiopia," Middle East Journal, XV (winter 1961), p. 69.

³Ibid., p. 77.

testimony of Laval, this freedom was meant to extend only into the economic sphere.⁴ Yet, from the very moment the talks began there was speculation that Ethiopia's independence would be undermined by a private agreement between Laval and Mussolini. While Laval was in Rome the French Communists were warning of the long-term dangers inherent in any accord that would sacrifice Ethiopia to the colonial ambitions of Italy:

The French Government by attaching its name [] to an agreement that would allow Italy to dominate Ethiopia [] will create a singular precedent. Tomorrow other applicants will reclaim their places at the colonial banquet. Tomorrow Hitler will put forth his candidature for a portion.⁵

The Communist's fears of giving encouragement to Hitler were to prove all too true, as was seen at the time of the remilitarization of the Rhineland and afterward. But, as his subsequent policy at Stresa was to demonstrate, Laval's avowed intention was to strengthen the alliance against Hitler, not to weaken it.

Whatever the intent of the published and private accords of Rome, their net effect was to assure Mussolini that France

⁴Journal Officiel de la Republique Francaise. Chambre. Debats. December 27-28, 1935. Hereafter cited as J.O.C.

⁵L'Humanité, January 6, 1935.

would not be a major obstacle to his plans for Ethiopia. Whether or not Laval deliberately, and overtly, gave Mussolini a promise of French acquiescence to Italy's political ambitions in east Africa has never been conclusively determined. Since both men were very anxious to reach an agreement at Rome--Laval wanting to strengthen Italian ties with France and Mussolini wanting to neutralize French resistance prior to his Ethiopian venture--it is quite possible that a misunderstanding resulted on the question of Ethiopia's future. "One is led even to wonder if the question was not tacitly left in that gray and cloudy limbo where one assumes that one has been understood for fear that direct inquiry may show that one has not."⁶

The importance of the Rome talks lies very much in what the two sides thought had been agreed upon. On the Italian side it was felt that "'So far as France was concerned, no obstacles would be placed in our path in any eventual action we should take against Abyssinia.'⁷ This opinion faithfully reflects the situation as it was seen by all observers in Rome."⁸ The French on the other hand

⁶D.C. Watt, p. 73.

⁷Marshal DeBono, quoted in Macartney and Cremona, pp. 299-300.

⁸Macartney and Cremona, p. 300.

generally praised Laval for having ameliorated Franco-Italian relations and for having improved chances for peace in Europe.⁹

Among the major Parisian dailies there was one which did not succumb to the euphoria which followed Laval's return from Rome.¹⁰ The Communist Party organ, L'Humanité, began casting aspersions upon the Franco-Italian talks from the time they began and increased both the tempo and intensity of its criticism after the public provisions of the agreements were announced. There was immediate fear that both Britain and France were prepared to stand by and allow Italy to make a second Manchuria of Abyssinia.¹¹ This assessment of Ethiopia's future proved, in the end, to be accurate, Britain's support of the League notwithstanding.

There were good reasons for the Communist press to suspect that the Rome Agreements contained secret provisions. It is a measure of the French press's credulity, and even

⁹Laurens, pp. 31-36; Le Temps, January 8-9, 1935; Le Populaire, January 9, 1935.

¹⁰Laurens, pp. 31-36, surveys the political spectrum of Parisian newspapers following Laval's return from Rome. However, he omits any reference to L'Humanité or any other vehicle of Communist opinion, perhaps because it would have weakened his assertion that "the big Paris dailies, . . . , gave the impression that the Rome agreement was of pure benefit to France."

¹¹L'Humanité, January 12, 1935.

more so a reflection of the strong desire for international security, that other newspapers did not comment upon the disparity between the published accords and the long-standing claims made by Italy. The public agreements indicated that Mussolini had renounced Italy's claims to colonial indemnification stemming from Article 13 of the 1915 Treaty of London in exchange for some unpopulated desert areas and the right to purchase a mere seven percent of the stock in the French-owned Djibouti-Addis Ababa railroad.¹² Such magnanimity was not customary of Il Duce, but could be understood if in actuality Laval had intimated that Italy could descend upon Ethiopia without fear of French reprisals.

This was, in fact, what L'Humanité began suggesting with increasing regularity in the weeks following the Rome meeting.¹³ On January 19, Gabriel Péri, the leading political analyst of the Communist daily, suggested that during the Rome talks Laval had assented to granting Mussolini "a free hand [les mains libres]" in Ethiopia.¹⁴ The following week the same charge was repeated even more bluntly: "We

¹²Baer, pp. 75-79; Le Temps, January 7-8, 1935.

¹³L'Humanité, January-February, 1935. passim.

¹⁴Ibid., January 19, 1935.

do not doubt that the minister of the Flandin government [Laval] has given Mussolini a free hand so that Italian imperialism can throw itself into the conquest of Ethiopia."¹⁵ This theme of Laval having granted Mussolini a free hand in Ethiopia became the dominant charge levelled against the then foreign minister throughout the crisis.

The only "free hand"--and he did not use those words--that Laval acknowledged granting Italy was in the economic sphere.

I granted to Italy, by a formula of economic relinquishment, the right, to the exclusion of France, of asking for concessions throughout Ethiopia, except where we have acquired rights.

In exchange, Italy grants to France the same rights in a zone which has been delimited on the map, and which appeared sufficient, in any case necessary, for the support of the traffic on the Djibouti to Addis-Ababa railway.¹⁶

The kindest appraisal of Laval's actions is to assume that he was abysmally ignorant of the preparations which Mussolini was making for a war in Ethiopia.¹⁷ Otherwise, there is little excuse for his failure to realize that the type of outlet which Mussolini wanted for Italy's economy

¹⁵L'Humanité, January 24, 1935.

¹⁶J.O.C., second session of December 28, 1935. p. 2865.

¹⁷Salvemini, p. 278n.

and her surplus population could only be achieved through political as well as economic penetration of Ethiopia. Furthermore, Laval, and those who accepted his agreement with Mussolini at its face value, were criminally uncritical of Mussolini's arguments if they believed that one of his major reasons for wanting to expand Italian influence in east Africa was to provide an area for Italian immigration; a mere five thousand Italians had settled in Eritrea which Italy already held.¹⁸

The Communists were neither uncritical of the arguments favoring the Rome Agreements nor disposed to believe that any French complicity in the feared subjugation of Ethiopia would be unintentional. They maintained that a dishonorable pact had been made between the two men during their meetings in Rome: "Now, in order to gain the assistance of Italy in central Europe, the government in Paris has allowed her to have a free hand in Africa."¹⁹ The PCF was not disposed to let such an arrangement pass unchallenged. Just two weeks after the fateful meeting between Laval and Mussolini, the

¹⁸Peter J. Larmour, The French Radical Party in the 1930's (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964), p. 188n.

¹⁹L'Humanité, January 23, 1935.

Communists first alluded to a possible means for countering the colonial war which they were certain was in the offing.

The obligation of the proletariat of France, Italy, and England is clearly outlined: They must show solidarity with the Abyssinian people against the imperialist plunderers of London, Paris, Rome, and also those of Tokyo. With all the force of their united Front, they will support the oppressed Abyssinians against imperialism.²⁰

This paragraph from an article written shortly after the Rome meeting reveals much more than Gabriel Péri's penchant for using the standard rhetoric of the French Communist Party. The inclusion of England as one of the "imperialist plunderers" reveals that the PCF, at that time, was still assuming that Britain would strongly support Mussolini. The results of the Peace Ballot, which was held from November, 1934, to June, 1935, had not yet led the British government to re-evaluate its policy toward Italy and the League of Nations.²¹ It was to be in England that the "proletariat" would make its opinions most effectively felt. On the other hand, the most that could be expected of the workers in Italy, especially those belonging to the outlawed Communist Party, was moral support.

²⁰L'Humanité, January 23, 1935.

²¹Baer, pp. 202-207.

The French Communists, by using vague phrases such as "showing solidarity with the Abyssinians," were avoiding firm commitments to specific courses of action and were leaving themselves with more freedom to formulate tactics later. Yet, the Communists, at least, were taking a stand against any Italian conquest of Ethiopia at a time when other parties either did not perceive the seriousness of the threat or, like the extreme Right, would have applauded such an undertaking.

It should not be assumed that the Communist attacks upon the Rome agreements extended no further than the pages of L'Humanité, although they were most prominent there. In the Chamber of Deputies, where the Communists held less than two percent of the more than five hundred and fifty seats, Gabriel Péri, the vocal Communist critic of French foreign policy, called upon Laval to explain "the recent diplomatic negotiations and the general orientation of France's foreign policy."²² No such accounting was to be forthcoming, however, for several months. In the meantime, it began to appear that the fears voiced by the PCF in January were going to be realized.

On February 17, little more than a month after his

²²J.O.C., January 15, 1935. p. 78.

conversations with Laval, it was reported by the Communists that Mussolini was preparing to send 30,000 soldiers to re-enforce the Italian garrison in Eritrea.²³ The Party quite naturally wondered what such large numbers of troops could be intended for if not the eventual military conquest of Ethiopia.²⁴ The embarkations of Italian troops were reported in the Communist press often during February and March.

The failure of the other Parisian newspapers to take note of Italian preparations for war provided the Communists with another issue which they were not long developing:

It is quite significant that the French press which, formerly, made too much of an uproar about the bellicose speeches of Mussolini, has made no public commentary on the mobilisation of two divisions [for service in east Africa].²⁵

Not a word has appeared in the French press concerning the two interventions, on the 13 and 17 of February, of the Japanese ambassador to Rome, M. Sugimura, who informed Mussolini that Tokyo would oppose any attempt to conquer Abyssinia. L'Humanité alone reported this.²⁶

What makes these charges particularly noteworthy, coming from an ideologically biased source, is that they are

²³L'Humanité, February 17, 1935.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid., February 18, 1935.

²⁶Ibid., February 20, 1935.

basically accurate. With the occasional exception of the Socialist newspaper, Le Populaire, the Parisian press, by and large, chose to ignore news which would have reflected adversely upon France's new ally.²⁷ In part, this could have been the result of deliberate manipulation of the news by emissaries of the Italian government. "Italy. . .was said to have scattered sixty million lire among a number of French dailies and periodicals at the time of the Ethiopian Affair."²⁸

While Italian money could have been a factor, albeit a very minor one at that early stage of the crisis, the PCF had a more plausible explanation, although a rather simplistic one.

It is by the order of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the press has adopted this attitude of complicity with the fascist crime in Africa.

It is because, in spite of the embarrassed lying of M. Laval, the accords of Rome contain a secret clause giving a free hand to Italy in Abyssinia.²⁹

The Communist allegation that the agreements contained a secret clause was a factual one, although the intended

²⁷Le Figaro, Le Populaire, Le Temps, February, March, 1935.

²⁸Micaud, p. 9.

²⁹L'Humanité, February 20, 1935.

interpretation of the private agreement is debatable. The charge, made by L'Humanité, that the French Government was influencing the reporting of the other newspapers was at least partially true. Le Temps and several lesser newspapers were known to be "Directly under the control of the Comite des Forges."³⁰ This association of heavy industry was in turn closely allied with conservative governments. The papers of the extreme Right, such as Charles Maurras' Action Française, were basically Italophilic to begin with and needed no encouragement in order to heap praise upon Mussolini and his projects.

As Italy's military preparations became more apparent the Communists' condemnation of Italy and the French Government also intensified. The Leftist workers were continually reminded of the sequence of events leading up to Mussolini's open preparations for war in Africa: "The conquest of Ethiopia is following the Accord of Rome, because the Accord of Rome gives Italy a free hand in east Africa."³¹ This constant repetition of the same charges appears to have been effective in shaping the opinions of L'Humanité's

³⁰Micaud, p. 8.

³¹L'Humanité, February 13, 1935.

readers, especially since most of them read no other newspaper.³²

At the same time that L'Humanité's editorial counter-offensive was gaining momentum, the first calls for direct action on the part of the workers began appearing in the Party press.

The Central Committee of the P.C.F. calls upon the workers to react vigorously in all countries against our own bourgeoisie who are engaged in this policy [of supporting Italian aims in Ethiopia]. They must call for the complete publication of the accords of Rome of which the integral text remains secret.³³

Although such calls to action were as yet vague, they implied that the workers should employ the standard tactic of street demonstrations, which usually fulfilled all too well the dictum to "react vigorously." As the spring of 1935 approached, however, events which were to influence greatly the Communist strategy in the Ethiopian affair were taking place in diplomatic circles as well as in the streets of Paris.

³²Micaud, p. 7.

³³L'Humanité, February 20, 1935.

CHAPTER IV

THE FRANCO-SOVIET PACT AND ITS AFTERMATH

On May 2, 1935, the Franco-Soviet Mutual Assistance Pact was signed by the foreign ministers of the two countries. The signing of this agreement was the occasion for a major revision of the foreign and domestic policies of the French Communist Party. An examination of the activities and concerns of the PCF during the preceding several months will help to demonstrate just how extensive this policy shift was. At the same time, it can be seen that in some areas the Communists had already made significant modifications in their traditional policies.

During March, two important debates took place in the Chamber of Deputies; each saw the Communists in the minority. On March 22, the Chamber took up the question of granting approval to the agreements reached in Rome during the Laval-Mussolini meetings of January. Despite the fact that the situation in east Africa had become more tense and Mussolini was dispatching more troops every week, acts to which L'Humanité had repeatedly drawn attention, the members of the Chamber chose to minimize these developments in their

zeal to strengthen Franco-Italian relations.

Even the Socialists who, to a lesser degree than the Communists, had recognized and condemned Italian actions in Africa put a higher value on trying to improve Franco-Italian relations than on preventing a threat to the freedom of a member of the League of Nations. In presenting the position of the Socialists to the Chamber, M. Henry Fontanier stated that,

Certain people will be surprised that we give our approval to the accord which has been concluded between France and Italy, and will say that the Socialist Party seems thus to give its support to the political regime in power in Italy.

This is not the case. We remain, with regard to fascism, in the same position that we were in previously, ready to combat it wherever we encounter it. Moreover, no one has ever conceded that when one signs a treaty with another country, he renders homage at the same time to its political regime and gives allegiance to its constitution.

We vote for this accord because it can consolidate the peace, because it can bring about a rapprochement between two countries whose interests are not absolutely opposed.¹

Although the hoped for rapprochement with Italy was short-lived and, in retrospect, it is relatively easy to condemn those who, like the Socialists, voted for the Rome Accords, there is one mitigating factor which should be taken into account. On March 16, less than a week before

¹J.O.C., March 22, 1935. p. 1203.

this debate, Germany had publicly renounced the military restrictions of the Treaty of Versailles. This open threat to the future security of Europe was at the very least an emotional factor in the thinking of the supporters of the agreements with Italy. Their mistake was in not foreseeing the possible subordination of France's other international obligations to this illusory anti-Hitlerian alliance.

When the vote on the "bill granting approval to a treaty between France and Italy for the regulation of their interests in Africa" was taken, 560 deputies voted to approve the measure while only 10 opposed it.² Throughout the months ahead the Communists were not to let their friends or enemies forget that it was they alone who withheld approval of an agreement which was allegedly responsible for giving French support to Italian imperialism.

Despite the fact that, as will be shown later, the Communist position was based more upon ideology than upon conviction, the arguments put forth by the Communist deputy Gabriel Péri were worthy of consideration:

It is not our systematic opposition, constant and resolute, to fascism which dictates, at this time, our attitude. Whatever our repugnance with regard to the fascist regime and whatever horror

²J.O.C., March 22, 1935, p. 1213.

it inspires in us, there are other questions which we now pose.

Do the treaties of Rome bring an element of peace and protection to the world situation? Can they constitute an obstacle, however fragile, to war? Can they discourage enterprises of conquest? There is the real problem.

It is because we must give negative replies to these three questions that, in a short while, we will cast our vote against ratification of the treaties. For us, they sanction the policy of give and take. And never, in the course of history, has this policy truly strengthened the peace.³

After hearing the Government's arguments in favor of ratification, Péri was quite skeptical of their veracity, especially since the concessions made to Italy were made to seem so insignificant by the representatives of the Government. He questioned the Foreign Ministry about the incongruity of its argument:

But then, if the admitted and public concessions are so insubstantial, by what miracle have they satisfied Italian ambitions?

.....
If Italy was satisfied with such minimal advantages how does one keep from having the impression that along side these public concessions others have been consented to?⁴

This last question drew applause from the non-Communist left as well as from the Communists, but applause did not carry the same weight as did a non.

³J.O.C., March 22, 1935. p. 1205.

⁴Ibid.

The desire for good relations with Italy, which proved in the end to be so damning to the security of France and Ethiopia, was in evidence again less than a month later when the heads of state and foreign ministers of Britain, France, and Italy met at Stresa to denounce Hitler's defiance of the Versailles limitation on arms. Perhaps the chief importance of the meeting lay in the psychological effect it had on France. The Stresa Front, as the short-lived alliance against Germany was called, gave France a feeling of increased security which was not warranted by the circumstances.

Both during the preliminaries in March and during the actual meetings the Communists condemned the Stresa conference as being inferior to Locarno--which it unquestionably was--and as giving aid to an aggressor nation--which in the long run was also true.⁵ Stresa, and the German reassertiveness which brought it about, served to diminish temporarily the attention given to the growing threat to Ethiopia. At no time, however, did the situation go unmentioned in the pages of L'Humanité for more than a few days. It was merely a case of the German belligerency within Europe being viewed as a more immediate danger than the Italian preparations for war in east Africa.

⁵L'Humanité, April 10, 14, 15, 1935.

The Stresa Conference, by making the bonds between France and Italy seem stronger than they actually were, made it less likely that the Communists, who staunchly supported Ethiopia and the League, would be able to convince the French people or their Government that stringent measures should be taken to counter Italian aggression. At Stresa both Britain and France deliberately avoided raising the issue of Italian intentions in Ethiopia.⁶ Although the Communists did not fail to take advantage of this omission to support their contention that the French Government was approving of Italian policy, public opinion was overwhelmingly behind the anti-German Stresa Front.⁷

At about the same time that the Stresa Conference was taking place negotiations were underway to conclude the previously mentioned Franco-Soviet Treaty of Mutual Assistance. Although preliminary discussions for the pact had begun in the latter half of 1934, diplomatic activity did not reach its peak until after the German announcement of March, 1935. The quest for security had by that time led

⁶Paul Reynaud, In the Thick of the Fight, 1930-1945, trans. James D. Lambert (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), p. 66; Macartney and Cremona, p. 309.

⁷Laurens, p. 59.

the Socialists and most of the Radicals to join with the Communists in urging the Government to conclude an alliance with Stalin.⁸ Laval, however, seemed to be doing little to expedite the talks. The political parties of the Right wanted security from Germany, but none was willing to overlook ideological differences and mistrust of the Soviet Union to the extent necessary to achieve a truly strong alliance. Laval, who was in general agreement with the parties of the Right, was justly accused of employing dilatory tactics during the negotiations.⁹ Finally, on May 2, the Mutual Assistance Pact was signed, but only after it had been emasculated by the restrictions incorporated into it by the French Government.¹⁰ Despite its relatively minor military value, the Franco-Soviet treaty brought about a great change in the policy of the PCF, although not as drastic a one as that following the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939.

The revision of French Communist policy came about as the result of Stalin's decision to oppose fascism, especially

⁸Brower, pp. 106-107; Nathanael Greene, Crisis and Decline: The French Socialist Party in the Popular Front Era (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), pp. 25-27.

⁹L'Humanité, April 6, 19, 20, 21, 23, 1935; Geoffrey Warner, Pierre Laval and the Eclipse of France (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1968), pp. 76-82.

¹⁰Warner, p. 80; Ulam, pp. 223-225.

the German variety, with much more vigor and on a broader scale than before Hitler's announcement of March, 1935. The change in official Soviet foreign policy included the sanctioning of the Popular Front tactics of the French Communist Party.¹¹ The PCF had, on its own, been gradually moving toward a Popular Front strategy which had "the aim of containing the spread of fascism rather than of destroying its focal points in Germany and Italy."¹²

During the period of the Ethiopian crisis the PCF employed Popular Front tactics mainly in dealings with the Socialists. A gradual recognition of their common interests had begun in mid-1934 so that, by 1935, the Political Bureau of the PCF could use the front page of L'Humanité to urge the Socialists to join with them in a conference to organize resistance to the fascists.¹³ By uniting the two major parties of the Left, it was hoped that a stronger opposition to the fascists would be possible. This wish was realized soonest and most noticeably in the electoral process.

Since French elections usually consisted of two ballots

¹¹Ulam, p. 227.

¹²Ibid.

¹³L'Humanité, February 1, 1935.

held one week apart, the PCF and SFIO each agreed that whichever party's candidates made the best showing on the first ballot would receive both parties' support on the second ballot. This tactic of "republican discipline," which had been used occasionally in the 1920's, was first employed by the Popular Front parties in the municipal elections of May, 1935.¹⁴ It is interesting to note that the unwillingness of the Communist Party to use this method in the previous national election, in 1932, had cost the parties of the Left possibly as many as sixty seats in the Chamber of Deputies. Not only did such intransigence cut the PCF representation from a possible twenty-five to a mere ten, but it "modified significantly the power balance in the legislature which was to rule France from 1932 to 1936."¹⁵ Thus, nearly three years prior to the crisis between Italy and Ethiopia, the Communists unwittingly lessened their ability to influence its outcome and that of other important events.

In addition to the official sanctioning of the Popular Front tactics by Russia, there were several other reversals

¹⁴L'Humanité, May 9, 1935.

¹⁵Brower, p. 16.

of previous PCF policy which should have made it easier for the Communists to take a forceful stand against Italy. The French Left had a tradition of pacifism, which had been shaken only briefly during the First World War. In the period from 1933 to 1938, however, a reversal of roles took place in the French political system, so that the pacifist Left began to urge a policy of resistance while the nationalistic Right became the advocate of pacifism.¹⁶

One of the Communist's most dramatic shifts toward a militant resistance to fascism came in the wake of the Franco-Soviet alliance. Right up to the moment that the agreement was signed the French Communist Party resolutely opposed any measures that were aimed at increasing the military strength of France. Only two months before the signing, Maurice Thorez railed against a bill before the Chamber of Deputies which proposed to extend the period of conscription from one to two years:

The return to the two years announces and prepares for war.¹⁷

.....
We are resolutely working, in the spirit of Lenin and the bolsheviks, to organize mass action against

¹⁶Micaud, p. 2.

¹⁷J.O.C., March 15, 1935. p. 1038.

war. We are determined to accomplish without failure, and in spite of repression, the anti-militarist task.¹⁸

Thorez forcefully stated his case against the bill for two years service and those who were sponsoring it when he insisted that the French Communist Party "would not permit the workers to be dragged into a war said to be in defense of democracy against fascism."¹⁹

It is very interesting to compare this statement with the official PCF position of the following October, shortly after the invasion of Ethiopia had begun and when the fascist threat in Europe seemed even more serious than at the beginning of the year:

the working masses do not have a choice between the dictatorship of the proletariat and democracy, but between bourgeois democracy and fascism. This is a very important distinction.

.
Under these conditions, while holding itself resolutely, absolutely, to its policy, and while acting as Engels said to, in view of its revolutionary goals, in a very flexible manner, while giving concrete directives, our Party struggles to maintain bourgeois democracy in opposition to fascism.²⁰

¹⁸J.O.C., March 15, 1935. p. 1040.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 1038, quoted in Brower, p. 88.

²⁰Maurice Thorez, Oeuvres; Livre deuxieme, tome dixieme, Octobre 1935-Janvier 1936 (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1952), pp. 32-33, quoting from Le Rapport au comite central du Parti communiste, le 17 Octobre 1935.

Although the official position of the PCF, after May, 1935, was that support for the French national defense could be justified because it served the interests of the Soviet Union, the Party leadership in Paris tended to interpret the new directives in a very conservative manner. In June, for example, it was stated that "The Communist Party interprets the unanimous [sic] wishes of the workers as being resolutely against war credits being voted under the guise of passive defense."²¹ By gradually changing their editorial position to one of support for a policy of limited co-operation with the other Leftists the Communists were able to convert most of their readers to the Popular Front tactics.²² Many of the Party's members, of course, needed no prodding from above.

Yet the full potential of the Communist-Socialist co-operation was not realized because the Communist leadership refused to curb its ideological attacks against the Socialists. Even after Italian troops began advancing into Abyssinia on October 3, Maurice Thorez was still putting propaganda ahead of Popular Front in the Communist lexicon.

²¹L'Humanité, June 19, 1935, quoted in Thorez, Oeuvres, tome neuvieme, p. 71.

²²Micaud, p. 7.

Fascism is not inevitable. The essential cause for the victory of fascism in other countries, and especially in Germany, is the schism of the working class, a schism provoked by the reformist policy and the collaboration of social democracy.

Social democracy disarms the working class ideologically and makes it disorganized.²³

The Communist policy vis-à-vis the Socialists during most of 1935 was an uneasy mixture of co-operation and contempt. While joining with the Socialists during electoral campaigns and in the condemnation of the fascist leagues, they sought to maintain, in the minds of the workers, their own distinct identity. Usually their partisan zeal served no useful purpose.

It is true that on the issue of Italian aggression in Ethiopia the French Communists were the first and most vocal critics of the Government's pro-Italian policy. But, because they often seemed to be trying to carry on an ideological war against other parties of the Left at the same time that they were urging total commitment to the anti-fascist campaign, the cause of Ethiopia was ill-served and their own sincerity was brought into question.

A careful appraisal of the relationship between the Parti Communiste Française and the Comintern reveals that

²³Thorez, tome neuvieme, p. 172.

there were valid reasons for questioning the Party's sincerity. As will be seen in the following section, the conscience of the PCF all too frequently was merely an extension of Soviet defense policy.

CHAPTER V

THE FRENCH COMMUNIST PARTY AND THE COMINTERN

It has already been mentioned that following the signing of the Franco-Soviet Treaty of Mutual Assistance the PCF began actively joining with the Socialists in denouncing the fascists, both foreign and domestic. In the wake of the fascist rioting of February, 1934, the rank and file of the French Communist Party urged unity with the Socialists in order to defend the Republic.¹ Nevertheless, the Party leadership resisted this pressure as best they could until the spring of 1935.

During April and May Maurice Thorez was in Moscow where he was informed of the new Comintern decision to support Popular Front movements, especially in France.² The purpose of the Popular Front policy was to strengthen the defensive stance of the Soviet Union in relation to Nazi Germany.³ The frequent ambiguity of PCF actions during the period of the Ethiopian Affair can be understood if one takes into

¹Brower, p. 31.

²Ibid., pp. 52-54.

³Beloff, p. 196.

account the difficulty of attempting to thwart fascism without wholeheartedly co-operating with the Socialists. This, in essence, was the problem faced by the Seventh Congress of the Comintern, held in July-August, 1935.

The Congress was called for two reasons. One was to enthrone the policy of the Popular Front, the other was to prevent the policy of the Popular Front from running away with Communism.

.
For all their discipline and their boundless devotion to Stalin and the U.S.S.R., the foreign Communist leaders could not always penetrate and follow the Comintern's oversubtle and often contradictory directions, and they were not, even at the highest point of Stalinism, entirely immune to the pressures from their rank and file.⁴

This was certainly the case in France where the membership of the Party exerted a great deal of pressure upon the leaders to work in concert with the Socialists. It was this impetus from below and not merely the dictates of Soviet policy which forced the Central Committee of the PCF to adopt the Popular Front tactics which added strength to the French Left.

There was in reality a basic disharmony of interests between the Party leadership and the Communist workers. "Though the central core of leaders continued to identify with the interests of the Soviet Union, the membership to

⁴Ulam, p. 230.

a large extent did not."⁵ This incisive evaluation of the problem was borne out numerous times both before and during the crisis, in ways which quite possibly effected its outcome.

As was previously stated, the failure of the PCF to co-operate with the Socialists by supporting the stronger candidates on the second ballot of the national elections of 1932 significantly diminished the representation of the Left at the time of the crisis. This policy of overt hostility toward the Socialists was a major factor in costing the Communists nearly half of their membership between 1928 and 1933.⁶

During the periods both before and after the invasion of Ethiopia actually began it was evident that the enthusiasm which L'Humanité displayed for the Ethiopian cause was never equaled by the actions of its readers. The Party's leaders had failed to realize to what extent the fascist threat had undermined their control over the minds of the membership. They were out of touch with the political realities of the mid-1930's in many ways. Between the early 1920's and 1933,

the internal Bolshevization of the PCF--which inter alia entailed the replacement of intellectuals by functionaries of working class origin,

⁵Brower, p. 199.

⁶Ibid., p. 15.

who could be more easily manipulated and were less inclined to ask awkward questions--had proceeded to the point where the leadership could impose a complete change of 'line' almost overnight.⁷

The Central Committee's ability to impose such doctrinal changes upon a passive following was severely impaired, however, by the increased political awareness which the workingmen showed in the wake of the fascist riots of February, 1934.

The hierarchy of the French Communist Party could accurately be characterized as "woodenly Stalinist,"⁸ yet, ironically, it served neither the purposes of Stalin nor of its own members. It also certainly failed to turn the French Government toward a policy of firm support for the League and for Ethiopia even though the Soviet Union was urging just such a policy. "The U.S.S.R. joined in the sanctions imposed on Italy [November, 1935] after her aggression in Abyssinia, undoubtedly in the hope that an effective restraint of aggression would become an important precedent for stopping aggression elsewhere."⁹ The "elsewhere" in this case was

⁷George Lichtheim, Marxism in Modern France (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), pp. 51-52.

⁸H. Stuart Hughes, The Obstructed Path: French Social Thought in the Years of Desperation, 1930-1960 (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 190.

⁹Ulam, p. 222.

clearly referring to central Europe.

Throughout the period of the Ethiopian Crisis, Maurice Thorez, never an innovative leader, attempted to enforce the wishes of Moscow. Yet, in his efforts to revamp the PCF's position to conform to the Soviet Union's increasingly overt anti-fascist stance, the sincerity of the Party's pro-Ethiopian crusade was put in doubt.

Sometime in 1935, the party stopped its campaign for national independence movements among the colonial peoples of the French Empire. The argument, the same as that used after World War II, was that France was on the way to being governed by the 'people' and that therefore the colonial peoples should accept a 'fraternal union' with the French people for the sake of joint progress and resistance to common enemies. Thorez later stated the issue quite clearly when he argued that 'the interest of the colonial peoples is in their union with the French people,' since the 'critical issue at present is the defeat of fascism.'¹⁰

For the French Communist Party to say that "France was on the way to being governed by the 'people'," was paramount to announcing that its entire program and all of its propaganda had been lies. More importantly, in the case of the Ethiopian situation, the Party's abandonment of its support for colonial independence movements revealed the primacy of

¹⁰Brower, p. 105, quoting from La France du Front populaire et les Peuples coloniaux (Paris, 1938), pp. 5-6. [no author or publisher listed].

its anti-fascist policy. In light of the PCF's newly adopted position on colonialism, one can only wonder whether the Communists would have sought to support Ethiopia so zealously had her attacker not been a fascist state or if such support had been antithetical to Soviet interests.

Yet, even if the Communists did not have altruistic motives, the fact remains that they mounted an earlier and more energetic campaign to save Ethiopia than did any other group in France. It was, of course, L'Humanité which had the responsibility of carrying the Party's crusade to save Ethiopia to the workers.

CHAPTER VI

THE COMMUNIST OFFENSIVE

Although the Central Committee's campaign to keep Abyssinia free of Italian domination had occupied a prominent place in the pages of L'Humanité during the discussions of the Rome Accords, from January to March, and occasionally afterward, the reports of Italian preparations for war began to have a greater urgency shortly after the signing of the Franco-Soviet Pact in May. This was so, not only because of the new Russian support, but also because the invasion itself seemed to be drawing nearer. L'Humanité was not far wrong when it predicted that the offensive against Ethiopia would be launched in September.¹ In making this forecast they were undoubtedly aware that the rainy season in Abyssinia would be ending in late September.² Just as compelling a reason for their prediction was the buildup in east Africa of which the entire world was aware.

The Communist daily continued to insist that the French Government was engaged in a policy of complicity with

¹L'Humanité, June 3, 1935.

²DeBono, p. 95.

Mussolini. There seemed to be no question in the minds of the paper's staff that this support for the Italian dictator was intentional. Yet, whether by design or miscalculation, the long-range result of many of France's actions was beneficial to Italy.

An example of the ineptitude of Laval's diplomacy can be seen in the agreement reached at Geneva between May 20 and 25, 1935. The League of Nations agreed that bilateral arbitration should continue between the two principals in the dispute until August 25, at which time the League would intervene if no settlement had been reached.³ Thus, the Italian preparations could proceed with near impunity until nearly the eve of the planned invasion. Although France was hardly alone in approving this strategem, it was the most ardent advocate of the arrangement.

The Communists, as might be expected, did not allow this concession to Italian belligerency to go unchallenged. They reported, quite correctly, that Mussolini had little regard for the international organization at Geneva and that he was using the threat of withdrawing from it as a ploy to gain time through bilateral negotiations which were never

³Baer, p. 154.

intended to succeed.⁴ Because many Frenchmen of the Center shared the Left's belief in the peace-keeping mission of the League of Nations, the Communists were not alone in feeling that Laval's conduct at Geneva was sabotaging the League's machinery.⁵ But, as the succeeding months were to reveal, not all of the champions of the Covenant were prepared to carry their advocacy of collective security to the lengths demanded by the Communists after the October assault upon Abyssinia.

In the early summer of 1935, however, most factions, other than the Communists, were talking optimistically of a peaceful settlement to the problem. The PCF had very little confidence either in the desire or the ability of the French Government, or of Pierre Laval, who, on June 7, 1935, assumed the Premiership of France while retaining his position as Foreign Minister. The pro-Italian bias which Laval revealed during the Ethiopian Crisis was viewed by the Right as a valuable asset in maintaining France's security in the face of Hitler's militancy.⁶ The Communists, however, looked upon

⁴L'Humanité, May 25, 26, 30, 1935; J.-B. Duroselle, Histoire Diplomatique de 1919 a Nos Jours (Paris: Librairie Dalloz, 1957), p. 210.

⁵Elizabeth R. Cameron, Prologue to Appeasement: A Study In French Foreign Policy (Washington: American Council on Public Affairs, 1942), p. 157.

⁶Warner, pp. 96-97.

Laval's maneuverings as a source of encouragement for the German dictator, who was seen as the ultimate beneficiary of France's foreign policy. It often seemed that that view was the leitmotif of the Communists' campaign against Italy.

The Communists were not merely more prescient than the Socialists and other groups in foreseeing the benefits which Germany stood to gain from the imbroglio surrounding the Italo-Ethiopian situation, but their ideological bias kept them from being lured from their path by the dream of an alliance with Italy--a trap which the Socialists fell into initially.⁷ In addition, the Communists realized, already in the summer of 1935, that there were unmistakable signs that the Italian hostility toward Germany was softening. If the French Government had realized, by October, how seriously the alliance with Italy had deteriorated, it might have acted differently on the sanctions question.

In May, L'Humanité revealed that Mussolini's resolve to stand firm at the Brenner, in order to discourage German ambitions in Austria, was weakening. Mussolini had stated to the Italian Chamber that he would not allow Italy to become petrified on the Brenner to the detriment of Italy's

⁷Supra.

plans for colonial expansion.⁸ That the overt hostility between Germany and Italy was subsiding was also evident to the PCF from the decline in the number and intensity of attacks upon Hitler by the Italian press.⁹ These subtle changes in Italian sentiment were not overlooked by the French Government of Pierre Laval, but they were misinterpreted. Even the moderate Government-oriented newspaper Le Temps was aware that Mussolini would very likely continue his diplomatic and military effort until there was a satisfactory and definitive solution to the Ethiopian question.¹⁰ But the French Government, which operated on the assumption that once the crisis over Abyssinia was resolved the Stresa Front could be reconstructed,¹¹ minimized the significance of these signs of an Italo-German rapprochement. The Communists, who had opposed the Franco-Italian ties from their inception, placed their emphasis where they felt it would do the most good: on the encouragement being given to Germany and upon the Government's apparent wanton disregard for the sovereignty of Abyssinia.

⁸L'Humanité, May 30, 1935.

⁹Ibid., June 3, 1935.

¹⁰Le Temps, June 9, 1935.

¹¹Wolfers, pp. 150-151.

If France permitted and countenanced the Italian adventure in Ethiopia it would, in the view of the Communists, surely give Hitler the opportunity he desired to bring about an Austro-German Anschluss.¹² Even before that came about, however, the Communists' fears were realized when in March, 1936, the Italo-Ethiopian war provided encouragement as well as diversion while Hitler remilitarized the Rhineland. That action on the part of Germany, although it did not take place until the war in Ethiopia had nearly run its course, was the type of German aggrandizement of which the PCF had warned.

Because Laval was now Premier in addition to being Foreign Minister, he was held to be even more responsible than before for the alleged French support for Italian acquisitiveness. Thus, when it became known, in July, that munitions made by French firms were being sold to Italy and were helping to arm the Italians for the conquest of Abyssinia, the Communist press was able to point to another concrete example of Laval's callous pro-Italian policy.¹³ At almost the same time, the Banque de France admitted that it was in the process of negotiating a loan, amounting to several million francs, with

¹²L'Humanité, July 29, 1935.

¹³Ibid., July 27, 29, 30, 31, 1935.

the Italian Government.¹⁴ For the Communists, the French financial dealings with the fascist aggressor to the south was merely another indication of France's rather unique position among the powers of western Europe.

it is remarkable that in Europe, despite its efforts, Italy has been unable to find any power openly willing to be its accomplice.

Any . . . [sic] except the France of M. Laval. History will remember that at the hour when general reprobation was shown toward the Italian conqueror, the Bank of France was granting, to the fascist adventurers, its approval and its loans.¹⁵

The Communist contention that Italy had failed to secure any overt support for her venture from the governments of western Europe was true. Even though the press of the French Left often considered both German and Italian fascism as merely variations on the same theme, Hitler did not choose to support Mussolini's colonial claims since he did not feel that it was in Germany's best interests to do so.¹⁶

Although there have been precedents--and antecedents--to the Banque de France's action, in which an ostensibly neutral party granted loans to a belligerent power, the

¹⁴L'Humanité, July 27, 1935.

¹⁵Ibid., July 28, 1935.

¹⁶Brice Harris, Jr. The United States and the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964), pp. 112-113.

Communists' charges were given added weight by the fact that the transaction was made by a national bank. Thus, there appeared to be even more reason to believe that the Government of Pierre Laval was giving its tacit approval to the Italian preparations for war.

A major tenet of the Communist position was that the League of Nations should receive the full support of the French Government and that a solution should be reached through that body. Yet, from the Communists' point of view, the League's peace-keeping function was being circumvented by Italy, with the connivance of Laval. The major mistake made by the French Premier was trying to preserve the utility of the League while hoping that Mussolini's territorial ambitions might be satisfied.¹⁷ Laval had given in to the Italian insistence that the League should restrict itself to arbitration of the Walwal incident, of the preceding December, and he had hoped for an overall settlement outside the League.¹⁸

The Communists recognized that the end result of Laval's policy of side-tracking the League was to allow the Italians to gain the dwindling amount of time which they would need

¹⁷ Warner, p. 101.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 97-100.

in order to prepare for their assault upon Ethiopia.¹⁹

The denouement which the PCF foresaw as a result of the French Government's diplomacy at Geneva was, unfortunately, much too accurate:

Is Laval making 'pacific' compromises at Geneva in order to bring about a colonial war which will be at one and the same time the last chance for Italian fascism, the first chance for Hitlerian fascism north of the Brenner, and the origin of a world war?²⁰

There is no doubt that the Communists' penchant for rhetoric had gotten the better of them; Laval did not want an outcome such as they envisioned, even though in the long run he helped to bring it about. The Party's tendency to generalize about the lack of support for Laval's policy during the Ethiopian Affair revealed a fundamental weakness in their ability to use objective judgment when assessing public opinion.

The people in Geneva and in Rome should be informed that M. Laval, whose support they are counting on, does not represent France. The true French people want peace, peace in Africa and peace in Europe, and the warlike expedition of fascism inspires horror in them.²¹

¹⁹L'Humanité, August 3, 1935.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid., July 27, 1935.

The Communist claim that Laval did not represent the views of the French people was either a product of blissful ignorance or wishful thinking. His foreign policy did, in fact, have the support of a majority of Frenchmen,²² which, while it should not have given the PCF comfort, should have been taken into greater account when formulating public appeals for support of Abyssinia. The Communist Party press, and often that of the Socialists as well, brought significant arguments to the public's attention, but their impact was frequently lessened by the ideological context in which they were presented.

The growing seriousness of the crisis was reflected during August and September by the added space devoted to it in the press and by the movement of related stories from the foreign affairs sections to the front pages of the Parisian newspapers. During early August, charges of French complicity with Italy were again brought against the French Government by the Communists. The withdrawal of two divisions of Italian troops from the region of the French frontier gave credence to the charge that General Gamelin, who had just returned from Rome, had concluded a military accord with

²²Laurens, pp. 120-123.

Mussolini.²³ The Left's displeasure was only exacerbated by the intemperate and ill-timed praise which Marshal Petain heaped upon the Italian Under-Secretary of War, Marshal Badoglio with whom Gamelin had conferred.²⁴

Not all of the Communists' criticism of the Laval Government was directed at its actions; some of the criticism was a response to governmental inaction. In particular, it was charged, with much justification, that "The equivocal policy of M. Laval favors the aims of Mussolini."²⁵ The Communists were condemning Laval for serving the interests of Italy through his refusal to affirm support for the application of the Covenant of the League of Nations.²⁶

Although there were more than enough weaknesses in Laval's Italo-Ethiopian policy, and in its implementation, to provide the PCF with grounds for strong criticism, the Communists were at times quite reckless in their assaults. On September 12, 1935, they charged Laval with having "bought the vote, in favor of Mussolini, of a delegate to the Council of the League of Nations."²⁷ The document which

²³L'Humanité, August 7, 9, 1935.

²⁴Ibid., August 9, 1935; Le Temps, August 9, 1935.

²⁵Ibid., September 5, 1935.

²⁶Ibid., September 5, 12, 1935.

²⁷Ibid., September 12, 1935.

was alleged to prove this charge was not published by L'Humanité nor was the source of the information revealed or the delegate supposedly involved named. Since there was apparently no genuine evidence to support the allegation, the matter was quietly dropped.

It was due mainly to the British affirmation of support for the Covenant²⁸ --and not to the diatribes of the Communists --that Laval finally declared that France would "apply the Pact" in the Ethiopian affair.²⁹ The Communists' skepticism in accepting pronouncements by the French Government was definitely warranted in this instance.

Will the speech of M. Pierre Laval before the Assembly of the League of Nations, on September 13 7 mark a turning point in the foreign policy of France and consecrate a definitive break with the detestable practices in which the head of the French Government has indulged for so long? We would like to believe it.³⁰

L'Humanité was swift to point out that Il Duce was not certain whether the French Government would use the League Covenant against Italy even after Laval's announcement that France would support the League. Péri charged that Mussolini

²⁸ L'Humanité, September 5, 12, 1935; Le Temps, September 12, 1935; Micaud, p. 52; Wolfers, pp. 186-190.

²⁹ Ibid., September 14, 1935.

³⁰ Ibid.

could still wonder what France's position would be at Geneva "Because, as always on similar occasions, the head of the French Government has been endeavoring to retract his statement and evade his obligations."³¹ This assertion, as it related to the impending Italo-Ethiopian conflict, contained a great deal of truth. Laval did not want to take a pro-League position which would offend Mussolini or lessen the possibility of a privately negotiated settlement of the east African problem³² From the unslackened pace of the Italian preparations for war, it was evident that the conclusions to be drawn from Laval's ambivalent attitude toward the Covenant were as obvious to Mussolini as to L'Humanité.

The League of Nations worked throughout the month of September to formulate a compromise solution which would be acceptable to both Italy and Ethiopia. Although the Communists slackened their attacks upon Laval after he had vowed support for the Covenant on the 13th, his subsequent tergiversation led to harsh condemnations of his actions at Geneva.³³ Particular criticism was levelled at Laval for his insistence upon weakening the British proposals. There was also specu-

³¹L'Humanité, September 18, 1935.

³²Baer, pp. 337-338.

³³L'Humanité, September 20, 24, 26, 28, 1935.

lation as to the long term effects of his bargaining:

Does anyone believe that after being opposed with so much bitterness to Great Britain, after having inspired in the French press those campaigns which the Times /of London/ has so severely criticized, in recent days, that M. Pierre Laval is particularly qualified to promote British adhesion to the procedures of collective security. If, tomorrow, France must call upon England for the defense of the Covenant, against a Hitlerian menace in eastern Europe, in the central part or in the demilitarized Rhineland, she would do well to choose a spokesman other than the signatory of the treaties of Rome and the negotiator of Geneva. It would be better if she made this choice immediately.

That is not all. The aggressor who it is necessary to encircle is today Mussolini.

Tomorrow it will be Hitler. And M. Laval will proceed the same way with Hitler as he has done with Mussolini. With the same results. But the field of battle will not then be east Africa! ³⁴

The Laval Government was to fall, as the Communists had hoped, partially as a repudiation of his Abyssinian policy,³⁵ but by the time that event took place, in January, 1936, the chances of preserving Ethiopian independence were indeed slim. It is doubtful, in view of Mussolini's determination to dominate Ethiopia that Laval could have dissuaded the Italian dictator from carrying out his planned conquest.³⁶ Laval's

³⁴L'Humanité, September 28, 1935.

³⁵Warner, pp. 126-131; Larmour, p. 194.

³⁶Warner, pp. 107-108; Macartney and Cremona, pp. 302-311; Baer, pp. 29, 79, 346-347.

hypocrisy, in attempting to allow Italy to overrun a member of the League while France professed support for that international body, contributed heavily to an outcome similar to the one predicted by the Communist Party.

CHAPTER VII
ON THE EVE OF WAR

As has been shown above, the French Communist Party was highly critical of France's policy toward the principals in the Italo-Ethiopian dispute. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the PCF restricted itself to launching verbal attacks upon the Government in Paris. It began very early--in fact, immediately after the Laval-Mussolini talks of January--to encourage public opposition to the Government's Ethiopian policy. Yet the very manner in which the Communists went about the implementation of their opposition during the period prior to the attack reveals a fundamental weakness of their effort.

The political power of the French Communist Party was derived primarily from the industrial workers, the urban proletariat. For the PCF's pro-Ethiopian policy to be transformed into either electoral gains or direct action, it was necessary to convince these workers that it was in their interest to preserve the independence of Abyssinia. It was in accomplishing this task that the Party failed.¹

¹Brower, p. 112.

The Communist failure to rally support for Ethiopia was a result of the workers' overriding concern with domestic problems. The major domestic issues for the French Left, at that time, were: improvement of the economic condition of the workers, avoidance of monetary deflation, and suppression of the armed fascist leagues.² Prior to the Franco-Soviet Mutual Assistance Pact, the two years conscription law was also a major concern.³ Since the Party's constituency was worried primarily about domestic matters, the PCF had to take that factor into consideration when it sought to mobilize support for Ethiopia. The tack which the Communists followed was to include speeches related to the Italo-Ethiopian situation in demonstrations and rallies which had been organized chiefly around domestic issues.

Thus, for example, a Communist street demonstration, which took place in Paris on March 31, 1935, was called to protest against the two years conscription law, but the policy of the Government in the Italo-Ethiopian dispute was briefly attacked also.⁴ Since, by the Communist count, no more than

²Larmour, p. 184.

³Supra; L'Humanité, April-May, 1935.

⁴L'Humanité, April 1, 1935.

five thousand participants were attracted to this multi-purpose demonstration,⁵ it seems obvious that the drawing power of the Ethiopian crusade alone would have been very weak.

This procedure of including anti-Italian and pro-Ethiopian diatribes as subordinate features of domestically oriented mass meetings was followed on numerous occasions.⁶ One of the most noteworthy of these demonstrations took place on July 14, Bastille Day, a traditional day for political rhetoric. The Communists used the occasion to denounce the Government's domestic policies and hardly mentioned foreign affairs.⁷ This practice of relegating the Ethiopian issue to a position of secondary importance continued throughout most of the summer.

However, during September this tendency was superseded by the formation of demonstrations which had Ethiopia as their main topic. This change in Communist priorities reflected the realization that an Italian attack upon Ethiopia was imminent. At the beginning of September, a crowd, estimated by the Communists to number 10,000, turned out to hear Marcel

⁵L'Humanité, April 1, 1935.

⁶Ibid., April 13, 14; June 27, 1935.

⁷Ibid., July 14, 15, 1935.

Cachin, the editor of L'Humanité, condemn the Italian fascists for their threat to Abyssinia. He also urged the League of Nations to clearly label Mussolini as the aggressor in the dispute. His main theme, though, was that it was necessary to achieve unity of action among the workers of all countries.⁸ As Cachin envisioned it, the workers would then have the power to pressure their own governments into following the "lead" of the Soviet government by giving their support to the League.⁹

Unity among parties of the Left, and their associated workingmen's organizations, had been, as was shown above, the declared policy of the French Communist Party since the signing of the Franco-Soviet Pact of May, 1935. Yet, it was not until an Italo-Ethiopian war seemed almost inevitable that the Communists began to act as though they might truly wish to achieve it.

During September, the French Communists appeared to be trying to bridge years of factional rivalries among various Leftist organizations of western Europe. The appeal made to the British Labour Party, on August 31, is illustrative of the approach used by the PCF:

⁸L'Humanité, September 1, 4, 1935.

⁹Ibid.

Georges Lansbury, member of the House of Commons, London,

In view of the imminent danger that a war of brigandage will break out to threaten the independence of Abyssinia and put the peace of the world in jeopardy, I urge that you will use your influence in favor of the Labour Party accepting the French Communist Party's proposition to convoke an international conference of all worker's organizations in order to organize the struggle against the war of fascist brigandage. The Socialist Party (SFIO) has been notified of our proposal and we hope that it will respond favorably. Regards.

Marcel Cachin¹⁰

The British Labour Party did not share the PCF's sense of urgency in the matter of international co-operation. When, after a week and a half, the French Communist Party received no reply, it addressed a second, and lengthier, appeal to the British Labourites. In this second French call for unity, the Party elaborated some of the measures which it felt should be discussed by the two groups:

You know, dear comrades, that in our opinion, the international conference [which the PCF was requesting] must concern itself with: organizing common action with the goal of preventing all arms shipments to Italy, demanding the cloture of the Suez Canal, struggling against all financial aid to fascist Italy, demanding authorization to ship arms to Abyssinia, and organizing popular demonstrations against the fascist provocations.

In the hope that you will wish to inform us of your opinion of our propositions,

Receive, dear comrades, our Communist greetings,

The Secretariat¹¹

¹⁰L'Humanité, September 1, 1935.

¹¹Ibid., September 11, 1935.

This message also failed to elicit the desired response from the British Labour Party. The problem was not that the British workers' party was less enthusiastic in its support of Ethiopia than was the French Communist Party. In fact, at the very time that the Central Committee of the PCF was sending its appeals to England, the leader of the British Labour Party, George Lansbury, was being denied permission to enter France on a speaking tour of various Leftist organizations. The reason for that denial was the Government's knowledge that he intended to advocate military sanctions against Italy.¹² The Labour Party's position on the Ethiopian problem was hardly at variance with that of the Communists. What was at issue was the need for the two parties to work in conjunction. Perhaps the British Labourites, not being committed to a Popular Front policy, were not willing to forget the vitriol which Communist parties had routinely directed at other parties of the Left. And, as has been stated, the Communists' motives were not above suspicion.

The French Communists refused to lessen their efforts or to show signs of discouragement, however. Their quest for united action against fascist imperialism continued on

¹²Laurens, p. 141.

several fronts. During the month of September the PCF seemed to be ubiquitous as it entreated numerous workers organizations to act in unison with it to save Ethiopia. What these other groups were certainly aware of, in addition to the Communists' past hostility, was that they would not be able to work with the Communists on a basis of equality. In essence, the French Communist Party seemed to be asking that all workers' parties and organizations declare solidarity with the Soviets, who were hailed as the champions of peace.¹³ Litvinov, the Soviet delegate to the League of Nations, was, for the PCF, the embodiment of Russian peacemaking.

A strong bid was made by the Parti Communiste Française to gain a pledge of support and co-operation from the Secretariat of the Socialist International which was meeting in Geneva in September.¹⁴ In the same issue of L'Humanité in which that appeal was reported there appeared an open letter addressed, "TO ALL THE FRIENDS OF PEACE":

By deserting the hall of the Council of the League of Nations, and by their attitude at Geneva, the delegates of Mussolini have demonstrated the Italian fascists' desire for war.

.
All the friends of peace must mobilize in order to defeat this policy.

¹³L'Humanité, September 8, 13, 1935.

¹⁴Ibid., September 7, 1935.

Not a cent [sou] to the government of Mussolini!

Not a crate of war material to the army of Mussolini!

To this end, the Communist Party calls all workers, all supporters of peace to follow the directives below:

1. All workers in war materiel factories have the obligation of notifying the public of any manufactures likely to be sent to Italy, with the aim of organizing protests by all levels of the working class, and with the aim of boycotting war materiels destined for Mussolini.

2. In each important railway center, as soon as possible, all popular forces should form themselves into a committee in order to gain credence so that in conjunction with the railway workers they can search out all war materiel being sent in the direction of Italy or her colonies and so that they can alert the public in order to prevent the shipment of this material.

3. In each sea port, analogous groups should be formed in order to co-ordinate the action of the working class in the interests of peace, and so that the dock workers who report suspect cargoes can be prepared to refuse to load them after the example of the workers of the Cape and of Marseilles.

4. For their part, all those who have financial transactions with Italy, sending funds to Italian banks or companys, will have their heart set on diverting them immediately in the struggle for peace.¹⁵

The Party's letter concluded by stating that Communist organizations everywhere would disseminate these directives to Socialist groups and to all participants in the Popular Front. Although the PCF considered itself to be the leader in the movement to save Ethiopia, there were no non-Communists'

¹⁵L'Humanité, September 7, 1935.

organizations which felt the desire, or the necessity, to subordinate themselves to Communist leadership.

The combination of arrogance and self-interest which led the PCF to presume that it could issue "directives", to all who expressed a desire to preserve Ethiopian independence, is another manifestation of the type of political naiveté which tended to alienate, rather than attract, those who sympathized with the Party's efforts. If the protection of Ethiopia's freedom was the truly paramount concern of the French Communist Party, overriding even considerations of ideological leadership of the workers, then there is no immediately evident justification for the Communists' tactics.

Almost on the eve of the Italian invasion the French Communists were still addressing pleas for unity to the British Labour Party.¹⁶ The Communists asked for a meeting of the two parties so that they could discuss means of preserving the peace, although it was surely evident to them that the time for talking was rapidly running out. The Italian war against Abyssinia, which was launched on October 3, did nothing to bring to fruition the Communists' proposal to the Labour Party. Judging from the results of the PCF's collaboration with the French Socialist Party, it seems likely

¹⁶L'Humanité, September 29, 1935.

that little of substance would have come from a meeting of the Communists and Labourites.

In the major instance in which Communist and non-Communist parties attempted to co-operate--involving the Communist and Socialist Parties of France--the results, in the period prior to Italy's invasion of Ethiopia, were very disappointing. Less than two weeks before the anticipated attack upon Abyssinia occurred, a "Platform of common action of the Socialist Party and the Communist Party" was published.¹⁷ The program set forth in that document emphasized once again the overwhelming primacy of domestic problems in the thinking of those two parties of the Left, as well as in France generally.

Of a score of objectives listed by the PCF and SFIO only two were devoted to France's foreign policy:

It is necessary TO DEFEND THE PEACE and unmask the hypocritical and two-faced foreign policy of Laval which, more and more, deviates from the system of mutual assistance and collective security.

It is necessary to defend the peace by the prohibition of the private manufacture and sale of arms; by intensified action against militarism,¹⁸ colonialism, arms credits and secret diplomacy.

¹⁷L'Humanité, September 23, 1935.

¹⁸Ibid.

While these aims are laudable, they, nevertheless, are subordinated to domestic economic and political concerns to such a degree that they are almost overlooked. Yet, given the French workingman's increased preoccupation with his economic well-being during the mid-1930's, it is hardly surprising that he was generally uncommitted to the preservation of Ethiopia's freedom. The French Communist Party's difficulty in generating large scale support for Abyssinia was aggravated by the division of opinion within the Socialist Party over whether the fascist threat was serious enough to warrant co-operation with the Soviet Union and the Communists.¹⁹ Even though the majority of the Socialists, under the leadership of Leon Blum, repressed its apprehensions about collaboration with the Communists, no substantive countermeasures to the Government's policy in Ethiopia, were taken.

It has been shown above, and can be seen from the electoral victory of the Popular Front, in 1936, that the two parties could work together for their mutual benefit. Their failure to achieve significant results prior to the outbreak of the Italo-Ethiopian war has been attributed, in part, to the concern with domestic economic problems. But

¹⁹Greene, p. 47.

the French Left's inability to mobilize the workers against foreign fascism is also a reflection of the overriding menace posed by domestic fascism.²⁰

During the summer and autumn of 1935, there was a resurgence of activity by the militant French fascists, especially the Croix de Feu of Colonel de la Rocque.²¹ This renewed threat to the Republic further diverted attention from fascist activity outside of France and diminished the possibility of enlisting the workers' participation in pro-Ethiopian activities, such as strikes and boycotts aimed at trade with Italy. The restrictions which finally were placed upon trade with Italy came only after the war had begun and, because of Laval's recalcitrance, were too limited in scope to be effective.

Despite the fact that there were only rare occasions upon which French workers employed direct action in order to interfere with the shipment of strategic goods to Italy, the Communist press hailed these actions as important contributions to the prevention of war in east Africa. Indeed, such

²⁰Elizabeth R. Cameron. Prologue to Appeasement: A Study in French Foreign Policy (Washington: American Council on Public Affairs, 1942), pp. 140-141.

²¹Ibid., p. 140.

initiatives by transport, in particular, might have had some effect on the attitude of the French Government and upon public opinion--if they had taken place on a massive scale. But they did not.

The pathetic weakness of the workingmen's commitment to the PCF's crusade to save Ethiopia is evident from L'Humanité's efforts to attach importance to inconsequential incidents. At the beginning of September, for example, it was reported, on the front page of L'Humanité, that "120 dock workers in Marseille stopped loading the Italian boat Rossini for one half-hour."

This morning at 7:30, the dock workers of pier 4 demonstrated against working on the Italian boat Rossini by a work stoppage. . . .the workers stopped in order to protest against the warlike policy of fascist Italy and as a sign of iraternity toward the Italian /sic/ and Abyssinian people. The one hundred and twenty decided unanimously to send a telegram to the League of Nations.²²

This was truly a sad commentary on the French workingman's interest in preserving the independence of Ethiopia. It is representative, however, of L'Humanité's reporting of pro-Abyssinian news, which was characterized by a proclivity to overestimate the importance of favorable events and to issue blanket condemnations of people or actions which did not have a pro-Ethiopian orientation.

²²L'Humanité, September 5, 1935.

The anti-imperialist and pacifistic Amsterdam-Pleyel Movement, which had been founded in 1932,²³ received considerable coverage in L'Humanité, as did the group's two leaders, novelists Romain Rolland and Henri Barbusse. Yet, even these men, whom the Communists praised for publicly urging the preservation of Ethiopia's sovereignty,²⁴ were not accurate representatives of Communist policy, because they were unwilling to use force, even to preserve Abyssinia's freedom. There were, in reality, few groups outside of the Communist Party which were willing to resort to force to restrain Italy. This, in itself, would probably not have been a fatal shortcoming, if Italy had been assured, from early 1935, that all non-military options would be employed.

If Italy was assured of anything, it was that there was little probability that there would be a military response, by the League, to Mussolini's invasion.²⁵

²³Brower, p. 17.

²⁴L'Humanité, April 21, June 28, July 7, 1935.

²⁵Baer, p. 363.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

On the morning of October 3, 1935, the long-anticipated Italian attack upon Ethiopia began. The attempt by the Parti Communiste Française to prevent war, and at the same time deal a blow to fascism, had failed, as had the efforts of many other individuals and groups. Since no one was able to prevent the Italo-Ethiopian war, which most people were aware was approaching, it may seem that no one is really deserving of credit for trying to avert it. Those who warned the public about actions--especially those of the French Government--which contributed to Mussolini's success should, however, be recognized.

The leading authority on French Governmental policy during the period of the Italo-Ethiopian war concludes that:

French policy makers must accept a large share of the responsibility for the League's loss of stature. But it is open to question whether France could have faced the dilemma conjured up by the Italo-Ethiopian conflict in any other way than by attempting to steer a middle course.¹

It is difficult, however, to understand how France, in the long run, could have found a way to satisfy Italian

¹Laurens, p. 401.

demands in Ethiopia and still have preserved the League as a viable organ of collective security. Perhaps there was no middle way; perhaps an unequivocal choice between Italy and the League would have served the cause of French security far better.

It is, in a sense, misleading to say that France chose a "middle course", for that implies that the French Government favored neither Italy nor the League. That is clearly not true. Each time Laval made a concession to Italy, at the expense of the League's prestige and Abyssinia's sovereignty, he was, in the simplest terms, favoring war over peace.

The French Communist Party, despite the shadow cast over its motives by its ideological bias, repeatedly warned its members and the French public, with lamentable accuracy, of the consequences of Laval's policy. It was, as it never tired of reminding the French public, the first to warn of the danger of secret clauses in the Rome Accords, and the only party to vote against ratification of those agreements. The Communists charged Laval with granting Mussolini a free hand in Abyssinia, an impression which the Italian dictator did nothing to dispel. If Laval had been duped by Mussolini at Rome, the French Premier certainly did not act it as he attempted to forestall League action.

Pierre Laval, whom the Communist Party quite rightly saw as the chief architect of France's pro-Italian policy,² was the focal point of the Party's anti-Government offensive. The Communists recognized very early in the crisis that it would be Germany that stood to benefit the most from Laval's failure to take a firm stand against aggression. Although, of course, a further consequence of the French Government's policy was that the League and the French system of security, which the Communists began to support after the signing of the Franco-Soviet Pact, both suffered severe setbacks.

Even though the French Communist Party's volte-face, following the signing of the Mutual Assistance Pact, in May, demonstrated the leadership's allegiance to Moscow, the PCF, nevertheless, "failed completely as an instrument of Soviet foreign policy."³ Domestic problems, over which they had little control, were also a reason for the Communists' failure to arouse working class support for Ethiopia.

The Communists seemed to be moving in the right direction, during the last few months before the attack, when they

²Cameron, pp. 115, 158, 166-168; Warner, pp. 101-102; Wolfers, p. 189.

³Brower, p. 230.

sought to strengthen the movement to save Ethiopia by promoting unity among the Leftist organizations of western Europe. Yet, by the time they began working in earnest for unity it may have already been too late to reverse the Italian momentum toward war. Even if there were still time to take effective action, the French Communists, by their refusal to renounce ideological rhetoric, minimized the possibility that any non-Communist groups would join forces with them.

The Communist Party, both before and after the actual invasion, sought strict enforcement of the Covenant of the League of Nations. Some of the Party's proposals, such as embargoing arms to Italy prior to October and closing the Suez Canal, could have been, at the very least, effective means of impeding the Italian preparations for war. Yet, as with so many other measures which the Communists undertook to support during the crisis, the result of their effort was failure. In the final analysis, the Parti Communiste Française failed in its attempt to prevent an attack upon Ethiopia because it was unable to mobilize its own constituency.

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