

The Second Italo-Ethiopian War (1935-1936) and the Politics of Trotskyism

In October 1935, in a context of increasing political polarization in Europe because of the Great Depression and the rise of inter-imperialist rivalries, the Mussolini's fascist regime invaded Abyssinia (Ethiopia). This aggression initiated a military campaign that, in a few months, ended with the victory of Italy. In this article, we seek to rescue the debate that took place around the character of the Italian-Ethiopian war. Of interest is the position of the revolutionaries, in particular the position of Trotskyists around the policy of sanctions pushed by England and France against Italy. We will explain how the Trotskyists sought to develop independent politics of and for the working class and the oppressed nations in this conflict, facing both the social-patriotic and the pacifist pressures that had destroyed the Second International. These destructive pressures had already led to the end of the international and anti-imperialist character of an already Stalinized Communist International. A member of the imperialist League of Nations, this International supported, in a confused but effective way, the policy proposed by the "progressive" imperialist camps (England and France during the Italo-Ethiopian War).

In contrast, both the British Trotskyists active in the Independent Labor Party (ILP) and their American comrades in the Workers' Party (WP), then in the Socialist Appeal Tendency, opposed giving any support to the policy of "economic sanctions" promoted by the Franco-British axis.¹ Instead, they proposed that the working class take into its own hands the task of active solidarity with the Ethiopian resistance and of permanent denunciation of the aims of their own imperialist governments in the war. They outrightly rejected the propaganda of the bourgeoisie that it was a struggle of the "democracies" (England, France, USA) against "fascism" (Italy). Their position was not one of neutrality in the war, but that of seeking to formulate a class policy in each country, independent of all imperialisms, beginning with its own, to actively support the struggle for the independence of Ethiopia and the military defeat of Italy.

The Context and Character of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War (1935-1936)

When the invasion of the Italian troops began, Abyssinia was ruled by the terrible dictatorship of Haile Selassie and was one of the few territories on the African continent, along with Liberia, that were not then under colonial domination. Abyssinia had defeated the Italian colonial troops in the battle of Aduwa in 1896 and managed to preserve a relative independence from the European imperialisms, although Italy, England, and France had clear ambitions to annex it.

From 1932, Italy began a campaign of clear rearmament and troop movements in preparation for the invasion, and in January and March 1935, months before the invasion, Ethiopia appealed to the League of Nations to request its defense. Italy's military campaign was short and victorious. It ended seven months later, in May 1936, with the defeat of Selassie. Under the command of Emilio de Bono, Italy deployed the largest army ever sent by a European power in Africa: 300,000 Italian troops, 87,000 "askaris" troops (local recruits especially from Eritrea and

¹ The American Trotskyists of the Workers Party were making an entryist experience in the Socialist Party (SPA) between 1935 and 1937 and were grouped within it as a tendency. In 1938 the Socialist Workers Party was founded.

Somalia), and 100,000 workers to build roads and infrastructures necessary for the military invasion.²

An estimated 760,000 Ethiopians died in that conflict in a country with a population of around 6 million. 275,000 died in direct military engagements in which Italy used bombs and chemical gases (such as mustard gas) to attack Ethiopian armed resistance and civilian populations, and 300,000 died as a result of the destruction of populations, starvation, disease, etc. that accompanies all war. The rest died in concentration camps and summary executions. During World War II, Ethiopia became a British colony in 1942, and only regained its independence in 1947.

The Trotskyists understood the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 as an urgent war that required the mobilization of the proletariat to defend the Ethiopian people. Revolutionaries stood against all wars of a colonial character and gave military support to the national liberation struggles. That war, however, presented new particularities that required a deeper and dialectical analysis of the different world tendencies of the class struggle that sought to express themselves in it. It was of course about ensuring the national sovereignty of an independent country in the face of the imperialist aggression of Italy, and that was definitely the main contradiction of the conflict. But this war was also taking place against a background of rapid rearmament and growing economic warfare between the various imperialist powers, both triggered by the brutal economic crisis of the 1930s, by the unresolved imperialist rivalries after the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, and obviously by the structural need of imperialist capitalism to constantly increase its profits, which requires the conquest of new territories that provide both resources and labor and markets to realize surplus value.

Two months before the actual invasion of Abyssinia, Trotsky sent the following letter to the IS of the Fourth International on July 17, 1935:

"Far too little attention is paid to the Italo-Ethiopian conflict by our sections, especially by the French section. This question is highly important, first for its own sake, and second from the standpoint of the turn by the Comintern. Of course, we are for the defeat of Italy and the victory of Ethiopia, and therefore we must do everything possible to hinder by all available means support to Italian imperialism by the other imperialist powers, and at the same time facilitate the delivery of armaments, etc., to Ethiopia as best we can.

However, we want to stress the point that this fight is directed not against *fascism*, but against *imperialism*. When war is involved, for us it is not a question of who is "better," the Negus or Mussolini; rather, it is a question of the relationship of classes and the fight of an underdeveloped nation for independence against imperialism. The Italian comrades might give us a short historical summary indicating how Crispi's defeat had a positive effect on the further development of Italy."³

Trotsky's methodology is clear: in an imperialist war waged against "*an underdeveloped nation*," one could not be neutral and had to be on the military side of Ethiopia. It was a question of developing a double military policy: disarming Italy and arming Ethiopia.

2 Nicholas Mulder, *The Economic Weapon*, p. 213-214.

3 Trotsky, "Letter to the International Secretariat," July 17th 1935 Original emphasis. Writings of Leon Trotsky, Vol. 8, 1935-36, New York 1977, p. 41, title: "The Italo-Ethiopian Conflict"-
https://wikirouge.net/texts/en/Letter_to_the_International_Secretariat,_July_17,_1935

This dimension of the second Italo-Ethiopian war as an anti-colonial war was clear not only to Trotsky and to CRL James in the ILP, but also to the American Trotskyists who published several articles on the subject. Albert Goldman of the *Socialist Appeal* wrote:

"The revolutionary interests of the proletariat of the imperialist countries necessitate that the working class come to the aid of all colonial people struggling against imperialism. Every defeat of the imperialists by a colonial people is a victor for the working class. The proletariat therefore must champion the interests of the colonial and semi-colonial peoples not simply out of a vague sympathy but out of consideration of its own class interests. A revolutionary socialist part, representing the interests of the working class, cannot afford to be indifferent to the fate of any colonial people. Every struggle in Asia and Africa against the imperialist robbers must get the whole-hearted support of the Socialist part, especially of the party of that country against which the colonial people is struggling."⁴

That was also the position of Parabellum (Karl Radek), who had again broken with Stalinism, and who after summarizing Leninist policy in the war stated the following:

"The position of neutrality of the international revolutionary proletariat we dismiss with a wave of the hand: if it is true that the revolutionary proletariat is for the defeat of Italy, when it is not neutral, then it is for the victory of Ethiopia. If it desires the victory of Ethiopia, then it must help to produce it. This means that it does not remain "neutral", but that it actively intervenes for Ethiopia... Ethiopia has up to now been a more or less independent country. The attempt to annex it encountered (a) a national Ethiopian defense movement which will express itself in a national war which is to that extent a "just" war, quite regardless as to whether the social form of Ethiopia is backward; and (b) the will of Italy to annexation accentuates the antagonisms within the "common imperialist front" of which Lenin speaks; (...) the world is already so partitioned among the imperialist great powers that every non-imperialist nation faces the common front of the imperialist oppressors; but every attempt to divide the world differently among the imperialist robbers, sets the thieves of this "common front" of robbery against each other, therefore facilitates the task of the international proletariat – the socialist revolution – and by virtue of the rupture of the "common front" of the temporary status quo of the last piratical partition of the world among the imperialist robbers, it promotes the revolutionary struggle of the working class."⁵

However, Trotsky and the British and American Trotskyists had a more dialectical and contradictory understanding of this war than Radek. It was not *just* an anti-colonial war. Barely nine days after sending the previous note to the IS, Trotsky had an interview for the *Arbeiderbladet* newspaper, the newspaper of the Norwegian Labor Party. When asked if this military conflict could mean the prologue to a new world war, Trotsky answered:

" It is very difficult to make any predictions ...but I would say yes, in the sense that I believe that the prospective war between Ethiopia and Italy stands in the same relation to a new world war as the Balkan War in 1912 did to the World War of 1914-18. Before there can be any new big war, the powers will have to declare themselves, and in this regard the Ethiopian-Italian war will define positions and indicate the coalitions. It is impossible to say whether it will then take three, four, or

4 Goldman, Albert, "Socialists and Attack of Italy Upon Ethiopia," December 1935
<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/socialistappeal/vol02/no02/ethiopia.htm>

5 Radek, Karl (Parabellum), "Questions of the Italo Ethiopian War" October, 1935.
<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/ni/vol02/no06/parabellum.htm>

five years or more before the big war breaks out. We should be prepared for a short rather than a long time."⁶

Trotsky was merely corroborating what was stated in the programmatic document of the Fourth International approved in 1934 by the International Secretariat, *The War and the Fourth International*, where Trotsky stated that although "it would be too venturesome, however, to predict precisely where and when the first shot will be fired" since "the multitude of factors and the intertwining of conflicting forces exclude the possibility of a concrete prognosis". Yet what was out of debate already in 1934 was that "the general tendency of development is absolutely clear: the post-war period has simply been transformed into an interval between two wars, and this interval is vanishing before our very eyes. (...) A new great war is knocking at the gates. It will be crueller, more destructive than its predecessor. This very fact makes the attitude towards the oncoming war the pivotal question of proletarian policy."⁷

In October 1935, at the beginning of the invasion, the resolution of the American Workers Party was based on the same framework of international analysis:

"The outbreak of war in Africa demonstrates that the conflicts of world imperialism have reached the stage of armed struggle for a re-making of boundaries, and a redivision of territories and colonial possessions. Though in Italian campaign in Ethiopia may not lead immediately and directly to a world struggle of imperialist powers, this delay can prove no more than temporary. The war in Ethiopia must be understood as the prelude to the new imperialist world war."⁸

Therefore, when Trotsky defined in 1935 the Italian-Ethiopian war as a war "against imperialism," he was of course referring in a more direct way to Italian imperialism, but also indirectly to the rest of the European imperialist powers that would very possibly seek to transform this conflict of national liberation in Ethiopia into a confrontation of another order: an imperialist war. That is to say that Trotsky saw this war as a living and dynamic process of two wars combined in one, with a principal contradiction (the imperialist and colonial aggression) and a secondary contradiction not yet fully developed and at maturity (the clash between imperialisms).

However, in this period of prelude to a new imperialist conflict, the tasks of the revolutionaries of unconditional military support to the oppressed peoples in the wars of anti-colonial character, such as that of Ethiopia against Italy in 1935 or that of China against Japan in 1937, were not suspended, but maintained even with their contradictions. As the resolution of the Fourth International of 1934 affirmed, the policy for the right of self-determination of the peoples and against colonial oppression remained in full force in the context of imperialist war:

"A special and important place is occupied by the question of *colonial and semi-colonial countries of the East*, which are even now fighting for the independent national state. Their struggle

6 Trotsky, Leon. "Report in Arbeiderbladet," July 26th 1935. From *Writings of Leon Trotsky*, Vol. 8, 1935-36, New York, 1977, p. 53-57

https://wikirouge.net/texts/en/A_Report_in_Arbeiderbladet

7 Trotsky, *War and the Fourth International*, 1934. Original emphasis.

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1934/06/warfi.htm>

8 Workers Party, "War Flames Ethiopia. Statement of the Third Plenum of the National Committee, Workers Party of the US, New York, Oct. 4th ", *The New Militant*, October 5, 1935.

is doubly progressive: tearing the backward peoples from Asiatism, sectionalism and foreign bondage, they strike powerful blows at the imperialist states. But it must be clearly understood beforehand that the belated revolutions in Asia and Africa are incapable of opening up a new epoch of renaissance for the national state. The liberation of the colonies will be merely a gigantic episode in the world socialist revolution, just as the belated democratic overturn in Russia, which was also a semi-colonial country, was only the introduction to the socialist revolution."⁹

Sanctions debate divides labor and socialism in England

When the military aggression began, British imperialism, anxious to preserve its colonial empire and with aspirations to control Ethiopia, mobilized the League of Nations to propose "economic sanctions" against Italy. To win public support, it argued that the defense of "democracy" and "freedom" against the rise of "fascism" embodied by Mussolini was at stake, and that a "system of collective security" embodied in the League of Nations, the predecessor of the UN, had to be strengthened. The League of Nations (LN) was created by the Versailles Peace Conference of 1919 by the victorious powers of World War I to share the spoils and maintain their respective colonial empires. Lenin described the League as a "den of thieves" since in appearance it was presented as a form of world government and cooperation that would prevent future wars, but in practice it ensured the maintenance of the new imperialist world order under the domination of England, France, and the United States. Its Article 16 granted "collective security powers," which required its member states to support sanctions against acts of aggression by other states in order to maintain peace.

In *The Economic Weapon, The Rise of Sanctions as a Tool of Modern War* (2022), historian Nicholas Mulder explains how the Italo-Ethiopian war was the first time that the sanctions policy envisioned by LN went beyond threats and was actually implemented. Its implementation was in fact very rapid and forceful:

"In the space of two weeks, [the League of Nations] group outlined a package of five economic sanctions: an arms embargo, a financial freeze, an import embargo, a range of export prohibitions on specific commodities and goods, and a mutual support fund. The sanctions went into effect on 18 November and were applied fairly consistently by fifty-two out of fifty-eight League member states. It was a remarkable feat of transnational coordination."¹⁰

When the war began in England, Stanley Baldwin's National Coalition governed, consisting of an alliance of Conservatives, the Liberal Party, and a small break from the Labor Party (National Labour) that came to power in 1931 to face the devastating effects of the economic crisis. Baldwin, despite his initial hesitations, had a clear pro-imperialist rearmament policy from 1934 onwards, under pressure from Churchill who squarely confronted the pacifist positions of a large part of British public opinion and the Labour Party.¹¹ In 1933, Hitler's Nazi Germany had launched an unrestrained rearmament race, and in the summer of 1934, Britain entered the race to

9 Trotsky, *War and the Fourth International*, 1934.

10 Mulder, *The Economic Weapon*, p. 214.

11 In June 1935 Lord Robert Cecil, a League of Nations adept, set up a public consultation on the peace "Peace ballot" asking the British whether they preferred the League's preventive policy of "collective security" or whether they approved of entering the arms race: 11 million approved of the preventive sanctions policy versus 6 million who favored arming the League.

catch up with the aim of establishing at least "parity" between the size of the land, air, and naval fleets of the two powers.

The economic sanctions campaign promoted by the British and French governments against fascist and invading Italy, and the rapid military rearmament among the great European powers, opened a great debate in the workers' movement and the socialist and communist currents in England. What position should the workers take in the Italian-Ethiopian war in a context of widespread rearmament and the rise of imperialist rivalries?

At the outbreak of the war, both the labor and socialist movements were divided over the policy of imperialist sanctions. The position of the majority of the class organizations was social-patriotic, that is, of total support for the actions of the Baldwin national government in the war and its policy of sanctions. That was the case with the majority of the Labor Party, the Parliamentary Party, and the General Council of the main trade union federation TUC. They all supported the sanctions and the Baldwin government's policy of securing "a collective peace system" through support for the League of Nations policy despite the strong pacifist sentiment in England as a result of World War I. A social-pacifist minority also emerged, which was opposed to sanctions on principle and also to taking any side in the imperialist war in Abyssinia. Among these minority sections of those who spoke out against imperialist sanctions were not only the social-pacifists (mainly a section of the left wing of the Labour Party), but also the Socialist League (SL) and the Independent Labor Party (ILP) where the Trotskyists intervened.

Between the two variants of "socialist" reformism, social-patriotism and social-pacifism, the revolutionary Marxists sought to develop an independent, working-class policy to defend the independence and national sovereignty of Ethiopia against Italy and at the same time to position themselves against all the maneuvers of the imperialists that wanted to take advantage of this conflict to advance their interests.

The Socialist League (SL)

The ILP broke with the LP in 1932 after a failed attempt to integrate and embed it with revolutionary politics. The Socialist League of the Labour Party was founded that same year by former ILP members who refused to disaffiliate from the Labour Party after the split.¹² Within it operated a very small group of Trotskyists (the Marxist League) led by Reg Groves and Hugo Dewar. The SL began a campaign against the sanctions in the sectors of the labor movement where it had militants, organizing meetings in cities to propose a massive resistance to the war and the sanctions. They also campaigned within the LP to put forward an anti-imperialist and anti-sanctions policy at the October 1935 Labour Party Congress in Brighton, allying themselves with all those who were ready to oppose the social-patriotic policy of their leadership, and to denounce the League of Nations as an "*instrument of the imperialist countries already satisfied*" with their colonial victories, i.e. of the sellouts of WW1, and not as an instrument of the peace of the peoples. At the Brighton Labor Congress the anti-imperialist minority was soundly defeated: they polled 102,000 votes to 2.6 million for the pro-sanctions Executive Committee position.

¹² From 1934 to 1936 it was chaired by J.T. Murphy, a former Stalinist. It was also composed of Reg Groves and other former Trotskyists. It opposed the sanctions against Italy as a capitalist measure. In 1937 it agreed to dissolve itself at the request of the leaders of the Labor Party.

The Independent Labor Party (ILP)

The ILP was a political formation with various internal tendencies and lack of programmatic unity. It was also affiliated to an international configuration of different sectors of the revolutionary socialist movement that had broken with Stalinism for various reasons, but had not agreed to affiliate to the Fourth International. This was the so-called London Bureau or the International Revolutionary Marxist Center, also known as the "Third and a Half International."

At the outbreak of the Ethiopian war, the ILP launched a nationwide campaign calling to "*resist the war*," foreseeing that economic sanctions could be a prelude to a "*capitalist and imperialist war*" between the European great powers. The ILP position voted by the centrist leadership was: "*Refuse to support the National Government in imposing sanctions or waging War for British Capitalism and Imperialism! Carry on the struggle against the National Government, Capitalism, Imperialism and War! Carry on the struggle for Workers' Power and Socialism!*"¹³

In fact, the ILP, like many socialist sectors, had already warned in its press since June 1935 that Italy was going to invade Ethiopia and that England would want to enter into political and military conflict to prevent it and try to subordinate Ethiopia for its own interests. This indeed ended up happening after the war with Italy and in the framework of the Second World War, when in 1942 Helassie signed the Anglo-Ethiopian Agreement. In their press, both in the British *New Leader* and in the American *New Militant* and later the *Socialist Appeal*, the Trotskyists explained that Ethiopia had been the object of the rivalries of the different European imperialisms since the end of the 19th century. Although in 1906, France, England and Italy signed the Tripartite Treaty in which they urged each other to respect the national sovereignty of Ethiopia, they did so in order to organize the construction and administration of the various sections of the railroad line that would cross the country and allow the continuation of the colonial plundering of the continent. But the economic crisis and the rise of imperialist rivalries in the 1930s was leading these powers to renegotiate, by force of arms, the colonial distribution.

The ILP, however, not only took a stand in opposition to the British government's imperialist policy in Africa, but Trotskyists within it raised from the outset the need to support politically and materially the struggle of the Ethiopian people and advocated weakening Mussolini's military apparatus. In July, the *New Leader* announced that conflict was imminent and that it was "*up to the workers to do everything in their power to stop war supplies going to Mussolini.*" In September, just before the Italian invasion, the ILP put out a leaflet entitled "*Abyssinia - Workers Facing the Crisis*" and explained that this conflict could be "*the spark of the world war.*"¹⁴ The ILP leaflet openly called for no confidence in either the British government or the League of Nations, which did not represent the interests of working people, but used hypocritical arguments to defend the interests of the big monopolies and colonial plunder. Instead, it urged the unions to form an "*All-inclusive Workers Committee of Action*" and developed what would become the policy of "workers' sanctions" as opposed to both imperialist sanctions and abstentionist pacifism. Several ILP articles mentioned the examples of independent action by the unions during the First World War in England, or in the present crisis in South Africa and showed this as the way forward.

13 Cohen, *The Failure of a Dream*, p. 170.

14 Bullock, *Under Siege, The Independent Labor Party in Britain*, p. 250.

The U.S. Workers Party had a very similar policy in its party statement at the beginning of the invasion:

“The Workers Party calls for the defense of the Ethiopian peoples against Italian aggression, for the defense of the USSR, for unremitting struggle against the coming imperialist war. But for this defense and this struggle, the Workers Party calls at the same time for the sole means by which they can be, in fact, conducted: for the independent and autonomous action of the working class. It is the international working class, especially the Italian working class, together with the oppressed colonial peoples who are the true allies of the Ethiopian peoples – not “peace-loving” Britain, Nor the League of Nations, nor Stalin-Laval, nor Roosevelt, nor their own Christian Emperors and semi-feudal lords. It is the independent sanctions of the working class, its own boycotts, strikes, defense funds, mass demonstrations that can aid the battles of Ethiopian peoples, not the sanctions of finance capital and its puppet-states.”¹⁵

As the controversy progressed, three distinct positions emerged within the ILP on the position to be taken on the war and the sanctions policy of the League and the Baldwin administration:

- a **Parliamentary Group (PG)**, led by Maxton, and which, together with the group's leadership, the NAC (its centrist executive committee) and its leader Fenner Brockway, formed the social-pacifist bloc of the ILP. These were against all sanctions and wars *on principle*, and therefore against taking a stand in the Abyssinian war. This sector presented the war in Ethiopia as a confrontation between "*two rival dictators*," Haile Selassie and Benito Mussolini, and that "*the difference between them...was not worth the loss of a single British life*," opposing a war "*they are not going into another blood bath under the false cry of a small defenceless nation*."
- At the opposite end of the PG was the **RCG** (Revolutionary Communist Group), which supported sanctions and intervention through the League of Nations, and advocated for the affiliation of the ILP to the Communist International (CI). The RCG minimized the inter-imperialist dimension (Italy-England) in the conflict partly because the CI joined the League of Nations in 1934, laying the foundations for a peaceful coexistence with the imperialisms and abandoned with this turn its position of permanent criticism and denunciation of European and American imperialisms.¹⁶ This alignment with the imperialist policy of sanctions made impossible any development of an independent intervention of the working class in the war.
- Finally, there was the **Marxist Group** of Trotskyist orientation, led by Denzil Harber, John L. Robinson, Margaret Johns, CLR James and Bert Matlow, which sought to recruit workers and fought for the group's affiliation to the Fourth International and was in dialogue with Trotsky. In 1932, the first Trotskyist group was founded in London, the Communist League which in 1934 integrated into the ILP under Trotsky's advice. The Marxist Group militated against any kind of support of imperialist sanctions, but with a political line very different and opposed to that of the pacifists of

15 Workers Party, "War Flames Ethiopia. Statement of the Third Plenum of the National Committee, Workers Party of the US, New York, Oct. 4th ", *The New Militant*, Oct. 5th 1935.

16 Bullock, p. 253.

the ILP. For them, the opposition to all imperialist sanctions was the necessary starting point of the revolutionaries (that of the independence of the proletariat against its own imperialism) to elaborate an intervention in the war in support of the Ethiopian military front, fighting the pacifist pressures of the sector of socialism and the workers' movement which had broken with social patriotism. The proposal was to organize "workers sanctions" as a way to oppose the invasion of Abyssinia by fascist Italy, that is to say to mobilize the working class to take the side of the Ethiopian military camp against the invasion of Italy, and at the same time to be able to confront and unmask the British government and its imperialist policy of bourgeois sanctions.

Trotskyists against imperialist sanctions

In that context, Trotsky fully endorsed the ILP's policy of rejecting any support for imperialist sanctions during the war. That policy was also shared by the Italian, French, and American Trotskyists.¹⁷ He also agreed with the ILP Trotskyists' concrete tactic of raising "*workers sanctions*" to mobilize the class independently in the war and fight pacifism. Trotsky asserted that "*economic sanctions, if real, lead to military sanctions, to war*"¹⁸ and that "*the I.L.P. has taken an honest revolutionary position on the question of the League of Nations and its sanctions. Each of us has read with pleasure a number of excellent articles in the New Leader.*"¹⁹

As Mulder explains, while today social-patriots defend imperialist sanctions as "alternatives" to military conflict, in the interwar period their true character and role was bluntly expressed as a continuation of war by other means:

*"Today, economic sanctions are generally regarded as an alternative to war. But for most people in the interwar period, the economic weapon was the very essence of total war. Many sanctionists regretfully noted the devastating effects of pressure on civilians but nonetheless wholly accepted them. Woodrow Wilson held that if "thoughtful men have ... thought, and thought truly, that war is barbarous, ... the boycott is an infinitely more terrible instrument of war."*²⁰

Economic sanctions, permitted for the first time in history through the creation of the League of Nations in 1919, were "*a coercive policy that used to be possible only in time of war— isolating human communities from exchange with the wider world—now became possible in a wider range of situations.*"²¹ It was thus a matter of continuing the economic warfare of WW1 after the end of the military war, with the aim of preventing the defeated enemy from having the means to rearm and attack again. History has shown what was in practice the result of this continuation of the imperialist war by other means: the economic isolation of Italy, and in reaction

17 See the bibliography at the end for a partial list of articles in the Trotskyist party press against imperialist sanctions and in favor of "workers sanctions" or boycotts, strikes and defense funds to defeat the Italian army.

18 Trotsky. "Once Again: The ILP." February 1936

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1936/xx/ilp.htm>

In another article on the ILP he reiterates his support: "In my article I approved of the attitude of this party on the question of sanctions." Trotsky, Leon. "A necessary addition" October 1935.

19 Trotsky, Leon. "The Treachery of the Spanish "Labor Party of Marxist Unity. " January 1936.

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1936/01/poum.htm>

20 Mulder, p. 4.

21 Mulder, p. 3.

of Germany and Japan, very fearful of possible blockades, and the coming to power in those countries of imperialist fascist regimes that pushed forward an unbridled arms race to achieve revenge. In fact, Mulder recalls that during World War I, economic sanctions were a weapon of war that had devastating effects on the world proletariat: “300,000–400,000 people died of blockade-induced starvation and illness in Central Europe, with an additional 500,000 deaths in the Ottoman provinces of the Middle East affected by the Anglo-French blockade.”²²

That imperialist sanctions are not an "alternative" to imperialist war but a means of carrying it out was already explained by the Trotskyist John West of the Workers Party in an important pamphlet published by the party in 1936, *War and the Workers*:

"This extension of the use of the word “sanctions” is significant. It indicates a new and ingenious method for turning opposition to war into support of war. All that is necessary is to *call* the war an “application of sanctions”. Then it becomes the duty of all “friends of peace” to support it. (...) But sanctions are war measures. They include withdrawal of financial credit, embargoes on trade, various forms of boycott. To enforce them genuinely would require a blockade of the country against whom the sanctions were invoked. The probable, the almost certain outcome of such a blockade, as history has so often proved, is war – since the blockaded nation cannot accept such a measure peacefully without surrendering political sovereignty.

Thus it follows that sanctions must be either ineffectual – a kind of large-scale bluff – or they must lead to war.

If they are ineffectual, support of them is certainly no aid to peace (or to Ethiopia). If they lead to war, support of them – no matter with what verbal reservations – means nothing else than support of war undertaken by the imperialist government applying the sanctions. In both cases, support of sanctions to be applied by capitalist governments (whether or not these are League members) is in effect support of these governments themselves. This means that such support necessarily leads to a betrayal of the revolutionary struggle against war, and the revolutionary defense of Ethiopia, which is always a struggle *against* the capitalist governments and the bourgeoisie whose governments they are.”²³

For that reason, Trotsky polemicized with the German Trotskyist Erde (Karl Friedberg) who advocated a "critical support" to the imperialist sanctions. Erde did so as a palliative in the face of the real fact that the proletariat was not mobilizing independently in a massive and sufficient manner to effectively come to the aid of Abyssinia. Trotsky replied:

"Erde sets forth a whole number of criticisms of the Bolshevik-Leninists, among which the important ones are mixed in with the unimportant and no general perspective emerges. The whole document is, however, characterized by a hostile tone, directed not against me personally, but against our international organization and various individual comrades. There are two passages in this letter that I find revealing: one has to do with the question of sanctions, the other with the SAP. Erde writes: "*Since the working class is doing nothing, can do nothing, and for the most part desires to do nothing, the measures taken by the bourgeoisie must serve as the basis for a campaign. Any kind of negative position serves fascism.*"

On this basis, Erde rejects the position on sanctions taken by our Italian comrades. What position does Comrade Erde himself take toward the Stalinists and reformists? Since the proletariat is weak at present, it must . . . look to the bourgeoisie for support. The weakness of the proletariat is in fact a result of allowing the bourgeoisie to do as it likes. And, if this passivity toward one's own imperialist government is raised to the level of a principle, this serves not to strengthen the proletariat but only to undermine the future of its vanguard."²⁴

22 Mulder, p. 5.

23 West, John, *War and the Workers*, 1936. Emphasis in the original.

<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/burnham/1936/war/index.htm>

24 Trotsky, Leon. "Remarks in passing." December 1935.

What is important in Trotsky's answer here is that he reaffirms that the weakness of the organization of the proletariat and the political confusion in its ranks can never be an excuse to abandon class independence and "*look to the bourgeoisie for support*," which amounts to supporting the policies of imperialist governments that under the guise of the struggle for "peace" and "democracy" seek to establish the supremacy of their own monopolies and interests in the global market against that of their rivals. In a war, as in a strike, the proletariat cannot seek to act through its own bourgeois government, even less so when it has imperialist interests in the conflict, but must seek to mobilize independently and separately, even if at times it strikes together with its own bourgeoisie against a common imperialist enemy in a sporadic unity of action.

Faced with the prevailing disorganization and confusion in the British proletariat, the first task of the revolutionaries was to pinpoint the progressive character of the war of resistance waged by the Ethiopian people, the imperialist interests of the various bourgeois governments, and the contradictions of the conflict. And the only materialist method of analysis to understand the role of each sector of the proletariat in each country in an international conflict was according to CLR James to follow a class criterion instead of simply analyzing the positioning in the war according to national criteria. Each European government obviously sought to bind its own proletariat in a "national" bloc against the rival country, but in each country the proletariat and the bourgeoisie had different interests and objectives in the war:

“The I.L.P. has declared against a policy of sanctions. The Labour Party and the Trade Union Congress are for sanctions, even if it means war. Loudly and clearly the social-democratic leaders have sounded the trumpet. The Trade Unions in France are for sanctions, but not to the extent of war. There for the time being they stop. The parties of the Third International in Moscow and out of it are for sanctions. In Britain it is difficult to say where they are, except that they are for sanctions. To the average worker there seems a bewildering (and disheartening) confusion in these diverse reactions of the parties to the first great war crisis that faces the international working class movement. Yet it is here that the materialistic method, particularly as developed by Lenin, proves its worth. The confusion is only superficial. Behind it can be clearly discerned the rails laid down in advance, along which classes and different sections of classes were foreordained to travel, to be driven from them, if at all, only by the accumulating pressure of great historical events, and the chaos ends in revolution.”²⁵

James asserts that the best method to resolve this confusion is to return to the centrality of the social subjects or what he defines as the "lanes" of each class. Faced with the politics of sanctions, revolutionaries should not first ask themselves whether or not sanctions are useful (pragmatist approach) or who they are against (whether they directly attack the bourgeoisie or the people), but more fundamentally: which social class is carrying out those sanctions and with what objectives? Since each class is fixed in its "lanes," we know that the more power it accumulates, the more it will defend its own interests regardless of the motives it claims to justify its actions. Therefore, instead of asking *when* to support sanctions of imperialist governments, or *which* specific sanctions to support and which to reject, James points to another criterion: to counterpose to the sanctions of the imperialist bourgeoisie a different and independent policy of "workers

25 James, CLR. "ILP Abyssinian Policy. *Controversy*; Internal Discussion Organ of the ILP. October 1935. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1935/abyssinia.htm>

sanctions" with a working class and internationalist content, and to carry out a policy of systematic denunciation of the sanctions explaining their objectives and the hypocrisy of the governments.

Although initially it could be given that the workers' sanctions and the imperialist sanctions implemented in England against a country like Italy would seem to be of the same nature when confronting the same enemy, Trotsky affirmed that as the class struggle developed and as the mobilization of the workers with an independent policy of aid to Ethiopia was also achieved, the opposing class nature of both initiatives would be revealed:

"The truth is that if the workers begin their own sanctions against Italy, their action inevitably strikes at their own capitalists, and the League would be compelled to drop all sanctions. It proposes them now just because the workers' voices are muted in every country. Workers' action can begin only by absolute opposition to the national bourgeoisie and its international combinations. Support of the League and support of workers' actions are fire and water; they cannot be united."²⁶

The policy of workers' sanctions which "*can only start from absolute opposition to the national bourgeoisie*" therefore proposed a temporary unity of action against Italian imperialism but with different tactics and class content, and most importantly, with different strategies: for while the imperialist sanctions are a declaration of economic war between the rival bourgeoisies, the workers' sanctions of boycott and strike are acts of solidarity between sectors of the proletariat to build the unity of the world proletariat against the policies of the various imperialist bourgeoisies. This was also the understanding of the U.S. Trotskyists:

"Only sanctions which are results of the independent and autonomous actions of the working class are of any value in the revolutionary struggle against war – since only these separate the class from the state and the class enemy, and only these build the fighting strength of the workers, which is alone the road to workers' power and thus to the defeat of war. Mass demonstrations, strikes, labor boycotts, defense funds for material aid to Ethiopia, refusal to load munitions for Italy, revolutionary agitation for Marxism as it applies to the war crisis, these are such sanctions as the working class must make use of. But these will be ineffectual in the immediate crisis? They are romantic and utopian? If so, then the revolutionary struggle is itself ineffectual, romantic and utopian. Perhaps such sanctions will not "solve" the present crisis. But they, and they alone, will help steel the class, materially and ideologically, for the struggle to come – the struggle for workers' power, which is, in the end, the only solution."²⁷

The 1935 imperialist sanctions of the League of Nations against Italy were selective despite the warmongering rhetoric of the governments because they were not primarily motivated by the imperative to defeat the military invasion, but instead to weaken Italian imperialism militarily and economically and to hinder its rearmament.²⁸ That is why they focused on a boycott of arms exports and a unified blockade of financial capital to stifle the Italian economy, or what was called the "treasury theory." With access to international credit and foreign currency closed, the Italian government was forced to choose between arms production or the import of raw materials and consumer goods. The sanctions, however, excluded from the embargo the strategic sectors of oil, coal, and steel because it was not in the interest of British and French imperialism to slow down

26 Trotsky, Leon. "Once Again: The ILP." February 1936.

27 West, John, *War and the Workers*, 1936.

<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/burnham/1936/war/index.htm>

28 See Mulder, "The Greatest Experiment in Modern History, 1935-1936" pp. 202-225.

one iota this commercial exchange on which its own economic development was based, nor to initiate an inflationist policy. But the bourgeois press was already saying at the time that the war in Abyssinia would not have lasted more than three months with a consistent oil embargo.

Both British and American Trotskyists not only opposed the sanctions head-on in their press, but analyzed their content, exposed their real objectives, and denounced the hypocrisy of the imperialist governments. John West (Burnham), for example, wrote the following in the *New Militant* in March 1936 taking stock of the first 5 months of sanctions:

"Most of the nations belonging to the League have put into effect certain measures relating to their trade with Italy. These measures have included prohibitions on the export to Italy of a number of materials and products related to the carrying on of war (implements of war, horses, trucks, etc.); and also certain restrictions on granting loans and credits to Italy. The United States, also, though not a member of the League, has carried out certain sanctions: the prohibition of the export of certain implements of war, as provided in the Neutrality Act; and restrictions on loans and credit, through the Johnson Act.

It is to be remarked that all these nations, including the Soviet Union, have been very zealous in sticking to the letter of the law on sanctions. They have been careful not to step over the bounds of "collective action" by extending sanctions to anything not specifically agreed upon – to, for example, oil.

Italy, on her side, however, has gone a little further, and has expanded the reign of sanctions by instituting what she has called "counter-sanctions": restriction of imports, prohibition of the sale of certain products from sanctionist nations, freezing of credits and other financial restrictions to prevent payment to these nations, etc.

What has been the effect of these measures?

First, it will require no argument to prove that their effect on the conduct of the Italian military campaign in Ethiopia has been zero. There is no indication that they have affected the campaign in the slightest. From a military point of view, Ethiopia has fared neither better nor worse than if sanctions had never been thought of. As means of stopping the war or of saving ravaged Ethiopia, sanctions have accomplished nothing.

Sanctions seem to have had some effect in adding to Italy's economic and financial burdens internally, in cutting down supplies of certain goods and in raising prices. How great a percentage of such dislocation can be traced to sanctions, however, and how much to what would have occurred in any case under the given circumstances, without sanctions, it is difficult to estimate. Certain economic and financial difficulties have also followed with the sanctions-invoking countries. Indeed, it is probable that sanctions have been as burdensome to Great Britain and France as to Italy.

This, then, is the sum of the effects of sanctions as pretended instruments for stopping war and maintaining peace. This does not, however, complete the story of the effect of sanctions."²⁹

West's article goes on to explain the real effect of the sanctions, whose aim was not only to advance the interests of the capitalist classes competing for resources and markets, but also to weaken the labor movement in their respective countries:

"The outstanding effect of the policy of sanctions has been: to aid in bringing to a new high point national unity within both the sanctions-invoking nations and Italy. The united support of sanctions by the dominant sections of the bourgeoisie together with the leadership of the dominant working class parties and organizations has meant in practice a coalition between the bourgeoisie and the working class. The crucial result of sanctions, thus, from the point of view of the working

29 West, John. *After Five Months of Sanctions. Its Effects Upon the Italo-Ethiopian War, the Great Powers and the Workers*, March 1936.

<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/burnham/1936/03/sanctions.htm>

class, has been the weakening of the position of the working class, a shift in the relationship of forces in favor of the bourgeoisie, a setback to the revolutionary struggle."³⁰

In 1937, when the Second Sino-Japanese War broke out and the debate over sanctions in the U.S. began again, the SWP explained in the *Socialist Appeal* in a very concise way why the conquest of having opposed the imperialist sanctions of the previous war, and the new attempt of the Socialist Party to support them, should be maintained:

"In opposing the policy of sanctions during the Ethiopian War, the Socialist Party pointed out with absolute correctness that this advocacy of "anti-war" measures to be taken by imperialist governments: (1) sabotaged effective independent working class support of the Ethiopian struggle; (2) disoriented the working class on the whole problem of the fight against war and the role played in that fight by all imperialist governments; and (3) led logically support of "one's own" imperialism in the coming war, in order to back up the governmental acts (the "sanctions") which had been advocated."³¹

The policy of "workers' sanctions" and the struggle against pacifism

As we have seen, to imperialist sanctions the Trotskyists of the ILP and WP counterposed the policy of "workers sanctions." As CLR James put it in the war, *"the workers have to act through their own organizations."*³² In England, in October 1935, the tactic of workers' sanctions was clearly outlined by James in the *New Leader*. This was always accompanied by a permanent propaganda campaign against the hypocrisy of the imperialist sanctions of the British government, and a denunciation of the imperialist plans of the latter:

" Use Your Own Power

Workers of Europe, peasants and workers of Africa and of India, sufferers from imperialism all over the world, all anxious to help the Ethiopian people, organise yourselves independently, and by your own sanctions, the use of your own power, assist the Ethiopian people. Their struggle is only now beginning.

Let us fight against not only Italian imperialism, but the other robbers and oppressors, French and British imperialism. Do not let them drag you in. To come within the orbit of imperialist politics is to be debilitated by the stench, to be drowned in the morass of lies and hypocrisy.

Workers of Britain, peasants and workers of Africa, get closer together for this and for other fights. But keep far from the imperialists and their Leagues and covenants and sanctions. Do not play the fly to their spider.

Now, as always, let us stand for independent organisation and independent action. We have to break our own chains. Who is the fool that expects our gaolers to break them?"³³

³⁰ West, John. *After Five Months of Sanctions. Its Effects Upon the Italo-Ethiopian War, the Great Powers and the Workers*, March 1936.

<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/burnham/1936/03/sanctions.htm>

³¹ Socialist Appeal, "Socialist Call Comes out for Sanctions" *Socialist Appeal*, August 21st 1937.

³² James, "Socialist and Sanctions," *New Leader*, 1936.

³³ James, CLR. "Is This Worth a War? The League's Scheme to Rob Abyssinia of its Independence". *New Leader*, October 4th 1935.

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1935/10/abyssinia.html>

The *New Leader* editorial explicitly calls for a struggle not only against Italian imperialism in Africa, but also against all the other imperialisms that want to subjugate the peoples of the region, especially French and British imperialism. The victory of the Ethiopian people would lead to a wave of colonial struggles in Africa and Asia against British imperialism that the ILP Trotskyists (and those in the WP) were eager to develop. Supporting Ethiopia's military victory against Italy was the beginning of support for a much broader conflict: that of the colonial peoples against British and French imperialism. What appeared as a temporary unity of action with the British bourgeoisie against Italy around the sanctions was to be understood as a moment to be overcome by the unfolding of the class struggle. With an Ethiopian victory, the British proletariat would then turn to revolt against its own government to defend the liberation of the peoples oppressed by British colonialism, just as the Italian Trotskyists sought to oppose by all means the military campaign of their own government.

In "Abyssinia and the Imperialists" (1936) an article for *The Keys*, the newspaper of the League of Coloured People led by Harold Moody and composed of Black (Caribbean and African) workers in England, James again reiterated that the only strategy to fight for the victory of the Ethiopian people was the independent mobilization of the working class as an alternative to the support of imperialist sanctions:

"But British imperialism does not govern only the colonies in its own interests. It governs the British people in its own interests also, and we shall see that imperialism will win. It will talk a lot but it will do nothing for Abyssinia. The only thing to save Abyssinia is the efforts of the Abyssinians themselves and action by the great masses of Negroes and sympathetic whites and Indians all over the world, by demonstrations, public meetings, resolutions, financial assistance to Abyssinia, strikes against the export of all materials to Italy, refusal to unload Italian ships etc." ³⁴

Concretely, the ILP proposed to organize workers in England, but also in the English colonies, to take actions of solidarity with Ethiopia, proposing the boycott of the production and shipment of arms, of oil to Italy, and eventually a more generalized boycott of exports to Italy. These kinds of actions, if taken by the workers and trade unions, would not only directly affect the profits of the Italian industrial and commercial monopolies but also those of the English, and would increase the power of action of the working class as a whole.

CLR went even further, and in 1935 pushed for the creation of the International African Friends of Abyssinia (IAFA), which included, among others, Kenyan Prime Minister Jomo Kenyatta and Amy Ashwood Garvey, the ex-wife of Pan-African leader Marcus Garvey. Initially, CLR James and his allies wanted to form a military brigade composed of black British volunteers to join the Ethiopian resistance against the Italian troops. But IAFA's hopes faded very quickly as British law (the Foreign Enlistment Act of 1870) prevented British citizens from joining armies with which England had fraternal relations (in this case Italy and Ethiopia). James even thought of going alone as a volunteer to Ethiopia and published his intentions in the *New Leader* party newspaper:

"My hope was to get into the army. It would have given me an opportunity to make contact not only with the masses of the Abyssinians and other Africans, but in the ranks with them I would

34 CLR James, "Abyssinia and the Imperialists" (1936).

have had the best possible opportunity of putting across the International Socialist case. I believed also that I could have been useful in helping to organise anti-Fascist propaganda among the Italian troops.... I did not intend to spend the rest of my life in Abyssinia, but, all things considered, I thought, and I still think, that two or three years there, given the fact that I am a Negro and am especially interested in the African revolution, was well worth the attempt.”³⁵

American Trotskyism also fully supported the policy of workers' sanctions and the independent mobilization of the working class to implement active and material solidarity with the Ethiopian people:

“We must work for a boycott against Italy, a boycott so effective that it will defeat Italian imperialism. But we must also struggle against being involved in any war on behalf of “our” imperialist government. We must clearly state that no matter what the ostensible reason is, the real reason for any imperialist government in declaring war is to protect the interests of the capitalist class and under no circumstances can we support such a war.

Based on our conception of the necessity of supporting the struggle of Ethiopian independence against Italian imperialism we reject the idea of boycotting both Italy and Ethiopia.. Nor can revolutionary socialist accept the absurd idea of permitting food to be shipped for the Italian civil population....

The task of a revolutionary part is clear: For the defense of Ethiopia against Italian imperialism by independent working class action; against sanctions by any capitalist government; no support of neutrality legislation but a real struggle against the capitalist government to prevent its declaring war; struggle for the proletarian revolution if war is declared in spite of all our efforts.”³⁶

The crisis in the British ILP

The line of "workers sanctions against Italy" explicitly counterposed to support for imperialist sanctions was initially proposed by the Marxist Group of the ILP and became the line of the whole party. This led to the immediate break with the RCG, which was pro-imperialist sanctions. That same month, the RCG joined the British Communist Party, which explicitly supported the League of Nations policy of imperialist sanctions.

But this tactic of "workers sanctions" became the linchpin of an ongoing internal struggle between the pacifists who wanted to advocate "neutrality" in the war and the Trotskyists who militated for a clear policy of material and military solidarity with the Ethiopian people. The Maxton-led, pacifist-oriented Parliamentary Group began to question the tactic by changing the ILP line bureaucratically without going through the rank and file. The Inner Executive and the national leadership stopped supporting such a tactic and instead held an abstentionist line.

The party thus entered into a very confusing situation: its newspaper, *The New Leader* led by Brockway, sought balance between the party's tendencies. It publicly opposed imperialist sanctions with the following formulation: “*the struggle between these rival imperialisms is not worth the loss of a single British life*” while the Internal Executive changed the formulation in its internal circular to guide the party's activity to: “*the difference between the two rival dictators and*

35 James, CLR. "Fighting for the Abyssinian Emperor" *New Leader*, June 5th 1936.

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1936/06/abyssinia.html>

36 Goldman, Albert, "Socialists and Attack of Italy Upon Ethiopia," December 1935.

<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/socialistappeal/vol02/no02/ethiopia.htm>

the interests behind them are not worth the loss of a single British life."³⁷ This change of vocabulary, from "imperialisms" to "dictators" radically changed both the character of the war and the content of party policy: if for the Trotskyists it was necessary to take sides in the war and oppose the aggression of Italian imperialism against Ethiopia and also all the aspirations and policies of British imperialism itself, for the pacifists of the leadership and the PG, the best thing was to maintain a position of neutrality in a war "between two dictators," Mussolini and Helassie, completely abdicating workers' internationalism and class solidarity, and also avoiding any explicit denunciation of British imperialism itself.

Trotsky replied in a very forceful manner against such a deliberate obfuscation of the character of the war by the pacifist leadership of the ILP to justify its "neutrality":

"Maxton and the others opine that the Italo-Ethiopian war is "a conflict between two rival dictators." To these politicians it appears that this fact relieves the proletariat of the duty of making a choice between two dictators. They thus define the character of the war by the political *form* of the state, in the course of which they themselves regard this political form in a quite superficial and purely descriptive manner, without taking into consideration the social foundations of both "dictatorships." (...) If Mussolini triumphs, it means the reinforcement of fascism, the strengthening of imperialism, and the discouragement of the colonial peoples in Africa and elsewhere. The victory of the Negus, however, would mean a mighty blow not only at Italian imperialism but at imperialism as a whole, and would lend a powerful impulsion to the rebellious forces of the oppressed peoples. One must really be completely blind not to see this. "³⁸

The resolution of the Internal Executive of the ILP further added a call for "*its members and the working class of Britain to offer the maximum opposition by holding mass demonstrations in their area, by refusing to bear arms, and in every other way possible to show to the Government their determination that they are not going into another blood bath under the false cry of a small defenceless nation.*" Trotsky denounced this capitulation and called on the Marxist Group to confront this internal maneuver of the social-pacifist sector of the ILP to prevent any real solidarity activity with the struggle of the Ethiopian people:

"In my article I approved of the attitude of this party on the question of sanctions. Later, friends sent me a copy of an important letter from Comrade Robertson to the members of the ILP.¹⁸ Comrade Robertson accuses the leadership of the party of maintaining pacifist illusions, particularly in the matter of "refusal" of military service. I can only associate myself wholly with what is said in Comrade Robertson's letter. The ILP's misfortune is that it doesn't have a truly Marxist program. That too is why its best activities, such as sanctions against British imperialism, are always influenced by pacifist and centrist mixtures."³⁹

Trotsky considered the ILP as a whole a "*pacifist-centrist party*" rather than a socialist and revolutionary party: "*The parties which on the question of war adopt a pacifist attitude cannot be looked upon by a Marxist as revolutionary proletarian parties. Maxton, for instance, is a pacifist and not a Marxist. His war policy can perhaps contribute much to the saving of his soul but scarcely to the liberation of the working class.*"⁴⁰ Nevertheless, he encouraged CLR James and the

37 Bullock, *Under Siege*, p. 251.

38 Trotsky, "On Dictators and the Heights of Oslo," A Letter to an English Comrade. April 1936.
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1936/04/oslo.htm>

39 Trotsky, "A Necessary Addition." October 1935.

40 Trotsky, "Open letter to An English comrade." April 1936

other Trotskyist cadres, who controlled the London and Lancashire regionals, to wage the political struggle within the party against pacifism and for active aid to Ethiopia. They began an internal struggle to reestablish the political line of the workers' sanctions at the National Conference scheduled for April in Keighley.⁴¹ At that Conference they defended the centrality of the anti-imperialist struggle and the need to give political and military assistance to the colonized peoples. They also argued that the leadership had violated party discipline when it changed its voted political line. The Lancashire resolution, pushed by the Trotskyists, won the vote 70 to 57. But this defeat left Maxton's Parliamentary Group, which was totally opposed to supporting workers sanctions, very uncomfortable. According to Brockway: "*Maxton carried his parliamentary colleagues with him when he urged that "working-class sanctions" could not be distinguished publicly by League sanctions and would help create a psychology for war against Italy.*"⁴² The next day the PG again presented its opposition to workers' sanctions despite the previous day's vote, and created great confusion by presenting another resolution: to organize a debate and a referendum in the rank and file of the party on the issue, a proposal which it presented as an ultimatum: if the policy of workers' sanctions won, the PG would break with the ILP. To avoid the break, the delegates voted 93 to 39 in favor of the plebiscite proposal.

The internal referendum contained two questions: the first was to know if the ILP should have declared *itself* "*against Italy and in favour of Abyssinia by the refusal of war materials to Italy*"; the second if, on the contrary, the ILP should have "*refused to back either Italy or Abyssinia and opposed the sending of war materials to either side.*"⁴³ A special issue of *Controversy*, the Internal bulletin, was issued with the various positions and an internal debate was organized. The problem is that by the time the plebiscite was organized in May, Selassie had already capitulated to Mussolini who proclaimed in Ethiopia the foundation of a new Roman Empire. Given this fact, the PG's ultimatum and the fear of losing all access to the parliamentary tribune, the ILP militants ended up voting 809 in favor of Maxton's pacifist position and 554 in favor of the Trotskyists' working-class sanctions. It must be said that this debacle led Trotsky to conclude that the experience of the Trotskyists in the ILP must come to an end: "*My conclusions? The cause of the ILP seems to me to be hopeless. The thirty-nine delegates who, despite the failure of the Fenner Brockway faction, did not surrender to Maxton's ultimatum must seek ways of preparing a truly revolutionary party for the British proletariat. It can stand only under the banner of the Fourth International.*"⁴⁴

The Betrayal of Stalinism

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/britain/v3/ch02h.htm>

41 "*The ILP cannot and will not admit that the Swedish Party is an anti-Marxist organization, because its own leadership shows that it itself is through and through a pacifist-centrist party. We have heartily welcomed the series of truly revolutionary **New Leader** articles about sanctions with **Unser Wort**, Nos. 6 and 8, without any of those mental reservations with which the critic has reproached us. But one swallow does not make a summer. But even these articles bestow no Marxist halo upon the ILP.*" Trotsky, "Open Letter to An English Comrade", 1936.

42 Giliani. Francesco. "*Troisième Camp " ou nouvel " Octobre "?: Socialistes de gauche, trotskistes et Deuxième Guerre mondiale (1938-1948)*". Histoire. Université de Lyon, 2020. Français. p. 148. Giliani today changed his policy and opposes the right of self-defense and military aid to military fronts in progressive wars, such as those of national liberation.

43 Flinn Andrew & Cohen, Gidon, "The Abyssinian Crisis, British labour and the fracturing of the anti-war movement", *Socialist History*, 28 (2006).

44 Trotsky, Leon. "On Dictators and the Heights of Oslo," April 1936.

In 1934, what Trotsky considered the last betrayal of Stalinism to the proletarian movement for socialism took place with the pact signed by Stalin with the French imperialist government of Laval for mutual military assistance in a common front, and his adherence to the League of Nations. This turn was confirmed at the Seventh Congress of the Communist International which according to Trotsky "*signed the death certificate of the Third International*."⁴⁵ In May 1935, Trotsky stated:

"Today, there is not a single worker, even the most politically backward, who is unaware that the Soviet bureaucrats have just publicly, decisively betrayed the international proletariat. For the first time, Stalin has openly said what is, i.e., in full view of the entire world, he has repudiated revolutionary internationalism and passed over to the platform of social patriotism. He has informed his lackeys in France of his open betrayal through the medium of a bourgeois minister, who is himself a traitor to the working class in his own country (...) his bureaucrat has the audacity to write that there is no longer any room for the independent activity of the proletariat in its revolutionary struggle against its own bourgeoisie, that all efforts are to no avail and that to stave off the invasion of the USSR nothing remains except to place faith in French imperialism. Crawling on his belly, he consummates the betrayal of his master (...) *There is nothing new in the new position of the Communist Party. It is social patriotism.*"⁴⁶

When the invasion of Abyssinia began, Stalin's USSR made a bloc with France and England to apply the sanctions of the League of Nations but argued that it only knew of "critical support" and that it also supported the workers' sanctions. In short, Stalinism's social patriotic policy sowed even more confusion in the ranks of the proletariat than that of the Social Democrats as many looked to the Russian workers state for independent class positioning in the war. Trotsky denounced this betrayal:

" Most dangerous of all, however, is the Stalinist policy. The parties of the Communist International try to appeal especially to the more *revolutionary* workers by denouncing the League (a denunciation that is an apology) by asking for "workers' sanctions" and then nevertheless saying: "We must use the League when it is for sanctions." They seek to hitch the revolutionary workers to the shafts so that they can draw the cart of the League. Just as the General Council in 1926 accepted the general strike but behind the curtains concluded a deal with the clergy and pacifist radicals and in this way used bourgeois opinion and influence to "discipline" the workers and sabotage their strike, so the Stalinists seek to discipline the workers by confining the boycott within the limits of the League of Nations."⁴⁷

Both John West and CLR James also sharply criticized Stalinism's policy of critical support for imperialist sanctions as implying that the proletariat could expect to act through the bourgeois governments in the war:

"The pro-sanctions policy has sabotaged any effective independent working-class actions against the war. With their customary hypocrisy and cynicism, the Stalinist spokesmen inform us that they are for both governmental and working-class "sanctions"; and that the latter are more "basic." The C.I. "criticized" at length the British Labour Party because it advocated only governmental sanctions and neglected working-class actions. But this is only rhetoric, only phrases to temper the social-patriotic wind. Governmental sanctions and independent working-class "sanctions" do not supplement each other, as the Stalinists pretend, but contradict each other. The reason is easy to understand. Supporting governmental sanctions is supporting the government;

45 Trotsky, "Stalin Signed the Death Certificate of the Third International".

46 Trotsky, "Stalin Signed the Death Certificate of the Third International". Original emphasis.

47 Trotsky, "Once Again: The ILP".

independent working-class actions are necessarily directed against the government (the representative of the opposing class) and its policies. You cannot simultaneously fight with and against the government. You can pretend to do so, in words, as the Stalinists do; but the logic of facts, not phrases, governs your actions. And, as the last five months proves, the logic of facts prevented those who stood for governmental sanctions from organizing any significant working-class actions. (...)

To carry out working-class actions would have meant a consistent policy against the government, against the national state. Such a policy, though under the given conditions it too would doubtless have been unable to bring about peace and stop Italy's campaign, on the other hand would have acted in a manner just the opposite of the pro-sanctions policy in its influence on the relationship of class forces: however unsuccessful it might have been "practically," it would have promoted the class differentiation, strengthened the independent struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie, and hindered the building up of national unity. It would have provided the basis for agitation to dispel and not to consolidate illusions. In short, it would have been the foundation for revolutionary, and not for social-patriotic strategy".⁴⁸

That was precisely why Trotsky advocated a definitive break with Stalinism beginning in 1935. By promoting workers' reliance on "democratic" imperialist governments, seeing them as "imperfect" but possible vehicles for defending themselves in such critical moments of the class struggle as the fight against fascism, for the defeat of a colonial invasion or for preventing imperialist war, the Communist International, in the name of "pragmatism" and "realism," disposed of the most precious treasure of the revolutionary movement, the conviction that the only way out was independent class action:

*"To fritter away the only capital we possess, the revolutionary independence of the proletariat, in return for precarious, equivocal and unstable diplomatic combinations would be tantamount to walling up the avenue to the revolutionary future. The basic crime of reformism lies precisely in the fact that, chasing after the shadows of reforms, it castrated the proletariat by class collaboration. This policy is ten times, one hundred times, a thousand times more criminal at a time when it is a question not of a peaceful period of parliamentary combinations but of a war that concentrates all the instruments of oppression and destruction in the hands of the bourgeoisie and leaves the proletariat its one and only weapon: its political independence, its hatred of the bourgeoisie, its revolutionary will."*⁴⁹

48 West, John, *War and the Workers*, 1936. In the same vein CLR James wrote: "Only thoughtful revolutionaries, however, realise how the International, following Stalin, missed the greatest opportunity in years of at best striking a powerful blow against the colonial policy of imperialism, and at worst rallying round itself the vanguard of the working-class movement in preparation for the coming war. Nothing was more certain than that the capitalists would ultimately do a deal at the expense, large or small, of Abyssinia. Liberals and Social Democrats will always follow Anthony Eden or any glib Conservative behind whose words they can shelter and then claim to have been deceived. Communists have nothing to gain by such practices. The International from the first moment could have pointed out that nothing but working-class action could have saved Abyssinia, and as the whole dirty record of lies and greed and hypocrisy unfolded itself could have driven home nail after nail into the coffin of the League. The Liberals, Social Democrats (particularly the Social Democrats) and pacifists, with their desires to help, could have been challenged every time they opened their mouths with proposals for supporting action by the working-class. Every day that the League further exposed itself the emptiness of their words would have been made more manifest. Abyssinia might not have been saved—Abyssinia is not saved today—but the International would have had a chance to build up around itself a mass-resistance to wars for collective security and international law and democracy and all the shibboleths, new and old, which would have given it a firm base for the internal class-struggle and the international complications that were bound to ensue. Instead they followed the new line, driven by the Russian bureaucracy's hope that a successful sanctions policy might be a useful precedent against Germany for Russia in the future." CLR James, *World Revolution 1917-1936, The Rise and Fall of the Communist International*, (1937) p. 372

49 Trotsky, "Stalin signed the death certificate of the Third International" May 25, 1935. Original Emphasis.

Conclusion

We have seen that Trotsky understood the second Italo-Ethiopian War as articulating a double contradiction or confrontation. The job of all revolutionaries was therefore to intervene in the Abyssinian conflict not only to defeat Italy but also to contain and confront each of the imperialist aspirations of the states supposedly "allied" with the Ethiopian cause (France, England, and the USA) and to begin to prepare politically the world proletariat to confront and defeat the new inter-imperialist war that was brewing. If the war maintained as its main contradiction the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggle, there was a "progressive" front in it that should be supported to the end. But if British imperialism succeeded in transforming the conflict into an essentially inter-imperialist war, then the only possible policy would be class war and revolutionary defeatism.

The combined character of this war led the Trotskyists in imperialist countries "allied" to Ethiopia to have to position themselves doubly: against Mussolini's invasion and against their own imperialist government, delimiting themselves from both the social-pacifist and the social-patriot pressures. This problem had been succinctly posed by Trotsky in *The Fourth International and the War*, in the section on "imperialist combinations" when he foresaw that sectors of imperialism could ally with the USSR in a war against an imperialist power. The tasks of revolutionaries in these "allied" imperialist countries would have to combine a "*fully and completely its irreconcilable hostility to the imperialist government of its own country*" but "*considerable differences may arise depending on the concrete war situation. For instance, it would be absurd and criminal in case of war between the USSR and Japan for the American proletariat to sabotage the sending of American munition to the USSR. But the proletariat of a country fighting against the USSR would be absolutely obliged to resort to actions of this sort – strikes, sabotage, etc.*"⁵⁰

In fact, several wars of such a combined character took place, but it was first anti-colonial conflicts (Ethiopia-Italy, China-Japan) and struggles against fascism (Spanish Revolution) before the outbreak of the Second World War where the scenario imagined by Trotsky most directly took place. Rudolf Klement, in an important development of the Theses of '34 revised by Trotsky and published three years later, summarized this problem for the proletariat of the "allied" imperialisms:

"Recognising the progressive character of this war of liberation, it must fight decisively against the main enemy, reactionary imperialism (or else against the reactionary camp, in the case of a civil war), that is, fight for the victory of the socially (or politically) oppressed or about-to-be oppressed: USSR, colonial and semi-colonial countries like Abyssinia or China, or Republican Spain, etc.

⁵⁰ Trotsky, "War and the Fourth International." July 1934.

Here too, how ever, it remains mindful of its irreconcilable class opposition to its "own" bourgeoisie-or its political opposition to the Soviet bureaucracy – and does not surrender without resistance any of its independent positions."⁵¹

In times of rising imperialist rivalries, Klement explains that the proletariat of an imperialist country "allied" to a progressive military front has a complicated task: "*of combining revolutionary defeatism towards their own bourgeoisie with support of progressive wars.*"⁵² However, he specifies that in this combination of tasks "*the methods of revolutionary defeatism remain unaltered: revolutionary propaganda, irreconcilable opposition to the regime, the class struggle from its purely economic up to its highest political form (the armed uprising), fraternisation of the troops, transformation of the war into the civil war.*"⁵³

The problem is then how to concretely succeed in the combination of tasks in a conflict where there is a "just" war in course, but another very unjust and destructive one is being prepared, the imperialist war. Trotsky affirmed in 1934 that "*intransigent proletarian opposition to the imperialist ally Of the USSR must develop, on the one hand, on the basis of international class policy, on the other, on the basis of the imperialist aims of the given government, the treacherous character of this "alliance," its speculation on capitalist overturn in the USSR, etc.*"⁵⁴ But how to define precisely such an "*international class policy*" in an imperialist country in the midst of a war? That task cannot be carried out at the national level, but can only be carried out in and from an international organization, which is nourished by the experiences of all its sections and which understands that in an international conflict each section is going to have different tasks according to the "imperialist objectives" of its government, and therefore develop a different combination of tactics to carry them out within the framework of a program and a common strategy for the whole of the world proletariat.

This was Trotsky's view, who with the MG chambers carried within the ILP a campaign to build in England a group affiliated to the Fourth International. In fact, the proposal he made to the ILP, which was "halfway" to internationalism in September 1935, when it was definite that Italy would initiate the invasion, was forceful:

"We should like to entertain the hope that the leaders of the ILP will come at last to an understanding of how lawful is the complete and irremediable collapse of the Communist International, as a revolutionary organization, and that they will draw from this all the necessary conclusions. These are quite simple:

Work out a Marxist program.

Turn away from the leaders of the Communist party and face towards ... the mass organizations.

Stand under the banner of the Fourth International.

On this road we are ready to march shoulder to shoulder with the ILP."⁵⁵

51 Rudolf Klement, "Principles and Tactics in War" (1937)

<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/revhist/backiss/voll1/no1/printact.html>

52 Rudolf Klement, "Principles and Tactics in War" (1937)

53 Klement, "Principles and Tactics in War" (1937).

54 Trotsky, "War and the Fourth International." July 1934.

55 Trotsky, "ILP and the Fourth International", September 18th 1935.

Had the ILP done so, it would have been able to implement a truly internationalist policy to act in effective solidarity with the Ethiopian people instead of being mired in an internal struggle of tendencies that paralyzed it for months. The American Trotskyists of the WP agreed with Trotsky and in their article in *The New Militant* concluded that the best way to help the Abyssinian people, besides through the campaign of workers sanctions and material aid, was to build the Fourth International: "*Thus the struggle against war poses, in the most intense form, the central task of the present period: the Building of the Fourth International, the dynamic generator to drive forward the revolutionary advance of the working class.*"⁵⁶

Florence Oppen, (Workers' Voice) May 2022.

⁵⁶ Workers Party, "War Flames Ethiopia. Statement of the Third Plenum of the National Committee, Workers Party of the US, New York, Oct. 4th", *The New Militant*, Oct. 5, 1935.

In fact, in August 1935, they were one of the five organizations that signed the "Open Letter for the Fourth International". Trotsky, "Open Letter for the Fourth International," May 1935.

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