‘The dark millions in the colonies are unavenged’: Anti-fascism and anti-imperialism in the 1930s

> ‘We have seen murder and destruction by Fascism in Italy, in Germany – the organisation there of social Injustice and cultural death – and how revived, imperial Rome, abetted by international treachery, has conquered her place in the Abyssinian sun. The dark millions in the colonies are unavenged’.
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> From ‘The Question’, Authors take sides on the Spanish War (Left Review, 1937)

In June 1937 the writer and political activist Nancy Cunard circulated her famous questionnaire to ‘the Writers and Poets of England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales’. Cunard was not only a passionate supporter of the Spanish Republican cause, but also a champion of racial equality. Even so, this particular passage expresses a political dilemma, as the ‘dark millions’ were likely to remain ‘unavenged’ so long as authors were asked to take sides on the Spanish Civil War rather than colonial oppression. Indeed, anti-fascism might well be thought of as, in a sense, antithetical to anti-imperialism. After the Nazis took power in Germany the focus of political attention (especially that of the left) shifted from the colonial world towards continental Europe, and this shift was greatly reinforced by the Communist International’s adoption of the policy of the ‘People’s Front against Fascism and War’ (or ‘Popular Front’) at its Seventh Congress in July-August 1935. In a world in which the greatest military threat was apparently posed by Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and imperial Japan, and in which many anti-fascists saw an alliance between the western democracies and the Soviet Union as the only way to contain that threat, criticism of the democracies’ own empires could be – at least temporarily – muted. Moreover, given that the major colonial question of the later 1930s was Germany’s claim for the return of its colonies, which had been allocated to former rivals in 1919 as League of Nations mandates, French and British colonial rule was suddenly placed in a rather better light. The idea that ‘the operation of imperialism in India is, in essence, no different from the operation of Fascism in Germany’[1], as Reginald Sorensen told the Labour Party conference in October 1933, was far less likely to be articulated in the later 1930s when there was a possibility that the proposition could be put to the test in Africa. This article explores the complex relationship between anti-fascism and anti-imperialism, focusing on Britain and, to a lesser extent, France. ‘Anti-fascists’ are broadly defined to include representatives of the spectrum of anti-fascist political parties (not only those associated with the Popular Front), as well as opinion formers who perceived fascism as an international threat. There are three main parts; the first examines the proposition that the rise of fascism meant that anti-imperialism was ‘put on the back burner’[2] in the later 1930s; the second looks at how the relationship between anti-fascism and anti-imperialism played out in the

context of the three major international conflicts of the mid-to-late 1930s; and the third argues that the underlying assumptions on which anti-fascism rested were often, in certain respects, imperialist. A concluding section looks at how the relationship changed yet again with the coming of a wider war in September 1939.

1) Anti-imperialism in the era of the Popular Front

Metropolitan anti-imperialist sentiment had been galvanised in the inter-war years not only by the impact of the First World War, the Russian Revolution, and the rapid advance of nationalist movements in Ireland, India, China and elsewhere, but also by such shocking instances of imperial violence as the Amritsar massacre (13 April 1919), the shooting of Chinese protestors in Shanghai on 30 May 1925, and the French suppression of the Syrian revolt of 1925-7. One indication of the increasing sympathy with struggles in the colonial world was the extensive support for the "Hands off China" campaign of the mid-1920s in Britain and Germany[3]. Another was the solidarity campaign in connection with the Meerut conspiracy trial of British and Indian trade unionists (1929-33), widely regarded as marking the high point of anti-imperialist mobilisation in inter-war Britain[4]. A number of influential organisations were set up in the later 1920s with the intention of channelling such sympathy into effective political action. In particular, the League against Imperialism (LAI) was established in Berlin following a successful founding Congress at Brussels in February 1927. The LAI, Communist-inspired but embodying the inclusivity of the Comintern's current 'united front' policy[5], was one of a number of anti-colonial movements which found a haven in the Weimar Republic. After the Nazi seizure of power in 1933 the League eventually moved to Britain under the stewardship of the radical former diplomat Reginald Bridgeman. Other organisations which dated from this period include the London-based India League (established in 1930 under the leadership of Krishna Menon), and the *Ligue de Défense de la race Nègre* (formed in France in May 1927, with strong Communist support, by Lamine Senghor and Tiemoko Garan Kouyate)[6]. Of course, the extent and cohesiveness of the anti-imperialist movements of this period should not be exaggerated. The record of the 1929-31 Labour Party government in colonial affairs was regarded by many with deep disappointment, and this added to tensions with its more determinedly anti-colonial affiliate the Independent Labour Party (ILP). Likewise, the Communist International's radical anti-imperialist policies during the "Third Period" (1927-33) were accompanied by a highly sectarian and counter-productive attitude towards middle class nationalist movements in the colonial world. Ras Makonnen, one of the leading international black activists of the period, developed a deep animosity at this time towards the Communists and, indeed, all political movements not under black leadership[7]. Even so, the visibility of anti-imperialism, above all in the politics of the Left, stands in sharp contrast with the situation in the later 1930s. As Elizabeth Ezra has noted, the intense and protracted criticism directed by French Communists against the 1931 *Exposition colonial internationale* was absent in response to the colonial festival at the Paris world fair only six years later[8].

In the case of Britain, there is no question that the relative significance of anti-imperialism declined in the later 1930s. The lack of attention paid by successive party congresses to this issue tends to support the criticism made in May 1938 by Krishna Menon that the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) 'had not taken up a strong enough line with regard to the colonial question'[9]. Moreover, the League against Imperialism, still the principal focus for anti-imperialist agitation on the left, was dissolved in 1937, ostensibly to allow mass activism amongst trade unions and youth movements. Its work was carried forward in Britain, albeit on a greatly reduced scale, through a Colonial Information Bureau [10]. The Labour Party, meanwhile, saw itself as an anti-imperialist party, but its thinking was still dominated by a gradualist mentality that (India aside) postponed colonial self-government into the indefinite future. As party leader Clement Attlee acknowledged in 1937, the 'simple surrender of all ill-gotten gains was undesirable and unpractical'[11]. The low priority given to anti-imperialism is particularly noticeable in the new anti-fascist movements of the later 1930s. For instance, the Left Book Club (which had been established by Victor Gollancz, John Strachey and Harold Laski in May 1936, and which after a year had a membership of 40,000) established numerous branches within the empire, including in Hong Kong, Pretoria and Bulawayo. However, the club published very few book choices concerned specifically with imperial issues, and the one that was was primarily concerned with rebutting Germany's colonial claims[12]. By contrast, the club published five books specifically on the Spanish Civil War, and one of its most successful volumes was Edgar Snow's Red Star over China (1937) which presented the Communist bastion of Yenan as an anti-fascist Shangri-La[13].

In Britain most anti-fascists stood in opposition to the Conservative-dominated National Government and therefore had limited political influence. In France, however, the Popular Front was in office (minus the Communists) between June 1936, when the Socialist Léon Blum formed his first cabinet, and April 1938, and the lack of progress on imperial issues was therefore more striking. On closer inspection this was not so surprising[14]: of the parties that supported the Popular Front, the Radicals had never been anti-imperialists, the Socialists (SFIO) envisaged a 'humane' and 'altruistic' version of colonialism[15], and the Communists (PCF) had come to prioritise national defence against Germany over anti-imperialism. As the PCF leader Maurice Thorez told his party's December 1937 congress, so far as the French colonies were concerned, the right to divorce was by no means an obligation. For the moment the best interests of the colonial peoples lay 'in their union with the people of France, and not in an attitude which might further the aims of fascism'[16]. The Algerian nationalist group *Étoile Nord-Africaine*, which was dissolved by the Popular Front government in January 1937, branded the French communists as 'chauvinists of the worst sort, allies of colonialism'[17]. Even so, the Popular Front's election victory of May 1936 had initially aroused hopes amongst French colonial peoples: the leader of the Algerian Muslim Congress greeted Blum's government as one 'based on justice [which] allows me to ask for my rights'[18]. Some initial gestures, such as a purge of conservative colonial officials, gave hope that these aspirations would be fulfilled. However, even relatively limited reforms, such as the proposal to extend citizenship rights to some 20,000 Muslims in Algeria, eventually failed due to a

combination of colonial vested interests, administrative incoherence, lack of political will and opposition in the Senate. Likewise, a treaty offering mandated Syria independence in1936 was never ratified. A parliamentary committee of inquiry into the situation of France's overseas territories, established under the terms of the Popular Front agreement, did not report before the fall of the government. From the perspective of a jittery French military and political leadership the empire was far too important (and vulnerable) to be the subject of experimentation. In a coming war with Germany, France would have need of large numbers of colonial soldiers for its national defence, just as it had in 1914-1918.

Even without the rise of the fascist powers, the colonial world would have been in some turmoil in the later 1930s. Britain, for instance, faced the Arab revolt in Palestine, a strike-wave in Trinidad which required military intervention, and a protest movement over economic rights in the Gold Coast, while also conducting a military campaign against the Mohmand tribes on the North-West frontier in 1935. France was confronted with the rise of Arab nationalism across North Africa and the Levant, notably the Neo-Destour Party in Tunisia. The importance of colonies for France's defence, as well as the threat posed by the Italian presence in Libya, meant that the Popular Front's relations with the colonial populations were increasingly testy. Arab nationalists were often branded as, at best, unhelpful, and at worst, pro-fascist. Thorez warned nationalists against misguided policies which might 'place Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco…under Hitler or Mussolini's yoke, or turn Indo-China into a base for the operations of Japanese militarists'[19]. This crude thinking was less apparent in the British case, where anti-fascists were more likely to see fascist tendencies emerging from within the ruling colonial elites rather than from amongst the oppressed. In the parliamentary debate on the disturbances in Trinidad, for instance, Aneurin Bevan criticised the organisation of armed – and by implication fascistic – 'volunteers' to support the civil power, and claimed that workers would be forced to join a Nazi-style 'National Labour Front'[20]. There was also increasing concern that South Africa was imitating the expansionism of the fascist powers in its stated intention of absorbing the British Protectorates of Bechuanaland, Basutoland and Swaziland. The South African journalist George Lowther Steer, who was emerging as a leading critic of fascist aggression, visited Basutoland in 1937 and reported that it was 'a little Abyssinia, and free, thank God'[21]. The case that posed the most taxing problems for British anti-fascists was the Palestine mandate where many on the left sympathised with the Jewish immigrants. Two ILP MPs, John McGovern and Campbell Stephen, visited Palestine and declared their open support for the Jewish settlers on their return. McGovern noted that the Jewish workers, who had 'escaped the ruthless terror of Hitler and his accomplices' represented modernity and a higher standard of culture compared with the squalid conditions of the Arab peasants, dominated by reactionary landlords[22]. Clement Attlee described the Peel Commission report of 1937, which advocated a British retreat from the mandate and partition, as a 'triumph for Fascism'[23].

The major imperial question facing Britain was the future of India which, since the India Act of 1935, enjoyed limited provincial autonomy and an extended – although still small – franchise. The British left, which had always regarded Gandhi as

something of a 'humbug', felt much more comfortable with Jawaharlal Nehru, who, unlike Gandhi, was both socialist-inclined and willing to cultivate foreign support[24]. As the President of the Indian National Congress (INC) during the provincial election victories of February 1937 Nehru was a rising political force. The instruction of the 1935 Comintern Congress for Communists to work with the 'mass anti-imperialist movements headed by the national reformists', and to form an '*anti-imperialist people's front'* in the colonies, deepened his attraction[25]. Nehru worked closely with Menon's India League in the late 1930s, which had strong Communist associations, and also drafted a potential treaty for Indian independence at a private meeting with the Labour leadership in June 1938[26]. Nehru (unlike his successor as INC President Subhas Chandra Bose) was a staunch anti-fascist, and felt a deep commitment to embattled Spain and China, both of which he visited in the later 1930s[27]. While in Spain he was greeted by the British Battalion of the International Brigades with a cry of 'Long live Indian independence!'[28] Nehru's language was pleasing to the ear of European anti-fascists, by appearing to suggest that India would be a major source of strength in a war against the fascist powers. But this obscured his full message: in fact, Nehru regarded fascism and imperialism as 'blood brothers', with the former merely an intensified form of the latter. To condemn fascism while defending imperialism was 'illogical and absurd' [29]. He stated publicly that he would not support India being meekly dragged into a war by Britain – no matter who the enemy – without consultation, as would indeed happen in September 1939. In the words of one of Nehru's biographers, 'the polar attractions of anti-fascism and Indian freedom were never reconciled'[30].

While anti-fascists appeared to lose their appetite for anti-imperialism in the later 1930s, they correspondingly rediscovered their own national pasts. At the Comintern Congress Georgi Dimitrov had told delegates that anti-fascists must not concede their national histories to fascist 'demagogues': 'The fascists are rummaging through the entire history of every nation so as to be able to pose as the heirs and continuators of all that was exalted and heroic in its past…'[31] The ensuing struggle for control of national iconography was very evident in Spain, where International Brigade units were named after Garibaldi, Abraham Lincoln, and '*La Marseillaise*', as well as imprisoned Communists such as Ernst Thaelmann. One interesting exception was the British Battalion which was named after the recently-deceased Indian politician Shapurji Saklatvala, the first British Communist MP, although the title was never widely adopted. In both Britain and France, the Popular Front was associated with the celebration of national histories, slanted towards expressions of popular radicalism. In France, a series of mass demonstrations – notably that on 14 July 1936 – reclaimed the Republican tradition for anti-fascism, while in Britain historical pageants depicted an inheritance that stretched back to the Chartists and the Peasants' Revolt. Harry Pollitt, leader of the CPGB, had stated that Communists must 'prove that we love our country so well, that our lives are dedicated to removing all the black spots on its name', and that this should include 'the bloody oppression of colonial peoples'[32]. However, these pageants tended to engage with the wider world only in passing, with contemporary references to Spain and China[33]. The embrace of the nation was not to everyone's taste: one commentator at a rally to mark the return of the British volunteers from Spain was appalled to see them march like a

'boy scout demonstration' behind an assortment of national flags. These included 'a number of Union Jacks, and included the emblem of the Union of South Africa – one of the 'democracies' we presume!' One woman was heard to say that her husband died at Madrid for the working class, not the Union Jack[34].

As the Communists distanced themselves from active anti-imperialist politics, the ILP moved into the space vacated. The ILP – an independent party since its disaffiliation from the Labour Party in 1932, but also reduced in size and positioned further to the left - was the most outspoken voice on imperial questions in Britain in the later 1930s. For instance, it opposed the Empire Exhibition in Glasgow in 1938, and even organised a small counter-exhibition[35]. The ILP also established a British Centre against Imperialism in January 1939, and one of the two French delegates, Daniel Guérin, told the founding conference that 'the repression in the French Empire was at its worst during the Popular Front Government'[36]. The ILP's journal New Leader could still be relied on to draw unflinching parallels between British imperialism and fascism. However, the party was at times deeply divided, for instance over whether to support League sanctions against Italy over Abyssinia. The ILP also acted as an umbrella for a number of black activists from the colonial world, notably the Trinidadian revolutionary socialist C.L.R. James, who had been resident in Britain since 1934, and the former Communist activist George Padmore (*né* Malcolm Nurse). Padmore had worked for the Red International of Labour Unions' Negro Bureau, which he ran from an office in Hamburg until 1933. Explaining his expulsion from the Communist party in February 1934, he recalled that the Communist International had been required to 'put a brake upon the anti-imperialist work of its affiliate sections and thereby sacrifice the young national liberation movements in Africa and Asia. This I considered to be a betrayal of the fundamental interests of my people…'[37] He later wrote that 'politically-minded Negroes despised the opportunism of the British Communists' in the Popular Front era: the CPGB had 'soft pedalled the demand of Africans for immediate self-government' and bribed them with the prospect of 'pettifogging' liberal reforms[38]. Both men were further radicalised by the Abyssinian conflict, with James embracing Trotskyism, while Padmore became a pioneering advocate of Pan-Africanism.

2) **Abyssinia, Spain and China**

The advent of the Popular Front was swiftly followed by a series of major conflicts which transformed the character of international anti-fascism: the Italian conquest of Abyssinia (October 1935-May 1936), the Spanish Civil War (1936-9), and the onset of full-scale war between China and Japan in July 1937. The international anti-fascism of the later 1920s and early 1930s had tended to follow the cause célèbre model, whereby individual cases of injustice were used to highlight wider inequalities. This had been successfully employed in the campaigns over the 'Scottsboro Boys' (nine young black men accused of rape in Alabama in 1931) and the Meerut trial[39]. Accordingly, anti-fascists initially focused on seeking justice for political prisoners in Nazi Germany, Mussolini's Italy, or Spain after the defeat of the October 1934 rebellion. However, the Italian invasion of Abyssinia changed the focus from the individual to the national level, as henceforth entire peoples were drawn

into the struggle against fascist aggression. This was no longer simply the solidarity of the petition or the collecting box. Spain, but also to a degree Abyssinia and China, presented the opportunity for individual participation through military volunteering, medical assistance, or propaganda. Anti-fascism became a theatre for direct action, and the prospect of success or failure on a global scale seemed to hang in the balance when, in the words of John Strachey, the whole world was 'to-day a suburb of Madrid.'[40]. Anti-imperialism, conversely, seemed less pressing. G.T. Garratt, a long-term critic of the British Raj now working as a relief organiser in Spain, wrote from Valencia in April 1937 that: 'India seems the devil of a way off, and its politics somehow rather squashy in the very hard but attractive atmosphere of Spain. I do not feel I ever want to go back East'[41]. Likewise, Michael Carritt, an Indian Civil Servant who was secretly assisting the Indian Communist Party, wrote later with regard to the presence of two of his brothers in Spain (where one would die): 'what I was doing in India seemed to me to be somewhat irrelevant and, probably, quite ineffective'[42]. Should the wars in Abyssinia, Spain and China be seen, therefore, as a distraction from the evils of empire? Certainly in September 1936 Reginald Bridgeman, International Secretary of the LAI, warned that over-concentration on the problems of the labour movements in Britain, France and Spain would permit the struggles of oppressed colonial nations to be crushed. He pointed to Palestine where 'a great army of 10,000 British soldiers is waging pitiless warfare against the unorganised and poorly armed forces of the Palestinian Arabs'[43]. However, a brief review of how these three conflicts were framed and understood shows that in each case 'anti-fascist' struggles often also had very concrete imperial dimensions. Therefore, anti-fascism and anti-imperialism could not be easily disentangled: the former reconfigured, rather than simply displacing, the latter.

In the autumn of 1935 the CPGB swiftly took the position that 'the attack on Abyssinia is not merely an imperialist attack, but also a fascist attack', which would also embolden Nazi Germany[44]. In other quarters, however, there was some confusion over what the Italian invasion represented and how far it was relevant to anti-fascism. For some, it marked a resurgence of European colonialism – Leonard Barnes, for instance, noted how Mussolini was 'reconstructing before our eyes the type of crime by which most of our own Empire was acquired'[45]. Mussolini's claim to bring modernity and even emancipation to a backward 'feudal' society bedevilled by slavery added to the confusion, as did the Soviet Union's reluctance to oppose the invasion so long as there was any prospect of Italy acting as a counter to German ambitions in Austria. The USSR even continued to sell oil to Italy[46]. For George Padmore the Soviet record over the Ethiopian conflict was shameful, especially compared to its later exertions over Spain: 'Not one rouble was sent to Abyssinia, not one bandage, not one ton of wheat'[47]. For the ILP leadership, the conflict was one between rival imperialist interests, and 'not worth the life of a single [British] worker' [48]. Even those who passionately supported the Abyssinian cause, such as George Lowther Steer, could not help imbuing it with a high degree of exoticism[49]. For others the war was significant principally due to its European ramifications. As the Labour politician Philip Noel-Baker told Léon Blum in October 1935, the Abyssinian conflict was 'becoming a real disaster': if the League of Nations could not

restrain a war such as this, 'when every card is in its hands, what hope can we have of ever making it an instrument to check Hitler and keep peace in Europe'[50].

For a minority on the left, the assault on Abyssinia confirmed a perception that anti-fascism ignored the suffering of non-white victims of fascism. Sylvia Pankhurst wrote in August 1936 that 'people stood by while Ethiopia was vanquished: this is only Africa; this is not a White Man's country. They listened to the Italian propaganda: these are primitives, their customs are barbarous'[51]. Accordingly, the war took on a totemic significance for African and Caribbean radicals. C.L.R. James, for instance, went so far as to offer his services to the Abyssinian government, hoping to have the opportunity to put the socialist case to the African masses, spread anti-fascist propaganda amongst the Italian troops, and garner 'invaluable' military experience[52]. In the event, he was persuaded to support the Abyssinian cause from Britain, where he helped to organise the International African Friends of Abyssinia (IAFA) along with Padmore, the Kikuyu leader Jomo Kenyatta (who was resident in Britain for most of the period 1930-45), and Amy Ashwood Garvey, the former wife of the Jamaican-born champion of black rights. This formed part of a worldwide mobilisation of diasporic blacks outside of conventional party channels, the extent of which has only recently been fully acknowledged by historians[53]. By contrast, most anti-fascists lost interest in Abyssinia after the Italian victory – despite a continuing guerrilla war – until Italy declared war on Britain and France in June 1940.

The questions posed by the Spanish Civil War were also complex for anti-fascists, but there was at least broad agreement that it was an anti-fascist conflict between the elected Popular Front government and Franco's Nationalist rebels (supported militarily by Germany and Italy)[54]. Even so, the Civil War also raised many issues related to the future of empire. Indeed, many on the left in Britain were aware of the strange reversal of roles whereby the governing Conservatives were often now depicted as being – unlike the anti-fascist left - careless with imperial security. As the leader of the Labour left Sir Stafford Cripps put it in late 1937, since the birth of the Soviet Union one could no longer assume that a Conservative government would act in the best interests of British Imperialism[55]. The pro-Republican Liberal MP Wilfrid Roberts castigated the National Government as 'this Empire suicide group'[56], while G.T. Garratt noted the 'delightful paradox' whereby 'a handful of Glasgow Communists [in the International Brigades] saved the British Empire on the banks of the Jarama river in February and March 1937'[57]. In August 1936 Ernest Bevin – leader of the Transport and General Workers' Union - wondered whether the British government had 'given up' on the Mediterranean. 'He had often said', he added, that 'it might be a strange thing that it would fall to the lot of the Labour Party to save the British Empire'[58].

Two specific imperial issues posed by the Spanish Civil War were of pressing concern for anti-fascists. The first was the threat that the rebellion posed to Anglo- French strategic control of the vital sea routes across the Mediterranean. In August 1936 H.N. Brailsford warned that with a Nationalist victory 'the strategical situation in the Mediterranean would be transformed'[59]. Another prominent anti-fascist politician, Ellen Wilkinson, wrote in late 1938 that the cutting of the Gibraltar-Suez route would

'make a serious difference to the speed with which we could get our Empire troops from India and Australia', and that the National Government had allowed 'the German and the Italian grip to close on our vital trade and food routes'[60]. Similar fears afflicted French military leaders and anti-fascist politicians about the threat posed by German and Italian warships in Spanish waters – and more specifically by the presence of Italian forces in the Balearic islands - to France's hold over its North African territories[61]. A particular British concern was the potential danger to the naval base of Gibraltar and, therefore, Britain's continued ability to command the Straits. The installation of Nationalist artillery close to the Rock was publicly admitted by the Foreign Office Minister Lord Cranborne in July 1937, although he was adamant that the guns were defensive in purpose and inferior to those inside the British fortress[62]. A retired admiral and Conservative MP, Sir Roger Keyes, incurred ridicule for telling parliament that, even if hostile artillery were in placed on either side of the Straits, the Royal Navy would still be able to pass through – at least by night – by means of a smoke screen[63].

The second, related, issue was the role played by Spanish Morocco. The Spanish zone had been the first region to declare for the rebellion on 17 July 1936, and the military authorities had successfully won over the local Arab and Berber elites, not least by making minor political and religious concessions[64]. French anti-fascists were deeply concerned about the prospect of a growing German presence in Spanish Morocco: Gabriel Péri, a French Communist deputy and foreign editor of l'Humanité warned in January 1937 that such a development would sow unrest in French North Africa and potentially undermine the 'whole system of French national defence'[65]. Moreover, there was widespread alarm at the recruitment of more than fifty thousand Moroccans (including some from the French zone) to fight for the Nationalists against the Republic. These fears were often racialized, as in this report picked up by Jennie Lee of the ILP: '"the Moors were coming. Black troops were being rushed along the coast road. Black troops with German guns and Italian conscripts to aid them"'[66]. Just as important, however, was the concern that Franco's use of the Moors might presage the raising of a 'great black army' by Italy in its African territories[67], or, indeed, inspire the British and French governments to deploy colonial troops in a domestic crisis. In this sense, Franco's willingness to use 'the Moors' was not an isolated peculiarity of the Spanish Civil War, but amplified existing anxieties within all imperial powers about the future loyalties of colonial troops. George Orwell, convalescing in French Morocco after fighting in Spain, observed a column of black Senegalese troops marching past. He noted that every white man (socialist or not) would pose the same question: '"How much longer can we go on kidding these people? How long before they turn their guns in the other direction?"'[68]

The 'Moors' were widely demonized during the Civil War, and often blamed for atrocities. However, some anti-fascists were more sympathetic. Both George Padmore and Nancy Cunard argued that the Moors could be seen as victims of the war, forced to enlist by economic hardships and poorly treated by their own side, especially when wounded[69]. Cunard reported a comment by an Algerian nationalist, lamenting the fact that the Spanish Government – 'which by its very nature should

be anti-imperialistic' – had not taken measures to avert Moroccan support for the rebels[70]. Likewise, Padmore argued that if only the Spanish government had 'made a gesture to the Moors', Franco would never have been able to 'deceive' them into supporting his cause[71]. Jawaharlal Nehru stated that the Nationalists 'deceived these poor unfortunate Moors by making them all manner of false promises and enlisting them on [their] side to attack the very people who were likely to give freedom to them'[72]. The idea that the Spanish Republic had missed an opportunity to undermine the rebellion by adopting a more liberal policy towards Morocco gained considerable currency during the Civil War. Claud Cockburn, an accomplished Communist propagandist who wrote as 'Frank Pitcairn', later boasted how he had manufactured a news story about a rebellion against Nationalist rule in Tetuan with the intention of boosting the Republic's international standing[73]. Similarly, an advisor to the Spanish Republican government claimed that it had intended to grant Morocco autonomy, 'except that France would not permit it…fearful of the effect on her adjoining African colonies'[74]. The Republic, under the wartime premiership of Francisco Largo Caballero, certainly expended substantial sums of money on unsuccessful attempts to foment rebellion in Spanish Morocco[75]. However, these attempts were all too little, too late – the Republic's best opportunity to pursue a more progressive policy had come at its foundation in 1931, not under the conditions of Civil War when the Nationalists had the zone under firm control. The idea of a 'missed opportunity' is therefore – like Cockburn's report – mere wishful thinking.

China, unlike Spain and Abyssinia, had been of interest to the European left since the early 1920s – although it was, of course, initially seen as the site of an anti-colonial struggle which, during the 1930s, evolved into an anti-fascist struggle. The conflict between China and Japan had rumbled on intermittently since the Japanese occupation of Manchuria in September 1931, but finally developed into all-out war following the Marco Polo Bridge incident in July 1937. Although China could only compete with Spain for the attention of anti-fascists at specific moments (notably, during the bombing of Chinese cities in the autumn of 1937[76]), it was widely regarded as analogous to – if not on a par with - Spain. However, the memory of European aggression against China was still uncomfortably close, and the claim that Britain had 'shown Japan the way in China'[77] could not be lightly dismissed. Indeed, as recently as 1926 Britain had sent a major expeditionary force to protect the International Settlement of Shanghai (ISS) from the victorious Nationalist forces, and a British flotilla had caused heavy casualties when shelling the river port of Wanhsien. Ten years later, the major difference was that Japan was seeking hegemony in China, destroying the delicate balance of foreign interests and driving out the Europeans and North Americans. Westerners were now themselves vulnerable to attack, and the British Ambassador was severely wounded when his car was strafed by Japanese aircraft. Accordingly, when anti-fascists looked at the Sino-Japanese war, their perceptions were informed by the knowledge that Britain's imperial role in China was rapidly changing. For instance, Hilda Selwyn-Clarke had arrived in Hong Kong in 1938 with her husband, the Chief Medical Officer. 'Red Hilda' was firmly on the left and no imperialist. Even so, she swiftly came to appreciate the colony's importance as a haven for refugees, a centre for gathering information, and a channel for medical supplies to Chinese forces. She rejected a comment by the

New Statesman's editor Kingsley Martin that white civilians should be evacuated from Hong Kong. 'For nearly a hundred years' she replied 'we have only been concerned with making profits out of the Chinese…Since the Japanese aggression the situation has changed; probably for the first time in our long association…we are being of real use to China'[78].

For European anti-fascists, the sheer distance and inaccessibility of the Chinese theatre - compared to Spain - almost ruled out direct personal intervention. Those who did make the journey, such as W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood in 1938, found themselves suspended between two worlds: the chaos of the ill-defined front regions contrasted with their privileged status in the international settlement at Shanghai, 'an oasis in the midst of the stark, frightful wilderness which was once the Chinese city'[79]. Distance was compounded by the political complexity of the conflict. The Japanese were facing an inherently unstable 'united front' between Chiang Kai-shek's government forces and the Chinese Communists, led by Mao Zedong and Zhu De, the leader of the Chinese Red Army. Until recently, moreover, Chiang Kai-shek had routinely been branded a 'fascist' by the left, and the German military mission which had been training his army was only formally withdrawn in April 1938. Within Britain, the China Campaign Committee, a Communist-backed organisation formed on a Popular Front basis in the summer of 1937, succeeded in bringing China's plight to a wider audience. However, its virulently anti-Japanese rhetoric has left it open to the criticism that 'the most important anti-colonial work [of the period] was that directed against Britain's imperial rivals'[80]. The ILP's New Leader warned that the Popular Front against war was, in fact, more likely to be a front 'for a war, e.g. to defend China against Japan…'[81] These tensions came to a head in a bitter exchange of words between the veteran socialist H. N. Brailsford, who had warned against Britain joining with the United States in a naval embargo to restrain Japan, and the Communist fellow-traveller John Strachey. Strachey responded that Brailsford's stance was 'odiously sanctimonious': Britain was to be denied the opportunity to aid Mao and Zhu for fear of 'sullying' Brailsford's conscience by 'giving some incidental support to the protection of some British imperial interest!'[82] What lay behind these differences, however, was the fact that – far more so than the Spanish Civil War – the Sino-Japanese conflict was a 'proxy war' between the imperialist powers and Japan for control of China. The 'appeasement' of Japan was not pursued consistently, and the British government in particular sought to prolong Chinese resistance by channelling aid through Hong Kong and building the Burma Road[83].

3) Anti-fascism's imperial assumptions

All three major 'anti-fascist' conflicts of the later 1930s served to highlight a paradox: if anti-fascists were to achieve their objectives (such as closing the Suez canal to Italian shipping, safeguarding ships conveying food to Republican Spain, or sending aid to Chinese forces) they would have to enlist the support of the instruments of imperial power, such as the Royal Navy. This is not to say that anti-fascists had become imperialists, but rather that the experiences of the later 1930s created an identity of interest, at least while the threat of fascism persisted[84]. When British and

French anti-fascists conceptualised fascism globally, it was inevitable that imperial power would be at the core of any global response. Like George Orwell, who awoke on the morning of the Nazi-Soviet pact to discover that he was a patriot who would back the Chamberlain government in the coming war[85], many anti-fascists evinced an almost jingoistic pride in imperial power. For instance, H. N. Brailsford sharply challenged the idea that Britain could not have stood up to Italy during the Abyssinian crisis: 'It is humiliating nonsense to pretend that the British fleet, even if it had stood alone, was incapable of dealing with a second rate naval power like Italy'. When British ships were being bombed in Spanish Republican ports his message was even more direct: 'Where is our Navy?' The British lion 'must roar again' in order to restrain the Fascist powers, and not wait for full rearmament[86]. When Franco's navy attempted to blockade Bilbao in April 1937, the Labour spokesman Arthur Henderson expressed incredulity that HMS Hood, 'the largest warship in the world', which was in the vicinity, would not be deployed against 'a dilapidated battleship, two or three rusty gunboats and half a dozen converted fishing smacks'[87].

A softer attitude was also evident towards the military in the later 1930s, which reflected the changed position of the Comintern. As the Italian Communist leader Palmiro Togliatti ('Ercoli') told delegates at the Seventh Congress: 'We are not Anarchists. Boycott of mobilisation…refusal of military service, and so on, these are not our methods of fighting war'. Communists should now see the military as a forum for their 'mass work', with a view to democratising 'capitalist armies' rather than undermining them[88]. In France, the PCF was forced to abandon its traditional anti-militarism sharply when, after the May 1934 Franco-Soviet pact, Stalin signalled his public support for French rearmament. The PCF's new 'belligerent anti-fascism' put it at odds with more pacifist sections of the French left – for instance, in March 1935 the Socialist newspaper Le Populaire was still denouncing the army as 'a school for slaughter'[89]. British soldiers also received a better press. In the mid-1920s British troops in China would automatically have been seen on the left as an oppressive and illegitimate presence. By 1938, however, the Daily Worker was noting with implicit approval the role of the Seaforth Highlanders in preventing the Japanese from entering the ISS. Likewise, the newspaper headlined the fact that British soldiers had risked their lives to rescue Spanish Republican sailors when a cruiser was attacked off Gibraltar. The fact that they were rescuing servicemen 'like themselves' asserted their essential humanity[90]. Lewis Clive, a young lawyer who would subsequently die fighting in Spain, noted the irony that in Abyssinia British military personnel may well have been required to come to the aid of the very '"native" races' that they were trained to subdue. However, Clive's rather fanciful model remained the 'democratically organised' Soviet Red Army, where the soldier's life was calculated to 'stimulate his faculties to the utmost' and allow him 'the fullest self-development'[91].

Anti-fascists also discovered a new interest in conventional diplomatic mechanisms. C. L. R. James later admitted to having become muddled when, at the launch of the IAFA, he supported a resolution calling on the League of Nations (which, as a Marxist, he disapproved of) to protect Abyssinia[92]. In the Daily Worker Ivor Montagu

chastised the British government for killing off the proposal by Australian Prime Minister J. A. Lyons for a 'Pacific Pact against aggressors' as an action which 'cleared the way for Japan' to assault China: yet this was precisely the kind of agreement which Communists would until recently have treated with suspicion[93]. Likewise, the failure of the Nine-Power treaty conference at Brussels in November 1937 (the mechanism created in 1922 to enforce the 'open door' for trade with China) was criticised In the Daily Worker as a 'complete surrender' when it failed to recommend concrete measures for restraining Japan[94]. One diplomatic instrument that most anti-fascists were never reconciled to was the Non-Intervention Agreement in the Spanish Civil War. However, its reluctant architect Léon Blum was one of the few honest enough to point out that, for all its shortcomings, the popular alternative – a free trade in arms – would not provide sufficient assistance to the Republic: 'the arming of a government can really only be done by another government'[95].

Finally, anti-fascists found a new respect for 'their' empire, so long as it was threatened by fascism. Ronald Kidd of the National Council for Civil Liberties reported that an anti-fascist heckler had been removed from one of Sir Oswald Mosley's meetings in October 1936 for making two comments: the first, '[d]oesn't Italy want to dominate the Mediterranean?' and the second, '[w]ell, Germany wants our Colonies'[96]. George Steer is best known for reporting the bombing of Guernica, but was also deeply committed to resisting Germany's colonial claims. In a book published in May 1939 he concluded that pre-1914 German imperialism had been reliant on 'gross and criminal violence', while the mandate system had 'brought great good to Africa. It has raised the efficiency and the standard of humanity of Imperial Governments'[97]. In rebutting Nationalist designs on Gibraltar the Labour MP James Chuter Ede noted that for decades British school children had been raised to think of it as 'a symbol of the impregnability and unassailability of the British Empire'[98]. When a Communist journal noted that a fascist Spain and a fascist-controlled Morocco would 'make of Gibraltar not a fortress, but a nut between the nut-cracker jaws'[99] it was clear that at that moment the one thing worse than imperial strength was imperial weakness.

4) 'On the side of the Cossacks'? Anti-fascism and anti-imperialism after 1939

In a parliamentary debate in November 1939 Neville Chamberlain dismissed allegations of British imperialism:

> '…if Imperialism means the assertion of racial superiority, if it means the suppression of the political and economic freedoms of other peoples, if it means the exploitation of the resources of other countries for the benefit of the Imperialist country, then I say that those are not the characteristics of this country, but that they are characteristics of the present administration in Germany'[100].

Henceforth, it seemed, one could be both anti-imperialist and anti-fascist simply by supporting the war against Nazi Germany. These brazen comments underline the growing complexity of the relationship between anti-fascism and anti-imperialism following the remarkable turn of events between August and October 1939. The

Nazi-Soviet Pact strained British anti-fascism, but the announcement by the Communist Party's Political Bureau on 2 October 1939 that the war with Germany was a war 'between imperialist powers over profits, colonies and world domination' caused far greater damage. Former anti-fascist allies such as Victor Gollancz grew increasingly vitriolic in their criticism of the party. The situation was even more divisive in France where the Popular Front had collapsed in the autumn of 1938: Spanish Republican refugees were held in grim camps in southern France, sometimes guarded by Senegalese troops[101], and in late September 1939 the PCF was itself banned. The confusion of the politics of the period is neatly illustrated by a comment by the Barbados-born activist Peter Blackman in January 1940. Blackman asked the leading Communist James Shields to address a meeting: 'he wanted him to discuss the current international situation, especially the African situation, with particular reference to Russia and Finland from the angle of "how this affects people in Africa"'[102].

Despite its volte face, however, the CPGB did not suddenly return to the anti-imperialist activism of the early 1930s. Kevin Morgan notes that the Communist Party journal Inside the Empire only achieved a meagre circulation during its short life in 1940, and that the People's Convention of January 1941 initially made no mention of colonial freedom. He also notes that the argument of leading party theoretician Rajani Palme Dutt that this 'imperialist war' was motivated by actual imperial fears (such as a putative German threat to India) was not shared by many Communists[103]. A few individuals did continue to press the anti-imperialist cause during the early phase of the war. On Empire Day, 24 May, 1940 the Communist Ben Bradley, one of the defendants at the 'Meerut trial', was arrested for telling a public meeting in Walthamstow marketplace that only 50 million out of the British Empire's population of 450 million supported the war against Germany. He received a three month jail sentence with hard labour for 'conspiracy to wage war against the King'. It remains unclear whether he courted arrest, although the fact that two other Communists, Arthur Clegg and Jacob Lerner, were convicted at the same time suggests an element of premeditation[104]. The date is significant, as by 24 May the war against Nazi Germany had begun to go disastrously wrong, and the evacuation from Dunkirk was about to begin. Bradley had emerged from four years of incarceration in 1934 as an anti-imperialist hero: this second period in jail, by contrast, generated little interest and has been largely forgotten. A year later, following the German invasion of the Soviet Union and a further change in the party line, Bradley's principled stand would seem rather out-dated. By May 1942 Reginald Bridgeman was advising Harry Pollitt that, in seeking support from colonial peoples for the war effort, Communists must avoid giving the impression that they were simply trying to 'enlist all colonial peoples in the struggle to smash Fascism', rather than asserting their right to freedom[105].

Anti-fascists who participated in the war would continue to find that questions over the future of empire complicated the war against fascism. One serving British Communist noted how, as the defeat of Germany grew closer, the more the British army reverted to thinking about 'the routine defence of the British Empire'[106]. G.T. Garratt, who was – he suspected – deemed to be 'still too Italianophobe' to serve in

Africa joined the Pioneer Corps in his fifties. In September 1941 he admitted that he was in despair 'about India', where the nationalist leaders were in jail: '…no one cares a damn, Left or Right'. A few months later he was killed when a mine exploded while he was lecturing at Pembroke Dock[107]. George Steer took part as a field propagandist in the campaign to evict Italian forces from Abyssinia in 1941. Yet, although proud that '[w]e had freed the first of the cruelly treated nations', Steer also noted that the Abyssinians were now under British military occupation, and that the South African military presence served initially to reinforce the Italian colour bar in Addis Ababa.[108] Alun Lewis, a gifted Welsh poet who had called after the Munich agreement for British colonies to be placed under supra-national mandate, served during the war in India and Burma. On hearing news of Italy's surrender in September 1943, he wrote that: 'There is such a thing as freedom, and in Europe we are liberators at the moment. In the East it is less so, alas. Liberty isn't the point at issue, and neither side offers it. That's what makes it so hard to accept'[109]. The artist Clive Branson, who had been taken prisoner while serving with the International Brigades in Spain, was appalled to find that, as a British soldier in India in 1943 he was – to some Indians – seen as part of an army of occupation. 'It seems rather curious' he mused 'to find oneself on the side of the Cossacks: rather revolting in fact'[110]. Steer, Lewis and Branson would all die in the war against Japan: a war which was at the same time anti-fascist and imperial.

Conclusion

> 'All the world must now fight against Hitler and Japan. The African enslaved by the Kenyan settler and the French colonist, the starving millions of India…these also are summoned to fight for the peace-loving democracies against war-making fascism'[111].

For C.L.R. James, writing in 1937, the looming struggle between the fascist states and the European empires could bring no benefit to the colonial masses, and he was not alone in warning that the logic of anti-fascism was to give priority to European over non-European interests. As late as January 1939 Jomo Kenyatta noted that the world was horrified by the exile and confiscation of property suffered by European Jews, but 'this goes on every day in Kenya'[112]. At the same time, Leonard Barnes, academic and leading critic of empire, argued that the impulses that drove Hitler to dominate Europe sprang 'from the same economic and psychological sources' as those which drove Britain to maintain dominance over 400 million people in Asia and Africa[113]. Even so, by the later 1930s such overt coupling together of anti-fascism and anti-imperialism was the view of a minority, and the attention of most anti-fascists was focused on the immediate military and political threat posed by Germany, Italy and Japan rather than the iniquities of empire. Clearly, this was in part a question of priorities: for the time being at least, empires had to be maintained because they had an important role to play in the defence against fascism. Yet there were also other factors at work. As this article as argued, to a surprising degree the anti-fascism of the later 1930s rested on imperial assumptions. Moreover, especially under the pressures of war, it was difficult for anti-fascists to address both fascism

and imperialism at the same time, even when they wanted to. George Orwell devised a programme for just such a war in The Lion and the Unicorn (1941), but spent the next two years at the BBC broadcasting – as he put it - 'British propaganda to India'[114]. Above all, the act of placing anti-imperialism 'on the back burner' (even temporarily) not only did nothing in the short term to address the grievances of the colonial peoples, it also perpetuated them. As I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson, a shrewd West African critic of British colonialism, commented with regard to the decision by Nigeria and the Gold Coast to make a financial contribution to the British exchequer for the costs of defence: "There can only be one interpretation to the term 'Imperial Defence' and that is *The Defence of Imperialism*"[115].

Acknowledgements
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[3] Tom Buchanan, East Wind: China and the British Left, 1925-76 (Oxford University Press, 2012), 30-43; Fredrik Petersson, 'Hub of the anti-imperialist movement; The League against Imperialism and Berlin, 1927-1933', Interventions: Journal of Post-Colonial Studies, 16:1. 2014, 49-71, here 55.
[4] John Saville, 'The League against Imperialism', Dictionary of Labour Biography, vol. vii, (1984), 40-50, 48; Stephen Howe, Anti-colonialism and British politics, 1918-64, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993), 65 esp. note 107.
[5] For a good account of the early phase of the LAI see Petersson, 'Hub of the anti-imperialist movement'. See also Nathanael Kuck, 'Anti-colonialism in a post-colonial environment – the case of Berlin, 1914-33', Journal of Contemporary History, 49:1, Jan. 2014, 134-59.
[6] Jonathan Derrick, Africa's "Agitators": Militant anti-colonialism in Africa and the West, 1918-1939, (Hurst, London, 2008), 216-26.
[7] Ras Makonnen, Pan-Africanism from Within, (Oxford University Press, Nairobi and London, 1973), esp. 159. Makonnen was born as George Griffiths in Guyana, but claimed Tigrean ancestry and changed his name following the Italian invasion of Abyssinia.
[8] Elizabeth Ezra, The Colonial Unconscious: Race and culture in interwar France, (Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 2000), 26-30.
[9] At its 1937 congress the CPGB Central Committee admitted that 'insufficient' had been done to assist anti-imperialist movements in the Colonies (Report of the Central Committee to the 14th National Congress, (CPGB, 1937), 13. In September 1938, at the height of the Munich crisis, the primary reference to anti-colonialism came in fraternal greetings from Nehru and a greeting to the West Indian workers, (For Peace and Plenty! Report of the 15th Congress of the CPGB (1938), 19-20 and 175-6). See also Neil Redfern, Class or Nation: Communism, imperialism and two world wars, (I B Tauris, London, 2012 edition), 93-5. For the Menon quotation see The National Archives, Kew (TNA) KV2/2509, 12 May 1938, report of Menon's telephone conversation with Ben Bradley.
[10] Hull History Centre, Bridgeman papers, UDBN/25/2, letter of 11 May 1937; Saville, "The League against Imperialism".
[11] Clement Attlee, The Labour Party in Perspective, (Victor Gollancz, London, 1937), 229.
[12] Leonard Barnes, Empire or Democracy? A study of the colonial question, (Victor Gollancz, London. 1939).

[13] Buchanan, East Wind, 58-9.
[14] William B. Cohen, 'The Colonial Policy of the Popular Front', French Historical Studies, 7, 3, Spring 1972, 368-93. For a more recent and more sympathetic account see Tony Chafer and Amanda Sackur, eds., French colonial empire and the Popular Front: Hope and disillusion, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1999). See also Martin Thomas, The French Empire between the Wars, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2005), 271-339.
[15] Chafer and Sackur, French colonial empire, 17, citing Maurice Moutet's phrase '*colonisation altruiste*'.
[16] Maxime Rodinson, Marxism and the Muslim World (Zed Press, London, 1979), 98.
[17] Ibid, 97-8.
[18] Cohen, "Colonial Policy", 380.
[19] Rodinson, Marxism and the Muslim world, 98.
[20] Hansard, Parl. Debs., 28 Feb. 1938, cols 850-51. Bevan noted apropos the volunteers that: "I have heard them called different things in different parts of the world"
[21] Steer to Philip Noel-Baker, 24 Jan. 193[8], Churchill College Cambridge, Noel-Baker papers, NBKR 9/64.
[22] Hansard, Parl. Debs., 14 June 1938, col. 170.
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[30] Michael Brecker, Nehru: a political biography, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1959), 259.
[31] Georgi Dimitroff, The United Front, (Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1938), 77.
[32] Pollitt, Unity against the National Government, (CPGB, London, 1935), 9.
[33] For historical pageantry see Mick Wallis, 'Heirs to the Pageant: Mass spectacle and the Popular Front' in Andy Croft (ed.), A weapon in the struggle: The cultural history of the Communist Party of Great Britain (Pluto Press, London, 1998), 48-67.
[34] New Leader, 3 March 1939.
[35] Sarah Britton, '"Come and see the Empire by the All Red Route!" Anti-imperialism and exhibitions in interwar Britain', History Workshop Journal, 69, 68-87, esp. 78-85.
[36] New Leader, 27 Jan. 1939. Guérin was a leader of the *Parti Socialiste Ouvrier et Paysan*, a left-wing breakaway from the French Socialist party.
[37] Quoted in James R. Hooker, Black revolutionary: George Padmore's Path from Communism to Pan-Africanism (Pall Mall Press, London, 1967), 31. For a different account see Fenner Brockway. Workers' Front, (Secker & Warburg, London, 1938), 162-3.
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[39] See in particular Pennybacker, Scottsboro to Munich, chapters 1 and 4.
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[44] Emile Burns, Abyssinia and Italy, (Gollancz, London, 1935). 182-3.
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[52] New Leader, 5 June 1936.
[53] See Joseph Fronczak, 'Local people's global politics: A transnational history of the Hands off Ethiopia movement of 1935', Diplomatic History, 2014, for a valuable – if rather overstated - contribution.
[54] Although there were major political disagreements on the Republican side, the debate was principally about the nature of the Republic and its appropriate strategy rather than the nature of its opponents.
[55] Left News, December 1937, 595. See also Attlee, Labour Party in perspective, 232.
[56] Left News, May 1939, 1257.
[57] G.T. Garratt, Mussolini's Roman Empire, (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1938), 183. The battle of the Jarama marked the first appearance of the British Battalion of the International Brigades. The British diplomat Geoffrey Thompson made a similar point in his memoirs: the International Brigaders were 'ironically enough, fighting for British imperial interests in the Mediterranean' (Front-line diplomat, Hutchinson, London, 1959), 120.
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[74] New Leader, 20 May 1938.
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[84] As Orwell wrote in July 1939: 'One threat to the Suez Canal, and "anti-fascism" and "defence of British interests" are discovered to be identical' (CEJL Vol 1, 434).
[85] Orwell, CEJL, Vol. 1, 590-91.
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