Hakim Adi's "Pan-Africanism and Communism": A pro-Stalinist attempt to erase the Trotskyist alternative — Part Eight

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This is the eight part of a 10-part series responding to British-based historian Hakim Adi's recently republished book, Pan-Africanism and Communism: The Communist International, Africa, and the Diaspora, 1919–1939.

Padmore, Ethiopia and the Soviet betrayal of the colonial revolution

Adi dedicates several sub-sections to the Italian invasion of Abyssinia (today's Ethiopia). The country occupied a unique place in the consciousness of Africans and the diaspora. Its defeat of Italy at Adwa in 1896 made it a symbol of resistance to European imperialism. By the 1930s, alongside Liberia, it remained one of the very few African states outside direct colonial rule. On 3 October 1935, Italy under fascist dictator Benito Mussolini launched an invasion from the Italian colonies of Eritrea and Somaliland, employing modern artillery, tanks and hundreds of aircraft against an ill-equipped Ethiopian army, subsequently resorting to chemical warfare. An estimated 275,000 to 700,000 Ethiopians died during the war and "pacification" campaign.

The crisis would test three political perspectives: that of the Stalinised Comintern, the developing Pan-Africanism of figures like George Padmore, and the revolutionary internationalism of Trotsky and the Fourth International.

The reaction to the invasion across Africa and the diaspora was explosive. Kwame Nkrumah, then a young anti-colonial activist who would later lead Ghana to independence in 1957 and become its first president, recalled that hearing of the invasion was almost as though "the whole of London had suddenly declared war on me personally." *The Gold Coast Spectator* from modern-day Ghana declared that the Gold Coast man, "down to the schoolboy", understood that he had everything in common with the Ethiopians.[1]

Mussolini's aggression gave an enormous impulse to anti-colonial consciousness. Adi records a huge "Hands off Abyssinia" demonstration in Johannesburg and a Cape Town meeting attended by representatives of twenty-three African, coloured, white and Malay labour and mass organisations. Dockworkers in Durban, Cape Town and Lüderitz Bay refused to load Italian ships. In British Guiana, Trinidad and elsewhere in the Caribbean, defence of Ethiopia became intertwined with struggles against unemployment, poverty and colonial repression.

But the movement extended beyond Africa and the Caribbean, a fact Adi's account omits. In Britain, France, Belgium, Greece, Egypt, India and the US, dockworkers and seamen refused to handle Italian shipping or war supplies. Strikes and boycotts were reported in Cardiff and London, Marseille and Port-Saint-Louis-du-Rhône, Antwerp, Piraeus, Port Said and San Pedro. In India, mass meetings in Calcutta denounced the "imperialist threat" to Ethiopian independence, boycotts of Italian goods spread across several cities, and socialist parties and trade unions organised demonstrations and "Abyssinian days". Black dockworkers refused to load Italian ships in Seattle and San Francisco. The defence of Ethiopia had become an international movement of workers and colonial peoples.

The crisis brought George Padmore to the centre of an emerging Pan-African movement. Padmore had been politically formed within the Stalinised Comintern, joining in 1929 after the expulsion of the Left Opposition and was steeped in the Comintern's anti-Trotskyist political culture. He had headed the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUCNW), established in 1930 under the auspices of the Comintern-led Red International of Labour Unions, which sought to organise black workers across Africa, the Caribbean and the Americas, coordinate militant trade union activity, and advance the struggle against racial oppression, colonialism and capitalist exploitation. He edited *The Negro Worker*.

In 1933–34, Padmore broke with the Soviet bureaucracy based on his conviction that colonial struggles were being sacrificed to Soviet diplomacy. Adi devotes considerable effort to challenging Padmore's explanation of his break with the Stalinist Comintern. He disputes Padmore's claim that the ITUCNW had effectively been "liquidated" in 1933 to placate the British Foreign Office, and suggests that Padmore's later account in his "An Open Letter to Early Browder" (October, 1935), was shaped by his subsequent turn towards Pan-Africanism.

Adi's own evidence, offered in defence of the Comintern, weakens his case. He cites Padmore's July 1934 private letter to Cyril Olliviere stating that the Comintern had wanted him to close down the ITUCNW's activities "to appease the British Foreign Office". This was alarming, Padmore wrote, because "the Blacks in Africa were beginning to wake up".[2] In other words, even before the Popular Front policy had been formally adopted at the Seventh Congress of the Comintern in July 1935, Padmore was already accusing the Comintern of sacrificing the colonial struggle to Soviet diplomatic interests.

Ethiopia strengthened Padmore's case. In May 1935, his article "Ethiopia and World Politics" was published in *The Crisis*, the magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), founded by W. E. B. Du Bois in 1910. Padmore argued that Moscow's position had to be understood in relation to its rapprochement with France and its concern to preserve the European balance against Germany. His article was widely reproduced in the African American and

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international press.

Padmore increasingly interpreted the crisis produced by the Comintern's line through a racial and Pan-African framework, describing the Italian Invasion of Ethiopia as a "united front of White Europe against black Africa. It should serve to open the eyes of Negroes the world over, that White nations, regardless of their political systems, have no scruples in joining hands in assigning parts of Africa to whichever one stands most in need of colonies."[3]

Before Italy's invasion of Ethiopia, Trotsky warned of the precise danger that would unfold. On 17 July 1935, he urged his supporters to pay more attention to the Italo-Ethiopia conflict: "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."[4]

Trotsky's warning about the political logic of the new Comintern line was clear. If fascism became the overriding criterion, Britain and France—the greatest colonial empires in Africa—could be transformed from imperialist enemies into "democratic" allies.

Nine days later, on July 26 , Trotsky predicted that the Ethiopian crisis might play a role comparable to the Balkan Wars before 1914, helping to delineate the competing coalitions of a coming world conflict. He explained that the Soviet bureaucracy had become a conservative defender of the international status quo, and "has not lifted a finger for the status quo in Ethiopia." He accused Soviet diplomacy of [being] "indirectly … a means of support for Italy" because Moscow was leaning upon France and Italy in its attempt to construct a European balance against Germany.[5]

Adi defends the Soviet bureaucracy's foreign policy. He writes that Moscow aimed "to stop fascist aggression in Africa" and prevent another world war, stressing that the USSR eventually became "the most vocal critic of Italian aggression". He emphasises Soviet entry into the League of Nations, the pact with France and later support for sanctions. But Adi also acknowledges the underlying calculation: the USSR maintained "significant economic and trade links with Italy" and sought to use its relations with both France and Italy to isolate Germany.[6]

That admission deserves far more weight than Adi gives it. While Italy mobilised for war, the Soviet Union delivered wheat, oats, barley, coal, timber, coal tar, and petroleum for the Italian military build-up at Massawa and Mogadishu. The Soviet bureaucracy thus assisted Italian fascism as it materially prepared for Ethiopia's conquest.

Moscow then shifted. By September 1935, Italian aggression threatened the League of Nations system of "collective security", upon which the Soviet bureaucracy's hopes depended. Adi stresses the subsequent Soviet role: Moscow denounced Italy, opposed the arms embargo on Ethiopia, implemented sanctions and supported extending them to oil, coal, iron and steel. Soviet exports of some strategic materials were halted or reduced.[7] In reality, the Soviet bureaucracy first attempted to preserve Italy as a possible counterweight to Germany, then sided with British and French imperialism through the League of Nations to ensure imperialist "collective security".

The Ethiopian crisis accelerated the political radicalisation of an entire generation which had come to regard the Soviet Union as the uncompromising enemy of colonialism. Among them were Jomo Kenyatta, honorary secretary of the International African Friends of Abyssinia (IAFA), who would become the first president of independent Kenya; Nnamdi Azikiwe, the future first president of independent Nigeria; and I. T. A. Wallace-Johnson, who became one of the most important anti-colonial organisers in British West Africa and later participated in the constitutional negotiations preceding Sierra Leonean independence. None of these trajectories was predetermined. That militants radicalised in the 1930s should ultimately become leaders and high-ranking civil servants of capitalist post-colonial states was not inevitable. The political disorientation produced by Stalinism played a central role in obstructing their possible development toward a revolutionary Marxist and internationalist alternative.

Through *The Negro Worker* and its networks across Africa, the Caribbean, Europe and the United States, the ITUCNW had helped draw black workers and anti-colonial militants toward the Communist International on the basis of the October Revolution and its opposition to imperialism. Its international campaigns had sought to mobilise workers independently against colonial oppression. The Soviet bureaucracy increasingly subordinated this work to the requirements of its foreign policy.

Adi's own account exposes the diplomatic zigzags of the Soviet bureaucracy in *The Negro Workers*. He records that the ITUCNW's programme for Ethiopia demanded the "Stoppage of all war material to Italy", the lifting of the arms embargo so Ethiopia could defend itself, the abolition of imperialist spheres of influence and the "Complete integrity and independence of Abyssinia". But these demands were accompanied by an appeal for League of Nations sanctions against Italy. Independent working-class action, exemplified by dockworkers refusing to handle Italian cargo and transport workers obstructing military supplies, was now being combined with appeals to an organisation dominated by Britain and France, the very imperialist powers responsible for the subjugation of much of Africa and Asia.[8]

Here, Adi again effaces the revolutionary Trotskyist alternative. Discussing the International African Friends of Abyssinia, he acknowledges that it was led by Padmore and C. L. R. James, whom he describes as "at that time a leading Trotskyite critic of the Comintern". The terminology is revealing: "Trotskyite" is a pejorative term Stalinists used against Trotsky and his supporters.

Adi never explains what James was criticising. Having identified him as an opponent of the Comintern line, he dissolves that opposition into a generic "united front against fascism and in defence of Ethiopia".[9] He thereby erases the distinct political programme James advanced in line with Trotsky.

James's argument was directed against reliance on the League. In *Is This Worth a War?* published on October 4, 1935, he denounced the claim that Britain and the League were defending Ethiopian independence as "the greatest swindle" and warned British workers and Africans against following the imperialist powers:

"Workers of Europe, peasants and workers of Africa and of India" should "organise yourselves independently" and "by your own sanctions, the use of your own power, assist the Ethiopian people." He concluded by calling for "independent organisation and independent action" and warning workers to keep away from "the imperialists and their Leagues and covenants and sanctions."[10]

James described Geneva, home base of the League of Nations, as a place where imperialist governments bargained over "imperialist booty", each invoking collective security only for "its own imperialist property". The warning was confirmed in December 1935 by the Hoare–Laval plan, secretly negotiated by British Foreign Secretary Samuel Hoare and French premier Pierre Laval, which proposed handing large areas of Ethiopia to Mussolini in return for ending the war. James concluded that British imperialism would fight neither for Ethiopia nor for collective security as principles: "If Abyssinia is to be saved", it would be through its own resistance and "the help of the International working class".[11]

Trotsky returned to the question in April 1936, as Ethiopia approached military defeat. Rejecting Britain's Independent Labour Party leadership's description of the war as a "conflict between two rival

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dictators", he insisted that the issue was not the political form of the Ethiopian state but the imperialist character of Italy's aggression. If Mussolini triumphed, it would mean "the strengthening of imperialism and the discouragement of the colonial peoples"; an Ethiopian victory, by contrast, would be "a mighty blow not only at Italian imperialism but at imperialism as a whole" and would give "a powerful impulsion to the rebellious forces of the oppressed peoples". He stressed that defending Ethiopia "in no way means to encourage British imperialism to make war".[12]

The three political perspectives on the Ethiopian crisis pointed towards different futures for Africa.

The Stalinised Comintern and Soviet bureaucracy reacted by subordinating colonial struggles to the diplomatic interests of the Soviet state. This intensified after the Second World War, when Moscow provided substantial political, military and material support to national liberation movements across Africa, using them as bargaining chips in its negotiations with imperialism.

Padmore and Trotsky drew opposite conclusions from this betrayal. Padmore concluded that the Soviet Union, like the imperialist powers, was fundamentally hostile to the colonial peoples, and turned toward a racial and nationalist framework. Trotsky concluded that the betrayal flowed from the Stalinist bureaucracy's nationalist degeneration and insisted on the independent mobilisation of the international working class on a revolutionary socialist perspective.

Despite Ethiopia radicalising a generation who would later shape African independence, millions witnessed the treachery of the Soviet bureaucracy, and this demoralisation would lead them into the hands of the bourgeois nationalist project of Pan-Africanism—the perspective endorsed by Adi.

To be continued.

Op cit., p. 172.

Op cit., p. xxiv.

George Padmore, "Ethiopia and World Politics," The Crisis, Vol. 42, No. 5, May 1935, p. 139, Marxists Internet Archive: https://www.marxists.org/archive/padmore/1935/ethiopia-world-politics.pdf

Leon Trotsky, "The Italo-Ethiopian Conflict," letter to the International Secretariat, 17 July 1935, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky*, 1935–36 (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1977), p. 41.

Leon Trotsky, "A Report in Arbeiderbladet," 26 July 1935, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky*, 1935–36 (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1977), pp. 53–57.

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C. L. R. James, "Is This Worth a War? The League's Scheme to Rob Abyssinia of its Independence," *New Leader*, 4 October 1935. Available at Marxists Internet Archive: https://www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1935/10/abyssinia.html

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Leon Trotsky, "On Dictators and the Heights of Oslo," 22 April 1936. Available at: Marxists Internet Archive: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1936/04/oslo.htm

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[1] Op cit., p. 172.

[2] Op cit., p. xxiv.

[3] George Padmore, "Ethiopia and World Politics," The Crisis, Vol. 42, No. 5, May 1935, p. 139, Marxists Internet Archive: https://www.marxists.org/archive/padmore/1935/ethiopia-world-politics.pdf

[4] Leon Trotsky, "The Italo-Ethiopian Conflict," letter to the International Secretariat, 17 July 1935, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky*, 1935–36 (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1977), p. 41.

[5] Leon Trotsky, "A Report in Arbeiderbladet," 26 July 1935, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky*, 1935–36 (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1977), pp. 53–57.

[6] Op cit., p. 176.

[7] Op cit., p. 176 – 177.

[8] Op cit., p. 178.

[9] Op cit., p. 175.

[10] C. L. R. James, "Is This Worth a War? The League's Scheme to Rob Abyssinia of its Independence," *New Leader*, 4 October 1935. Available at Marxists Internet Archive: https://www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1935/10/abyssinia.html

[11] C. L. R. James, "Truth about 'Peace Plan': Britain's Imperialist Game," *New Leader*, 20 December 1935. Available at Marxists Internet Archive: https://www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1935/12/peaceplan.html

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