

ETHIOPIA, THE FALASHAS AND KURDISTAN: A LATTER-DAY TRAGEDY

The United States in Ethiopia

Ethiopia once had a special significance for black South Africans. In 1935, when Mussolini's Italy invaded that country there were mass demonstrations in Cape Town and a strike was threatened in the event of any Italian ships being loaded in the port. This was the latest seizure of territory in Africa by a European power and African resentment joined with anti-fascist anger in protesting against the Italians. The South African Communist Party brought out a special newspaper devoted to the struggle against this blatant act of aggression and the (Trotskyist) Workers Party campaigned on the same issue. The western powers in Europe invoked sanctions against Italy and, short of oil, the Italians might have been induced to withdraw. But sanctions have not been known to work. In this case, the USSR, under Stalin seized the opportunity for earning foreign currency and sold oil to the Italian state.

The Italians won in the end, after enduring humiliating defeats, largely because of its access to the most modern armaments of the time. Haile Selassie, upstart Emperor of Ethiopia, went in to exile and started on a round of missions to the League of Nations and the leaders of the Western world. He won nothing from the great powers, but he was the darling of the liberals and the left. These politicians had a champion at last, even if they were generally ineffectual in the metropolitan countries. Little did they know that they were the forerunners of generations of young people who would champion one or other small state, and that they would be the first of just as many generations of disillusioned lefties who believed that their efforts would lead to the uplifting of a poor oppressed people.

Then came the war in Europe of 1939-45, in which Italy was on the losing side. When peace finally descended, the Emperor returned in pomp and glory and for a time Ethiopia dropped out of the news. But no news was not good news for the people in the Horn of Africa. Those subjected to the rule of this petty tyrant saw little difference between domination under Mussolini and domination under the Emperor and his pampered palace retinue. As for the liberal souls of the west, they had found new causes in which to sink their energies. And sink them they did.

After one major failed coup, in December 1960, the Emperor was ultimately overthrown in 1984 and an army junta under Col Mengistu Haile Mariam took over. The event caused little stir in South Africa this time round. Ethiopia was too far away and events at home too pressing to occasion excitement in the townships. Also, the history of post-war Africa had cautioned against undue enthusiasm for yet another army coup. If there was any excitement it was among the Africa watchers in the ranks of the Communist Party. The army became a client state of the USSR, the leaders declared that they were Marxist-Leninists and received arms and money from Moscow. The Derge, as the leadership was called, set about building a new model army, with a

praetorian guard trained in North Korea. Giant stadia and prestige buildings were built; and Ethiopia long the capital of the Organisation of African Unity now gave a new twist to the rhetoric of African liberation. To show the world where their allegiance lay (and whence came their supplies) they also set up a giant statue of Lenin in the capital Addis Ababa. Oh, my countrymen! What a vista that was for the children of Ethiopia. They might go hungry, but father Vladimir was watching over them.

There were other people in Ethiopia who did not have the benefit of Lenin's determined face: and they did not receive arms from the USSR. Yet they too called themselves Marxist-Leninists (which was a bit confusing for those who followed the degraded messages coming out of Moscow). They rose in revolt: the people of Eritrea, of Ogaden and of Tigray, and for this the Communists condemned them. If the Derge claimed to be the 'true' communists (and they did have the statue of Lenin to confirm that fact), then those that opposed them were counter-revolutionaries. What most liberal observers preferred to ignore, was that the conflict had an ethnic or tribal base. The Tigrayans, despite their 'Marxist-Leninist' phraseology, built a tribal army to wrest control from the Amharic people, represented first by Haile Selassie and then by the Derge.

Strangely enough, there was one leading member of the South African Communist Party, Ruth First, estranged wife of Joe Slovo, (who was said to have left or been expelled from the party) who publicly backed the Eritreans. Quite why she felt it necessary to support one set of petty-bourgeois nationalists against another, is one more mystery that might need footnoting one day. But back then she did, and that was discretely ignored in the interests of party unity.

The story of the past decade in Ethiopia has been grim. Civil war, land displacement, then two massive droughts (and several minor ones) left a trail of deaths across the country. Countless thousands died, and many of the survivors owed their lives to hand-outs from western charities. Inside this scenario an even more fantastical event was played out. There is (or was!) a group of Ethiopians, known as Falashas (the 'Outcasts'), who claimed to be descendants of the Queen of Sheba. They were Jews, they declared, who followed the precepts of the Old Testament. In so far as people wish to follow a religion their claim was as good as any. However, there was no other link with Jewry, with Zionism or with Palestine. But, in a scoop out of Hollywood, the Israelis 'rescued' these Falashas in two massive air lifts, the last taking place one day before the fall of the Derge.

About 30,000 Falashas are now in Israel in operations that cost \$30 million each time. The first group has not been integrated into Israeli society as yet and there is no obvious future for them or those who have now followed. Nobody can object to the saving of men, women and children — if in fact they might have been subjected to some unknown terror. Nor can there be any objection to people being afforded better facilities if they are moved. But to do this while Palestinians are denied work, are subjected to curfews, are harried, harassed and expelled is obscene.

However, if there can be no justification for removing these people, difficult as their position in Ethiopia might be, there was one over-riding factor that can explain their flight. The Americans advanced the money for their transportation and will undoubtedly continue to pay for their upkeep in the coming years. The US administration that can find no money for the relief of blacks and Latinos in its own country, that allows millions to live below the breadline, that cannot (and has no desire to) curb race discrimination within its own borders, paid for the removal of the Falashas.

That, of course, was only part of the deal. The Americans also supplied the opposition forces with weapons and ammunition.

Through their State Department, they helped co-ordinate the final assault and stage managed talks in London to coincide with the final push on Addis Ababa. The 'new era' was being ushered in to the horn, as it is being levered into position wherever the US can find the fulcrum. The world is paying the price for the deal reached between Bush and Gorbachev. With the removal of the facade of greatness that was once bestowed on the USSR, the State Department is able to manipulate the situation in diverse states to secure its own grip.

In one respect, the fall of the statue of Lenin was appropriate. It represented the tutelage of Moscow, and that is now gone. The Derge could not survive because the weaponry on which it rested was no longer available. On the other hand, the removal of that statue represents another slap in the face for the left. In one more community the idea of Marxism (and of Leninism) was pulled down with the effigy. It was no more than a cast of a man, a symbol perhaps of what might have been, but not the reality. How were the people to know? They were told by the administration that Marxism had been installed, that Marxism was being implemented. Stalinists and others abroad had fawned on the regime and acclaimed it as another Marxist state.

This degenerate state, that waged internal war, wasted millions on symbolic buildings, persecuted minorities and moved people out of their traditional homes, could neither provide food nor shelter, and that finally imploded: if this was an example of Marxism, then the people could only reject it as the theory of a society that could not function. In so far as there is resistance to the new administration, the struggle is not over 'Marxism', but over tribal rivalries and the control of the state apparatus. Under the circumstances the only winner will be the US — the losers will be the people of Ethiopia.

The United States and Iraq

When this journal last appeared, the grand alliance led by America was about to pulverise Iraq. Using the highly developed technology of the space-craft age, the allies set about systematically destroying the enemy. Saddam Hussein, not to be outdone, poured millions of gallons of oil into the Persian Gulf in an act of ecological mayhem. He followed this with the firing of over 600 oil wells, destabilising atmospheric conditions for the coming decades. The

editors of this journal could support neither side and are proud to have said this before the destruction began.

The tragedy was that there was no means for socialists to intervene to prevent the carnage that followed. Despite all their editorials and demonstrations the little groups of the left were once again shown to be ineffectual — whatever their claims.

The information reaching London from South Africa suggested that most supporters of the ANC, and opponents of the government declared for Saddam Hussein or called on the US to get out of the Gulf. The one-sided position they took had the effect of placing them on the side of a government that treats (and treated) its opposition in a fashion that makes South Africa look like a Sunday School treat. In fact, it did not really matter. The attitudes they adopted were irrelevant because they could not affect what was about to happen. Instead of providing a balanced critique of what was happening, they rushed in with ready-made slogans that explained nothing. Yet there are urgent matters that socialists have to pose. Why did so many of the people of the Middle East support Saddam? What did they expect to achieve under Iraqi control? Why, above all else, has there been no socialist current to which these people could be drawn? Those are questions that need urgent answer.

There are also other questions that must be addressed, in line with the questions that Engels posed so urgently in the 1870s and 1880s: how do socialists hope to counter the growing might of the armies? What can small nations do in the face of modern weaponry and destructive technology? When Engels raised these questions he was accused by some of moving towards reformism because he feared the consequences of young workers being drawn into conscript armies. The critics were wrong then and would be wrong today. Socialists have to take a long and sober look at the nature of modern warfare and construct their tactics on the basis of the force that has become available to the modern army.

Then came the uprising in the wake of defeat. Socialists or nationalists who had tacitly or explicitly supported the Saddam regime had to do a rapid U-turn. They now became champions of the Kurds (and the Shi'ites?) and obviously wanted the defeat of Saddam. Even though the Americans were still there, and even though the anti-imperialist slogans still echoed in their papers, the Kurds were now the issue. What did they say when Bush and his administration refused to support the rebels in the south? And what did they say when the Yanks first refused to come to the aid of the Kurds, and then gave way to liberal voices and provided a safe haven along the Turkish border? Perhaps some did speak sense this time but, if they did, it made little difference. They only demonstrated again their impotence.

One letter-writer from America wrote to us criticising our original standpoint. We should have been gratified. Someone had read us and been concerned. We were condemned for our earlier stand. Now we were asked: were we not going to support the Kurds? Were we going to reject their pleas because they could be accused of being petty bourgeois nationalists?

We have not printed the letter, as much as we welcome correspondence, because it adds little to our knowledge of events in the Middle East or of our understanding of nationalist movements. But our correspondent deserves an answer on the last point. It is the bounden duty of every socialist to offer help and solidarity to every oppressed people. Solidarity comes easily, help is beyond our means or capabilities. But whatever sympathy we offer, there can be no support for the nationalist leaders. Their role as leaders (whether they wish it or not) is to represent the interest of their class — and this is not that of the workers or peasants. More than that, they will come to terms, as soon as convenient, with their erstwhile oppressors. In the case of the Kurds of Iraq that happened almost before we had a chance to read the disc that was sent to us. Barzani (of the Kurds) clasped the hand of Saddam Hussein and declared that all had been resolved. He had nothing to say about the Shi'ites who were mercilessly crushed. He had no programme for the workers of Iraq (whether Kurd or Muslim), no vision for a better society. It is not that we expect him to have such a programme, we only wish to indicate that such leaders do not point a way out for the people they claim to represent. We can only be thankful that they do not have statues of Lenin with them. Imagine lugging such a symbol up into the mountains when fleeing towards the Turkish borders.

Within a few months the US State Department has demonstrated its intentions. Its actions in Iraq and Ethiopia have been the first examples of the 'new world order' it intends imposing on humankind. If this is the scenario it is preparing for the 'new South Africa' the future looks grim. Perhaps we must repeat with the old Griqua Chief the prayer he was once said to have offered up:

*Lord, Save Thy People.
Lord, We are lost unless thou Savest us.
Lord, This is not the work for Children.
It is not enough this time to send Thy Son.
Lord, Thou must come Thyself.*

Wang Fan-hsi

MEMOIRS of a Chinese Revolutionary

(with the chapter that the OUP excluded)

Translated and introduced by Gregor Benton

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The history of Communism and the Left Opposition in China as told by a participant . Of special interest to South Africans who are interested in the life of the South African revolutionary, Frank Glass (Li Fu-jen). *Searchlight South Africa* can obtain copies at less than shop price for readers (not in the USA) who request copies (approximately £7). Requests to the editors only, send no money.