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The Offspring of Vainglory and Violence. The Labour party and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-1936

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«The Offspring of Vainglory and Violence»



The Labour Party and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-1936

Giulio Fugazzotto

Abstract

This article is concerned with the reactions of the Labour party to the Italo-Ethiopian dispute and war by considering three different issues: in the first place, it focuses on the impact of the event on Party's line and leadership as well as on its position towards the League of Nations. The main argument is that the conflict significantly contributed to a shift away from the old pacifist leadership and line towards a more moderate and pro-League one. Secondly, the article stresses the influence of the crisis in the development of an anti-fascist conscience within the Party, which – it is argued – was also supported by the connections established with Italian anti-fascists and exiled as well as by the increasing Nazi threat. Thirdly, it explores the emergence of colonial and imperial issues as well as Labour's reform proposals in these field, characterised by a strong ambiguity and a certain racist streak.

Keywords: Labour party – Italo-Ethiopian War – Fascism.

As a belated colonial expedition and the first conflict undertaken by a fascist power, the Italo-Ethiopian war (1935-1936) had a great impact on the public opinion all over the world. Particularly, as the pioneering (though outdated) research of Daniel Waley demonstrates¹, in Great Britain the war stimulated great debates around the application of sanctions in order to discourage the outbreak of a new global conflict. This article aims to highlight the impact that the Italo-Ethiopian war (1935-1936) had on the British Labour party.

Although not much scholarship has been devoted to this topic, the importance of the Italo-Ethiopian war in the history of Labour party has been recognised by different perspectives. According to the historian Ben Pimlott, the discussions about

¹ D. Waley, *British Public Opinion and the Abyssinian War 1935-6*, London, Maurice Temple Smith, 1975.

the Italo-Ethiopian war increased the fracture within the British left as a whole and fastened the decline of pacifism within the party. Furthermore, whether the debates in the Margate and Brighton conferences favoured a shift towards a defencist line, the 1935 general election marked a definitive generational shift². Other scholars such as Swift and Ceadel, instead, tend to underestimate the centrality of the Italo-Ethiopian war in the decline of pacifism, seen as a process begun in 1934 – when the party formally rejected Christian pacifism – and only concluded with the general elections⁵. Although a deep revision of Labour's foreign policy was certainly boosted, according to Worley, by the eruption of the Italo-Ethiopian crisis, he identifies it as part of a wider crisis begun in the years of the second Labour minority government (1929-1931), following the economic crisis⁴.

Finally, Coen and Flinn, on the heels of Ceadel's works, argue that the Italo-Ethiopian war determined an irreversible fracture between the three main trends within the labour movement and the Labour party itself: the defencists, supporters of the need for collective security to prevent international conflicts; the pacifists, who refused the use of force under any circumstances; and the «pacifists», who considered the war as a last resort⁵. In their view, the Brighton conference accelerated the party's shift towards defencism and marked a victory over the anti-imperialist as well as over pacifist opposition⁶.

This article proposes an analysis of the impact of the Italo-Ethiopian war over the party along three different dimensions. First, whether the conflict and the conferences of Margate and Brighton, as Pimlott remarks, determined a political shift, they also significantly favoured a generational change within the party leadership: in the precarious global context of the Thirties, which was characterised by the weak reaction of the League of Nations towards the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, the rise of Nazism in Germany and the expansionist projects of fascist Italy, the old labour pacifist leadership's position became unbearable. When Italy openly planned military operations to invade

² B. Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s*, Cambridge-London-New York-Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 1977.

⁵ J. Swift, *Labour in Crisis. Clement Attlee and the Labour Opposition, 1931-40*, London, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2018; M. Ceadel, *The First Communist «Peace Society»: The British Anti-War Movement, 1932-1935*, «Twentieth Century British History», 1990, 1.

⁴ M. Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate. A History of the British Labour party Between the Wars*, London-New York, I.B. Tauris, 2005.

⁵ A. Flinn, G. Cohen, *The Abyssinian Crisis, British Labour and the Fracturing of the Anti-War Movement*, «Socialist history», 2005. Martin Ceadel also identifies three historical strands within pacifism: the socialists, who supported the need for workers' «war resistance» throughout the general strike; the radicals, who although accepted the economic irrationality of war, yet recognised the existence of interests (international financiers, «jingo» press, ...) which rationally overlooked this fact; the liberal internationalists, who identified the reduction of the sovereignty of the states through the transfer of certain powers to federal or confederal institutions as key to reaching harmony between nations. See M. Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain, 1914-1945. The Defining of a Faith*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980, p. 5.

⁶ A. Flinn, G. Cohen, *The Abyssinian Crisis*, cit., p. 2.

Abyssinia, the majority of the party agreed with the necessity of undertaking economic and, if necessary, military sanctions as provided for by the covenant of the League of Nations. Thus, Lansbury, the pacifists – who refused the adoption of sanctions – and the anti-imperialist «pacifists», were defeated at the Brighton conference of October 1935. However, not only – as Coen and Flinn have pointed out – the Brighton conference marked the decline of the pacifist leadership and the «pacifists», but it marked the rise of a new generation of more pragmatic, realist leaders who *de facto* took control of the Labour party. Thus, November general election, which Pimlott identifies as a generational watershed, only established what the debates about the Italo-Ethiopian War at the Brighton conference and, broadly, the party's slow though progressive detachment from pacifism since the rise of Nazism had already been highlighted.

Second, the emergence of fascism in Europe and, above all, the Italo-Ethiopian dispute and war, boosted the debate about anti-fascist unity within the British left. Although, as Copsey's research demonstrates, Labour leadership was quite cold towards grass-roots opposition against to British fascism⁷ and the party steadily refused the proposals of united front from the Communist party, the contacts with the Italian socialists stimulated the emergence of a proper anti-fascist discourse. Besides the presence of different positions, anti-fascism increasingly became part of Labour's identity, as well as the perceived necessity to find a common ground for all democratic and progressive forces.

Thirdly, Italy's imperial «dream» and colonial ambitions, as well as Germany's demands for the return of her former African possessions, renewed discussions about imperialism and colonies within the Labour party. The steady opposition to Italian expedition, indeed, was counter-balanced by the attempt to appease the fascist powers through proposals of redistribution of colonies and, more often, through the involvement of Italian and German officers in the administration of the mandated territories. Whether on one side these discussions constituted an important moment for the development of project of imperial reforms, on the other side they brought to the surface all party's ambiguities not only about colonialism, but also about racial issues. As the leading party of an imperial power's working-class, the Labour found itself in a contradictory position: being the interest of British workers Labour leaders' main concern, the possibility to appease the fascist powers at the expense of colonial population and working-class was a solution widely accepted. Furthermore, this parochial attitude was supported by a paternalist approach and a feeling of superiority towards colonial subjects.

Through the analysis of the party press and papers, I attempt to outline a political history of Labour's foreign and colonial policy: in particular, the focus is on the party

⁷ N. Copsey, A. Olechnowicz (eds.), *Varieties of Anti-Fascism. Britain in the Inter-War Period*, London, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2010.

leadership, the conferences, the relationships with Italian socialist leaders and exiles and the public interventions about colonial issues. The identification of this threefold impact of the Italo-Ethiopian war over the Labour party, through the intersection of the William Gillies's papers with the «Daily Herald», constitutes the main contribution of this article. More broadly, I attempt to connect and integrate Labour political history with research issues raised by colonial and postcolonial studies, particularly by authors such as Howe, Gupta and Bush⁸.

In the first section, I outline how the beginning of the Italo-Ethiopian crisis, along with the Peace ballot, brought the Labour party towards the support of a «sanctionist» line. Through the analysis of the party conferences in Margate and Brighton, the reaction to the Hoare-Laval Plan and the pressure for oil sanctions against Italy, I show how the conflict contributed to the establishment of a more moderate Labour leadership.

The second section is devoted to the emergence of anti-fascism within the party: the correspondence of Labour's international secretary William Gillies with Pietro Nenni and Carlo Rosselli, along with articles appeared on the party press, are the key references to highlight the importance of the contacts between Labour and Italian anti-fascists before and throughout the conflict in the development of an opposition to Italian fascism.

In the third and last section, I analyse Labour's colonial policy: the interventions of Labour leaders such as George Lansbury – who proposed the redistribution of colonial territories – Francis Williams – a strong supporter of the mandate system – H.N. Brailsford and Ernest Bevin reported on the «Daily Herald», along with the colonial program expressed in the pamphlet *The Colonial Empire*, are the sources on which I rely in order to understand the tensions caused by the Italo-Ethiopian War.

The League of Nations, sanctions and war

In December 1934, a frontier incident at Wal Wal marked the beginning of the Italo-Ethiopian crisis. Both the States appealed to the League of Nations in order to resolve the dispute and determine who bore the responsibility for the aggression. However, the increasing presence of troops in the Italian colonies of Eritrea and Somalia soon raised doubts about Italy's imperial ambitions in Ethiopia. As Mussolini had repeatedly declared, Italy was no longer willing to be the last of the great powers, the little nation betrayed by the rich empires at the end of the First world war: now

⁸ S. Howe, *Anticolonialism in British Politics: The Left and the End of Empire 1918-1964*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995; P.S. Gupta, *Imperialism and the British Labour Movement, 1914-1964*, London, Macmillan, 1975; B. Bush, *Imperialism, Race and Resistance. Africa and Britain 1919-1945*, London-New York, Routledge, 1999. These authors has analysed, from different perspectives, the contradictions within the labour movements towards the colonies and colonial working-class.

she was in search of her position within the club of the great imperial powers and determined to take what she deserved⁹.

The Italo-Ethiopian dispute had a great echo in the British public opinion and came to be perceived as a test bench for the effectiveness of the League of Nations as a mechanism able to guarantee collective security. Meanwhile, the pacifist organisation League of Nations union, led by Sir Robert Cecil, launched the Peace ballot, a questionnaire designed to demonstrate that the British people agreed with the government's expressed wish to make the support of the League of Nations one of the main points of its foreign policy and to influence the peace movements in other countries. The crucial question was the fifth: «Do you consider that, if a nation insists on attacking another, the other nations should combine to compel it to stop by (a) Economic and non-military measures? (b) If necessary, military measures?»¹⁰. The Peace ballot was an extraordinary success: about eleven and half million people answered the questionnaire, a figure that corresponded to more than half of the total number of the votes cast in the 1935 general election. Over 90% of respondents answered positively to all the questions besides the most problematic 5(b), to which however only the 20% answered negatively¹¹.

As for the British political landscape, the Labour party was arguably the most involved in the results of the Peace ballot¹². It had strongly endorsed the ballot and the Tories' lack of enthusiasm towards the campaign had transformed the results in electoral issues: as Swift has pointed out, the Labour thus increasingly presented itself as the party of the League of Nations and collective security¹³.

The Peace ballot and the parallel outbreak of the Ethiopian crisis brought to the surface a widespread pro-League feeling along with a general trust in collective security: economic and, if necessary, military sanctions against the aggressor of a state member of the League, as provided for in the 16th article of the covenant, were considered as absolute legitimate means. In this context, the already strong support for collective security expressed in various forms by several members of the Labour

⁹ N. Labanca, *La Guerra d'Etiopia*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2015, pp. 28-37. About the Italo-Ethiopian war and Mussolini's imperialism, see also the classic research by A. Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale. La conquista dell'Impero*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1979, the works by G.W. Bear, *La Guerra Italo-Etiopica e la crisi dell'equilibrio europeo*, Bari, Laterza, 1970, and Id., *Test Case. Italy, Ethiopia, and the League of Nations*, Stanford, Hoover Institution Press, 1976, and the more recent G. Rochat, *Le guerre italiane 1935-1943*, Torino, Einaudi, 2008.

¹⁰ D. Waley, *British Public Opinion*, cit., p. 19; a remarkable contribution about the Peace ballot is also M. Ceadel, *The First British Referendum: The Peace ballot, 1934-5*, «The English Historical Review», 1980, 95.

¹¹ D. Waley, *British Public Opinion*, cit., p. 20.

¹² G. Procacci, *Il socialismo internazionale e la Guerra d'Etiopia*, Roma, Editori Riuniti, p. 65.

¹³ J. Swift, *Labour in Crisis*, cit., pp. 75-76. For a better understanding of Labour's foreign policy in these years see R. Vickers, *The Labour party and the world, vol. 1. The evolution of Labour's foreign policy, 1900-51*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2003 and P. Corthorn, *In the Shadow of the Dictators: The British Left in the 1930s*, London-New York, Tauris Academic Studies, 2006.

party – such as Attlee and Bevin – came to be a central, though controversial, issue of its policy. A memorandum published at the end of July by the «Advisory committee on international questions» about the Italo-Ethiopian dispute, which was intended to be in private circulation among the party's candidates, summed up the background of the dispute and considered its resolution as a «vital test for the League of Nations» as well as a British responsibility, as «geography has placed the decisive power in her hand». The passage of Italian troops or supplies through the Suez canal, indeed, could not be undertaken without the British navy go-ahead¹⁴.

This statement left few doubts about the positions of the Advisory committee: Italy must be restrained in her expansionist plans, even at the point of undertaking a naval blockade. A free hand to Mussolini would have resulted in the mistrust towards the League of Nations and, eventually, in greater danger of war. However, the seventh point of the memorandum was particularly interesting. Although it dealt with the accusations of «bloody-minded pacifism» of the «diehards in all countries», it arguably attempted to reassure the Lansbury-led party's internal absolute pacifist christian minority.

In this particular case the risk of war involved in upholding the covenant is still extremely small. Mussolini has never yet dared to stand against Great Britain, and it is extremely unlikely that he would do so to-day. In any case it is impossible to conceive any application of the covenant in which the risk of the loss of British life would be so small. The Navy would be able to exert its power almost bloodlessly¹⁵.

Nevertheless, the Labour party's position on the issue of sanctions was not completely clear even at the end of the summer 1935, on the eve of Italian aggression. Not only, as Procacci reminds, this memorandum was never published¹⁶, but William Gillies, secretary of the Labour's international department, explicitly warned Philip Noel-Baker – former member of the British delegation to the assembly of the League of Nations and assistant to the chairman of the World Disarmament Conference Arthur Henderson¹⁷ – to avoid any reference to naval sanctions and the closure of the Suez Canal during a meeting with the Sfió and the CGT in Paris at Magic City. Gillies justifies his statement by maintaining the existence of a widespread opposition among the French public opinion to any naval sanctions. Curiously, however, Noel-

¹⁴ Labour party Archives, William Gillies Papers [hereafter WG], *Italian – Abyssinian Conflict 1935-1938*, 356, 3.

¹⁵ WG, *Italian – Abyssinian Conflict 1935-1938*, 356, 5.

¹⁶ G. Procacci, *Il socialismo internazionale*, cit., p. 67.

¹⁷ L. Lloyd, *Philip Noel-Baker and Peace Through Law*, in D. Long, P. Wilson (eds.), *Thinkers of the Twenty Years' Crisis. Inter-War Idealism Reassessed*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996, pp. 25-57. Noel Baker was a distinguished expert in international law and one of the strongest supporters of the League of Nations within the Labour party.

Baker went to Paris as a substitute for Lansbury, who would have doubtfully accepted a proposal of naval blockade on his behalf¹⁸. Whether this prudence was due to the French situation, to a personal matter or, more probably, to a still unsecure position of the party is not an easy task to solve. In any case, on 3 September, the same day of the meeting at Magic City, the Trade Union Congress (TUC) conference at Margate expressed an unequivocal line of the labour movement, which the coming annual Labour party conference in Brighton could hardly ignore.

On the eve of the Brighton conference the Labour party was deeply divided on the attitude towards the Italo-Ethiopian dispute and specifically on the question of sanctions. On 3 September the «Daily Herald», the paper of the trade unions, published a statement by William Kean, president of the TUC, at Margate: he believed that economic and financial sanctions, provided for in the article 16 of the covenant, would suffice to restrain Italy's aggression. These involved an embargo on the supply of essential raw materials and the refusal of financial help in any shape or form¹⁹. Two days later a declaration approved by the General council of the Trade union congress, the executive of the National labour party and the Executive of the parliamentary Labour party was ratified by the TUC and marked a clear resolution in favour of pacifism under the head of the League and the covenant. The congress, thus, «united and determined in its opposition to the policy of Imperialist aggression» called «the British government in co-operation with other nations represented at the Council and Assembly of the League to use all necessary measures provided by the covenant to prevent Italy's unjust and rapacious attack upon the territory of a fellow member of the League. The congress», stressing this point, pledged «its firm support of any action consistent with the principles and status of the League to restrain the Italian government and to uphold the authority of the League in enforcing peace»²⁰. The statement was clear enough in his absolute commitment to the League of Nations even, if necessary, to resort to the use of force. Although the threat of a military intervention was an *extrema ratio*, the mere fact that it was accepted as a possibility deeply disappointed the christian pacifists in the party. The Labour press began to circulate rumours about Lansbury's resignation from the leadership and Stafford Cripps, the leader of the Labour affiliated left-wing Socialist league, pronounced highly critical words about the League of Nations²¹.

Lansbury, who found himself increasingly isolated from the majority of the party, recognised his embarrassing position in a declaration delivered to the «Daily Herald»: «It may be very well», he confessed, «that now that things have reached their pres-

¹⁸ WG, *Italian – Abyssinian Conflict 1935-1938*, 355, Gillies to Noel-Baker, 30 August 1935.

¹⁹ «Daily Herald», 3 September 1935.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, 5 September 1935.

²¹ *Ibidem*, 9 September, 17 September 1935.

ent stage my colleagues and myself may feel it is imperative that they should have someone as leader who will speak for them with conviction on this subject»²². On the other side, Sir Stafford Cripps refused to subscribe to the faith of his fellow Labour colleagues on the League of Nations on very different grounds. He believed, along with a left-wing minority within the party, that the League was nothing more than a forum of imperialist nations hypocritically united by the covenant, committed only to satisfy their self-interest and to exploit their subjects' resources²³. On 19 September, two weeks before the beginning of the Brighton conference, Cripps and Lansbury resigned from the National executive committee. Latter's resignation, however, was refused on the grounds that the matter of leadership lay in the PLP's jurisdiction, while as regards to the Nec, it saw no reason to accept his resignation²⁴.

In Brighton, the discussion about the Italo-Ethiopian question started on 1 October in the morning and lasted until the following day²⁵. The Brighton conference was a watershed moment, which sanctioned the final defeat of the Christian pacifism as well as of the anti-imperialist left within the party. George Lansbury, who had previously shown his willingness to resign, was celebrated with encouraging cheers and «For He's a Jolly Good Fellow» was sung by his fellow comrades. When he rose to speak, he reiterated his absolute opposition to any form of resolution by force: «They that take up the sword shall perish by the sword»²⁶, eloquently declared. «War», he said, «became more bestial and more sickening every day», and he could not think that «anybody would believe that the Christ they worshipped, or the saints whose memories they adored, would be found pouring bombs or poison-gas on women, children and men»²⁷. Lansbury's speech, deeply rooted in a religious framework, appealed to the Christian feelings and the authority of the Scriptures.

Able to understand the personal appeal on which Lansbury attempted to build support for his position, the general secretary of the highly influential Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) Ernest Bevin said: «When George Lansbury says what he has to-day in this conference, it is rather late in the day, and I hope you will not be influenced by sentiment or personal judgement»²⁸. He then started to support the duty of standing by the covenant and the League of Nations, the necessity to keep the pledges subscribed with other Nations of which Britain should be the leading power. Then he dropped the final bombshell which in few words dismissed Lansbury: «It has been quoted against us that those who take the sword shall perish by the

²² *Ibidem*, 9 September 1935.

²³ G. Procacci, *Il socialismo internazionale*, cit., p. 141.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 139.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 140.

²⁶ «Daily Herald», 2 October 1935.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

sword. Mussolini has taken the sword and we stand by the Scripture, and say he shall perish by economic sanctions»²⁹. Besides the immediate impact on the conference, Bevin's speech was a key moment in the shift of Labour foreign policy towards the support of a «defencist» line, whose main expression would be the support of national government rearmament in 1937³⁰.

However, there was another minority position which was wiped out by the Brighton conference: the anti-imperialist Socialist league led by the barrister Sir Stafford Cripps. He started by recalling the excuses which supported rearmament at the eve of the First world war: «throughout the history, not only of British but of every Imperialism, there have always been fine and patriotic excuses for acts full of useless tragedy and suffering for the workers»³¹. Then he went on with the classic Leninist argument which saw in the League of Nations nothing more than a tool of the capitalist nations: «all of us know in our hearts that however fine the phrases used as to the support of the covenant of the League, the great driving force behind our government [...] is and must be the urgent necessities of the capitalist economic system itself»³². According to Cripps, the application of economic sanctions by the League of Nations implied the existence of a state of war, whereas the workers must act by themselves through the application of «working class sanctions», that is the boycott and the refusal to handle materials for Italy³³.

The final vote signed an overwhelming victory for the line of collective security and sanctions, with 2,168,000 votes to 102,000. The «Daily Herald» cheered this success and defined it «a policy of world solidarity against war»³⁴. More broadly, the conference of Brighton marked the beginning of a new Labour policy which on the one side broke with the past of the first generation of Labour leaders and, on the other side, increasingly isolated the left-wing areas and looked at a more moderate approach both in home affairs and in foreign policy.

On 3 October, when the Brighton conference had not yet closed, Italian troops invaded Ethiopia. British public opinion, as it was possible to foresee by the outcome of the Peace ballot, largely supported the Ethiopian cause and a number of pro-League initiatives and committees flourished throughout Great Britain. In the cinemas, people cheered the images of the emperor Hailé Selassié shown in the newsreels, while in Cardiff dock workers took initiative and refused to charge Italian boats³⁵. More broadly, it became clear that the Ethiopian war could be a crucial test to demonstrate the effectiveness of economic sanctions against an aggressor.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ A. Flinn, G. Cohen, *The Abyssinian Crisis*, cit., pp. 16-17; B. Pimlott, *Labour and the Left*, cit., p. 4.

³¹ «Daily Herald», 2 October 1935.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, 3 October 1935.

³⁵ G. Procacci, *Il socialismo internazionale*, cit., p. 146.

A powerful speech delivered at Geneva by the British Foreign Secretary Sir Samuel Hoare – where he declared that Britain stood for the entire maintenance of the covenant, particularly for resolute collective resistance to the acts of aggression – increased the popular support for the sanctionist line⁵⁶ along with the trust in the national government, overnight converted to the League cause⁵⁷. Although it had not officially been called yet, indeed, the general election was close and the national government had quickly understood the necessity to openly support the League of Nations in order to rally popular consent⁵⁸. Thus, the government seized the opportunity to put an already divided Labour in trouble on a ground where it had traditionally been strong. Meanwhile, the Labour party was struggling to recover from the earthquake of Brighton and to face an uncertain change of leadership. Lansbury's position was now untenable and a new group of Labour leaders, notably Bevin, Morrison, Citrine and Dalton pressed for implementing the party line sanctioned by the conference. However, splits within the Labour party lasted far beyond Brighton and the choice of the new leader partly reflected the willingness to overcome them⁵⁹.

On 8 October the «Daily Herald» announced Lansbury's resignation as leader of the Labour party⁴⁰. It followed interim appointment of one and a half months entrusted to Clement Attlee. While many considered him a rather mediocre figure – in contrast to Greenwood, Attlee's contestant for the leadership role, who could rely on the support of the powerful TGWU –, both Attlee's great media exposure throughout the election campaign and many MPs' loyalty to Lansbury (strongly opposed by the TGWU) favoured his election as leader of the party by the PLP on 26 November⁴¹. His strong political realism and his several pro-League speeches, let alone the one delivered at the Brighton conference, made him a suitable leader for the present and the coming hard times. Just few days after his appointment, he eloquently expressed his position about the policy of collective security in an article for the «Daily Herald»: he argued that «sanctions are most effective when they are known to be in the background, just as in community the police force is most effective when it does not have to be called in. When, however, the aggressor challenges the law, it must be vindicated or the reign of Law is at end»⁴². Nevertheless, Attlee did not support the unilateral measures of rearmament proposed by the national government; every increase of armed forces must be carried out exclusively through the League of Nations. However, he went on, «We believe that economic sanctions will be sufficient if applied by all the League

⁵⁶ D. Waley, *British Public Opinion*, cit., pp. 30-31.

⁵⁷ J. Swift, *Labour in Crisis*, cit., p. 98.

⁵⁸ T. Stannage, *Baldwin thwarts the opposition. The British general election of 1935*, London, Croom Helm, 1980, p. 124.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 88.

⁴⁰ «Daily Herald», 8 October 1935.

⁴¹ B. Pimlott, *Labour and the Left*, cit., pp. 73-74.

⁴² *Ibidem*, 9 October 1935.

members to bring home to Mussolini that force does not pay»⁴⁵. It was, after all, a position which saw the use of force more as a form of détente rather than an actual means to settle disputes. In any case, although truly representative of the majority of the Labour party, these arguments had to face a deep contradiction sharpened by the worsening international situation.

Since 1931, when the Japanese occupied Manchuria and provoked an international crisis, Attlee had attempted to support a policy which incorporated the need for disarmament into the call for sanctions, by thinking that an international force could enforce peace. Basically, he believed that the League of Nations, under the leadership of Great Britain, should be strengthened through the creation of an international armed force. An effective League force would have received the endorsement of the United States and would have prevented any aggressive action against a member state⁴⁴. However, Attlee built his discourse on an entirely tautological argument: the League would have become effective after it had been made effective. Furthermore, he overestimated Britain's possibility to influence the United States as well as her ability to play a leading role in the world stage⁴⁵. Moreover, although he claimed the necessity to establish an international armed force, he went on to oppose in Parliament the defence estimates voted by the national government. Attlee's line was probably an attempt to mediate between the rearmament policy supported by Bevin, Citrine and Dalton – who since TUC meeting on May 1935 had opposed the vacillating Labour's foreign policy in the face of Nazism along with Mussolini's expansionist designs –⁴⁶, the pacifists and the left fringes, opposed both to national rearmament and the creation of an international force under the head of the League.

The last months of 1935 saw a climax in the political debate around the Italo-Ethiopian war which reached the peak in December, when as a result of a leak the Hoare-Laval pact became public: after meetings and conversations in Paris, Sir Samuel Hoare and the French Prime minister Laval had agreed upon a plan which provided the partition of Ethiopia and the passage of about two-thirds of its territory under the Italian control⁴⁷. The news shocked European public opinion and a widespread protest involved communists, socialists as well as liberals and conservatives. The labour movement raised strong protests against a plan which was seen as a «great betrayal» of the Ethiopian people and the League of Nations. Many Labour leaders seized the opportunity to claim the insincerity of the national government's pro-League policy, which was merely an opportunistic manoeuvre to secure the success in November general election: «We said during the election, and these events prove it to have been

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, 11 October 1935.

⁴⁴ J. Swift, *Labour in Crisis*, cit., pp. 62-63.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶ R. Vickers, *The Labour party and the world*, vol. 1, cit., p. 115.

⁴⁷ G. Procacci, *Il socialismo internazionale*, cit., p. 207.

true», Herbert Morrison polemically declared, «that the Tory government is no real friend of the League of Nations»⁴⁸.

On 18 December, ten days after the publication of the terms of the agreement, the National Council of Labour issued a strong condemnation of the peace terms, where the party's position was expressed as follows:

The Council repudiates these proposals as a gross violation of the covenant of the League of Nations and as a betrayal of the Abyssinian people. Whilst the National Council of Labour earnestly desires to see the war in Abyssinia brought to an end, it unhesitatingly condemns any form of settlement which awards territory and political and economic advantages to the aggressor at the expense of the victim⁴⁹.

Labour attempted to seize the opportunity to discredit the national government, which was actually seriously shaken for about nine days⁵⁰. The party asked for the withdrawal of the proposal and to develop a progressive policy of sanctions until peace was restored under the terms of the covenant⁵¹. The great protests forced Hoare to resign, thus Mussolini refused the terms of the agreement and declared his willingness to carry out the war until the complete victory. Although the Hoare-Laval agreement never came to an end, it further undermined the already weak League's credibility. The two powers supposed to be the leading nations within the League and the main defenders of the covenant had preferred to sacrifice a state member of the League rather than to risk the loss of Mussolini's friendship.

In the months after the Hoare-Laval pact, the debate on sanctions continued vigorously⁵². A Committee of eighteen had been entrusted to draw the conclusions about the application of sanctions against Italy: on 19 October, it had established four measures, which involved embargo on Italian exports and on certain war-related materials – the most of which went to Italy from League's nations – along with the prohibition of loans to Italy and measures of mutual support in order to face the states' economic losses caused by sanctions⁵³. However, no references had been made to military sanctions nor to the ban on oil export⁵⁴.

Labour leaders raised reiterated appeals to the national government to enforce its authority within the League of Nations, but the application of oil sanctions, then endorsed «in principle» by the League, had to face a constant postponement. The break of oil supply to Italian army would have slowed, if not stopped, the operations

⁴⁸ «Daily Herald», 16 December 1935.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, 18 December 1935.

⁵⁰ D. Waley, *British Public Opinion*, cit., p. 48.

⁵¹ «Daily Herald», 18 December 1935.

⁵² D. Waley, *British Public Opinion*, cit., p. 71.

⁵³ G.W. Baer, *Test Case*, cit., p. 64.

⁵⁴ G. Procacci, *Il socialismo internazionale*, cit., p. 148.

in Ethiopia and forced Mussolini to revise his plans with unpredictable consequences for the international situation. An editorial published by the Daily Herald in the early days of 1936, after the air bombing against the Swedish Red Cross station at Dolo, stated the League's moral obligation to approve oil sanctions⁵⁵. Few days later, on 16 January, a joint meeting of the Bureau of the Labour and socialist international (LSI) and the International federation of the trade unions (IFTU), where the Labour party was represented respectively by Gillies and Citrine, issued a statement calling «upon the League of Nations to apply with their full force the sanctions provided for in the covenant». Particularly, it called «for the immediate application of the embargo upon oil, coal, iron and steel»⁵⁶.

However, no League member was really ready to take an initiative which involved, at least in the British and Soviet case, the risk of significant economic losses. The connection between the British economic self-interest and the continuous delay in the approval of oil sanctions was the bulk of a harsh parliamentary intervention by Hugh Dalton concerning Italian air bombing and massacres: «It is a great humiliation for this country that a number of these aeroplanes were flying on British oil [...]. We have a special responsibility, for without it the Italian victory could not have been accomplished»⁵⁷. Hence, since the government had a share in the Anglo-Iranian Oil Co., it was responsible for the crime committed against the Ethiopian people⁵⁸. Although Dalton's declarations simplified a little a matter which involved several complicated entanglements of international diplomacy, certainly the British representatives had refrained to go through with the question of sanctions, especially when faced with French procrastination and Soviet disinterest⁵⁹.

When Italy finally defeated Ethiopia and Mussolini announced the birth of the Italian empire on 5 May, no oil sanctions had been undertaken. Many, especially among conservatives, began to claim the necessity to take off sanctions and to prioritize the normalisation of the relationship with Italy, whose rapprochement to Germany was to be prevented by any means. The Labour party refused to find a compromise with Italy: sanctions had to be kept and no fascist conquests could be recognised. However, it was not just a matter of League's efficiency, but also and foremost a question of world peace. Italy's victory and the failure in the imposition of oil sanctions marked a defeat for the League and a failure of the western democracies, which could further encourage German militarism⁶⁰. «Any member of the League who hopes that fascist Italy, with its cynicism and brutality, may be a useful ally in its own distress, and per-

⁵⁵ «Daily Herald», 3 January 1936.

⁵⁶ WG, *Italian – Abyssinian Conflict 1935-1938*, 384 ii.

⁵⁷ «Daily Herald», 7 May 1936.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁹ G. Procacci, *Il socialismo internazionale*, cit., pp. 220-221.

⁶⁰ «Daily Herald», 11 May 1936.

mits Italy to collect the spoils of war in Africa», Labour's peace statement stated, «will endanger its own freedom and independence»⁶¹. However, the national government decided to lift every form of boycott at the end of June.

Anti-fascism: contrasting approaches

In one of the most important works about the impact of the Italo-Ethiopian war on European socialism, *Il socialismo internazionale e la guerra d'Etiopia*, Giuliano Procacci argues that the outbreak of the crisis marked the rise of an anti-fascist public opinion⁶². Although it is right to point out that the vigorous rise of German Nazism and the creation of the British union of fascists (BUF) by the former Labour leader Sir Oswald Mosley were at the root of a widespread attention towards fascism and its dangers for European stability, the outbreak of the Italo-Ethiopian crisis certainly brought to the attention of the British opinion the nature of Italian fascism as never before. Even in the papers of the Labour party's international secretary, the correspondence about Italian fascism increased significantly from 1934 onwards, particularly throughout and after the Italo-Ethiopian conflict. The William Gillies papers are an interesting source to look into the Labour anti-fascist background, especially to understand how contact with Italian political refugees contributed to shaping an opposition to Italian fascism. Curiously, although the regime was well established by the 1920s, the early regular correspondence with Italian anti-fascists does not precede 1933, when Hitler seized power and worldwide attention began to focus on what some defined as the German variant of fascism. This could be partly explained by the many shifts in Labour foreign policy throughout the 1920s. Since Mussolini's seizure of power, indeed, many labourites had believed in the revolutionary nature of fascism, whose leader had been the director of the socialist paper *Avanti*. Only after the murder of the socialist deputy Giacomo Matteotti a growing opposition to the fascist regime began to spread among Labour ranks and leadership: at a Socialist conference in 1930, Labour foreign secretary Arthur Henderson even labelled Mussolini as an assassin⁶³. Nevertheless, the pro-British policy of the Italian Foreign Affairs Minister Dino Grandi in the years 1929-1932 favoured a rapprochement between the Labour government and fascist Italy, to the extent that Grandi supported Henderson's candidacy for the presidency of the World Disarmament Conference⁶⁴. However, the rise of Nazism and Italy's increasing imperial ambitions put an end to Labour's swings.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, 15 May 1936.

⁶² G. Procacci, *Il socialismo internazionale*, cit., p. 51.

⁶³ C. Keserich, *The British Labour Press and Italian Fascism, 1922-25*, «Journal of Contemporary History», 1975, 4, p. 579; H. James Burgwyn, *Italian Foreign Policy in the Interwar Period, 1928-1940*, Westport-London, Praeger, 1997, pp. 58-59.

⁶⁴ P. Nello, *Dino Grandi*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2003, p. 110.

On 10 March 1933, Pietro Nenni sent the Labour party an invitation to the congress of the Italian socialist party on April 16 and 17 in Marseilles. As to justify a long silence caused by political repression, the Italian secretary announced that the party had not abandoned the struggle and was pursuing its aims and propaganda through clandestine organisation in Italy, waiting for circumstances which could permit the renaissance of the socialist movement. Meanwhile, it was operating in exile and seeking for sympathy among sister parties⁶⁵. Gillies replied warmly and spent words of solidarity for the Italian comrades. However, the late reply and the lack of confirmation of Labour participation in the congress raised some concerns about the attitude towards Italian socialism. These are confirmed by Gillies' a letter, where he explicitly admits the presence of a general lack of interest towards the Italian situation, which could become an issue among the public opinion only because of the rise of the more powerful and fierce German Nazism⁶⁶. The timing of the letter arouses the suspicion whether the Labour party itself shared this disinterest. However, Hitler's seizure of power certainly encouraged a closer attention to fascism, increasingly conceived as a broad European phenomenon which threatened western democracies.

Some weeks later, a letter by the London section of the Lega italiana dei diritti dell'uomo, whose Honorary secretary was the anti-fascist Decio Anzani, precisely warned against the tendency «to blame only the nazi brand of Fascism» and to «present the Mussolini brand as something good and worth trying»⁶⁷. In annex, the Lega sent a pamphlet entitled *The Menace of Fascism*⁶⁸, whose distribution among the Labour Executive was recommended to the MP H.S. Lindsay by Gillies himself⁶⁹. The pamphlet – as well as highlighting that Italian fascism sentenced to life and death hundreds of political prisoners, replaced Socialists in official positions and repressed the unions well before German Nazism – reported the guiding principles of the fascist Militia, contained in the «Fascist Decalogue» published in the tenth anniversary of the foundation of the Militia itself. This document, according to the Lega, displayed the real nature of fascism, its inseparable connection with violence and militarism and the falsity of the myth of Italian prosperity, a mask to hide an enormous number of bankruptcies and the high rate of unemployment⁷⁰. Although the comparisons between fascism and Nazism are rather simplistic and respond to needs of political propaganda, the presence of information and data probably made this pamphlet a source of knowledge about fascism for many Labour MPs. Furthermore, the recep-

⁶⁵ WG, *Italian – Abyssinian Conflict 1935-1938*, 27ii, Nenni to Gillies, 10 March 1933.

⁶⁶ WG, *Italian – Abyssinian Conflict 1935-1938*, 28, Gillies to Nenni, 11 April 1933.

⁶⁷ WG, *Italian – Abyssinian Conflict 1935-1938*, 22i, Lega italiana dei diritti dell'uomo to Gillies, May 1933.

⁶⁸ WG, *Italian – Abyssinian Conflict 1935-1938*, 22ii, pamphlet *The Menace of Fascism*, issued by the Italian league for the rights of man, London Branch.

⁶⁹ WG, *Italian – Abyssinian Conflict 1935-1938*, 23, Gillies to H.S. Lindsay, 16 May 1933.

⁷⁰ WG, *Italian – Abyssinian Conflict 1935-1938*, 22ii, *The Menace of Fascism*, cit.

tion and circulation of this document seem to suggest an increased interest for the Italian dictatorship among Labour ranks.

Within less than a year, contact between the party and Italian anti-fascists became closer and regular. On 25 January 1934, Gillies wrote to the leader of *Giustizia e libertà*, Carlo Rosselli, to communicate the arrival in London of Giardina, who had come to him to find a publisher for *Mussolini, Diplomate* and *Marcia su Roma e dintorni* by Emilio Lussu. The Labour secretary then issued an interesting proposal: «I am thinking of creating an informal group of Magri, Salvatore and Giardina, for purposes of consultation and mutual assistance in anti-Fascist Italian propaganda»⁷¹. Magri was an anti-fascist journalist in exile, whereas Salvatore, the wrong spell for Max Salvadori, was an Italo-British member of *Giustizia e libertà*, brother-in-law of Emilio Lussu. It is not clear if this proposal ever materialized; however, it not only reveals a political and personal connection between Italian Socialism, *Giustizia e libertà*, and the Labour party, but also an active interest for Italian fascism and solidarity for Italian anti-fascists which could be barely found just a year before.

As Flinn and Cohen point out, the Ethiopian crisis was probably the first moment when the Labour party expressed clearly its anti-fascist line⁷². The relationship between Labour leaders and Italian anti-fascists as well as the nazi seizure of power in Germany had already shaped an anti-fascist feeling among the Labour ranks. However, before Mussolini's imperial adventure in Africa fascism had never represented an immediate threat for European and world peace: the interest in fascism lied in the corporate state, its ruthless political repression and the widespread stereotypes about the railways' efficiency. Now, fascist dynamism and the breaking of the covenant brought the regime at the centre of the international stage.

A joint resolution of the IFTU and Lsi issued on 31 July 1935 harshly criticised Italian fascism as the imperial expedition it was going to undertake could have «incalculable consequences» for «the peace of the world, and particularly of Europe»⁷³. Besides breaking the covenant and exposing peace to a general threat, «Italian fascism» was also «offering to the Italian people the doubtful glory of an African adventure as an escape from economic, financial, political and cultural decadence»⁷⁴. This latter statement, issued by the National council of Labour on July 24, clearly expressed the party's contempt for the fascist regime, which was trying to hide the failure of its so called «third way» behind an imperial façade. However, the most interesting document about Labour's attitude towards fascism in the early phase of the crisis is an article by «The

⁷¹ WG, *Italian – Abyssinian Conflict 1935-1938*, Gillies to Rosselli, 25 January 1934.

⁷² A. Flinn, G. Cohen, *The Abyssinian Crisis*, cit., p. 28.

⁷³ WG, *Italian – Abyssinian Conflict 1935-1938*, 340i, joint resolution of the Iftu and Lsi re. «The Italo-Abyssinian Conflict», *International Information*, 31 July 1935.

⁷⁴ WG, *Italian – Abyssinian Conflict 1935-1938*, statement issued by the National Council of Labour, 24 July 1935.

Labour Press Service», the journal issued by the Labour party press and publicity department. Fascism was not only despised for its unscrupulous international policy, which was endangering peace, but also for its aesthetics, culture and values:

Italian Fascism is taking its predestined course. The offspring of vainglory and violence, it has been nurtured on self-deception and self-glorification. For the conflict of ideals, interests and cultures on the field of politics, it has substituted a uniform pattern of thought, education and behaviour, with the army as the model of the State and a new Fascist Empire as the summit of political endeavour. The Army is the Nation and the Nation the Army⁷⁵.

Labour's anti-fascist convictions were beyond doubt and they were at least as strong as their faith in parliamentary democracy. The militarisation of society and the arrogance of a one-man tyranny were something unbearable for the moderate and democratic trade unionists as well as for the many christian pacifists within the party.

As for the question of sanctions and collective security the conferences of Margate and Brighton represented a crucial moment of confrontation between the different positions about fascism within the Labour party. On one side the majority, orientated towards the trade unionist line, while on the other the left-wing minority of the Socialist league. They both understood fascism as a degeneration of capitalism, forced to deny the political and economic liberties in order to survive in a moment of deep economic crisis. Basically, as among the communists and the majority of the left-wing movements at that time, an economic argument prevailed. After the publication of *Democracy versus Dictatorship*⁷⁶ in 1933, the Labour party specified its position about fascism in the 1934 program *For Socialism and Peace*: fascism was conceived as a useless solution for «economic and social troubles». Rather it would have increased them, along with a political repression characterised by the widespread resort to torture. In this sense, fascism was nothing more than «Capitalism in its worst and most brutal form»⁷⁷.

In his intervention at the Margate conference William Kean, president of the TUC, stated that fascist dictatorship was threatening mankind by covering its economic failure at home with an imperialist adventure abroad⁷⁸. This position highlights two aspects: in the first place, fascist imperialism was closely connected with the economic crisis; actually, this was not an original argument as it had been already expressed in «The Labour Press Service», and could be considered as a corollary of the Italian socialists' positions about fascist propaganda as a diversion for the regime's internal problems. On the other side, fascism appeared merely as an external threat,

⁷⁵ WG, *Italian – Abyssinian Conflict 1935-1938*, 344, *Italy and Abyssinia*, «The Labour Press Service», 7 August 1935.

⁷⁶ Labour party, *Democracy versus Dictatorship – British Labour's Call to the People*, London, Transport House, 1933.

⁷⁷ Labour party, *For Socialism and Peace*, London, Transport House, 1934, p. 7.

⁷⁸ «Daily Herald», 3 September 1935.

whereas no mention about a fascist problem in Great Britain was made. In other words, it was Italian fascism as a peculiar regime undertaking an expansionist policy (along with Nazi Germany) which was threatening world peace and, above all, the stability of democracy in Europe. Although fascism was considered, in principle, rooted in capitalism, and imperialism was deemed as a further consequence of the regime's search for internal stability, it was apparently out of the question that fascism could constitute at present an internal threat to Great Britain. However, there were members of the Labour party who did not consider fascism merely as a degeneration of the weak capitalist system of some countries, but as an actual form of imperialism⁷⁹.

At the conference of Brighton, Sir Stafford Cripps, spokesman of the Socialist League, strongly opposed the sanctionist position of the majority of the party as it had been shaping since the Margate meeting. «All of us know in our hearts», he declared, «that however fine the phrases used as to the support of the covenant of the League, the great driving force behind our government, overpowering all humanitarian or liberal sentiment, is and must be the urgent necessities of the capitalist economic system itself»⁸⁰. He then went on arguing that sanctions involved an inherent risk of war which was not worth taking for the working-class. The refusal of standing by the covenant lied in the conviction that «no League system can be a reality within Imperialism»⁸¹. Although it is not immediately clear and explicit, the Socialist League did not oppose the League of Nations because, as the tool of the satiated imperialist powers, it was not better than the fascist dictatorship of Mussolini, but because fascism and imperialism were qualitatively on the same ground: they were no more than two sides of the same coin. The argument thus resulted in an equation which refused to conceive the fascist threat merely as a foreign question, to consider as its British declination just the isolated BUF rallies throughout the country.

This theoretical conception was partly rooted in Cripps' belief that if fascism was a reactionary attempt to stabilize the existing system of class-relationship, the formation of the national government, although different in methods, was inspired exactly by the same purposes⁸². Measures such as the Sedition bill approved by the government in 1934, along with the widespread indifference towards fascist propaganda and initiatives demonstrated that the strong British democratic tradition was not a real détente towards fascism; rather, it could drive Great Britain to a different form of fascism. Furthermore, the very existence of the British empire signalled the presence of an «imperial-entrenched master-class» which would have been prepared to preserve in any way the dictatorship of property. Although few British left-wing intel-

⁷⁹ D. Blaazer, *The Popular Front and the Progressive Tradition: Socialists, Liberals and the Quest for Unity, 1884-1939*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 157.

⁸⁰ «Daily Herald», 2 October 1935.

⁸¹ *Ibidem*.

⁸² D. Blaazer, *The Popular Front and the Progressive Tradition*, cit., p. 155.

lectuals wrote about the actual exercise of power within the British colonies, much literature focused on the concept of imperialism, which constituted the ground for the theoretical arguments about fascism. Imperialism was considered as a global system of relationships between classes and nations characterised by economic policies and military postures ultimately typical of the fascist regimes, namely autarchy and aggressive expansionism⁸⁵. Probably the enforcement of the so called «imperial preference» by the Ottawa agreements⁸⁴ along with the ruthless repressions of the colonial unrests throughout the British empire, especially in India and the Caribbean, were not detached from these considerations. Fascism thus simply embodied, disguised in black-shirt, imperialism's worst elements expressed to an extreme degree⁸⁵.

Nevertheless, the majority of the Labour party was uncomfortable with this position and was decisively more inclined to conceive the League of Nations as the last bulwark against the advance of the fascist powers rather than a forum of imperialist nations linked by common interests not so far from those of Italy and Germany. According to the former cabinet minister H.B. Lees-Smith, Labour delegate at Brighton and future MP, «to say there was no substantial difference between the British government and those of Hitler and Mussolini was simply to put all realities aside»⁸⁶. The controversy lied in the choice «between ourselves and Fascism» – wondering if «ourselves» meant the Labour party, the working-class, the British nation or the democratic forces. «If you want to fight Fascism, Imperialism and Capitalism», he went on, «you have got to stop Mussolini now»⁸⁷. This argument expressed fairly well the pro-League feelings and their entanglement with the variety of anti-fascism dominant among the Labour moderates. Interestingly, since February 1936 the Labour party increased its anti-fascist propaganda precisely along these lines: fascism was a threat for Europe and a nightmare for the people living in Italy and Germany. Italy had been transformed in a land of terror and poverty, where life was far worse than under the worst of the national governments⁸⁸.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 155-157.

⁸⁴ After the abandonment of the Gold Standard in 1931, the pound lost 31% of its gold value within three months. In an attempt to circumscribe the collapse of the British economy, the national government established the system of imperial preference at the Ottawa conference, with the aim to secure greater colonial import from the British industries and, at the same time, to favour the export of colonial commodities to the motherland by allowing them in free of duty. Many within Labour ranks perceived the new protectionist policy as a further mean to exploit the subject races. On this topic see M. Havinden, D. Meredith, *Colonialism and Development. Britain and Its Tropical Colonies, 1850-1960*, London-New York, Routledge, 1993 and the pamphlet issued by the Labour party, *The Colonial Empire*, London, Transport House, 1933.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 159.

⁸⁶ «Daily Herald», 2 October 1935.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁸ Since February 1936, the «Daily Herald» published a series of reportages entitled *Europe Under the Terror*, which aimed the Labour reader to shape a detailed image of what fascism was and the danger it represented for democracy in Europe.

Many among the contemporaries, as Howe has noted, criticized the Labour party for its negligible interest in colonial issues in the years following the First world war. The Fabian intellectuals and the bulk of the parliamentary Labour party, it was argued, were mainly concerned with domestic policy; above all, the trade unionists showed a parochial attitude which oscillated between a complete lack of interest and a deep suspicion towards the «sweated labour» competition from the colonies⁸⁹. However, when the fascist powers started to claim their colonial share and Italy invaded Ethiopia, imperial issues became central. Labour's anti-protectionist positions and the support for spreading the mandate system increasingly integrated in a wide policy of colonial appeasement, which revealed the party's striking ambiguities towards the Empire and its subjects.

In the mid-1930s, a wide debate about colonial possessions aroused as a result of fascist and Nazi claims. Germany, as a consequence of her defeat, and Italy, because of the non-application of a clause of the treaty of London, had been deprived respectively of their colonies and of the possibility to enlarge their colonial possessions after the First world war. The economic crisis and the collapse of German and Italian finances revived their imperial revanchism. The fascist powers were convinced that the presence of a colonial empire would resolve their economic problems in terms of access to raw materials and over-population. France and Great Britain, with their immense imperial possessions, were seen as greedy powers responsible for the smaller nations' economic suffocation and due to their richness became commonly described even in the British public debate as the «satiated» powers or the «haves». On the other side, Italy and Germany, over-populated nations without or with few colonies, became known as the «have-nots»⁹⁰.

Although the fascist claims did not gather Labour's sympathy, within the party there was a widespread opposition to the Versailles settlement, held responsible for European tensions. Hence, since September 1935 the Labour press began to give voice to the positions already expressed in the pamphlet *The Colonial Empire* – where the protectionist policy endorsed by Ottawa agreements was harshly criticized – but in a changed and far more unstable international situation⁹¹. Even after his resignation, George Lansbury was among the most vocal Labour leaders who advocated for territorial concessions to the «have-nots». Under these pressures, the party organized a joint meeting of the imperial and international advisory committee «to consider the syllabus of a memorandum on the Demand for Colonial territories and equality of economic

⁸⁹ S. Howe, *Anticolonialism in British Politics*, cit., pp. 44; 77; 81.

⁹⁰ Labour party Archives, H.N. Brailsford Papers [hereafter HNB], *press cutting*, 1936-39, 58/20, «Reynolds News», 9 February 1936; G. Padmore, *Africa and world Peace*, London, Frank Cass, 1937, p. 4.

⁹¹ «Daily Herald», 3 September 1935.

opportunity in undeveloped regions of the earth»⁹². However, Howe points out, few believed that handing over African colonies to the fascist powers would resolve tensions in Europe and similar proposals remained far from being seriously considered⁹⁵.

Nevertheless, different and more moderate instances came from the Labour intelligentsia and were widely discussed in the papers. Francis Williams, the City editor of the «Daily Herald» and future public relation advisor of Attlee, issued a series of articles where he underlined a party program on colonial questions based on the reflections of the colonial expert Leonard Barnes (ironically, as the years went by, he became a staunch supporter of the colonies' complete independence⁹⁴). Among the several points, it was proposed to turn British colonies into mandated territories, where the Mandate commission should exert a closer supervision of the workings of the mandated powers. As regards non-imperial powers, they were called to share an active responsibility in the mandated territories, where they could find outlets for their working-class as well as wide markets for investments⁹⁵. The close control of the League on the movement of capital within these territories should guarantee the highest degree of commercial fairness and impartiality also for foreign investors and workers. Within a different framework, but inspired by similar concerns, the socialist leaguer H.N. Brailsford proposed the creation of «an international Civil Service for the League's Colonies, with a training college, at which students drawn from the whole membership of the League would learn together»⁹⁶. Hence, from the most moderate areas of the Labour party to the left-wing, there was on the one side a general support for a broader foreign participation into the economic and political administration of the mandated territories, while on the other there were widespread claims for their closer integration within the League system.

Besides the need to spread the mandate system, the Labour party also railed against the imperial «selfishness» in handling colonies' and mandates' raw materials, conceived as a highly dangerous threat to the world peace. Since the outbreak of the Italo-Ethiopian crisis, many Labour leaders publicly advocated for the revision of the Ottawa agreement in favour of an open-door policy which allowed a fairer sharing of raw materials⁹⁷. From the TUC meeting at Margate, George Lansbury delivered a communication to the joint conference of the Labour party and the Sfió in Paris, urging the importance to «send a message to Mussolini», where the parties, together with their respective governments, would express the readiness «to collaborate to the last with him in the smoothing out of all difficulties, and the finding for all races of the world of the possibility to enjoy the

⁹² P.S. Gupta, *Imperialism and the British Labour Movement*, cit., p. 238.

⁹⁵ S. Howe, *Anticolonialism in British Politics*, cit., pp. 106-107.

⁹⁴ B. Bush, *Imperialism, Race and Resistance*, cit., p. 256.

⁹⁵ «Daily Herald», 27 February 1936.

⁹⁶ HNB, *press cutting, 1936-39*, 58/20, «Reynolds News», 9 February 1936.

⁹⁷ «Daily Herald», 4, 12, 13 September 1935.

fruits of the earth and the results of human labour unfettered»⁹⁸. A week later, speaking in support of J. Dowie, a Labour candidate in Dumfries, the Labour leader delivered a speech inspired by highly religious and moralistic stances, where he reminded that Britain was the «greatest imperialist power in the world» and was now faced with «the same call which Christ gave to the rich young man». Hence, he went on:

We are given the opportunity to place our all on the altar of common service. We must be prepared to share the natural sources of wealth which are ours with the rest of mankind. We do not say that the task of equitably distributing raw materials, of sharing markets and territories will be an easy one. It is, however, the only road along which the world can travel to peace and security⁹⁹.

Although Lansbury's pacifist stands increasingly reflected the position of a minority of the party, the open-door policy and the establishment of an economic and colonial appeasement with the fascist powers was shared by virtually all the moderate labour movement. Speaking at a harvest celebration at Ixworth, just a week before the Brighton conference, Ernest Bevin, who would have fiercely attacked Lansbury's positions about sanctions, expressed opinions close to the old leader's in terms of access to raw materials. In his words, «neither this nor any other country could hold a monopoly of the raw materials of the world, and put other nations in cages and prevent them from using raw materials»¹⁰⁰. Similarly, the Labour MP Lord Strabolgi warned against economic nationalism and the closure of colonial markets namely represented by the Ottawa agreement. «The just way to meet the grievances of the non-colony-owning Powers», he declared addressing a conference of the League of Nations union in London, «was to allow complete freedom of trade and opportunity in colonies and mandated areas»¹⁰¹.

Although the Labour party firmly stood for the line of sanctions and harshly condemned fascist imperialism, the bulk of the party generally showed the inclination to appease the fascist powers through a broader participation to the mandate system and an easier access to the colonies' raw materials. This apparent contradiction reflects some inner concerns of the party's leadership and rank and file as well as a «subconscious streak of racial typology» which, as Gupta has pointed out, characterised Labour's attitude towards colonial subjects¹⁰².

First, the party had long since opposed the old-fashioned imperialism, which Italy and Germany embodied with their aggressive and jingoistic stance. The 19th century-

⁹⁸ *Ibidem*, 4 September 1935.

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*, 12 September 1935.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibidem*, 23 September 1935.

¹⁰¹ *Ibidem*, 20 February 1936.

¹⁰² P.S. Gupta, *Imperialism and the British Labour Movement*, cit., pp. 260-261.

style imperial aggression of Ethiopia was immediately perceived by the Labour opinion as a brutal and anachronistic operation, worthy of a violent and militaristic fascist regime. Besides the violation of the covenant of the League, what astonished public opinion most was the ruthless massacre of the population and, above all, the use of poison gas¹⁰³. Even before the outbreak of the war, an article appeared in «The Labour Press Service» admitted that «there has been a renaissance of old-fashioned imperialism in Italy»¹⁰⁴. As mentioned above, Labour party countered military repressions and the exploitation of colonial territories with projects of colonial reforms which could gradually bring the subjects towards the self-government. Hence, whether the opposition to the aggressive fascist imperialism is perfectly understandable in the light of Labour's progressive and developmentalist attitude towards the empire, the way of coming to terms with fascists in the colonial field, along with Labour's paternalism and inner feeling of cultural superiority, raises some concerns about the declared intention to keep into account the natives' desires and self-interest¹⁰⁵.

Arguably, the foreign participation into the mandates' administration and the open-door policy answered to necessities of *realpolitik*: they could be both a source of relief for the exhausted British finances as well as a means to appease the fascist colonial pretensions. However, how could the progressive and anti-fascist labourites believe that whatever Italian participation (Italy still being a member of the League of Nations) into the mandated territories could be accepted by the natives or actually constitute any source of political and cultural improvement towards self-government? Had not fascist leaders expressed their willingness and then brought the western civilisation in Ethiopia with the force of arms? Everybody fiercely protested against the «great betrayal» represented by the Hoare-Laval pact, but, as shown above, still in February 1936 Labour's articles in the «Daily Herald» proposed to assign 'responsibility of trusteeship' to the non-imperial powers, in which Italy, despite her slight presence on the African soil, was included¹⁰⁶. There are of course explanations to this attitude towards the colonial empire: firstly, being the Labour leaders traditionally and primarily concerned with the interests of the British working-class, when the protection of colonial subjects (workers included) involved a perceived threat to the motherland, they did not hesitate to take the side of the British workers. An example of this was the already mentioned trade unionists' opposition to the competition of the so-called «sweated labour» from the colonies. Thus, given the fascist claims and the threat these represented for the British and global stability, where could a better solution be found to appease the fascists than in giving them some responsibilities in

¹⁰³ D. Waley, *British Public Opinion*, cit., pp. 73-75.

¹⁰⁴ WG, *Italian - Abyssinian Conflict 1935-1938*, 544, *Italy and Abyssinia*, «The Labour Press Service», 7 August 1935.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibidem*, 11 March 1936; Labour Party, *The Colonial Empire*, cit., pp. 3-4.

¹⁰⁶ «Daily Herald», 27 February 1936.

remote and forgotten African lands? Secondly, it is not difficult to identify in these proposals an underlying racial argument. Since the publication of *The Colonial Empire*, the Labour party supported the transformation of the colonies inhabited by people of «primitive culture» into mandated territories under the control of a League of Nations' Mandate commission. Fascist Italy, as a non-imperial power demanding her colonial share, would have a leading responsibility in the improvement of these territories and peoples towards civilisation. Actually, as far as fascism could be a hatred form of dictatorship and a danger for world peace, it was nevertheless an expression of western white civilisation. One could wonder if, for some labourites, white fascism's inherent superiority was preferable to the «primitive barbarity» of colonial subjects.

In this article, I have focused on the impact of the Italo-Ethiopian war on the Labour party in terms of shift in party line and leadership, development of an anti-fascist conscience and review of colonial policy. In the first place, I have explained how the Italo-Ethiopian crisis and war brought to the surface divisions and ruptures within the party between the old generation of labour pacifist leaders and the new, emerging group composed by figures such as Dalton, Morrison, Attlee and Bevin, whose positions were characterised by a strong opposition towards the fascist powers, a more pragmatic, realist approach in foreign policy and a substantial moderation in domestic affairs. Secondly, I have attempted to show how the war concurred to the shaping of party's anti-fascism, previously less defined and mainly connected on one side with the personal relationship between party's leaders and Italian anti-fascists, whereas on the other with a radical opposition to every form of dictatorship. Thirdly, according to my reconstruction, the conflict led to a rethinking of Labour colonial policy, which became a party's core issue in these years: whether the British empire as a system and institution was not questioned in itself, proposals of reform and an increasing role of the League of Nations in the administration of some territories became the basis for the renovation of old imperial structures. Most importantly, the need to appease the fascist powers through the assignment of a form of sovereignty over the mandated territories, strikingly revealed how the Party's concern for the interest of the British working-classes and the avoidance of a European war overshadowed the fate of colonial subjects.

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