

Chamberlain's War Pact

By R. Palme Dutt

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IN the name of peace to prepare war is an old and familiar maxim of British foreign policy. When the Anglo-French entente was established in 1904, it was widely welcomed on the left as a triumph of peace. Even the Anglo-Czarist agreement of 1907 was widely acclaimed as a triumph of appeasement and the reconciliation of an ancient antagonism. Events were to show that these were definite steps in the preparation of the war of 1914.

Today Chamberlain has signed a pact with Mussolini. The Anglo-Italian pact is being widely acclaimed as a triumph of appeasement. This pact, which is signed in the blood of Spanish democracy, which openly extends its blessing to fascist aggression in Spain and Abyssinia, is even being blessed by organs of the left in Britain as a victory for peace. Thus the liberal organ, the *News-Chronicle*, writes in its issue of April 25:

Nobody can question the immediate benefits of the Rome agreement so far as the immediate peace of the Mediterranean is concerned. It has occasioned a sense of relief which is felt beyond the shores of the middle sea. The agreement does more than ease a dangerous tension. It calls a truce to a duel—diplomatic, political, and strategic—which has been none the less deadly in earnest because the two protagonists happened to be at peace.

A very ugly disillusionment is awaiting those who see in this pact of alliance with fascism a victory for peace.

The main significance of the Anglo-Italian pact of April 16 is not to be found simply from a study of its terms.

On the face of it, Chamberlain would appear to have made a very poor bargain with Mussolini; and on this basis there are many critics who denounce his blindness, innocence, and simplicity in letting himself be thus out-manoeuvred by Mussolini.

Chamberlain has given away all that is immediately important for Italy. He has given away Abyssinia, and undertaken to secure recognition of the Italian conquest of Abyssinia at the League of Nations Council meeting on May 9. He has given away Spain, and for the first time openly recognized and approved the Italian aggression in Spain by accepting with "gratification" Italian promises for the withdrawal of troops after "the termination of the Spanish civil war." He has recognized Italian rights to unrestricted wartime use of the Suez Canal. He has recognized Italian equality in the Mediterranean.

In return he has secured entirely empty promises from Mussolini, whose value has been shown in what happened to the Anglo-Italian "gentlemen's agreement" of January 1937, immediately after its signing. Mussolini has promised not to set up any perma-

nent domination in Spain or the Balearic Islands, when in fact the Italian fascists and the Nazis are busy entrenching themselves both economically and strategically. He has promised to give over his propaganda, which can in any case be turned on or off at the tap according to future requirements. He has promised to diminish his troops in Libya by half; but no number is stated, and there is no pledge not to increase them again. He has promised not to conscript Africans in his conquered territory for "military duties other than local policing and territorial defense"—which covers all the conscription and military training that he is in fact carrying out.

That Mussolini interprets the pact as in no sense a restriction on his warlike aims, but an assistance to them, was ostentatiously demonstrated in his speech to the Italian Senate on March 30. At the very moment when terms were being drawn up and agreed on in principle, he was proclaiming for the near future a "third great victorious campaign of the empire" (i.e., the third after Abyssinia and Spain) and a new "war of short duration" of an "offensive" character, which would bring into play the entire military, naval, and air forces of Italy.

The theory that Chamberlain signed such an apparently disadvantageous treaty with Italy out of sheer innocence, naïveté, and inability to understand the issues, although often repeated in left circles in Britain, is too naïve a view of British diplomacy, which was not born yesterday and knows very well how to drive a hard bargain when it chooses. This was illustrated in the contrasting character and tone of Chamberlain's negotiations with Ireland at the same time as the negotiations with Italy.

The alternative theory is accordingly put forward that Britain has been so anxious to reach this agreement with Italy, at almost any cost, in order to detach Italy from Germany and rebuild a British-French-Italian "Stresa" front against Hitler as the main enemy.

This theory, also, will not hold water. The old Stresa aspirations have been indulged in by certain sections, represented by Vansittart, who was, however, thrust into the background before these negotiations opened. But these are not the dominant sections represented by Chamberlain, Londonderry, Montagu Norman, and the Cliveden group, who are precisely the pro-Hitler group.

In 1934 Italy could still stand up to Germany, and dispatch its divisions to the Brenner Pass when Hitler attempted his coup in Austria by the murder of Dollfuss. This was the basis of the Stresa alignment in the first half of 1935. But this is now past history. The relation of forces has changed. In the

Berlin-Rome axis the dominant role is that of Hitler. When Germany annexed Austria by military invasion in March 1938, Italy, beset with difficulties in Abyssinia and Spain and the economic situation at home, could only acquiesce. German troops on the Brenner hold Northern Italy in their power. Italy is becoming a semi-colony in the Nazi orbit. This is symbolically demonstrated in the immediate following of the Anglo-Italian pact by Hitler's visit to Rome on May 2.

For Britain, also, the Anglo-Italian pact is complementary to the Berlin-Rome axis. Chamberlain is pressing forward the negotiations for an agreement with Hitler at the same time as he reaches the agreement with Mussolini.

The German government has been kept fully informed of the negotiations throughout, so that there can be no question of anything but harmony and collaboration between the three powers. (*London Times*, April 4.)

The Anglo-Italian pact is a step toward the "British-German-Italian alliance" openly designated by Hitler already in *Mein Kampf* as the aim and pivot of Nazi foreign policy.

The reality must be faced. *The Anglo-Italian pact means the alignment of Britain with the fascist alliance.*

It is not a question of Britain making concessions to fascism as to a potential enemy. It is rather a question of Britain coming to the rescue of fascism, to strengthen and consolidate it against the rising democratic and popular forces and its own inner economic and social embarrassments. The extreme difficulties of Italy in Abyssinia, where reports show the increasing success of Abyssinian resistance, and the consolidation of the Spanish people's army and its initial victories at the beginning of the year, made urgently necessary, from the standpoint of British reaction, the agreement with Italy, the open recognition of Italian sovereignty in Abyssinia, and the open approval of unlimited Nazi and Italian reinforcements of artillery and aircraft to Franco in the hope of crushing Spanish democracy by the sheer weight of hostile material resources in the face of their own deprivation of arms.

British financial circles are working to follow up the Anglo-Italian pact by a loan to Italy of, it is reported, £20,000,000 or £30,000,000. Mussolini must at all costs be saved. Mussolini is able to "blackmail" Britain, not through his strength, but through his weakness.

The agreement with Mussolini is, for Britain, a step to the agreement with Hitler, for which negotiations are now being pressed forward. And this in turn is a step to the continuous British aim of the four-power

pact, with a weakened France as a prisoner, detached from the Soviet Union and its Eastern commitments, and so to the isolation of the Soviet Union.

Simultaneously with the Anglo-Italian negotiations, the British reactionary offensive has been carried forward in France, with the assistance of French finance-capital and pro-fascist reaction. Through financial and diplomatic pressure, through the offensive on the franc, through the paralysis of France in relation to Spain and the building up of the fascist strategic threat to France on the Pyrenees, Britain works to weaken France, to break up the People's Front, and to bring into existence a reactionary government in France, subservient to Britain and to fascism.

The reactionary aims of Chamberlain's foreign policy, and his ultimate war aims, should now be clear to all; and there is no excuse for misunderstanding them. The proceedings of

the last Soviet trial throw the clearest light on the realities of British foreign policy and the whole international situation. It is urgently necessary that all sections of the left should, without exception, learn to face these serious realities while there is still time, instead of indulging in frivolous speculations and moralizings which only show suicidal blindness to the character of the struggle against fascism.

Chamberlain's war plans can still be defeated. Spanish democracy is not broken, but is amazing the whole world by its resistance, and thereby winning us time in Britain and America to see that they get the arms which would ensure their speedy victory. Abyssinia is still fighting. China is winning victories that are throwing Japan into difficulties. At the League of Nations Council on May 9, Chamberlain may not have the easy passage for which he is hoping. The French People's Front is not broken, but increasing in strength

of support; the French government is not yet in the pocket of Britain; and increasing forces in France are recognizing the necessity of a stronger policy. The Franco-Soviet pact is not broken.

In Britain opposition is rising to Chamberlain's policy. The critical days of March, after Germany's seizure of Austria, saw the highest level of mass demonstrations and anger against the "National" government since its formation, which found its reflection in a revolt among the government's own supporters. At that critical moment Chamberlain himself believed that his days were numbered. The failure of the National Council of Labor to lead the movement, and the coöperation of Citrine with Chamberlain, saved Chamberlain's skin. But the movement of opposition goes forward. Although the Labor Party Executive has issued a manifesto denouncing the people's front, immediately after its issue the Coöperative Conference, representing over five million workers (including most of the two million workers in the Labor Party), carried a resolution for the United Peace Alliance or combination of all democratic and peace forces under the leadership of labor, to defeat Chamberlain and return a people's government which would carry out a positive peace policy. The All-Parties Emergency Conference for Spain on April 23, called under the auspices of the leaders of the Labor Party, the Coöperative Party and the Liberal Party, the chairman of the Trades Union Congress, Communist signatories, and prominent democratic and peace representatives, and marshaling with only a few days of organization over 1,800 delegates from trade unions, labor parties, coöperatives, Communist branches, liberal and peace organizations, was a demonstration of the will for a people's front. That such a people's front could defeat Chamberlain is widely admitted in the government press, which praises the Labor Party Executive for its prudent and patriotic opposition to the proposal. The campaign is undoubtedly gaining ground. On the outcome of this inner struggle depends the immediate future of British politics, the continuance or defeat of Chamberlain's "National" government and the consequent decision whether Britain shall be ranged with the fascist powers or with the democratic powers.

Opinion in the United States can play an important part in assisting this critical developing fight for a peace front in Britain by working to strengthen the advance of the United States toward policies of coöperation for the collective maintenance of peace. Every sign of such a move on the part of the United States is a blow in the face of the Chamberlain government and helps to expose its reactionary warmaking policy; every vacillation or hesitation, or expression of isolationism, is eagerly used by Chamberlain to justify his own policy. The fight of the working class and of the democratic and peace forces in Britain and the United States is more than ever a common one, in which each side can powerfully help the other.



J. Bartlett