

Routledge Studies in Fascism and the Far Right

ANTI-FASCISM, GENDER, AND INTERNATIONAL COMMUNISM

**THE COMITÉ MONDIAL DES FEMMES CONTRE LA GUERRE
ET LE FASCISME, 1934–1941**

Jasmine Calver



Anti-Fascism, Gender, and International Communism

Anti-Fascism, Gender, and International Communism provides a comprehensive history of the *Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme* (CMF), an international women's organisation concerned with confronting the impact of fascism on women and children across the globe.

Women played an essential role in the international struggle against fascism during the interwar period, although a focus on the efforts of men and political figures by the historiography has largely overshadowed women's interventions against right-wing dictatorships. Through an examination of the committee's key figures, strategies, connections, and campaigns, this book offers a significant contribution to the histories of both women's activism and anti-fascist activism by positioning the CMF as an important contributor to international political advocacy in the interwar period. Further, the group's association with international communism and the burgeoning Popular Front movement placed the CMF at the forefront of global debates about the threat posed by fascism and imperialism. This book explores how the professional women activists and the working-class women who populated the organisation developed a committee which advocated for women on a global scale. It charts how the CMF utilised a variety of physical spaces and literary formats to co-ordinate anti-fascist actions through its expansive and ambitious campaigns. The author also demonstrates the close connections between the Communist International and the CMF as a communist front organisation, to provide context for the group's decision-making and prioritisation of certain campaigns over others.

This book will be of interest to scholars of anti-fascism, feminism, women's history, communism, activism, internationalism, anti-imperialism, and French history.

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The Comité Mondial des
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First published 2023
by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group,
an informa business*

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record has been requested for this book

ISBN: 978-0-367-72048-3 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-367-72144-2 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-15363-4 (ebk)

DOI: [10.4324/9781003153634](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003153634)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by KnowledgeWorks Global Ltd.

**For my grandparents, Brenda and John,
Pat and Bob.**



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Acknowledgements

I owe an immense debt to Northumbria University for funding the PhD research that has led to the publication of this book. I am also eternally thankful to Professor Charlotte Alston and Dr Daniel Laqua for their excellent supervision and consistent support in the PhD and beyond. I would also like to thank my PhD examiners Dr Laura O'Brien and Dr Laura Beers for their constructive comments, which encouraged me to expand the scope of my book in some important ways.

This book would not have come to fruition without the series editors of the *Routledge Studies in Fascism and the Far Right* book series and Craig Fowlie. Thank you for seeing the potential in my thesis and inviting me to submit a proposal. It is an honour to have the opportunity to contribute to this tremendous, increasingly important endeavour. I would also like to thank Routledge, and specifically Hannah Rich, for their support and understanding during a difficult personal time.

I have to thank my family, who have been eternally patient and supportive throughout this process. To my mother and father, Julie and John, my sister, Laura, and my grandparents: thank you for everything. Finally, I owe thanks to my partner, Connor, for making even the most difficult of times easier.

List of Abbreviations

ALWF	American League against War and Fascism
CGT	Confédération générale du travail (French Socialist Trade Union Federation)
CGTU	Confédération générale du travail unitaire (Communist Trade Union Federation)
CHSVS	Centre d'histoire sociale du XXème siècle
CMF	Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
CPUSA	Communist Party of the United States of America
Comintern	Communist International
DBMOMS	Dictionnaire Biographique Mouvement Ouvrier Mouvement Social
IAC	International Action Committee against War Danger and Fascism
ICW	International Council of Women
IFTU	International Federation of Trade Unions
IWSA	International Woman Suffrage Alliance (now known as International Alliance of Women, IAW)
KPD	Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands, German Communist Party
LC	La Contemporaine
MOPR	International Red Aid
PCB	Parti communiste de Belgique, Belgian Communist Party
PCE	Partido Comunista de España, Spanish Communist Party
PCF	Parti communiste français, French Communist Party
PCd'I	Partito Comunista d'Italia, Italian Communist Party
PNF	Partito Nazionale Fascista, National Fascist Party, Italy
POB	Parti ouvrier belge, Belgian Worker's Party
Profintern	Red International of Labor Unions
SFIO	Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière, French Section of the Worker's International or French Socialist Party
VOKS	All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries
WILPF	Women's International League for Peace and Freedom



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Introduction

On 4 August 1934, over 1,100 women from 28 countries gathered at the Maison de la Mutualité in Paris. For four days, these female activists formulated a plan for united action against the twin spectre of military conflict and right-wing dictatorship. By the close of the congress on 7 August, a new international women's organisation had been set up to confront fascism: the *Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme* (Women's World Committee Against War and Fascism, or CMF). Delegates pledged that they would create national sections of the group in their own countries, and the CMF began work against the major political problem of the early twentieth century. Two international CMF congresses took place before the outbreak of the Second World War – the founding congress in Paris and a congress in Marseille in 1938 – and plans were underway for a third in Cuba. National sections sporadically held their own meetings and the international executive committee met regularly at their base in Paris from 1934 to 1938 and in London in 1939. The committee was active from 1934 until shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War when international activism became more difficult, and divisions prevented the CMF's work. The committee had sections globally, with the majority concentrated in Western Europe and Scandinavia. Nevertheless, CMF activism occurred globally, with activists and campaigns sited in India, China, and South America, for example. There are no overall membership figures for the CMF, but some figures are available for its national sections: the French section was the largest, with 'up to 200,000 women united around 2,000 committees' in March 1937. The Belgian section had a much smaller membership, at around only 2,000 members, while the Swiss section had about 500 members.¹

The committee was founded in a period of international upheaval, with the rise of radical political ideologies and the associated growth of a nationalism increasingly based on racial hierarchy. Many leftist activists saw the Soviet Union and communist ideology as a bastion of progress and equality in this period and viewed it as directly opposed to and capable of combatting fascism.² Enzo Traverso has argued that the

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relationship between the European left-wing intelligentsia and the USSR was characterised by a tone of ‘complacency, if not of an uncritical admiration’ for the Soviet regime, which tended to excuse its totalitarianism because it appeared to be the only state willing to openly declare its opposition to fascism.³ The CMF was intrinsically shaped by the involvement of communist activists and a complex relationship with the Communist International (Comintern). The proliferation of fascist ideology and a commitment to communist ideals often galvanised women to join the CMF to confront the specific threat that women faced as a result of fascist policies.

The CMF can be described as a ‘transnational advocacy network’: ‘relevant actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services’, who ‘try not only to influence policy outcomes but to transform the terms and nature of the debate’, as defined by Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink.⁴ The CMF tried to go ‘beyond policy change to advocate and instigate changes in the institutional and principled basis of international interactions’, particularly how women were impacted by the changing social landscape of the 1930s.⁵ The committee embodied several ideologies prominent in left-wing activism in this period, all of which had transnational dimensions. The group was a proponent of anti-militarist, socialist, feminist, and anti-fascist activism which manifested itself in several ways. The CMF was the initiative of a group of women led by its president, Gabrielle Duchêne, a bourgeois pacifist activist best known for her work in the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), and its secretary, Bernadette Cattaneo, a working-class communist cadre and strike organiser. They used their ‘multifarious’ knowledge of feminism, pacifism, anti-fascism, and communism to create an organisation in the image of the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement, but with a focus on women.⁶ The CMF defined its contribution to international activism in simple terms as ‘the struggle against war and fascism’ and ‘for the liberation of women’ from fascist oppression.⁷

Communist Conceptions of Fascism, 1922–1935

Communist reactions to fascism fluctuated throughout the interwar period as activists struggled to define the concept. Definitions were fluid and varied from communist to communist. At the Fourth World Congress of the Comintern in 1922, the same year that fascists marched on Rome and Benito Mussolini assumed the Prime Ministership of Italy, fascism was presented as both the ‘political enemy of the capitalist bourgeoisie’ and the ‘political offensive of the bourgeoisie against the working class’.⁸ There was also a debate about the popularity of fascism in the countryside versus the cities. This uncertain approach

worried some prominent communists, including the veteran Clara Zetkin, who warned that

the mistakes of the Communist Party again lie above all in viewing fascism only as a military-terrorist movement and not as a mass movement with deep social roots. It must be expressly emphasised that before Fascism had won militarily, it had already achieved victory politically and ideologically over the labour movement.⁹

She noted two defining features of fascism: ‘the pretence of a revolutionary programme, which is cleverly adapted to the interests and demands of the large masses’, and the ‘application of the most brutal violence’. Ultimately, Zetkin believed that the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* (PNF) would be ‘unable to keep together the forces which helped it to get into power’ and would subsequently collapse. She predicted that ‘the workers will very soon come back to their class interest and class duty’ and embrace communism.¹⁰ Amadeo Bordiga, an early member of the *Partito Comunista d’Italia* (PCd’I) and a prominent communist internationalist, concurred that fascism would collapse under its own contradictions, as fascist ideology had nothing to add ‘to the traditional ideology and programme of bourgeois politics’ and was ‘full of difficulties that it is unable to overcome’.¹¹ This belief would persist throughout the interwar period and would shape communist efforts to combat fascism. Communist understandings of fascism also centred on the idea that it was an indicator of the breakdown of capitalist society, ‘one of the classic forms of counter-revolution in the epoch where capitalist society is dying’ and as such was not treated as a real threat until the mid-1930s.¹²

One of the first attempts at a transnational network of activists led by the Comintern against fascism was the International Action Committee against War Danger and Fascism (IAC), which was founded at a conference held in Frankfurt in March 1923. The organisation was backed by prominent artists, intellectuals, and politicians, including the French novelist Romain Rolland (who would work with Henri Barbusse in the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement in the 1930s), French poet Anatole France, American author Upton Sinclair, and German Comintern propaganda tsar Willi Münzenberg. The IAC was created ‘to lead the international propaganda against fascism’ and to encourage national communist parties to establish organisations against fascism.¹³ However, it only operated from March 1923 to September 1924 and was hindered in much of its work by bad relations with the Labour and Socialist International. Nevertheless, the IAC was the first example of a strategy that the Comintern would relaunch in 1933.

By the late 1920s, communist understandings of fascism had once again changed. Communist parties began to use the term ‘social fascism’ to refer to social democratic, socialist, and labour parties who were ‘still the main support of the bourgeoisie’.¹⁴ To further simplify the concept, the

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Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (KPD, German Communist Party) claimed that ‘Social Fascism is Socialism in word, Fascism in deed’.¹⁵ Fascism and social democracy were presented as ‘the two sides of the same instrument of capitalist dictatorship’ and social democrats could thus ‘never be a reliable ally of the fighting proletariat’.¹⁶ This so-called ‘Third Period’ in Comintern history, from 1928 to around 1934, was defined by an

extreme political intransigence toward all other political movements, from social democracy to fascism: all of these movements were reduced to a common denominator of their supposed class matrix and every possibility of manoeuvre and political alliance was excluded.¹⁷

This stance did little but isolate communists from other left-wing parties and downplay the increasing threat posed by fascism. The Comintern approach to fascism was criticised by some former Bolsheviks, however. For example, the exiled Leon Trotsky criticised those who intrinsically linked fascism and social democracy in their speeches.¹⁸ He claimed that both Mussolini and Hitler had ‘displayed initiative, roused the masses to action, [and] pioneered new paths through the political jungle’, which Stalin had wholly failed to do.¹⁹ Trotsky’s understanding of fascism was not taken seriously, however, because of his status as an adversary of the Soviet regime.

When considering the development of a communist anti-fascist strategy, it is important to mention the development of the Popular Front and its origins in France. There is much debate about when the Popular Front strategy officially became international communist policy, but several dates between February 1934 and July 1935 are offered by historians as the start of this new era. Gerd-Rainer Horn has described this year as an ‘intermediary’ period marked by small collaboration efforts by communists with other political groups, a departure from the previous strict ‘class against class’ policy.²⁰ Some of the first examples of collaboration between communists and socialists in the 1930s occurred in France. On 6 February 1934, extreme-right-wing paramilitary and veterans’ organisations protested in Paris against rumoured corruption in the Radical Party (the governing party in France at the time) as a result of the implication of several politicians in the Stavisky scandal.²¹ A far-right press campaign orchestrated by *Action Française* had circulated a story that Alexandre Stavisky, a Ukrainian Jewish fraudster who was wanted by the police, had donated to the Radical Party and that he ‘had escaped justice thanks to the patronage of friends in high places’. When Stavisky committed suicide, rumours abounded that he was silenced to prevent further secrets about corruption in the Radical Party from being exposed.²² Radical Prime Minister Édouard Daladier began to remove senior officials in the police and judiciary who had been implicated in the Stavisky affair to stave off criticism. In particular, the dismissal of the Paris Prefect of Police, Jean Chiappe, who was ‘famed for being tough on communist demonstrators and lenient towards extreme-right leagues’, was condemned ‘as a ploy to win the

support of the Socialists in the Chamber of Deputies'.²³ Right-wing newspapers argued that it was a means to include communists in government. The resulting 6 February 1934 demonstrations were organised by extreme-right paramilitary groups, including *Action Française*, the *Jeunesse Patriotes*, the *Croix de Feu*, and *Solidarité Française* and veterans' organisations like the *Union Nationale des Combattants*. The mobilisation ended in violence on the Place de la Concorde, when police at the Palais Bourbon opened fire on the protesters, killing 13 and fatally wounding six others.²⁴

Daladier responded to these protests by resigning on 7 February, and Gaston Doumergue, the former President of the Republic, formed a '*gouvernement de trêve*' which rejected the Radical and Socialist coalition which had previously held power in favour of a Centre-Right majority.²⁵ The violence of extreme-right organisations had unseated a democratically elected government, an indicator for many on the left that fascism was on the ascendency in France. The *Confédération générale du travail* (CGT), the socialist trade union federation, called for a 24-hour strike on 12 February in protest, with communists planning demonstrations on the same day in solidarity. Brian Jenkins has described the 12 February mobilisation as 'a massive success, marked by spontaneous displays of grass-roots unity between Socialist and Communist participants'.²⁶ In the face of 'fascism on the march', there was a 'growing restiveness' among French communists with the policies of the Comintern which stressed political isolation. Comintern leaders in Moscow eventually authorised a 'unity of action pact against fascism' for French socialists and communists in July 1934.²⁷ Swiss communist, Jules Humbert-Droz, posited that the 'Popular Front [was] imposed by the workers themselves, who gave the Comintern leadership and the German Stalinists the most sensational lesson in truth in the history of the workers' movement'.²⁸

Georgi Dimitrov, the Bulgarian communist, Reichstag fire accused, and former head of the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement, became the secretary of the Comintern in April 1934 and immediately set about reforming Comintern policy. At the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern in July 1935, Dimitrov announced the need for a 'broad people's anti-fascist front' against the 'open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, chauvinistic and...imperialist elements of finance capital'.²⁹ He established that there was no universal definition of fascism and that national context was key to formulating effective responses. He also rejected the spectre of 'social fascism'. Dimitrov told the assembled communists that

it would be a gross mistake to lay down any sort of universal scheme of the development of fascism, valid for all countries and all people...[as] it would result in indiscriminately thrusting into the camp of fascism those sections of the population which, if properly approached, could at a certain stage of development be brought into the struggle against fascism or could at least be neutralised...such an enemy must be known to perfection from every angle.³⁰

The Amsterdam-Pleyel Movement

Even before the adoption of the Popular Front strategy by the Comintern in July 1935, some communist internationalists explored collaboration with other left-wing activists in contravention of Comintern directives. The key player in these endeavours was Willi Münzenberg, a German communist who was responsible for designing and circulating propaganda on behalf of the Communist International. As a German communist, Münzenberg was acutely aware of how serious the threat of fascism was; he watched the arrest of his comrades in the KPD leadership en masse by the Nazis, leaving only ‘uncoordinated activity of isolated pockets of resistance’ where a political powerhouse had once stood. He enjoyed a unique, ‘semi-autonomous’ position in the German and international communist movements which allowed him a level of freedom in his work which was essential for Popular Front activism.³¹ Mass communist auxiliary organisations orchestrated by Münzenberg, including the World Committee against Imperialist War formed in Amsterdam in August 1932 and the European Workers’ Anti-Fascist Union formed at the Salle Pleyel in Paris in June 1933, allowed communist activists to explore collaboration with others on the left without officially committing to an alliance. They also allowed Münzenberg to demonstrate the utility of implementing a Popular Front strategy to the Comintern, without forging official links to the International should it fail. These committees merged into the World Committee against War and Fascism later in 1933 (referred to here as the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement), an organisation headed by prominent western European intellectuals, including Henri Barbusse and Romain Rolland, both of whom were involved in earlier Comintern efforts against Italian fascism. This committee was the predecessor to the *Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme* in terms of organisational similarity and as an early Popular Front endeavour.

The Amsterdam committee has been identified by historians as Münzenberg’s ‘most spectacular success’ because it was the most significant application of his ability to harness ‘individuals and groups of widely differing political complexions’ to covertly communist organisations.³² Held in Amsterdam from 27 to 30 August 1932, 2,200 delegates from 25 different countries attended the congress to protest capitalism and Imperialist War.³³ The delegates primarily came from Germany, France, and Holland, with 35%, 27%, and 21% of delegates, respectively.³⁴ The social and political composition of the congress was also deliberately diverse and demonstrated Münzenberg’s attempts to extend the scope of the congress beyond communist concerns and towards pacifism. Communists were the largest political group at the congress by more than 500 attendees, but those without party affiliation were the largest proportion of attendees overall.³⁵ The organiser’s goal that the meeting was ‘above parties’ was therefore at least somewhat successfully achieved; however, some socialist and labour leaders

Table 0.1 Composition of the Amsterdam congress against Imperialist War, 1932

<i>Of 2,195 delegates from 29 countries</i>			
<i>Political composition of the amsterdam congress against imperialist war (1932)</i>		<i>Social composition of the amsterdam congress against imperialist war (1932)</i>	
Without party/various parties	1,015	Workers	1,865
Communists	830	Intellectuals	249
Social Democrats	291	Peasants	72
Members of 'National Revolutionary Parties'	35	Unrecorded	9
Independent Socialist Worker's Parties	24		
Total: 2,195			

Source: 'Das Meeting des Antikriegskongresses, Bulletin Nr. 9', Pandor 543_1_18, Doc. 141-148, p. 6.

believed that the congress's primary 'purpose was to create propaganda for the Soviet Union and to disrupt the socialist parties all over Europe' and were, therefore, reluctant to engage with the group (Table 0.1).³⁶

The decision to hold the congress was triggered by Japanese aggression in Chinese Manchuria (an exonym referring to Dongbei Pingyuan, a North-eastern region of China) beginning in September 1931. As such, the congress openly rejected war as a capitalist tool of oppression. The slogan chosen to embody the direction of the congress was '*Pacifisme Combattant!*' ('Combative Pacifism!'), evoking a contradictory image of a violent struggle for peace. Traditional pacifist methods were criticised as 'foredoomed to failure' and 'unfortunately futile' by the congress.³⁷ The Amsterdam congress did not hide its preference towards the Soviet Union; it emphasised the necessity of defending the USSR against capitalist aggression on all fronts and lambasted the aggressive capitalist nations who were attempting to 'undermine and overthrow' the 'peaceful' Soviet Union in its manifesto.³⁸ In contrast to the violent capitalist powers, the Soviet Union was praised for having a 'steadfast peace policy' despite continued attacks on its sovereignty.³⁹ This commitment to the defence of the USSR reflected a communist front preoccupation in the interwar period with the survival of the Soviet state, which would also be present in the CMF's work.⁴⁰

The European Workers' Anti-Fascist Congress, held at the Salle Pleyel in Paris in June 1933, focused more on fascism than war. Thirty-two hundred delegates from 13 countries attended the congress, the majority of whom were '*sans parti*'. However, there were also many more communists than socialists in attendance, quickly leading to accusations that the meeting was a 'communist congress'.⁴¹ The number of socialist attendees fell by about 100 and the number of communist participants overwhelmed the socialists. Despite this, the *International Communist* newspaper wrote that 'the antifascist congress in Paris [was] a powerful demonstration of proletarian solidarity and

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Table 0.2 Composition of the Pleyel European Workers' Anti-Fascist Congress, 1933

<i>Of 3,277 delegates</i>					
<i>Geographical Composition</i>		<i>Political Composition</i>		<i>Gender Composition</i>	
France	2,590	Without Party	1,801	Male Delegates	3,011
Italy	174	Communists	1,153	Female Delegates	266
Czechoslovakia	147	Members of the Second International (Socialists)	199		
Germany	121	Anarchists	26		
Britain	62	Miscellaneous	15		
Switzerland	53	Republicans	11		
Holland	39	Christians	4		
Scandinavian countries	27				
Spain	25				
Belgium	12				
Austria	9				
Balkan countries	9				
Luxembourg	9				

Source: 'Le congrès européen antifasciste', *L'Humanité* (9 June 1933), p. 2.

of Marxism. The spirit of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin was widespread in the Salle Pleyel despite the efforts of all the fascists, of all the social-democrats, of all the pacifists and social-pacifists'.⁴² Thus, the Comintern was not quite ready to break with the social fascist crusade which defined the third period at that point; however, it had begun to accept the necessity of confronting the fascist threat (Table 0.2).

The Amsterdam and Pleyel committees merged on 15 June 1933 to become the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement, a move confirmed by the Political Bureau of the Comintern two days later. By the end of 1933, the number of Amsterdam-Pleyel committees in France exceeded 700 with more being set up across Europe, the United States, and Australia. However, committees were not spread equally across France; 26 *départements* did not have local committees, while the Parisian, Midi, and Seine-Maritime regions had several.⁴³ This can partly be traced to the movement's continued poor relationship with the socialists: the secretary of the LSI, Friedrich Adler, was suspicious of the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement from the start and rejected any collaboration with the group. He wrote of his 'sad[ness] that, today, when the true and loyal collaboration of all forces of the proletariat is necessary more than ever, we always get more of the small and infantile... united front manoeuvres'.⁴⁴ In addition, it is important to note that Henri Barbusse also often complained about the lack of sufficient funding for the movement from the Comintern which severely impacted its ability to expand, a regular

complaint among CMF women too. Barbusse expressed his belief that ‘our movement, now more necessary than ever... becomes anaemic, restricted and paralysed by the lack of new resources’, which indisputably prevented the movement from being able to ‘multiply, diversify, and intensify its activity’.⁴⁵

Despite its issues, the Amsterdam-Pleyel group was indicative of the growing desire among activists on the left to explore Popular Front solutions to the threat of fascism before it became official Comintern policy. It is also evidence of attempts made by the Comintern to create organisations that were inherently concerned with the defence of the USSR. Further, the CMF was certainly created in the image of the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement and CMF women did work within the movement: for example, Gabrielle Duchêne read Romain Rolland’s ‘Declaration to the World Congress’ at the opening session of the Amsterdam meeting in his absence.⁴⁶ Despite the similarities between the groups, it would be inaccurate to label the CMF as the ‘women’s section’ of the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement. The groups operated separately, with the CMF focusing exclusively on women’s issues, while the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement played a more general role in the communist anti-fascist movement.

The CMF diverged from the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement primarily because its feminist goals added another dimension to its anti-fascist work. The CMF deployed gendered language in its campaigns and propaganda to present pacifism and anti-fascism as specifically feminine attributes. Concepts of motherhood and international sisterhood were consistently deployed by the CMF as reasons for women to oppose fascism and for their ‘predisposition’ to peace work. This was also a common feature in non-communist women’s organisations. It was argued that because ‘only women can experience maternal feelings’, they had the ‘edge over men in understanding emotions, in being compassionate, and in being able to envision peace’. Harriet Hyman Alonso has argued that ‘just possessing the proper biology or the emotional capacity to “mother” [was] enough to claim the superiority of motherhood’ by international women’s activists.⁴⁷ Jo Vellacott has suggested that women’s organisations, particularly WILPF, ‘deliberately trail[ed] clouds of motherhood and nurturing’ to justify women’s involvement in a highly politicised discourse, which she has argued could be ‘positively subversive of feminist purpose’.⁴⁸ This can also be applied to the CMF, as it often used maternalist language in its rhetoric despite not advocating for maternalism as a defining concept of women’s activism. However, the CMF’s combination of feminism, communism, and anti-fascism created problems that were not always easily surmountable.

This book examines the work and ideology of the *Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme* to demonstrate that the CMF was a complex organisation that utilised a synthesis of different ideas in the pursuit of an effective anti-fascist movement. It will cover how the CMF was organised, the language utilised in campaigns, and the group’s relationship with the Soviet Union, to establish the group’s place in the history of international

women's activism between the world wars and its designation as an early Popular Front organisation. It was a Soviet-linked, international women's organisation, which deployed the language of gender difference to appeal to a broad section of the female populace. The CMF existed alongside and often worked with other international women's and socialist activists on a transnational basis. The CMF's complex ideology and efforts against war and fascism in the context of the political situation of the 1930s merit its acknowledgement among the key women's organisations of the period, including the International Council of Women (ICW) and the WILPF, for example.

The key themes guiding CMF work can be divided into three overarching points, with some overlap between them. First, the CMF had a mass, diverse character, as an early iteration of Popular Front strategies. Although perhaps not as large or diverse as some of its counterparts, the CMF was a movement that attracted women from a variety of backgrounds before many international communists adopted the policy. The CMF was a Popular Front organisation dominated by communist women before the Comintern policy of 'class against class' had been abandoned. Second, the CMF's relationship with the Comintern and the Soviet Union inherently influenced its work as an international women's movement. However, the CMF had a level of freedom not afforded to other communist front groups because of its exclusive focus on women's issues. Third, the CMF gave women a platform to voice their opinions and experiences on topics from which they were still largely excluded. Nevertheless, the committee did deploy traditionally gendered language throughout its work to appeal to the female masses. How far these linguistic choices represented the ideology of the CMF and its members, in general, is frequently revisited throughout the book. This book contributes to the existing, rich historiography on international feminism, communism, and anti-fascism and provides an analysis of an organisation that engaged with all these ideologies to varying degrees.

As an examination of the entire *Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme*, the scope of this book is wide. Each chapter considers a different theme about the CMF, its work, and its ideology. The first chapter discusses the activist careers of key women in the committee, namely Bernadette Cattaneo, Gabrielle Duchêne, Maria Rabaté, and Charlotte Haldane, to understand the ideological basis of the CMF. This analysis of individual ideologies and careers reinforces the collaborative effort that directed CMF work both internally and externally. Second, the organisation, decoration, and content of CMF congresses demonstrate the widespread appeal of the committee in terms of attendance statistics and communist influence. I argue that the committee successfully attracted a mixture of women from different social, political, and national backgrounds, although women from outside Europe were certainly underrepresented. Third, the transnational interactions between the CMF and the Soviet Union are charted to determine the exact nature of the relationship. This is divided into two sections covering written correspondence between CMF and Soviet

women and the political tourism of CMF women to the USSR. The fourth and fifth chapters focus on the CMF's international campaigns: [Chapter 4](#) examines those campaigns with a European focus, while [Chapter 5](#) looks at the group's more global campaigns. [Chapter 4](#) examines the gendered rhetoric and tactics deployed by the committee in its campaigns on the Spanish Civil War and Nazi Germany, while [Chapter 5](#) extends this discussion on the representation of gender into questions about the portrayal of race in CMF campaigns on the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. All these campaigns focused only on specific issues faced by women and the language used to propagandise them was heavily gendered with a focus on motherhood as a unifier. However, rhetoric did come into play in the non-European campaigns that emphasised difference between the predominantly European CMF centre and the subjects of its humanitarian efforts. CMF campaigning on a more micro level, such as national campaigns on the protection of women's right to work, French women's ongoing fight for the vote, and debates around abortion and birth control, is/are the focus of [Chapter 6](#). Finally, the depiction of stereotypically feminine topics and images in committee journals to attract non-politicised women is analysed to understand how far it reflected broader trends in socialist women's rhetoric in this period. The CMF was an innovative Popular Front organisation, which tried (with a level of success) to coordinate women on the left of politics and non-political women against the threat of fascism. It also often deployed heavily gendered language that emphasised women's potentiality for motherhood to attract women to its work. The CMF was a unique, enigmatic movement that utilised a variety of tactics to encourage women to organise against fascism and war when absolute pacifism was no longer the most satisfactory answer to the growing fascist threat.

Notes

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1 The Women of the Comité Mondial des Femmes Contre la Guerre et le Fascisme

The *Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme* (CMF) was primarily directed by four impressive, politically motivated women, all of whom were involved in activist circles. The success of the CMF was reliant on the close collaboration between its activists and an ability to foster national and international contacts. To fully understand the actions and goals of the CMF during its short lifetime, it is necessary to explore the backgrounds, political affiliations, and connections of these four leaders. The international secretary-general of the CMF, Bernadette Cattaneo, was born in Brélévanez in the Côtes-du-Nord, France, on 25 February 1899. She left school at the age of 12 as a result of her family's poverty, but she was heavily influenced by the socialist, anti-clericalist leanings of her teacher there. She spent some time in Rennes engaging in the city's academic community, despite not having a higher education herself. She had moved to Paris by the age of 20 where she met her husband, Jean-Baptiste Cattaneo, an accountant with links to socialist and communist circles. By the end of 1923, Cattaneo and her husband had joined the *Parti communiste français* (PCF) and she immediately engaged herself in the party's work amongst women.¹

By contrast, the early political education of the other three women was heavily influenced by the Dreyfus Affair. Charles Sowerwine has argued that the Dreyfus Affair in France 'began a new era of mass politics, thanks to the growth of mass media', which saw 'the collapse of monarchist hope... [and] the consolidation of the Republic'.² The president of the CMF, Gabrielle Duchêne, was 24 when the Dreyfus Affair began in 1894. Born on 26 February 1870, Duchêne had a comfortably bourgeois upbringing in Paris. She married Achille Duchêne, the prominent landscape architect who designed the grounds of numerous large chateaux, including the water terraces at Blenheim Palace.³ The Duchênes were 'ardent Dreyfusards', who became 'an embarrassment to both family and friends' after Dreyfus' conviction on espionage charges was upheld in 1899.⁴ Michael Marrus has argued that ardent Dreyfusards, who stood for 'justice and the individual', fought for his acquittal 'whatever reasons of state and military prestige stood in the way'.⁵ The Dreyfus Affair introduced Gabrielle Duchêne to a

political activism defined by its mass character and its opposition to injustices perpetrated by the right wing that would form the basis of her activism amongst women.

Charlotte Haldane, the leader of the British section of the CMF and later president of the Women's Committee for Peace and Democracy (the CMF's successor), was born on 27 April 1894 in Sydenham, South-East London, to an American mother and a German-Jewish businessman father. The Dreyfus Affair influenced her early political education, introducing her to the issue of anti-Semitism and making it 'a permanent part of her seemingly protected Edwardian bourgeois world'.⁶ She recounted in her autobiography published in 1949 that she 'knew about anti-Semitism long before [she] learned the facts of life'. By 1906, when French courts had quashed Dreyfus' conviction for good, Haldane was intimately familiar with 'the most dramatic racial and international controversy' of the fin-de-siècle period. She cited this 'impersonal cause' as 'perhaps [the] most significant' in the development of her anti-fascism in the 1930s.⁷ Haldane lived in Antwerp, Belgium, for five years from the age of ten, after which she returned to London as 'an atheist and ardent feminist'.⁸ She was an accomplished journalist and author, who met her husband, the prominent scientist J.B.S. Haldane while undertaking research for her seminal science-fiction dystopia *Man's World* (1926).

Maria Rabaté, the secretary of the French section of the CMF, was also brought up in an atmosphere that was heavily shaped by Dreyfusard politics. She was born in Moncontour in the La Vienne *département* of France on 3 July 1900 to politically active teacher parents. Her earliest political memory was of her father's indignation towards the 'clerical, militarist forces of the past' who had condemned Dreyfus. Rabaté also recalled an occasion when her father instructed her to walk 80 km to listen to the socialist, anti-militarist leader Jean Jaurès speak. She recounted that, as a 'profound' pacifist himself, her father was 'both revolted and overwhelmed' by the announcement of Jaurès' assassination in July 1914.⁹ Like Cattaneo, Rabaté also found some of her early political inspiration from two of her female professors at the *école normale* at Chateauroux which she attended from 1916, particularly regarding pacifism. By 1921, Rabaté had joined the fledgling PCF and the communist *Confédération générale du travail unitaire* (CGTU) to undertake trade union work amongst women. It was at the CGTU national congress in Bordeaux in September 1927 that she met her lifelong companion and collaborator in communist politics, Octave Rabaté. Together, they were a *tour de force* in communist politics in the interwar period and beyond.

These four women all underwent different journeys to political activism but found themselves united in their anti-fascist convictions: Cattaneo and Rabaté were both working class and developed their politics during their schooling, Haldane's origins were bourgeois, but her Jewish heritage influenced her perception of politics from an early age, and Duchêne was

comfortably bourgeois, but she chose to immerse herself in political work after being galvanised by the Dreyfus Affair. Despite their differences, these women became key actors in the CMF in the 1930s precisely because of their political background and relationship with the communist party. This chapter will consider how these women reached the stage of their careers where their paths converged and how their experiences in national and international communist politics influenced the development of the CMF. It will also explore some of the connections held by these women to demonstrate the concrete links between the CMF leadership and other prominent activists of the period.

Experimentations and Engagements with Communism

Charlotte Haldane returned to London from Belgium in 1910, a tumultuous year for the British labour force: the coal miners of South Wales went on strike, as did English seamen, dockers, and railway workers, while the suffragettes were intensifying their campaign for the right to vote.¹⁰ These events were the background to Haldane's feminist and socialist awakening, the two primary ideologies that defined her life and work. She became a journalist, writing for national newspapers including the *Daily Express*. She met her husband in this line of work. She visited the eminent biologist J.B.S. Haldane at the University of Cambridge for an interview and asked him about 'biological sources' for her dystopian novel, *Man's World*.¹¹ They were soon married, but Charlotte felt uncomfortable in the 'overwhelmingly Conservative in politics and orthodox in religion' Trinity College.¹² Both Charlotte and J.B.S. Haldane were long-time socialists with an interest in the USSR and made their first visit to the country in the summer of 1928. By the rise of Nazism on the continent in the early 1930s, the Haldanes were secret communists forging valuable contacts in the international communist movement.

In contrast to Haldane's bourgeois upbringing, Cattaneo and Rabaté had working-class origins. Cattaneo moved to Paris as an adult, frequenting intellectual circles in the city, often spending time in the university district. It was at her job at the *Pharmacie Bailly* on the Rue de Rome that she met her husband and future partner in communist politics, Jean-Baptiste Cattaneo, who was an accountant there. The Cattaneos were a poor family; Bernadette spoke of how, during a particularly trying time financially, she had to work until the day before she gave birth to her first child and returned to work only 11 days later. At the *Pharmacie*, Bernadette was the head of a department, and demanded better treatment of the workers who 'were very exploited there'. When management refused, Cattaneo helped to organise her first strike, numbering around 600 employees.¹³ Both Cattaneo and her husband were dismissed from their posts at the *Pharmacie* in 1925 because of Bernadette's role in the strike agitation. Her involvement in this industrial dispute demonstrated her utility to the French trade union

movement, after which she would be a regular figure in the organisation of strikes in a variety of different industries.

Cattanéo soon joined the CGTU and contributed to its newspaper, *La Vie Ouvrière*. From 1924, she was a member of the *Commission féminine* of the CGTU and became its secretary in 1929. The *Commission féminine* aimed to bring women into the ‘army of social revolution’ by establishing local CGTU women’s committees in France and launching a women’s newspaper entitled *L’Ouvrière*. This paper was created in part because the CGTU thought that its main paper was issuing directives ‘that women workers will not understand’. *L’Ouvrière* spoke to women in a more simplistic tone, with explicitly gendered language to attract the largest possible female audience.¹⁴ Only 8% of CGTU members in 1936 were women. Siân Reynolds has argued that this was due to ‘the culture, vocabulary, working practices and pride in status which so clearly marked ... the CGTU ... [which was] not on the face of it easily accessible to women workers’.¹⁵ While Cattanéo did work amongst women in her role on the *Commission féminine*, she was also closely involved with the general organisation of workers.

Cattanéo organised a variety of strikes during her career, including strikes in 1930 which engaged 20,000 workers from the textile factories of northern France.¹⁶ She also organised the strike at the Bréguet aviation factory in Le Havre during the May Day strikes of 1936, where an impressive 90% of the workforce went on strike.¹⁷ As a result, Cattanéo was often one of the CGTU’s preferred choices ‘when it needed to send a militant’ to ‘animate strike movements in the four corners of France’. Parallel to her role in the trade union movement, Cattanéo had taken an interest in women’s issues in the PCF, a role which would eventually extend to the Comintern. By the time Cattanéo made her first visit to the Soviet Union on the occasion of the 12th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1929, she was the main activist responsible for tackling women’s questions in the PCF. Bernadette Cattanéo was never simply viewed as the ‘wife of’ a party activist by her communist comrades; rather, the Cattanéos shared the burden of much of Bernadette’s political work, although Jean-Baptiste avoided ‘putting himself forward’ into the spotlight.¹⁸ This allowed Bernadette to play a prominent role in the international communist movement which involved much travelling, despite having two young children.

Maria Rabaté’s first political job involved campaigning for the women’s section of the CGTU in the Indre region, during which she met her companion and lifelong collaborator, Octave Rabaté, in 1927. He too was engaged in the communist trade union movement and was promoted to the Executive Committee of the Red International of Labour Unions (Profintern) to coordinate action in Spain and Latin America. Maria Rabaté found herself in a ‘scandalous’ situation soon after meeting her partner: forced to leave her teaching position, she was unmarried, pregnant, an ‘anti-conformist who was very open to feminism’ and consistently dressed provocatively, ‘draped in a black cloak lined with red!’¹⁹ To further exacerbate their situation,

Octave was sought by the French police as a result of his communist agitation, leading the couple to flee to the relative safety of Moscow.

The Rabatés lived in Moscow from February 1930 to November 1931, where Maria performed office work for the Comintern, while Octave continued his Profintern work. Maria avoided falling in with the French émigrés who had relocated to Moscow, preferring instead to live ‘to the maximum amongst the Soviets’. She complimented the ‘revolutionary enthusiasm’ of the Soviet youth, but also complained about how collectivisation had created ‘supply’ problems in the winter of 1930–1931.²⁰ However, Maria often spent long periods separated from Octave because of the international nature of his work, meaning that she was largely responsible for raising her young family; for example, a few days after her initial arrival in the USSR in February 1930, Octave left for Spain to participate in the organisation of a ‘day of metallurgy’.²¹ Eventually, the Rabatés received permission to move the entire family to Barcelona, which Maria credits with allowing her to do an ‘apprenticeship in underground life’, which will be expanded upon later in the chapter.²²

Gabrielle Duchêne’s activist beginnings came when women were still largely barred from participating in politics in Europe. After the political education provided by the Dreyfus Affair, Duchêne made the move into social activism by organising the co-operative *Entr’aide* in 1908, which represented the typically low-income women lingerie and dressmakers of France. Valérie Daly identified Duchêne’s work with *Entr’aide* as the beginning of her ‘long, independent crusade to work for the less fortunate, for which she earned a reputation as a “*bourgeoisie impossible*”’.²³ Her husband, Achille Duchêne, helped to fund the work of *Entr’aide* and was the deputy treasurer of another of her organisations, the *Office français du travail à domicile*.²⁴ It is unknown to what extent Achille knew about or supported his wife’s close relationship with communist activists in the interwar period, but he was central to her early work as a labour activist.

Duchêne soon became involved in feminist activism which would define her work for the rest of her life. In 1913, she was made the president of the labour section of the *Conseil National des Femmes Françaises* (CNFF), and in 1915 joined the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), assuming the role of president of the French section from the outset.²⁵ This marked her first interaction with pacifism which, although consistently fluctuating, was a feature of her personal ideology from this point onwards. Andrée Jouve, a member of the French section of WILPF, described Duchêne’s doctrine as ‘simple: listen to the revolt of the heart against injustice, collect the facts, criticise them, then devote all one’s strength to the struggle against that injustice, which is engendered and perpetuated by life, society, and war’.²⁶ As such, when the Bolshevik Revolution occurred in October 1917, Duchêne hoped that it would ‘sweep away all social injustices and wars’ and create gender and economic equality.²⁷ The intersection of and contradictions between her bourgeois feminism and

these communist sympathies have ensured that Gabrielle Duchêne is one of the WILPF activists of this period most studied by historians.

Duchêne's interest in the social experiment in the USSR was cemented after a visit to the country in 1927 with the CGTU, the communist trade union organisation, in the course of her labour activism. Duchêne's delegation was provided with the best accommodation and was accompanied by a guide to prevent problematic deviations from the itinerary to show a propagandised vision of Soviet life. That is not to say that the veneer did not slip, however. During Duchêne's second trip to the Soviet Union in 1936, she was touring the Soviet 'secret police commune' at Bolshevo, where street children, criminals, and drug addicts (2,200 in 1933) were sent to be rehabilitated and trained as 'skilled craftsmen'.²⁸ However, Duchêne was mistakenly taken to the dormitory for bachelors, 'the worst place' at Bolshevo.²⁹ Her interpreter, Ghilyarevskaya, excused the mistake by claiming that 'it was a dormitory for inmates who had just arrived and who hadn't settled in yet'.³⁰ The group also had the 'bad luck' of meeting someone who could speak French, which led to many 'conversational asides' between Duchêne and the individual that the guides tried to contain. Regardless of these deviations, Duchêne said that 'despite her age, she would stay at Bolshevo'.³¹ Duchêne has been accused by Lorraine Coons of a 'political naiveté which clouded her ability to be objective about Stalin's increased brutalities' because she prioritised women's emancipation above all else. For example, in an article titled 'La Femme en URSS', Duchêne referenced the achievements of the 6,000 women kolkhoz directors but did not mention the failures of Stalin's collectivisation policies in the First Five Year Plan, including the devastating famine from 1932 to 1933.³² Duchêne was the ideal western female intellectual for the Soviet Union: someone who would ignore the less positive aspects of the regime because of the 'gains' made towards women's emancipation.

Cattanéo, Rabaté, and Haldane were all self-described communists by the time that the CMF was founded in August 1934, so what was the nature of Gabrielle Duchêne's personal political ideology? This has been the source of much historiographical debate. Yves Santamaria has argued that Gabrielle Duchêne should be considered a 'crypto-communist' who secretly supported the Soviet regime, while Valérie Daly and Emmanuelle Carle have argued that she should instead be labelled as a fellow-traveller, who 'accepted part of the public programme of the Communist Party, but who was not a member'.³³ Why, despite her obvious links to communists, did Gabrielle Duchêne avoid joining the PCF? Her continued neutrality can be ascribed to three reasons. First, Valérie Daly has claimed that Achille Duchêne was 'little inclined' to finance potentially subversive communist activities due to the couple's bourgeois heritage.³⁴ However, it should be noted that Duchêne was an accomplished public speaker, who was employed to speak by a variety of different organisations and had some personal income and thus was not entirely reliant on her husband. It is therefore

unlikely that her husband's financial support alone would prevent her from joining the PCF.

Second, the PCF's attitude towards women was not always progressive, an issue across left-wing parties in France in this period. In the PCF, the number of women members declined across the 1920s, from 2,600 in 1924 (3 or 4%), to 964 in 1926 (1.7%), and only 200 in 1929 (0.6%). The PCF did not keep membership figures in the 1930s, but there was likely an increase in women members during the Popular Front period.³⁵ However, despite this, Duchêne still supported aspects of communism. She admired the Soviet approach to women's emancipation and identified an attractive camaraderie in communist politics. The belief that the struggle for a communist society would be fought with like-minded individuals across the world 'provided many activists with a sense of purpose and self-assurance', and Duchêne was no exception.³⁶ Nevertheless, the underrepresentation of women was likely a concern.

Third, Duchêne's 'independent temperament' did not suit her to the 'restrictions of an authoritarian party'.³⁷ Despite her support for communist ideals, her independence from political constraints would not be sacrificed; she asserted that

if at the moment, some doctrines satisfy better than others the spirit of progress, it could be allowed... to attach oneself to these doctrines, to make propaganda in their favour, but it is necessary that the faculty to judge, the independence of spirit, the freedom to evolve, is always safeguarded.³⁸

She later argued that it had been her duty to report on the positive aspects of the Soviet Union:

Those who had seen... the Soviet realities and the immense prospects for progress, had the duty, on their return to their country, to unmask the deliberate lies spread about the USSR, to undeceive those who had accepted them, to enlighten the ignorant.³⁹

Duchêne's apparent political neutrality was important precisely because she held leading roles in several bourgeois organisations. WILPF, despite its avowed neutrality, was consistently accused of being a communist auxiliary throughout the interwar period, because of some of its members' links with various national communist parties. Duchêne often tried to separate her politics from her WILPF work, arguing that 'even if I did belong to the Communist Party, it should not be a reason to consider our League an indentured organisation to this party'.⁴⁰ She also pointed out the gulf between WILPF and communist groups, highlighting the 'absolute impossibility of an organisation as bourgeois as ours ever being admitted into the Communist International'.⁴¹ From another perspective, Duchêne's central

position of influence over bourgeois pacifist women could be used by her communist comrades to legitimise Popular Front strategies amongst women from the mid-1930s onwards. Developing concrete links with bourgeois organisations while cultivating relationships with international communists provided new avenues for her work, particularly her anti-fascist activism. Duchêne's role as a prominent bourgeois activist positively affected the CMF's ability to attract non-political members, because she appeared to represent the less politically radical section of the committee and brought a sense of political diversity to the committee.

Conceptions of Anti-Fascism

The seizure of power by the Nazis highlighted the threat to women's rights in Germany and Europe more broadly. Sandi Cooper has suggested that Gabrielle Duchêne was 'clearsighted from the beginning' about the threat to women posed by German fascism, evoking 'mature peace *realpolitik*' by recognising the need to actively oppose fascist dictatorships.⁴² Duchêne believed that the capitalist 'crusade' against Soviet communism had led to 'the introduction and development of fascism'.⁴³ Like many on the left, she believed that fascism harkened the death of the capitalist system; she argued that capitalism would 'not abdicate power ... it will defend itself to the end ... and resort to the worst means to prolong its existence', referring to the discrimination, violence, and militarism of the Nazi party.⁴⁴ These statements attracted criticism from more conservative sections of WILPF; the British section labelled her a 'premature anti-fascist', and she bemoaned the British section's 'obstructionist policies' against her anti-fascist ideology in return.⁴⁵

Duchêne first became involved in anti-fascist activism in 1932 with the Amsterdam Congress against the Imperialist War, during which she read Romain Rolland's 'Declaration to the World Congress' in his absence. In front of 2,200 delegates, Duchêne evoked Rolland's belief that this anti-war demonstration should eschew party politics, a stance she would adopt for the CMF: 'to deploy the great flag of the united front: Above all parties!'⁴⁶ However, plans for a women's anti-fascist congress originated first with Duchêne and WILPF and not the Comintern. WILPF made enquiries about convening an anti-fascist congress of women's organisations for November 1933. Many women's organisations declined to attend because they did not want to support a meeting that was 'definitely directed against one political system'. Despite a 'need for concerted action amongst women to defend their hard-won rights', and the fact that 'the personal sympathies of all... [were] opposed to [fascism]', maintaining the image of political neutrality was the main factor in declining.⁴⁷ This put an end to WILPF's women's anti-fascist meeting. Thus, Gabrielle Duchêne and an 'ad hoc committee of which the nucleus was to be elected among Paris women', including Bernadette Cattaneo, decided to organise their own meeting, based on individual participation.⁴⁸

Charlotte Haldane initially opposed Nazism because of her religious background and parentage: her father was a German Jew, and she had been aware of the injustices of anti-Semitism since her youth. However, her feminist ideology began to influence her feelings about fascism; Hurlley and Russel have argued that Haldane ‘could not find sympathy for a movement which pursued white macho male bonding, defended “creative nihilism” and denied women the power increasingly achieved in the West following the rise of the New Woman, independent and assertive’.⁴⁹ She despised the perpetuation of gender and race differences by fascist politicians, who emphasised a return to the traditional roles of women in the home. Further, Haldane found the Chamberlain government’s ‘fraternisation’ with German and Italian fascists abhorrent and, spurred by the British government’s policy of non-intervention in the Spanish Civil War, would travel to Paris to recruit members for the International Brigades.⁵⁰

Interestingly, Maria Rabaté had participated in no substantive anti-fascist activism before she was ‘parachuted’ into her role as the secretary of the French section of the CMF. This was because, until December 1932, the Rabaté family still resided in Spain, continuing Octave’s Profintern work in the country. Further, on their return, they were sent by the PCF to Bordeaux, far from the Parisian hotbed of anti-fascist activism, where Octave became the secretary of the CGTU for South-West France, a region stretching from Gironde to Gers. Maria was commissioned by the PCF to work amongst women in the area, and it was here that she underwent an apprenticeship in oration, by agitating amongst the workers at the factories in Bordeaux and Bègles.⁵¹ It was only in February 1935 that the family permanently moved to Paris at the request of Henri Barbusse, situating them in the European anti-fascist capital of the period. Octave had been summoned to work in the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement, while Maria was made the president of the French section of the CMF by the PCF leader Jacques Duclos.⁵² Until 1934, Maria Rabaté was primarily concerned with trade union work amongst women; while the rise of fascism was undoubtedly a concern for her, her role as prescribed by the party demanded that she focus on domestic labour issues until preparations for a women’s anti-fascist movement had been made.

National and International Activist Connections

Each of the CMF leaders held impressive contacts useful for the development and spread of their committee. Before discussing this mass of connections, it is necessary to understand the nature of the relationships between the four women examined in this chapter. For the most part, there is little evidence of contact between most of the women before the women’s anti-fascist congress in 1934. Certainly, it is clear that Maria Rabaté and Charlotte Haldane were isolated from Duchêne and Cattaneo in Paris; Haldane, based in London, had not collaborated on any form of activism with her

French counterparts before 1934 at the earliest. Rabaté apparently had no contact with Duchêne in the period before 1934, primarily because she lived outside of France and then, on her return, was stationed in a region far from the Parisian centre. However, by the end of the 1920s, Cattaneo was heading the *Commission féminine* of the PCF with Rabaté and other 'motivated and efficient militants', including Cilly Vassart (the wife of PCF Secretary Albert Vassart).⁵³ Rabaté likely interacted with Cattaneo during CGTU and PCF conferences before 1934, although in the course of their daily work, they would not have interacted, as each was responsible for regions at opposite ends of France. Similarly, Duchêne and Cattaneo crossed paths on occasion. Duchêne's labour activism frequently put her into contact with Cattaneo's CGTU, even participating in a CGTU visit to the USSR for the 10th anniversary celebrations for the Bolshevik Revolution in 1927. Both women were based in Paris, worked in labour activism, and Cattaneo was on the list of Parisian women that Duchêne compiled to help convene an anti-fascist congress, establishing some level of prior relationship.

Each of the leaders of the CMF was well-connected in the communist and activist spheres. Cattaneo was particularly close to a variety of women's activists across Europe. According to Cattaneo, it was she who obtained the participation of the Belgian socialist women, headed by Isabelle Blume, in the CMF. Blume has been praised for understanding the rise of fascism and for 'helping her victims and alerting politicians about the risks' for democracy.⁵⁴ She would eventually be expelled from the *Parti ouvrier belge* (POB) in 1951 for her involvement with the Soviet-controlled World Peace Council, joining the *Parti communiste de Belgique* (PCB) in 1961.⁵⁵ Blume respected her communist colleagues in the CMF, allowing a collaboration that resulted in a strong Belgian anti-fascist movement. Belgian socialists were a key part of the CMF, as communist women felt a lack of support from their party in the movement. They asked the Party to raise 'the question of the significance, methods, and forms of work of the international women's anti-fascist movement' in the broader PCB and emphasised the need to 'organise the preparation of cadres for the anti-fascist women's movement' to help strengthen communist influence in the committee.⁵⁶ Cattaneo also visited Belgium on numerous occasions to aid the development of the national section there, collaborating with women of all parties.

Cattaneo also visited Spain and met with Spanish communist women. On one visit, with Isabelle Blume and other socialist women, the delegates broadcast an appeal for action on Radio Madrid; they argued that 'the time for words has passed [and] the time for actions has arrived' to protect Spain, 'the living and bleeding parapet against fascism'.⁵⁷ Cattaneo also attended congresses in Barcelona and Valencia in 1938 and held meetings on her return to influence public opinion on the 'desperate situation of a Spain strangled by non-intervention'.⁵⁸ Cattaneo went to Spain four times in total during the Civil War, with her final visit in 1938 intended to counter 'Trotskyist intrigues amongst women'.⁵⁹ Further, Cattaneo visited

the socialist deputy Margarita Nelken, who had asked for her assistance at a socialist meeting. Cattanéo employed her experience at this meeting to demonstrate the importance of working with all parties on the Republican side. In an article for *Femmes dans l'action mondiale*, she acknowledged that a close relationship between socialists and communists was unique to Spain and was necessary for the Republics' survival; Cattanéo saw that 'fraternity is great in Spain between sincere combatants of the same cause and that it greatly facilitates the common task – the fight against the main enemy: fascism'.⁶⁰ She thus reinforced the Popular Front ideology that ensured the success of the CMF by working with prominent socialists across borders on anti-fascist topics of international concern.

Cattanéo also worked closely with the Spanish communist politician Dolores Ibárruri while she was in Spain. Ibárruri (also known by the moniker 'La Pasionaria') had been active in communist politics from 1920.⁶¹ Ernest Hemingway immortalised her in his Spanish Civil War novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, stating that 'in her voice you could tell the truth of what she said... goodness and truth shine from her as from a true saint of the people. Not for nothing is she called La Pasionaria'.⁶² Cattanéo herself wrote that Ibárruri was 'the soul' of the Republican cause and 'a sublime heroine. In front of her, even enemies are obliged to bow'.⁶³ Ibárruri had been involved with anti-fascist activism from the early 1930s and had organised over 100,000 women into anti-fascist committees across Spain. Despite Ibárruri's work with women, Lisa Lines has characterised her feminism as 'routine, limited [and] subordinated to larger aims', preferring to focus instead on the war and international communism.⁶⁴ Ibárruri's goals were similar to those of Bernadette Cattanéo, who, while certainly being concerned about women's place in society, focused more on questions of economic parity and anti-fascist activism. Nevertheless, Ibárruri still had 'a powerful effect on Spanish women' in her role as the 'most prominent' Spanish communist leader of the period. Her visibility in Spanish politics made her an icon for ordinary Spanish women; she was described as 'strong, confident and dominant', deciding party policy, making visits to the front to keep morale high, and serving as a deputy in the Republican parliament throughout the conflict.⁶⁵

Cattanéo travelled with Ibárruri across war-torn Spain numerous times. They visited the headquarters of the *Partido Comunista de España* (PCE), including Ibárruri's office and the offices of the women's section. In addition, they visited a '*Pro Infancia*' children's home where orphans and the children of anti-fascist fighters resided. They also toured a women's prison in which the wives and relatives of fascist generals and some former aristocrats who had sided with Franco were imprisoned, including the Comtesse of Salvatierra and the Duchess of Victoria.⁶⁶ After the fascist triumph in Spain in March 1939, Ibárruri was exiled to the Soviet Union, where she worked for the Comintern until its dissolution in 1943. She remained in the Soviet Union until 1977 when she returned to Spain following Franco's death and became a member of parliament for the Asturias.

Cattané was also a frequent guest of the Soviet government in Moscow, maintaining relationships with high-level Bolshevik cadres and Comintern representatives. She was even considered important enough in the international communist movement to write a short autobiography at the behest of the Comintern.⁶⁷ Similarly, it was the leader of the Comintern, Georgi Dimitrov, who approached her in 1934 about launching a congress of women against war, according to Cattané.⁶⁸ Cattané's role in the women's section of the Comintern also provided her with the opportunity to interact with other prominent communist internationalists: for example, she hosted the Czech communist leader Bohumir Šmeral and the Italian Palmiro Togliatti at her home in Paris.⁶⁹ In addition, she had a close relationship with Elena Stasova, the head of International Red Aid (MOPR), which will be explored further in [Chapter 3](#).

Conversely, Duchêne's most important connections were with feminist pacifist activists in WILPF. However, Duchêne was viewed as controversial by some WILPF members and was often accused of harbouring communist sympathies; for example, Elisabeth Waern-Bugge of the Swedish section wrote to the International Executive Committee of WILPF, accusing Duchêne of secretly being a communist because of her links to the CMF. However, the Executive Committee was eager to refute this accusation. The international secretary, Emily Greene Balch, chastised Waern-Bugge, writing in response that

What we as chairman and honorary secretary of the W.I.L. cannot admit is your allusion to Madame Duchêne pretending not to be a communist. If Madame Duchêne says that she is not a member of the communist party, she is absolutely to be believed... She has never made a secret of her sympathy with Soviet Russia, and if she is more lenient to the faults that are certainly committed there, it is because she suffers more intensely under the faults that the political and economic regime under which we are living commits.⁷⁰

Greene Balch further explained that she wanted to defend 'Madame Duchêne's sincere, continuous, and self-sacrificing work for peace', but that she did not think it 'the case that the League allows her to be its dictator', as Waern-Bugge had insinuated.⁷¹ Duchêne complained to Gertrud Baer that

whether our dear international feminist tyrants like it or not, unity is making progress and 'with them or without them, or even against them', as the classical phrase has it. Unity among women will come about, it is to be hoped, if not among the leaders, then at least in the ranks.⁷²

Adding fuel to the fire, Duchêne insisted that French members of WILPF must not 'display open hostility' to the CMF, but this stimulated fear amongst WILPF members that the League was increasingly coming under

political influence and was thus ‘in danger of losing its own voice’.⁷³ Certain local sections in France began to openly question Duchêne’s leadership as a result. Norman Ingram has claimed that it was in this period that Duchêne developed ‘a very rigid idea of what constituted proper action for peace, and her attitude to the French section gradually became one of rule by fiat’.⁷⁴ In particular, she clashed often with the Lyon section over her role in the CMF. The Lyon group was one of the largest in France, with around 300 members out of a total of 1,400 across France. On 18 March 1936, Duchêne received a letter from the Lyon section which accused her of using her role as the president to quash dissent and asserted its independence from the larger French section of WILPF: ‘Your tone suffocates everyone... Your attitude both outrages and saddens us. We are a large enough group to direct ourselves’.⁷⁵ On 10 June 1936, Duchêne officially excluded all members who sympathised with the arguments of the Lyon group from the French national section, justifying her actions by publicly accusing them of undermining WILPF’s credibility in France. She was supported in her decision by the two international vice-presidents of the League, Clara Ragaz and Gertrud Baer; Baer wrote to Duchêne that she was ‘very interested to find out that you can now expel the “phenomena” of Lyon and others. It is really necessary, and you will see that you will benefit from this decision’.⁷⁶ By the outbreak of war in 1939, more than two-fifths of French WILPF members had resigned in protest at Duchêne’s authoritarianism, leaving the small French national section much weaker.⁷⁷

Lorraine Coons has emphasised how contradictory Duchêne’s leadership was; she ‘continually called for openness and discussion in the [international] WILPF’ but ‘in her own national section, become intolerant of any dissent within the rank and file’.⁷⁸ Similarly, Norman Ingram has argued that because of Duchêne’s ‘Stalinisation’, the French section lost its ‘inherently new, exciting, innovative and unique... feminist contribution to peace’ by the end of the 1930s.⁷⁹ Emily Greene Balch later recalled that Duchêne

had asked her directly whether she thought the Ligue would be better without the French Section... [Balch] replied that she had arrived, with great pain, at the conclusion that G. Duchêne was hampered in her work [with the CMF] by her connection with the WILPF, and that the WILPF found its work made difficult by G. Duchêne.⁸⁰

Despite these controversies, Duchêne remained the president of both the CMF and the French section of WILPF, maintaining control of WILPF until she died in 1954.

Charlotte Haldane was a frequent traveller during the interwar period and made a multitude of connections across the globe in the course of her journalism and communist activism. She and J.B.S. Haldane often visited the Soviet Union, where she worked closely with agents of the Comintern. However, Haldane’s most important assignment was arguably her work in China

during the Second Sino-Japanese War. According to Haldane, she initially met with Chinese representatives at the CMF's Marseille congress in 1938, after she had made a speech 'about the heroism and stoicism of the women of Spain'. Haldane claimed that she was approached by a Chinese delegate who personally asked her to investigate the impact of the war in China:

'If you would only do for the women of China what you have done for the women of Spain. If you would only help us, too'. I answered that I would be happy to do anything in my power to help them. 'Would you be willing to come to China?' she asked. 'Certainly', I replied, 'if I were invited'.⁸¹

Whether the exchange between Haldane and a Chinese delegate occurred is unknown; Chinese delegates attended the Marseille congress in 1938, making such a conversation possible, and one, Loh Tsei, gave a talk on the trauma faced by Chinese women under Japanese aggression, which, she said, would 'surpass the imagination of civilised people'.⁸² Regardless, Haldane did visit China, carrying messages from the British Labour leader Clement Atlee and the Liberal leader Sir Archibald Sinclair to Chiang Kai-Shek. Further, she also met with many prominent Chinese communists, Madame Sun Yat-sen, and the leaders of Chiang-Kai Shek's party, the Kuomintang, who had a tenuous 'alliance' with the communists against the Japanese invasion.⁸³

Haldane also visited Spain on numerous occasions during the Civil War, acting as an interpreter for various important guests during her visits. For example, in 1938, she travelled to Spain as an interpreter for the American singer and actor Paul Robeson and his wife Eslanda. During this visit, Robeson sang for International Brigade volunteers, visited various towns and cities close to the fighting, and met with communist activists, leading the Press in the United States to question his political allegiances. These meetings were very often facilitated by Charlotte Haldane using her contacts; she set up meetings between Robeson, Robert Minor and Earl Browder, both leaders of the United States Communist Party (CPUSA), and William Rust, the editor of the British *Daily Worker* newspaper.⁸⁴ She also witnessed the effects of the bombing of Madrid with Eslanda Robeson, which brought home for both of them the 'sordid wickedness of modern aerial warfare on defenceless civilians'.⁸⁵

Haldane was also instructed by the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) to go to Paris in March 1937 to meet groups of recruits for the International Brigades, spending three months responsible for the British Battalion. She took great pride in her political work there, despite the conflicts that her bourgeois background often caused between her and other party cadres. She turned up in Paris in a 'fur coat', which was considered inappropriate by her French contact, who also described her lipstick as 'a disgusting bourgeois habit'.⁸⁶ However, Haldane was impressed by her interactions with the women of the PCF, comparing them favourably to her British comrades; she stated that the French communist women were 'charming, intelligent,

well-dressed and obviously had a lot of money to spend'. She was particularly envious of their 'expensive and professionally produced women's paper', which was politically more subtle than its British equivalent⁸⁷

Maria Rabaté, on the other hand, seemingly had fewer prominent contacts in the activist circles she frequented than the other three women. Perhaps, this is because Rabaté was engaged in underground activist work before her return to France at the end of 1932, specifically facilitating the entrance of communists into Spain. This was brief work, only occasionally lasting long enough for Rabaté to form useful contacts. One such example is the work that she undertook for Ramón Casanellas and his partner, Maroussia Fortuss (also known as Maria Fortus). Casanellas was a Spanish communist and one of the assassins of Eduardo Dato, the president of the Spanish Council of Ministers, in 1921, after which he escaped to the USSR. Fortuss was a Ukrainian woman whom Casanellas first met in Moscow in 1919, and who would become an NKVD agent in Spain during the Civil War, using the identity of the Uruguayan Julia Jiménez Cárdenas.⁸⁸

Rabaté's two most important missions in Spain were for Casanellas and Fortuss; Casanellas had returned to Spain in 1931 to reorganise the PCE and stand as the party's electoral candidate in Barcelona, and Rabaté was charged with securing Fortuss on her arrival and delivering her safely to Casanellas.⁸⁹ No one was sure of the time or place of Fortuss' arrival, with the only useful information being 'soon, on the Ramblas'. Rabaté spotted Fortuss on the third day of waiting, and quickly sowed confusion in any possible followers by getting into a taxi with Fortuss, only to immediately leave through the opposite door and enter a second vehicle, which sped away quickly.⁹⁰ The second mission involved delivering Casanellas to a Comintern contact. Casanellas arrived at the Rabaté lodgings in June 1932 carrying a white cane in hand and wearing 'black glasses fitting his nose', posing as a blind man to avoid detection by the police. Rabaté's job was to procure a taxi from the Viaducto de Vallcarca and accompany Casanellas to the flat of a German Comintern delegate, known as Phillipe, where Rabaté left him, 'mission accomplished'.⁹¹

It is also important to briefly note that Rabaté also held contacts in the PCF through her work amongst women in France in the 1920s. In fact, Rabaté even claimed that it was her relationship with PCF politician Jacques Duclos which led to her appointment as the secretary of the French section of the CMF. Duclos and Octave Rabaté had also worked together in Spain for two years from December 1930 strengthening the PCE and strictly enforcing the Comintern's 'class against class' policy, further reinforcing the connections between the Rabaté family and Jacques Duclos.⁹²

Conclusion

The CMF and its work were defined by the women who ran it; despite the Comintern's role in founding and funding the group, it was the leaders who shaped the policies of the organisation and who decided the ideologies it

was shaped by. These women were all influenced in their politics and ideologies by the prominent political issues of the early twentieth century, particularly the Dreyfus Affair, which provided the base for their anti-fascist activism in the 1930s. Beyond this, the promises of equality of class and gender made during the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 appealed to Haldane, Cattané, and Rabaté to the extent that they joined the communist parties in their countries, while Duchêne worked closely with communists in many aspects of her activism.

The organisation of the CMF was a collaborative effort, which is perhaps the most important feature of the CMF's hierarchical structure. Duchêne and Cattané acted as the president and secretary of the international committee, while Rabaté and Haldane represented their respective national sections. However, each woman played important roles in the group and the coordination of women's anti-fascist activism in general. The feminist pacifist Andrée Jouve labelled the CMF as the 'precursor of the united action' of the Popular Front, highlighting Duchêne's 'incessant work' and 'series of intelligent and opportune initiatives' for the committee's success.⁹³ Rabaté praised Duchêne and Cattané for their roles in the CMF: for her, Duchêne was 'a profoundly honest, sincere woman' who was 'pro-Soviet' and 'devoted all her time to the pacifist and anti-fascist movement', making her the perfect candidate for the presidency of the committee. Cattané, however, was 'a good journalist, speaker, agitator. And... she enjoyed the full confidence of the Communist Party and of the Comintern'.⁹⁴ Cattané's work in the CMF reflected these characteristics; she was the editor of the French section of the CMF's journal, *Femmes dans l'action mondiale*, she helped to orchestrate aid campaigns for victims of fascism and imperialism in Spain, Germany, and China, and she served as a liaison between the CMF and the Comintern. Duchêne represented the CMF publicly, and thus linked it to her other endeavours, providing the committee with a level of legitimacy and confirming the idea that the CMF was open to all women 'regardless of party'. That is not to say that she did not participate in the types of work Cattané was doing and that Cattané was also not an important figurehead. In addition, Haldane and Rabaté were intimately involved with the journals of their national sections too and were integral for maintaining links with women across Britain and France, respectively.

However, the contacts and connections held by CMF leaders across various spheres of activism in the interwar period were perhaps most integral for the committee's success; they were all closely connected to representatives of the communist, feminist, and pacifist movements and utilised these contacts during the course of their work in the CMF. Despite not being engaged in any significant international work with one another in the period before the CMF was founded, Duchêne, Cattané, Rabaté, and Haldane were chosen to work together to coordinate their anti-fascist activism by the Comintern. It was their external connections that enriched the CMF's work the most. Cattané's links with communist and socialist women alike legitimised the

CMF as a Popular Front movement, while her relationship with communist leaders across Europe, including Dolores Ibárruri, Elena Stasova, and Georgi Dimitrov, gave the CMF a sense of importance. Duchêne's feminist and pacifist connections also provided the committee with legitimacy from another perspective, allowing the CMF to present itself as a movement that was open to all regardless of party affiliation. However, her comrades in WILPF were not always accepting of her anti-fascist activism, with women in both the French and the international bodies raising concerns about her work with known communists. Rabaté was involved with clandestine work in Moscow and Spain before her return to France and role in the CMF, while Haldane's journalistic and academic connections allowed her to conduct CMF business in person as far away as China.

These activists shared the responsibilities of the CMF, working together to build an organisation at the behest of the Comintern, with the explicit goal of attracting women of all parties to struggle against fascism. Cattaneo, Rabaté, and Haldane had more freedom to hold an active role in the CMF than Duchêne, who already held leadership roles in other international organisations, and could not commit herself to CMF work in the same way. The divergent careers of each woman in activism and politics provided them with the tools to effectively create an organisation that allowed women to implement solutions against the fascist menace, which had a significant membership in France at least. They worked in tandem under the guidance of the Comintern, to create a women's anti-fascist organisation that embraced Popular Front ideals, while also encouraging non-political women to consider the benefits of supporting communism.

To conclude, I want to briefly mention the trajectory of the leaders of the CMF following the committee's dissolution during the Second World War. Bernadette Cattaneo resigned from the PCF and renounced her party work amongst women in October 1939, citing the Nazi-Soviet Pact for her decision. Cattaneo explained her decision in *Le Populaire*:

It is impossible for me... to understand a policy which extends a hand to the aggressor and makes 'friendship pacts' with Hitler. I cannot accept that Hitler has been presented to us as a champion of order in Europe, while he has continued to be a constant threat to everyone. I cannot, therefore, follow those who defend such a policy, and I remain convinced that we will not truly have peace until we have destroyed fascism.⁹⁵

She left Paris, moving to Moissac in the South of France with her husband where she helped Jewish children of the *Centre des éclaireurs israélites*, a Jewish scouting organisation, during the war. Bernadette and her husband returned to Paris after the war but following his death in 1953, Bernadette moved to La Penne-sur-Huveaune near Marseille, where she stayed until her own death in 1963. After Cattaneo's break with the PCF in 1939, she rejected

activism of any sort, living a comparatively quiet life to the one she had led during the interwar period.⁹⁶

Gabrielle Duchêne also left Paris after the outbreak of the Second World War, but immediately lost track of her family in the ‘mass exodus’ of people fleeing the German advance. Duchêne’s anti-fascist activities had made her a potential target for arrest, and she may have been ‘wanted by the Gestapo’.⁹⁷ Her family returned to Paris during the war, while Gabrielle stayed in the South of France, residing in Tarn and Aix-en-Provence primarily. She returned to Paris after the war in 1945.⁹⁸ Duchêne remained engaged in women’s activism until her death in August 1954 at the age of 84, at which time she still held the role of President of the French section of WILPF.

Charlotte Haldane spent much of the war as a journalist, visiting the Soviet Union and publishing a positive account of this time in the travel diary *Russian Newsreel*. However, this trip shattered the idealised image of the Soviet state that she had; she recalled that when she realised that the Soviet Union had hidden the devastating effect of the Blitz on British citizens from its people, it ‘brought home to me, speedily, and sharply, the effects of their censorship’. She also saw the poverty of the Soviet peasantry for the first time when she witnessed 200 peasants carrying ‘primitive agricultural implements’ and a ‘hunk of bread’. This image of poverty was contrary to what was ‘transmitted abroad by VOKS [the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries] for foreign propaganda purposes’, and she recounted that the scene she had ‘just witnessed... seemed to mock my facile and naïve optimism, my wishful dreaming, and to accuse me of bearing false witness to my own people’. Haldane stated that, even before her return to London, she knew that she would ‘cast off [the] physical burden’ and end her relationship with the CPGB. When she related her desire to leave the party on her return from the USSR to her husband J.B.S. Haldane, they split ‘without acrimony’ due to his ‘disbelief and opposition’ to her experiences in the Soviet Union.⁹⁹ She died in 1969, 20 years after the publication of her anti-Soviet memoir, *Truth Will Out*.

Maria Rabaté’s post-CMF career was perhaps the most eventful of the four. The Rabaté family were on holiday in Isere when they received news of the Nazi-Soviet Pact. They were confused by the events, but inherently trusted the Soviet Union and its actions. Octave was soon mobilised into the French army, and Maria began to establish links between communists who had been forced underground and organised the defence of communists who had been imprisoned. Maria was approached by the leaders of the PCF in exile and asked to go to Angoulême, where she would continue to re-establish links between local communist activists. Octave was eventually arrested by the Nazis and sent to the Mauthausen concentration camp, after which Maria left her children with her mother and worked clandestinely in Paris.¹⁰⁰ Until the liberation of Paris in August 1944, Maria was a member of the Résistance, responsible for co-ordinating the movement in several

départements in Northern France: Seine-Maritime, Eure, Eure-et-Loire, Calvados, Manche, and Oise-et-Somme. She was charged with mobilising women against the Germans by organising petitions on issues of food, heating, wages, and working conditions and by training women to help resistance fighters and make identity papers. By May 1943, Rabaté was the joint head of the women's committees for the entire Northern Zone with Claudine Chomat.¹⁰¹

After the war, Rabaté sat on the Parisian Committee of National Liberation and became a candidate for the fourteenth arrondissement to the Provisional Municipal Assembly. This was just the beginning of her governmental career, after which she sat on the Paris City Council and became the vice-president of the Seine General Council. In 1947, she was elected as a communist deputy to the National Assembly for the Seine region and was re-elected to government in 1951 and 1956, after which she was defeated by the Gaullist candidate.¹⁰² She served on committees that considered issues surrounding the family, population, public health, reconstruction and war damage, and justice, and was involved 'passionately' with the issue of adoptions, successfully lobbying for a bill to relax the conditions for adoption which left so many children without a family after the war.¹⁰³ She was well-known for remaining close to the people in her constituency and was labelled as 'a bitter Pasionaria from the Place Maubert, Montrouge and other places in the Paris Rive-Gauche' by the far-right politician Jacques Isorni.¹⁰⁴ Rabaté retired from politics after 1958 and died in 1985 at the age of 85.

Notes

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2 Sites of Anti-Fascist Collaboration and Exchange

CMF Congresses

Congresses were one of the most valuable tools for international activist organisations in the interwar period as spaces in which individuals could collaborate, exchange knowledge, create agendas, and coordinate action across borders in a way that in everyday work they would not. To cite Ruth Craggs and Martin Mahoney, congresses were ‘key sites of knowledge production... [which] provide opportunities for the performance of power and protest’ and contribute to the ‘global mobility of knowledge’.¹ For women activists in the interwar period in particular, congresses provided the opportunity to engage with other women who often subscribed to similar ideologies and who were concerned by the same issues, as well as allowing women who were politically disenfranchised to work beyond the boundaries they were confined to at home. International women’s congresses in this period were complex and often contradictory events, defined by celebratory feelings of fraternity, as well as conflict between women of different nationalities.² However, the international nature of these meetings meant that bourgeois women made up the majority of delegates, creating a significant underrepresentation of working women who did not have the financial means to travel or an education in languages necessary for effective communication.

The *Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme* used this activist tactic to stimulate exchanges of information between its members across the globe, and as a vehicle for propaganda at which Soviet communism was praised throughout. Only two international congresses took place during the CMF’s short existence, while a third was planned for the end of 1939, but cancelled due to the outbreak of the Second World War. The congresses in Paris in 1934, Marseille in 1938, and the planned meeting in Cuba in 1939 demonstrated the practical dynamics that existed between national sections of the CMF, in addition to acting as a public record for the committee’s shifting priorities throughout the latter half of the 1930s in response to the worsening international situation. CMF international congresses reflected the goals of the group and its leaders, not only in terms of the content of the speeches given, but also in terms of the planning, design, structure, and symbols of the meeting. Even the decoration of the venue

served a purpose in communicating the principles underpinning the committee at a given time to participants and observers. For example, the committee utilised congress slogans based on pacifist, feminist, and socialist rhetoric to set expectations how the group's aims would be formulated from the opening moments of the first meeting in 1934. Congresses allowed national sections and individual women to collaborate in a way that they would not usually be able to in their daily work. They also provided limited opportunity for some working-class and non-Western women to interact with prominent female activists. However, both geographical obstacles and traditional barriers of class, race, or nationality prevented true social and national diversity at CMF meetings, in a similar manner to other international women's congresses of the time.

This chapter will expose the ways in which the CMF used transnational activism to hold congresses in which communist, anti-fascist, and feminist ideologies intersected (and sometimes clashed). I will utilise the 'mechanisms of consensus-making' identified by Vanessa Lincoln Lambert in her analysis of the international peace congresses held between 1843 and 1851 as a framework for my examination of CMF congresses.³ The planning, organisation, and content mechanisms of these meetings will be analysed through congress appeals, delegate statistics, transcripts of delegate speeches, and newspaper reports to uncover how the CMF presented itself to its members, the media, and the public during these highly publicised events. Further, this chapter will consider how the committee deployed propaganda to attract new members and spread communist influence among women on an international level. These congresses also provide us with a unique opportunity to understand how women themselves comprehended the significant issues of the 1930s, and how left-wing politics influenced their experiences and perceptions of the looming threats of the period.

Congress Appeals

Congress appeals were key to expanding the influence of the CMF. Appeals for participation in meetings, protests, or other activist events could take the form of letters, pamphlets, or posters, and are key sources of information that can help examine the work of an international organisation like the CMF. These documents were crucial for attracting support and participation, but they also demonstrated who the targets of these appeals were, as well as who was excluded. Appeals for the founding congress of the CMF in 1934 were intentionally inclusive, encouraging women from all ages, backgrounds, and employments to contribute their strength to a meeting against the economic and human costs of fascism and war: the 'young and old, mothers, daughters, housewives [and] women workers in all trades and professions' were implored to join with other similarly minded women in a united front against the looming threat of violence.⁴ This inclusivity served two purposes: first, it targeted the largest number of women possible, thus

ensuring that the meeting would be numerically successful, and second, it fulfilled the fledgling committee's claim to be 'above parties' in that women were not sought nor excluded based on their political affiliation. However, appeals for the later congresses targeted women who had, until that point, avoided declaring their anti-fascist sentiment despite holding reservations about the pervasiveness of the ideology. For the Marseille congress in 1938, the committee appealed to '*Femmes du monde entier*' and utilised the militarism occurring in China, Ethiopia, Spain, and Austria because of 'fascism' to encourage unorganised women to attend the congress and hopefully become members.⁵

The leaders of the CMF were keen to draw upon their international contacts to ensure the success of the 1934 Paris congress, engaging them not only as speakers (as I will discuss later in this chapter), but also as signatories of the committee's appeals. Citing the names of famous women activists and non-activists was a legitimising strategy for women's organisations in the interwar period. The support of well-known individuals could draw public and media attention, highlight the seriousness of the cause, and influence women to become congress delegates or otherwise join local or national branches of an organisation. The CMF utilised this strategy often in many aspects of its work, including congress appeals. For example, 71 prominent British women were asked to sign a manifesto entitled 'To the Women of Britain' before the 1934 congress encouraging British women to be delegates to the meeting, although it is unknown how many of the women approached by the committee actually put their name to it.⁶ However, the variety of women asked to contribute is significant in itself. Famous women from different social and political backgrounds were invited to sign this appeal: for example, alongside Charlotte Haldane (who was not yet involved in the leadership of the British section of the CMF), the famous suffragette Emmeline Pethwick-Lawrence and the highly respected Anglo-Irish activist Charlotte Despard were all approached to legitimise the appeal. The document names prominent women from a wide variety of political backgrounds, including socialists, communists, cooperative women, and those without political affiliation. The committee also sought the signatures of novelists, politicians, activists, society women, and celebrities to demonstrate the foreseen diversity of the congress and to influence women to commit themselves to anti-fascism. Among those who were approached were actress Madeleine Carroll, novelists Virginia Woolf and Beatrix Potter, and theatre actress Flora Robson. These types of women were courted to generate publicity among the popular press to extend the reach of congress appeals.⁷

The French section often used this tactic to provide its appeals with authority. For example, a French congress appeal in 1934 entitled '*pour la défense des femmes contre le fascisme*' bore the names of Charlotte Despard, the British MP Ellen Wilkinson, and the peace activist Lilla Fenner Brockway among other prominent women activists.⁸ Another appeal authored by the French section for the congress entitled '*Aux femmes de*

tous les pays!' was signed by a diverse group of European women of prominence, including the French novelist Claire Charles-Géniaux, the French journalist Andrée Viollis, the British novelist Carmel Haden-Guest, and the Swedish academic Elin Wägner, highlighting the international character of the upcoming meeting.⁹

Appeals created for the 1938 congress continued to deploy this strategy for garnering attention; Ellen Wilkinson and Charlotte Despard again endorsed the meeting as members of the *Comité d'honneur*, as did Madeleine Rolland, the daughter of Romain Rolland, the Swiss peace activist Dr Gertrud Woker, and Carmel Haden-Guest. Despite being overwhelmingly European, at least one woman from each continent was represented on the *Comité d'honneur*: Australian feminist playwright Marguerite Dale, Egyptian feminist activist Esther Fahmy Wissa, Uruguayan feminist leader Dr Paulina Luisi, Syrian president of the Arab Feminist Union A. Nucho, American feminists Emily Greene Balch, Carrie Chapman Catt, Mary van Kleeck, and Joséphine Schain, Indian women's activist Shareefa Hamid Ali, and 'M. de Léon' from Venezuela all lent legitimacy to the committee's status as an international women's organisation.¹⁰

CMF appeals were carefully constructed linguistically, drawing upon the language of gender, class, and violence to underscore the seriousness of the international situation. These appeals often positioned the target audience (working-class women) against aggressive, upper-class fascist warmongers, emphasising the gendered impact of fascists in power. The *'Aux femmes de tous les pays!'* appeal is an excellent example of how the committee deployed such language. This document focused on the economic and human expense of the intensifying arms race; dramatic and violent language articulated how privileged militarists in fascist societies used 'violence to further subjugate [women] and make us servants mobilised for their warlike purposes' and how this fascist violence could be exported to democratic nations at any moment.¹¹

The pamphlet was divided into three sections: War, Misery, and Fascism. 'War' warned working women of the 'feverishness' with which the war profiteers were preparing for a new world conflict which would decimate the working classes, and informed about the conflicts in China, South America, and Morocco. 'Misery' drew upon class language to highlight the economic hardships faced by women in this period, acknowledging the varied experiences of French women to appeal to the widest audience possible. It recognised the financial plight of housewives and workers alike, even highlighting the inability of intellectual women to find suitable work, despite sacrificing their 'family life... so she can get her diploma', which was ascribed to discriminatory economic policies. This gendered phrasing suggested that women's role in the family was the norm and that women intellectuals had stepped outside the bounds of traditional femininity to carve their own path, and still their efforts were not financially rewarded because of the failures of the modern capitalist state. The section on 'Fascism' acted as a

cautionary tale, informing readers of how fascist regimes had revoked the rights of women and warning that French women (in this case) could face the same fate. However, this development was not presented as inevitable. The committee suggested that the reader could attend the women's anti-fascist congress to prevent it; it asked, 'Will we continue to leave fascism to accelerate its climb in the world and plunge people back into the worst barbarism?' This implied that the problems facing women in 1934 were problems that only women could fix by creating a movement which would be 'an impassable obstacle to the fascist terror'.¹² However, the 1934 congress appeals presented the impact of fascism at this stage as something distant – a potential threat, but one which was not immediate. Preparations for the 1934 congress were conducted with the understanding that women would meet for the sake of their 'sisters' elsewhere who were already struggling under fascist oppression.

A key aspect of the preparations for the 1934 congress was the circulation of forms based on employment, which asked delegates about their experiences in work and what they knew about the prevailing political situation nationally and internationally. Separate forms were disseminated for workers, teachers, government employees, agricultural workers, and housewives. Each questionnaire had between 11 (for housewives) and 33 questions (industrial and commercial workers) and covered basic topics like the respondent's location and length of employment, as well as some more in-depth enquiries about employment. The responses have not survived, but some of the data was included in Gabrielle Duchêne's extensive report at the congress. These questionnaires each began with specific questions about different aspects of each woman's employment; the CMF was interested in the physical conditions of women's labour, the impact of wage changes, and broader financial questions about taxes and revenue for those rural workers who rented land or owned farms. Beyond this, the committee was concerned with three categories of enquiry, some of which overlapped. There was a gendered angle to the questions, such as when professionals and civil servants were asked their thoughts on the protection of maternity and childhood, or when industrial workers were asked about the domestic labour they carried out alongside their employment.¹³ Some of the questions on the questionnaire for housewives were coloured by a negative attitude about the economic status of these women resulting from communist ideas about women as workers held by congress organisers. For example, housewives were asked how they made sure of their 'existence and those who depend on you' if their husband was unemployed, and whether they thought women were at their most independent 'when she has her own salary or when she can no longer count on that of her companion?' However, they were also the only category to be asked about their opinions on women's right to vote, although these questions too were asked from the assumption that housewives did not want to participate in politics.¹⁴

In some cases, gendered questions overlapped with political ones. Several categories asked respondents to provide information about the militarisation

and fascistisation of women in their local area or if they knew about the situation of women in fascist countries and the Soviet Union. Some questions simply asked for opinions on different political systems. The most pointed political questions were reserved for rural landowners, who were asked if they would like to see a change in regime and if there ‘may be interests between you and the big landowners... as Mussolini, Hitler and their imitators in all countries claim?’¹⁵ Again, communist influence permeated these questions as the committee sought to ascertain whether these women were allies of the anti-fascist proletariat or fascist aligned capitalists.

Unique of all the questionnaires, professional women were asked their opinions on colonialism and racism. Respondents were asked whether they belonged to a national minority in their country or knew people who did, if they were for or against the colonial system and why, and if they held links with ‘women from peoples oppressed by the imperialism of your country’. Growing concerns about anti-Semitism and racism were also reflected here, as opinions on racism and its effects on professional women were solicited. Women were asked their opinion and experiences of the situation of ‘whites and blacks in the United States, yellows in the Far East, and Aryans [and] Jews in Germany and elsewhere’.¹⁶ These questions were likely included to gauge how far anti-colonial rhetoric could or should be integrated into the congress. Unfortunately, the responses have not survived but, as anti-imperialism only featured in the resulting manifesto and not the congress itself, we can assume that opinions on the matter were not strong enough to warrant its inclusion as a theme of the meeting.

However, by 1938, the CMF was much more open about its concern with the worsening international situation and harnessed this to appeal for delegates to its Marseille congress. With the ongoing conflicts in China, Ethiopia, Austria, and Spain, the organisers of the Marseille congress emphasised the idea that the militaristic and ideological clashes caused by fascism had ridiculed the concept of ‘morality’ in international relations. The growing militarisation of the European continent even directly affected the committee’s plans for its second international congress. The congress was initially scheduled to take place in Prague, Czechoslovakia, but after the Sudeten crisis and the annexation of Austria by Germany, it was considered too risky for hundreds of women activists to travel to the city. Instead, the committee decided to host the congress in France, the country in which the International Executive Committee was based, ‘and the preference was on Marseille’.¹⁷

By 1938, the fear that the international situation could escalate into total war was becoming a reality, and the CMF placed this fear at the centre of its congress appeals. In *‘Appel aux femmes du monde entier!’*, the committee attributed this increasing likelihood to the actions of the fascists in Germany and Italy. The committee lamented that the German military invasion of Austria was ‘an established fact, repression [had] begun, terror reigned’, mirroring Hitler’s plans for territorial expansion detailed in Mein

Kampf. The committee used the invasion of Austria to alert the reader of this document that the spread of fascism was now an urgent threat, and that women needed to work together to formulate plans to encourage their democratic governments to organise common defensive action. The appeal concluded with a plea for women to take an active role in stopping the fascist advance across Europe. It asked 'our sisters from all continents, of all social classes, of all religious or philosophical convictions, without party, or belonging to all parties attached to the cause of democracy and peace... [to] put their power in the service of peace' as citizens, mothers, educators, and consumers.¹⁸

Following international backlash to the Stalinist purges and growing Nazi-Soviet rapprochement, the CMF was 'mysteriously killed off' in March 1939 in an attempt to disguise the communist influence over the group. It was rebranded shortly after as the Women's Committee for Peace and Democracy, based in London rather than Paris. This was a superficial change that acted as a 'break' from the Soviet Union to attract more women to the organisation.¹⁹ However, this 'new' committee remained under the influence of the Comintern, but in a more covert manner. It retained the structure of the previous organisation, with the only major differences being the shift in presidential control from Gabrielle Duchêne in Paris to Charlotte Haldane in London, and the change in correspondence language from French to English. CMF organs, including *Woman To-Day* and *Femmes dans l'action mondiale*, were still published, and many of the women closely involved with the CMF were involved in the Committee for Peace and Democracy.

The change in leadership also led to a change in how the group sought to entice women to attend its meetings. The committee no longer spoke to its audience as intellectuals or workers. Instead, the 1939 congress appeal focused almost exclusively on women's role as mother or wife, and their assumed natural predisposition for peace. This appeal went further than either of the previous calls for support, asking women to contribute to the congress for the primary reason of defending 'the safety of our hearths, the sanctity of our homes, the development of our children, the lives of our husbands, sons, and brothers'. Women as 'givers of life [and] makers of homes' had the overarching 'responsibility, duty, and power' to act as 'the effective instrument for the restoration of peace', reflecting the maternalist rhetoric often featured in CMF campaigns.²⁰ Until 1939, the CMF had not used this language to promote its congresses, as it preferred to utilise communist rhetoric which framed women as workers who had a duty to fight for their economic livelihood and the livelihoods of their sisters under fascist dictatorships.²¹

The focus was no longer on the threat of war created by international fascism and militarism. The Cuban congress appeal promoted a far more defensive approach than the committee's earlier appeals. By this stage, the CMF assumed that the spread of fascism and war to democratic countries

was essentially inevitable, and this assumption was exploited to harness the concern of women about their own rights. In addition, women were now presented as one homogenous group with little emphasis on nationality. The only mentions of atrocities in any national context were the wars in China and Spain, which were cited as preludes to a future global conflict: ‘all the richness of life, all our hopes for the happiness of our loved ones are darkened by the shadow of war... war which rages today in all its brutality in Spain and China and which threatens every country and men and women everywhere’.²² Consequently, these appeals did not suggest that women should contribute to the congress to organise intervention in ongoing global conflicts, but rather to halt the spread of far-right-wing ideology about the role of women to democratic nations.

CMF congress appeals often utilised the language of sexual difference and perpetrated the stereotype that women were naturally predisposed towards peace for two reasons: first, as economic actors (workers), women had a vested interest in avoiding the upheaval that war would cause to their livelihoods. Early CMF appeals relied on what Mona Siegel calls ‘feminist pacifism’, which assumed an inextricable link between feminist activism and pacifist advocacy, and thus women’s intrinsic right to participate politically regardless of their experiences (or lack thereof) of motherhood. However, by 1939, CMF appeals began to openly promote the idea women were predisposed to peace work because they had the potential to be mothers who, it was assumed, would have such deep bonds with their children that they had a natural opposition to war and the harrowing human cost of conflict. This idea that women were inherently built for peace work was subtle in the first two congress appeals, as they did not argue that women should act as peacemakers because of their biological potential for motherhood. Congress appeals in 1939, though, were more heavily influenced by ‘feminine pacifism’ which assumed that women naturally despised war due to their ‘close association with raising children’, a key feature of women’s activism in the early twentieth century. Perhaps, with the rebranding of the group, it was politically advantageous to appear less radical and more in line with the mainstream thought of women’s pacifism in this period. In addition, with the move to London as the centre of operations, committee work engaged many more British feminist pacifists, who tended to be less radical than their French counterparts. It was also true that, faced with the almost certainty of another war, a complete departure from the CMF’s former approach to attracting new members, which relied more heavily on women’s emancipation in a communist framework, was needed.

Delegate Composition

The first CMF congress in Paris in August 1934 attracted over 1,100 delegates from 28 countries, which was much lower than the number of delegates to either the Amsterdam Congress against Imperialist War in 1932

(2,196 attendees) or the Pleyel European Anti-Fascist Workers' Congress in 1933 (3,209 attendees).²³ However, this is largely unsurprising; there were fewer delegates to international women's congresses than to 'mixed-gender' meetings in general in the 1930s. Women activists tended to have less economic independence than their male counterparts, which was further hampered by the poor economic situation of the decade, inhibiting women from the international travel required to participate in such activism. To take an example from established women's organisations in this period: at the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom congress held in Zurich in 1934, 11 fewer sections attended than the congress in Prague had five years earlier, while the International Alliance of Women had to cancel a congress planned for Athens in 1932 entirely due to economic instability.²⁴ That the CMF appeals were persuasive enough to attract over 1,100 participants in such a turbulent political and economic atmosphere was a success of the group's carefully constructed propaganda.

The diversity of women who attended CMF congresses was consistently emphasised by the group in both internal and external media publications to legitimise its claim of being open to all regardless of political, social, or national background, and to demonstrate the 'success' of women's Popular Front activism. Did the CMF achieve true collaboration or did communists dominate proceedings to the point it was impossible? A comparison of the narrative about the attendees in media coverage of the congresses with extant delegate statistics can give insight into how the committee harnessed and exploited various delegate characteristics to reflect a wider and more diverse image of the committee than was the case.

The committee was less successful in attracting a variety of attendees from disparate nationalities. As both international congresses held between 1934 and 1939 took place in France, it is unsurprising that most delegates were French. At the 1934 congress in Paris, 630 delegates of more than 1,100 were French, dwarfing any other nationality. British women were the second highest number of participants with a comparably meagre 77 delegates, followed by the delegation from the Saar which numbered 48 women.²⁵ While it is important to note that representatives of France's North African colonies were likely counted among the 630 women labelled as 'French' as was the case at the later Marseille congress, the vast majority would still have been from France itself. Moving beyond France to a regional analysis, European women dominated the founding meeting. Twenty European countries sent at least one delegate compared with four American countries (the United States, Argentina, Mexico, and Cuba), two Asian countries (the Soviet Union and Indonesia), and Australia. No African women were officially represented at the meeting, although, as mentioned above, representatives of French North Africa were likely present.²⁶ The location of the meeting was also significant. As well as being the home of the founders of the committee, Paris was renowned as a centre for contact with 'knowledgeable, culturally heterogeneous' people. It also had some of the best

facilities for conducting international activism, including accommodation, entertainment options, and opportunities for communication. However, the choice of Paris, a western European capital city, as the location for the founding conference reflected Eurocentric attitudes among activists. Non-European women and working-class women were largely excluded from attending due to the exorbitant cost of travel and accommodation, meaning that the congress represented women from across the globe in a limited way (Table 2.1).²⁷

The international congress held in Marseille in 1938 was a smaller affair. From 13 to 15 May 1938, 500 women from 22 countries met to reconsider and reformulate the goals of the CMF in response to the worsening international situation.²⁸ Eleven countries represented at the earlier Paris congress

Table 2.1 National composition of CMF congress delegates (Paris, 1934)

<i>Country</i>	<i>Number of delegates</i>
France	630
Great Britain	77
Saar	48
Italy (including emigration)	47
Holland	45
United States	40
Belgium	34
Switzerland	28
Poland (including emigration)	28
Romania (including emigration)	25
Czechoslovakia	19
Germany	15
Spain	12
USSR	10
Austria (including emigration)	9
Bulgaria	3
Greece	3
Hungary (including emigration)	6
Denmark	5
Sweden	5
Yugoslavia	4
Indonesia	4
Norway	2
Argentina	1
Indochina	1
Mexico	1
Cuba	1
Australia	1
Total	1,113

Source: From 'Rassemblement Mondial des Femmes! Contre la guerre et le fascisme: Compte rendu des travaux du congrès', 1934, p. 31.

did not send delegates to the Marseille meeting.²⁹ In addition, although leaders in the American women's movement were members of the congress' *comité d'honneur*, they declined to attend in person citing the 'remoteness of the work' to be undertaken at the congress with regard to the political situation in the United States.³⁰ American delegates did attend, but none were well-known women activists. However, women from five countries who had not been represented at the founding congress participated in the 1938 meeting, three of which were non-European: China, India, Egypt, Finland, and Lithuania. Generally, though, the attendance of delegates from outside Europe was impressive. Travel was an expensive, time-consuming endeavour which excluded many non-bourgeois women from international activism at this time.

The Marseille congress report is far less informative regarding the exact number of attendees per national delegation than its 1934 counterpart, but it is safe to assume that the largest delegation was still French. The Czechoslovak and Swiss delegations were highlighted in the report as delegations with significant numbers, with 49 and 29 representatives, respectively.³¹ The Marseille congress report also highlighted the presence of six delegates from war-torn Spain, including the Republican politician Victoria Kent, Margarita Nelken, Emilia Elias, who was a director of a large school, and a 'Catalan peasant'.

The attendance of women from some countries was unexpected. German women still residing in Germany would not have been able to attend an anti-fascist congress at this time, so we can assume that the German women who attended both meetings were likely refugees from the regime. Similarly, by the 1938 meeting, the deteriorating situation in Spain also meant that the attendance of Spanish women was something to publicise. Thus, the presence of the Spanish women was given particular weight in the official report from the congress.³² Further, Soviet women were rarely involved in international activism in the period, as many mass women's organisations were deemed too bourgeois. As such, they were largely confined to the Comintern women's bureau, and tended not to contribute to international activism during the interwar period.³³ The involvement of Soviet women at the 1934 meeting was therefore unusual, but also expected; the committee was a communist front organisation, after all, despite the freedom it had in its work. However, Soviet women did not attend the 1938 congress in Marseille in any capacity. The reasons for this are unknown. Perhaps the international condemnation of Stalin's purges in the Soviet Union from 1936 or the USSR's intervention in the Spanish Civil War had caused the committee, or even the Comintern itself, to rethink the usefulness of the presence of a Soviet delegation because of the potential controversy.

One of the key signifiers for the CMF of the success of its appeals in attracting a diverse range of women was the wearing of national dress. Reina Lewis has argued that women's 'clothes, or their absence, are frequently the means by which... distance is affected'.³⁴ In the case of CMF

congresses, distance and difference in dress were integral for demonstrating the international scope of the event; for example, newspaper articles and official reports from the CMF's Paris congress in 1934 described women wearing the Spanish shawl, the Hindu veil, the 'darned Slavic headdress', and bright Balkan 'kerchiefs'.³⁵ Differences in the physical appearance of delegates were also emphasised, with the cooperation and collaboration of different races being an important visual tool for underscoring the internationalism of the event. An article on the 1934 congress in *L'Humanité*, for example, contrasted the 'pale faces and blonde hair of the young and athletic Nordic delegates' with 'the tanned face of a black worker'.³⁶ To borrow from Mineke Bosch's work on the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA), costume, dance, and other cultural symbols were used by the CMF to give 'reality to the idea of an essential unity and equality of women'.³⁷ By placing disparate examples of traditional national dress at the forefront of reports on the congress, the committee presented an image of women reaching across vast geographical and cultural space, exchanging ideas and information equally, and uniting against a common enemy. To use Leila Rupp's metaphor, women's internationalism at this juncture in history was a 'stitched together quilt of existing differences rather than a wholly new piece of cloth'.³⁸ Diversity in national dress and physical appearance was an indicator of the success of Popular Front ideology in attracting women from all corners of the globe to anti-fascist activism.

However, historians have also criticised how international women's organisations used national dress to indicate internationalist spirit in this period. Leila Rupp has pointed out that these organisations ignored the 'potential irony' in emphasising the differences of national symbols and that congress organisers were paradoxically harnessing 'the power of deeply felt national loyalties' to stimulate international cooperation.³⁹ Further, Marie Sandell has argued that the emphasis of national dress by women's international organisations often actually reinforced 'notions of difference' and 'represented a crucial part of discourses in which Western dress was depicted as "modern" and Eastern as backward'.⁴⁰ There was certainly an element of this discourse at CMF congresses: western European delegates were overwhelmingly presented as intellectual and emancipated, eastern European delegates were often depicted as typical peasants adorned with handmade kerchiefs and clothing, while the few black delegates were portrayed as manual workers, tanned from working outside in the sun. CMF attempts to demonstrate the internationalism of its meetings through consistent reference to national differences may actually have reinforced inequalities between participants.

The social class of delegates was key to establishing the popular unity of the congress, and therefore for establishing the principles on which the committee would be based. The attendance of *paysannes* (translated to 'peasants' but used generally to refer to rural workers in the report) and

housewives was of particular interest to the left-wing press, which praised the contribution of factory workers from all over Europe, miners' wives from the North, housewives from the United States, and rural workers from Brittany to the founding congress in 1934. These women were publicised because they were not the usual participants in international meetings; intellectuals, teachers, artists, and writers from different countries were the expected class of delegates, and as such their contribution was not as lauded as manual workers and housewives.⁴¹ *Paysannes* were overrepresented in newspaper reports on the meeting as only nine were in attendance, four of whom were French. This is not surprising: travel to Paris in this period would have been expensive even for those living in France, and thus it was inaccessible for many workers to make the journey from their homes in the countryside. While European workers surely faced difficulties in their travel to the congress, it would have been nearly impossible for *paysannes* from non-European countries to attend. The United States sent 40 delegates to the meeting, the Soviet Union sent ten, Indonesia sent four, and Argentina, Indochina, Mexico, Cuba, and Australia sent one delegate apiece. Thus, it was unlikely that any delegate from these geographically distant countries could be considered 'rural workers' or 'peasants'.⁴² Global travel presupposed financial security, which ultimately meant that bourgeois women dominated international women's activism during the interwar period. Therefore, it is unlikely that non-European *paysannes* were able to attend the congress, as the cost of travel prohibited many women from making the journey. However, their attendance was exaggerated to demonstrate the 'unity' of delegates from different backgrounds in propaganda in the aftermath of the congress (Table 2.2).

However, that is not to say that working-class women were not represented at the 1934 congress. On the contrary, women labourers were the largest group of delegates in terms of employment: 350 of the 1,100 delegates were classified as labourers, 208 of whom were French. Further, housewives were also a substantial proportion of delegates, with 327 in attendance. The careers of the women at the Paris congress were surprisingly varied, with teachers, students, nurses, rural workers, shopkeepers, cleaners, and those in 'liberal careers' all attending in one capacity or another. The congress report described only 18 delegates as 'without designation' or employment, which contributed to the CMF's propagandised image of itself as a workers' affair.⁴³ Unfortunately, it is impossible to compare the social composition of the first CMF meeting in 1934 and the Marseille meeting in 1938. The report generated for the Marseille congress focused much less on the differences between the delegates and did not include any information on the employment or political affiliation of the women who attended. However, it would be reasonable to assume that, because the Marseille congress consisted of fewer than half the number of delegates who attended the earlier Paris congress, it did not have nearly the same diversity of employment as the 1934 meeting.

Table 2.2 Social composition of CMF congress delegates (Paris, 1934)

<i>Non-French delegates</i>	
<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Number of delegates</i>
Workers	142
Housewives	158
Liberal Careers	50
Education	38
Employees	28
Students	23
Nurses	11
Rural workers	5
Cleaners	5
Shopkeepers	3
Civil Servant	2
Without designation	9
Total	474
<i>French delegates</i>	
<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Number of delegates</i>
Workers	208
Housewives	169
Employees	72
Teachers	58
Civil Servants	41
Liberal Careers	22
Nurses	16
Shopkeepers	13
Students	7
Unemployed	7
Rural workers	4
Craftsman	2
Member of a cooperative	2
Without designation	9
Total	630

Source: From 'Rassemblement Mondial des Femmes! Contre la guerre et le fascisme: Compte rendu des travaux du congrès', 1934, p. 36.

Language was one issue caused by the attendance of women from various countries and backgrounds. There are conflicting reports about how 1934 congress speeches were translated for delegates. The official congress report stated that speeches were 'translated immediately into the three languages of the congress: English, French, and German', while a report in the *Daily Worker* written by a British delegate, Marjorie Pollitt, stressed that only a 'small proportion' of attendees could understand a speech given by a British woman in English.⁴⁴ Despite this, Pollitt stressed that the 'sincerity and fervour' of the speech was enough to break through 'all language barriers and created a profound impression' on non-English speaking delegates,

a propagandistic idea which suggested that the strength of anti-fascist feeling negated problems of language and understanding.⁴⁵ It seems unlikely that translations were instantly made available as several factors could have hampered this effort: there may have been difficulty finding translators, translations may not have occurred simultaneously with the speeches, or perhaps the report was false and translations did not occur at all. However, this raises the larger question of how language was used in the congresses. As English, French, and German were chosen as the official languages of the committee, how did delegates who did not speak these languages participate? Rupp has argued that 'the ability to communicate in one of the official languages was an artefact of class and of shifts in the world system' which meant that working-class women and women who did not speak the languages of internationalism (i.e. English, French, and German) often found it difficult to participate.⁴⁶ In the case of CMF congresses, many of the women who attended would have had some form of independent financial backing, in terms of either personal or familial wealth. They could also be members of larger bodies, like the Comintern or prominent international women's organisations, which could fund international travel. Most of those who did not have financial support were French, and language would not have been a major concern. However, for those working-class delegates who did not speak French, English, or German, it may have been incredibly difficult to follow. As Marie Sandell has found with WILPF congresses, women often spent most of their time with women from countries which had 'similar cultures and sometimes languages', impacting how much collaboration between women from vastly different backgrounds actually occurred.⁴⁷

As an experiment in early Popular Front rapprochement, it was crucial for the CMF to demonstrate that the organisation was open to all on the left. In 1934, the British delegation was specifically 'directed to find what we have in common' because its delegates were so politically diverse.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, the Marseille congress report does not contain any information about the political composition of the meeting, so we cannot be sure of the communist/socialist division of the delegates at this later stage. As such, we cannot make any conclusions about the political orientation of the delegates with certainty. However, it is important to remember that the number of participants in the Marseille congress was significantly smaller than the earlier Paris meeting, and as such, the political diversity of the delegates may have been much less impressive.

The number of communists who attended the 1934 congress substantially outnumbered socialists. There were upwards of 320 communist women at the meeting, while only 79 socialist and 16 'Christian socialist' women were present.⁴⁹ Although a larger proportion of communist delegates was expected given the communist influence on the movement, the number of socialist attendees was still very small considering the overarching goal of the congress and the committee more generally: to stimulate popular unity among women. Socialist and communist collaboration was not yet at the

Table 2.3 Political composition of CMF congress delegates (Paris, 1934)

<i>Political party/activist designation</i>	<i>Number of delegates</i>
Socialists	79
Christian Socialists	16
Communists	320
Members of the 'Fédération Syndicale Internationale' (Amsterdam)	54
Members of the 'Internationale Syndicale Rouge' (Profintern)	109
Pacifists	158
Feminists	64
Cooperative activists	27
Members of Cultural Organisations	47

Source: From 'Rassemblement Mondial des Femmes! Contre la guerre et le fascisme: Compte rendu des travaux du congrès', 1934, p. 37.

peak it would reach in 1936. It is also probable that many of the women who defined themselves as communists for the purposes of the congress were not actually 'organised communists', in that they did not belong to a particular party but sympathised with communist ideas, as Emily Greene Balch suspected (Table 2.3).⁵⁰

Counted separately from the communists were members of the Red International of Trade Unions (or Profintern), an organisation affiliated with the Comintern, which coordinated communist work within trade unions. The Profintern's rival trade union organisation, the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU, a body closely associated with the LSI), also sent delegates to the CMF congress in 1934, although in much smaller number: while the Profintern sent 109 delegates, the IFTU only sent 54.⁵¹ The chair of the opening session of the 1934 congress, Carmel Haden-Guest, continued to stress its 'absolute independence' from any party or organisation, despite much evidence to the contrary.⁵²

Pacifists were also a substantial contingent at the meeting, with 158 women defining themselves as such. Considering Duchêne's role as the president of French WILPF, it is not difficult to understand why so many pacifist women were attracted to the meeting. In addition, pacifist women were encouraged to disregard their concerns about communist influence on the event by the aims of the congress. As a congress 'against war' and fascism, it widened its appeal to women who would not want to commit themselves against one political group for fear of being accused of some sort of bias.⁵³ The Executive Committee of the international body of WILPF expressed their gratitude to Duchêne for the 'immense trouble' she faced to hold the congress without official WILPF input, following their own aborted attempt to arrange a meeting against war and fascism from November 1933. The WILPF leadership therefore believed that it would be a 'great mistake' if pacifists were not represented at the meeting. A letter

to the WILPF executive committee written by Camille Drevet expressed that it was

quite impossible... to have a women's international organisation... which was founded to fight for Peace and Freedom, not officially represented at an International Congress protesting against War and Fascism. It would, I feel, prove what many say: that the W.I.L. is no more up to its task and no more among the peacemakers for Peace and Freedom.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, some women from more moderate WILPF sections who attended the 1934 CMF congress were concerned about the communist nature of the meeting. Cor Ramondt-Hirschmann, a member of the Dutch section of WILPF, recounted how Dutch women from 'the most extreme left to somewhat to the right' had prepared for the founding CMF congress, but all felt a 'great deception' when the congress appeals were published and were of 'an absolutely communist character'. However, Ramondt-Hirschmann believed that it would be a mistake to withdraw from the congress and remove the input of pacifist women, instead of working with communists. The Dutch delegation decided to participate in two factions in response: 'those who did not believe in violence under any condition whatever', and those who were against Imperialist War, but not war against fascism.⁵⁵

The Communist Character of the Congresses

Pacifists were concerned by the political orientation of CMF congresses due to the obvious communist influence that permeated every aspect of the events. I will analyse the character of the Paris congress in 1934 primarily, for two reasons: first, as the event at which the CMF was founded, the physical atmosphere of the congress was important for creating expectations for what the organisation would embody in the future. Would the CMF approach anti-fascist activism as a 'sans parti' organisation as it claimed in its appeals, or would communist influence dictate how it formulated its responses to fascism and war? Second, the 1934 congress generated far more media interest than the Marseille meeting, with extensive information on the decoration of the Maison de la Mutualité published in the press that highlighted the communist influence on the proceedings. As one of the first major international women's anti-fascist organisations, the founding of the CMF was an important moment in the history of women's activism, as it combined dominant pacifist discourses with left-wing unity. Thus, many individuals and organisations, activist and non-activist alike, had a vested interest in discussing the content and logistics of the founding meeting.

Despite claims that the congress was '*sans-parti*', it soon became abundantly clear to delegates that this was not the case. One of the earliest indicators that the congress was likely under communist influence was the slogans chosen to represent the meeting. Each slogan was publicised ahead of time

and draped across the Maison de la Mutualité for the duration of the meeting, amplifying the goals of both the CMF and the congress itself. These slogans demonstrated to attendees, observers, and potential members how the committee conceptualised itself, which goals it prioritised, and what role political ideology would play in its work. The slogan '*Toutes les femmes fraternellement unies contre la guerre et le fascisme*' ('All women fraternally united against war and fascism'), for example, highlighted the female character of the movement to confirm it as a women's endeavour, separate from the established Amsterdam-Pleyel movement. This was not simply a slogan, however, as many delegates gave speeches on women's rights since the First World War and how these rights were now increasingly coming under threat. Many women's organisations were reluctant to contribute to a congress 'definitely directed against one political system', so as not to alienate their members.⁵⁶ The CMF therefore deployed the language of women's unity to convince them that they shared a common sense of purpose based on gender, which superseded concerns about political neutrality. CMF attempts to foster a spirit of cooperation among women culminated successfully with the cultivation of a 'vibrant' atmosphere, in which delegates frequently shouted '*À bas la guerre!*' and '*Unité d'action!*' in 'the most varied languages' throughout congress proceedings.⁵⁷

Another slogan, '*Pour l'émancipation totale des femmes*' ('For the total emancipation of women'), reinforced the image of the congress as feminist, as it endorsed the acquisition and safeguarding of women's rights across the globe. However, it also reflected contemporary communist notions of women's emancipation, which argued that an economic, societal, and cultural revolution was needed for women to achieve true freedom and equality with their male counterparts. Communist feminists in this period were deeply concerned with the changing role of women in a socialist society and advocated for changes in the legal status of women, the legalisation of abortion to ensure the health and productivity of women workers, and the expansion of social provisions and institutions for their benefit. Bolshevik ideas on women's rights were reflected in the language used in their slogans; the idea of the 'emancipation' of women from the constraints placed upon them by capitalist society was a common feature of communist rhetoric, specifically that of Aleksandra Kollontai who believed that a full transformation of the family under communism was the only way for women to be liberated from the 'domestic drudgery' that they experienced under late stage capitalism and to achieve 'equality' with men.⁵⁸ Despite a departure from early Soviet policies which facilitated women's emancipation under Stalin's dictatorship towards a more traditional approach to women's role in society, the idea that the Soviet state had achieved women's total emancipation after the revolution was still deployed for propaganda purposes. However, many women's organisations in this period welcomed policies that allowed women to have greater independence in modern society. So, this slogan, while mirroring early Soviet rhetoric on women, was also designed to attract politically neutral bourgeois women's groups.

The final slogan chosen to represent the congress was the most revealing about the political direction of the future committee and its objectives. ‘*Soutenons la politique de paix de l’URSS, pays de la femme libérée*’ (‘Support the peace policy of the USSR, country of the liberated woman’) was indicative of how the CMF would prioritise ideology throughout its lifetime. To effectively examine the slogan, we must divide the slogan into two halves. The first part of the slogan, ‘Support the peace policy of the USSR’, both demonstrated the affinity of the committee leadership for Soviet communism, and acted as propaganda, which reinforced the image of the Soviet government as inherently peaceable. This image was incubated after the USSR suggested the ‘complete destruction’ of ‘the most aggressive types of armaments’ at the Disarmament Conferences from 1932 onwards.⁵⁹ As bourgeois peace women contrasted this supposed action for peace with the inaction of their own nations, some international pacifists began to view the Soviet government as a friend to peace. For example, the Soviet Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Maxim Litvinov, voted against a resolution which would delay disarmament negotiations, ‘the gallery, packed with bourgeois women, was swept into such spontaneous, riotous applause for the Soviet delegate that the guards couldn’t get order’ and ejected many of the women from the proceedings.⁶⁰

The second part of the slogan, the description of the Soviet Union as the ‘country of the liberated woman’, linked the USSR with the message of women’s emancipation contained in the first two slogans, promoting the idea that the Soviet Union was the leader on women’s rights across the globe. Theoretically, Soviet women could vote, had the same rights as men, equal standing in marriage, and direct access to abortion (although it was soon made illegal again in 1936). It was difficult for bourgeois women’s organisations at the meeting to deny that the Soviet Union positioned itself as the champion of women’s emancipation, despite the beginning of the erosion of women’s emancipation policies after Stalin came to power. To further enhance the committee’s clear support for communist ideals, the banner was positioned next to a large canvas painted by revolutionary Chinese artists for the occasion which evoked ‘war and the mass resistance of workers’.⁶¹

Soviet symbolism was also integral to the atmosphere cultivated by the organisers in the *Maison de la Mutualité*. The *Internationale* was sung often and with vigour during the meeting, establishing a collective identity among participants. Donny Gluckstein has argued that the *Internationale* functions ‘simultaneously as history, political argument and a rallying statement’ and represents a ‘final, all-out struggle with capitalism’, epitomising proletarian internationalism in the chorus:

C’est la lutte finale/groupons-nous, et demain/l’Internationale sera le genre humain.

(‘This is the final struggle/Let us group together and tomorrow/The *Internationale*/will be the human race’).⁶²

It was the national anthem of the Soviet Union until 1944, and the unofficial anthem of international communism more generally throughout the interwar period, further demonstrating the strength of influence Soviet communism held over congress proceedings. The *Internationale* was even sung at the opening of the 1934 congress when German delegates ‘spontaneously’ began to sing it in German, with other delegates joining in various languages.⁶³ The *Internationale* was also sung after speeches that resonated with attendees, including after the communist activist Antoinette Gilles spoke about ‘war psychosis’.⁶⁴ The song’s primary purpose was the stimulation of feelings of unity between delegates. Attendees sang the *Internationale* to demonstrate agreement or support. For example, delegates greeted the late arrival of the Soviet delegation after experiencing passport issues at the French border with a rousing rendition of the *Internationale*. Delegates also greeted Elena Stasova with the *Internationale* and shouts of ‘Long live the Soviet Union!’ when she rose to give her speech on the status of women in the USSR.⁶⁵

Similarly, the delegates demonstrated solidarity with women from countries under fascist oppression by raising their fists in a ‘red salute’. When German women opened the congress with the *Internationale*, those assembled in the hall stood and raised their fists to salute the ‘heroic delegates of the German proletariat and anti-fascists, who struggle [against fascism] under the leadership of the German Communist Party’.⁶⁶ Similarly, when a ‘visibly joyous’ Gabrielle Duchêne announced the arrival of the Soviet delegation, ‘all the room [had their] fists raised’ in the red salute, and shouted ‘*Les Soviets partout!*’.⁶⁷ Concurrently, a delegate named Comrade Zinkel welcomed them with a fist raised in a ‘red salute’ and exclaimed, ‘Long live the Soviet Union! All power to the workers and peasants! Down with fascism and war!’⁶⁸

The decoration of the Maison de la Mutualité itself was also heavily influenced by communist symbolism. Red flags were displayed around the room for the duration of the congress, for example. Although the red flag was more likely to be associated with socialist parties before 1917, the Soviet Union’s choice of a red field for its flag in 1923 led to it becoming a wholly communist symbol as many national communist parties also adopted red flags. Once again, the red flag was used at the congress to demonstrate support for the Soviets and simulate unity. As Stasova gave her speech, for example, a ‘magnificently embroidered red flag’ presented by Finnish women as a gift to celebrate this first, momentous rally of women against fascism and war was raised above the platform.⁶⁹ Similarly, at a meeting organised by the CMF in Alfortville to the south of Paris during the congress, comrades from the commune ‘arrived in a cortege, red flags at the head, singing revolutionary hymns’.⁷⁰

For many bourgeois women activists attending the meeting, communist dominance was a major concern. However, Duchêne’s role in WILPF shielded the CMF from some of the criticisms it faced in the period after

the first congress. For example, Swedish WILPF activist Elisabeth Waern-Bugge expressed her concern about the association of the League with a clearly communist-influenced CMF in a letter to WILPF International Secretary Emily Greene Balch. Balch responded, vehemently denying that the congress was a communist affair. She acknowledged that although the congress was 'more than ready to admit all the advantages of the USSR than its failings', this was because other bourgeois women's organisations were reluctant to join an anti-fascist coalition.⁷¹ Despite this, she pointed to the close involvement of Gabrielle Duchêne in the meeting as a mitigating factor; she argued that Duchêne's input as a bourgeois pacifist woman had ensured that other opinions had been represented:

Madame Duchêne has also the great merit of having, at the Congress, taken care that all the views could be represented; the pacifists, the Christian-socialists, the Feminists, have been able to put their views before the congress... we have had the opportunity of saying our say and of being listened to attentively.⁷²

Thus, Duchêne's involvement in the congress and the subsequent committee was indispensable for fostering the idea that the group was above parties. Her reputation as a pacifist feminist helped to deflect any criticism of proceedings as 'communist' and encouraged those women wary of Soviet communism to participate in CMF business regardless.

Speeches

The final aspect of CMF congresses that merit examination are the speeches. Made by women speakers from various backgrounds and affiliations, the speeches at these meetings give insight into the goals, priorities, and plans that the committee had and would have for its work. The opening speeches particularly reflected these aspirations. These speeches were integral for setting expectations for the meeting: who was involved? What were the topics to be discussed? How did the committee envision its work going forward? The first session in 1934 was opened by British peace activist Carmel Haden-Guest who emphasised the sense of unity that the organisers of the congress wanted to cultivate among attendees; she spoke about how women from different social and political backgrounds had collaborated in the international spirit to organise the congress and insisted that it held 'absolute independence from any party or any organisation'.⁷³ By drawing attention to 'the torture and imprisonment of antifascist militants', Haden-Guest called upon the women in attendance as a homogenous group to unite and to 'formulate a plan of action against war and fascism'.⁷⁴ She established a history of women's anti-fascism, pacifism, and activism in which she situated the congress; Haden-Guest drew upon this tradition to convince delegates that they were contributing to an important meeting

which would ‘count in the history of the struggle for the emancipation of women and for the defence of peace’.⁷⁵

The theme of the Marseille congress, however, was ‘*La moralité dans les relations internationales*’. The programme produced ahead of the meeting highlighted the situations in Ethiopia, Spain, China, and Austria as of particular concern for the delegates. The opening session amplified this; after the opening speech by the deputy mayor of Marseille Rémy Roux, the prophetic Parisian journalist and foreign editor of *L’Œuvre*, Geneviève Tabouis, warned of the potential destruction that the ‘Berlin – Rome – Tokyo triangle’ could wreak by pointing to the ‘tragic Austrian consequences’ which was facilitated by this alliance.⁷⁶ The prominent international law jurist Georges Scelle reinforced Tabouis’ speech in his own discourse, as he articulated the necessity of strengthening the international institutions established after the First World War to safeguard peace. He focused on the ‘real moral collapse, the collapse of humanism and logical thought’, which occurred when some governments recognised ‘de jure’ the annexation of Austria. These speeches were unique among those given at CMF congresses because they did not have a gendered angle; Tabouis focused on the general threat posed by fascist nations, and Scelle spoke of the international situation from a legal standpoint, with no reference to how these laws affected (or did not affect) women. However, in the closing moments of his speech, Scelle spoke to his female audience, imploring women, ‘who are braver than men and who often have better sense than them’, to understand that ‘the policy of burying one’s head in the sand has never averted peril’ and that ‘active pacifism’ was the only acceptable solution.⁷⁷

The differences between the opening session of the 1934 congress and the 1938 congress are striking. Carmel Haden-Guest’s speech at the first congress of women against war and fascism emphasised the power that women could hold as a united force and celebrated the meeting as a triumph for women as political actors across the globe, while the opening session of the Marseille meeting eschewed gender and the experiences of women as a concern almost entirely. It even broke with tradition by inviting men to speak; Rémy Roux and Georges Scelle were the first men to officially address a CMF congress. This is indicative of how the international situation had deteriorated in the intervening years, as the committee solicited experts to demonstrate to their members how serious the threat posed by Germany, Italy, and Japan was. The fact that the first speakers at the 1938 meeting were figures in international politics and law was no accident. Further, by 1938, the CMF was an established organisation. The founding meeting needed to attract women from all backgrounds to create a membership base. Thus, the opening session not only stressed the importance of women’s unity, but also avoided overt discussion of the international political situation so as not to alienate attendees.

The primary topic of the speeches at these meetings was the gendered impact of fascism and war. Participants in the first CMF congress considered

how women's social, political, and economic rights were consistently challenged in the period after the First World War and explored solutions to ensure both the maintenance and progression of these rights. Perhaps the most impressive speech of either congress was made by Gabrielle Duchêne on the opening day of the Paris congress on 4 August 1934. With attached tables and statistics, it consisted of 32 pages of thorough research into women's issues across the globe, and merited publication by the committee as a standalone pamphlet. Duchêne implored her audience to think about their government's policies towards women, particularly how the pace of women's emancipation had regressed in authoritarian and democratic countries alike 'since the establishment of fascist regimes', negating many of the political and societal gains that women had achieved after the First World War. The socialist influence on the congress demonstrated itself here too, as Duchêne identified this 'regression' in primarily economic terms; she described a 'violent' offensive waged by capitalist nations against women's inherent right to work for 'bread and independence'. In particular, she expressed concern about the removal of married women from government employ, a phenomenon that she identified as originating from Germany even before Hitler's rise and accelerating after it. She argued that this occurred due to a three-pronged attack by the German government: first, by the passing of legislation to dismiss 'at marriage every civil servant whose material maintenance is assured in a sustainable way by the family income'; second, by the introduction of marriage loans to encourage women to willingly renounce their employment; and third, by sending young girls to work camps governed by 'military harshness [and] severe punishments' where refusal to participate was indicated on a certificate which would impede finding a job in the future. She claimed that many non-fascist European nations had begun to follow suit, and that women's right to work was being 'gravely threatened' across the globe.⁷⁸

Duchêne thoroughly considered the topic of women's employment and the crises facing it by using statistics and personal testimony (particularly from German women) to evidence her concerns. She discussed subjects, including the decline of women in paid employment, the shrinking of women's wages, the cost of living, and moves towards returning women 'to the home' in various countries, utilising figures to increase the efficacy of points. For example, she stated that the number of women in work had decreased by 12.5% in Austria, 10.1% in Denmark, 7.9% in Belgium, and 2.2% in the United States.⁷⁹ She also utilised testimony to demonstrate the potentially devastating impact that the removal or reduction of unemployment assistance had on women. She stated that unemployed German women received 'insignificant benefits' which left them malnourished and inadequately housed, while Italian unemployment assistance amounted to only around 3.75 lira per day for only three months, with women often unable to fulfil the 'complicated conditions' to qualify.⁸⁰ Duchêne's use of concrete statistics and testimony from the countries under examination was

both informative and persuasive. She educated her audience on the economic fate of women in various environments and demonstrated the problems that could occur should these issues spread more widely. Duchêne argued that these attacks amounted to a severe loss of economic independence for women, which sometimes caused them to idealise the ‘falsely idyllic banner’ of the ‘Housewife’ and a return to domesticity.⁸¹ She warned that this reflected and reinforced fascist ideals of womanhood formulated to prevent the perceived modern phenomenon of ‘men who resemble women, and women who resemble men’.⁸²

However, despite the impressive scale and detail of Duchêne’s report on women at the twentieth anniversary of the war, it was heavily Eurocentric. Duchêne mentioned the situation of 19 different countries, 13 of which were European, and three more were ‘western’: the United States, Canada, and New Zealand. The only non-Western countries that Duchêne examined in her report were Japan, China, and India. Out of these three, only Japanese women were covered in any substantial way, as Duchêne showed particular concern about the increasing militarisation of the Japanese populace and the impact on women. Indian women were mentioned twice in the report: once when Duchêne briefly mentioned that the number of Indian women employed in factories had decreased, and once in statistics showing the length of the working week for male and female, seasonal and non-seasonal factory workers.⁸³ Chinese women were afforded one sentence in the entire report; in the section on ‘women in war industries’, Duchêne stated that ‘In China, the percentage has increased again’.⁸⁴ Insufficient information on women from non-Western countries did not reflect the fledgling committee’s aim of being a ‘world’ organisation, nor does it give a complete picture of women’s rights across the globe. In fact, much of the report focuses on how the German and Italian fascist governments were enacting policies to remove women from public life.

The report was unilateral in its negative portrayal of capitalist countries. This is something that Duchêne herself highlights. She offered no commentary on the Soviet Union and its policies on women in the main body of the speech, but she elevated the USSR as ‘the only country where a new society is built, ... where women are liberated, where peace is not only a theme but a resounding discourse’ in the conclusion.⁸⁵ She stated that her choice to avoid discussing the USSR was because Stasova would speak on the topic later, with the result that the report lacked an honest comparison between the Soviet Union and capitalist states. It demonstrated her personal bias towards the Soviet Union and the intrinsic Soviet influence on congress proceedings and ensured that an otherwise well-researched speech suffered from the inherent flaw presented by overt bias.

Duchêne’s speech at the 1938 Marseille congress tackled solidarity between nations, not solidarity between women. As CMF president, Duchêne spoke on the need for a ‘common resistance’ against the isolationism practised by Western governments, abandoning the gendered focus for

traditional foreign policy analyses. For example, she told the assembled delegates that it was 'the weakness of the democracies that made the strength of the fascist powers' and emphasised the necessity of common action to persuade governments to intervene in international crises.⁸⁶ Unfortunately, the full text of the speech was not transposed. However, as a leader of the CMF, Duchêne embodied the committee's growing concern about the international situation in general. The actual work of the committee remained heavily gendered, but the broad nature of the themes of the Marseille congress indicated the group's desire to place themselves among larger international women's organisations.

Perhaps the biggest draw of the 1934 congress was the presence of Soviet delegates. Around 900 members of the public joined the 1,100 delegates to listen to a speech on the status of women in the USSR by Soviet delegate Elena Stasova. Gabrielle Duchêne personally presided over Stasova's session, which was a clear propaganda exercise to stimulate support for the Soviet state. Designed to appeal to the feminists in attendance, Stasova promoted the improvement in women's status due to Soviet policies. For example, she lauded the widening of access to work for women, which had tripled the number in work between 1929 and 1934, because the government had identified women as an underutilised source of labour.⁸⁷ She connected this directly to schemes to communalise domestic labour, particularly the establishment of crèches, which had 'singularly facilitated' the growth of numbers of women in work. She also cited the founding of collective kitchens and laundries as aiding women's entry into the Soviet workforce. Despite the clear propaganda purpose of Stasova's speech, the statistics that she mentioned were largely accurate; Gail Warshofsky Lapidus has argued that between 1928 and 1940, the number of women in the Soviet workforce increased fivefold, and in the mid-1930s, women made up '82 per cent of all newly employed workers'.⁸⁸

Stasova even used the Soviet government's legalisation of abortion to demonstrate the nation's status as 'the country of the emancipated woman'. She stressed that it was not legalised due to any desire for women to choose when or if to reproduce. Instead, women who sought out 'clandestine abortions' were more likely to be removed temporarily or permanently from the workforce if something went wrong. She argued that the legalisation of abortion would prevent the 'adverse consequences' of these secret procedures, so that women could have them in 'the best conditions of hygiene' possible, thus avoiding death or serious injury.⁸⁹ Although not all feminists would support the legalisation of abortion, the debate had entered the international women's movement's lexicon due to Soviet policies on the matter. Stasova successfully deployed it in her speech to present the USSR as a valuable ally in the struggle for women's emancipation. *L'Humanité* reported 'the fever with which the delegates of all countries and of all [political] tendencies and [social] conditions took notes' during Stasova's report, which demonstrated how 'the precise arguments about the grandiose achievements

which only the Soviet regime could achieve' could be utilised to stimulate interest in the Soviet experiment.⁹⁰

As the speech was a propaganda exercise, Stasova neglected to mention that the Soviet government had begun to reverse some moves towards women's emancipation. The *Zhenotdel*, the Soviet women's department, had been closed in 1930 with the explanation that women had been fully emancipated and no longer needed it. Soviet politicians Inessa Armand and Aleksandra Kollontai founded the bureau in 1919 to educate women on their rights in the new socialist society, to improve literacy and political education. Its closure was representative of the Soviet government's orientation towards more traditional conceptions of women's role in society in the 1930s.⁹¹ Legal abortion was insecure too; it was outlawed again by the 'In Defence of Mother and Child' decree in 1936 as an 'attempt to strengthen the Soviet family' due to fears about slow population growth. However, Janet Evans identified it as 'another aspect of the political repression which was a prominent feature of Soviet politics in the second half of the 1930s' and another way to exert control over the lives of Soviet women.⁹²

The Soviet Union did not send a delegation to the Marseille congress, and it also did not feature in the speeches. Rather, the congress focused primarily on the impact of the growth of right-wing political ideologies across the globe. For example, Irene Kirpal, a member of the Czechoslovak national assembly who spoke on the 'solidarity and collaboration of nations', expressed her fear that the situation in Czechoslovakia in 1938 was the 'pivot of world political tension'.⁹³ Another theme of the congress was what democracy meant in practice in the new global situation in 1938; the Czech feminist activist Františka Plamínková examined the 'democratic base of relations between individuals, the nation, and in international life' in her speech. She made it clear to attendees that democracy must always be 'the government of the people, by the people, and for the people'.⁹⁴

The 1938 congress also considered contemporary questions of religion and prejudice. Constance Coltman, the first British woman ordained to Christian ministry, linked pacifism with the teachings of Christ in her speech. She argued that when religion was employed in the service of 'reaction and repression', it was not representative of 'the true teachings of Jesus, who proclaimed that peace must be the goal as well as the means'.⁹⁵ Germaine Malaterre-Sellier, a French Catholic feminist, denounced the deceptions often perpetrated by national governments through lying and breaches of treaties. She argued that these misdeeds would be 'considered degrading for individuals', but nations consistently behaved in contemptible ways with no real consequences. Malaterre-Sellier believed that morality needed to be restored in international relations, specifically through the influence of Western religion.⁹⁶

The Franco-Ukrainian Jewish journalist Juliette Pary gave perhaps the most important speech, vehemently condemning anti-Semitism as the complete antithesis of peace. In her analysis, anti-Semitism was the

first step to even greater oppression and discrimination: ‘first, to crush the Jews, then [German] citizens, finally other countries’. She warned that Nazi anti-Semitism alone had ‘catastrophically increased the number of stateless people, uprooted, pauperised, forced into migration’ and alerted congress delegates that the poor international response to the plight of Jewish victims would tarnish the response to ‘refugees of any origin’.⁹⁷ She pointed to growing anti-Semitism in Central and Eastern Europe, including Germany, Austria, Poland, Romania, and Hungary, as of particular concern. Conversely, she contrasted anti-Semitism with the ‘Jewish spirit’ which held many similar values as the CMF. Pary identified an intrinsic stance against violence and murder in Judaism, as ‘3000 years ago... the prophets preached fraternity between nations as between individuals’. She also specifically advocated for a sisterhood between Jewish women and anti-fascist women to fight

racism and anti-Semitism, for the maintenance of rights of asylum for refugees, for the boycotting of products sold by aggressor nations, for justice, freedom and peace, of which the Judaism of today, as that of other times, is inextricably linked.⁹⁸

The 1934 congress and the 1938 congress had divergent themes and distinct goals: the earlier congress, based on early concepts of Popular Front ideology, stressed the necessity of unity among women to protest the growth of far-right ideology across Europe primarily. It also needed to demonstrate that the CMF was a separate entity from the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement, not simply its women’s section. Thus, the content of the congress was gendered and tended to veer away from discussing international political questions, despite the communist symbols which permeated the atmosphere of the meeting. That is not to say that there was no clear bias towards the Soviet Union. Stasova’s propagandistic speech on women in the USSR was the most anticipated moment of the four-day meeting, and Duchêne’s choice not to discuss Soviet women in her deeply researched analysis of issues facing women across the globe presented the idea that the Soviet Union supported women’s emancipation and was therefore a key ally in the committee’s gendered work. Conversely, the theme of the Marseille congress, ‘*La moralité dans les relations internationales*’, required a broader approach. This was exemplified best in the opening sessions of the meeting, which considered larger questions about the consequences of alliances between far-right governments and the legality of the prevailing international situation. However, it was also concerned with the impact of these overarching political trends on the European masses. This demonstrated a particularly nuanced understanding of how growing anti-Semitism was an unacceptable and dangerous trend, which would not only impact the treatment of Jewish people, but also influence how fascist states would victimise other minorities and vulnerable people.

Conclusion

CMF congresses were essential activist spaces in which the ideologies of communism, antifascism, and feminism were united under the banner of internationalism in a performative and practical manner. The congresses were valuable tools for garnering publicity and attracting new members, but they also served the greater purpose of placing the committee and its work in a grander tradition of international meetings by activist groups. Following the first national conference for (American) women's rights at the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 and the First International Congress of Women's Rights in Paris in 1878, the conference had become an integral part of women's international organising by the 1930s as a space for public collaboration, solidarity, and performance. The CMF used congresses for these purposes, and in doing so connected themselves with women's activism of the past, as well as with other women's groups operating simultaneously in Europe. They employed traditional methods of organising and holding the congress, including generating appeals adorned with the names of the premier women's activists of the period, encouraging the wearing of national dress to stimulate internationalist feelings, and stressing unity based on shared femininity, rather than political division.

However, the same criticisms levelled at the congresses of other international women's groups in the interwar period can be applied to the CMF. Despite its label as a 'world committee', Western women dominated CMF congresses and discourses, with no special effort to ensure the participation of non-Western women. Women from French colonies in North Africa were even subsumed into the larger French delegation. Those non-Western women who attended were often specifically exalted as a proof of the committee's internationalism, which reinforces how Eurocentric CMF congresses actually were. The two international meetings held were hosted in France and were thus largely European in terms of delegate composition and content, with non-European issues being a secondary priority to the situation in Europe. Language also created inclusion problems, as business was primarily conducted in French, English, and German at the international level. This erected barriers for women who did not speak these languages (specifically non-Western women) and assumed a level of 'educational privilege accessible only to relatively elite women', largely excluding working-class women.⁹⁹ Again, the attendance of rural workers or peasants was highlighted by the committee as a marker of inclusivity, but actually demonstrated that the congresses were not as representative as was claimed. It would be materially impossible for women from outside Europe without significant income to travel and participate.

The planned congress in Cuba in 1939 may have provided a different, non-Western perspective. At the least, the attendance of women from Central and South America would have been easier. However, as the congress was cancelled with the outbreak of the Second World War, we cannot know

with certainty. Leila Rupp has argued that the predominantly European or North American setting for women's congresses in the interwar period 'revealed assumptions about the global distribution of membership', and that it was not until after the war that international women's organisations met 'beyond the confines' of Western nations.¹⁰⁰ Despite the prior realities of its international congresses, that the CMF was seeking to hold its most important meeting in Cuba demonstrates that the group conceptualised its work as truly international and wanted to reflect it in its most publicised event. It was also revolutionary among women's organisations of the period in its intention to expand its activist meetings beyond the usual geographical boundaries.

Communist women dominated proceedings as both delegates and through the clear communist influence on the congress. Socialist and pacifist women were present at these meetings and contributed as speakers, however. This created new opportunities for collaboration and cooperation between communist and non-communist women, which predated the earliest official Comintern Popular Front policy. It also facilitated further official collaboration between activist women of different political backgrounds in local and national CMF committees established following the founding meeting, allowing for continued exchanges of information and ideas between women on the local, regional, national, and international levels. However, it was abundantly clear to many non-communist attendees that CMF work was heavily influenced by communist ideology and may prioritise communist concerns over feminist or pacifist ones. The CMF leadership endeavoured to hold meetings characterised by unity against a common political enemy, but the communist influence consistently undermined this aim, which led to overt support for the Soviet cause. This was much more obvious in the first meeting, primarily due to the presence of a Soviet delegation headed by Elena Stasova. Soviet women were conspicuously absent from the 1938 congress for reasons unknown.

The CMF expressed more concern about larger political questions at their congresses as the 1930s progressed. The presence of prominent legal and political figures and a pivot towards a less gendered theme at the 1938 congress marked a public departure from exclusively women's issues. In practice, however, this did not trickle down to the everyday work of committees on either the international or national level, which remained strictly focused on women and children. The 1939 congress appeal represented a further development in the committee's ideology, with the geographical shift from Paris to London. It advocated a primarily defensive approach, which emphasised the prevention of war in non-fascist countries, rather than an active struggle against fascism. It also utilised more traditional conceptions of women as mothers, daughters, and sisters, to persuade women to defend their familial space. Maternalist rhetoric was already a feature of CMF campaigns, but it was not used in CMF congress appeals until this point. Perhaps the vast changes that the CMF had gone through earlier in 1939

required a wider approach to attracting congress delegates. In addition, the appeal presented women as homogenous groups, eschewing national and social differences, for a more general approach based on the role of women in the family. If the rhetoric of the Cuban congress appeal was reflected in the content of the aborted congress, the meeting may have focused on how women as mothers could protest the immediate threat of war in their own countries, rather than how to combat fascism across the globe, as female economic actors.

Notes

1. Ruth Craggs and Martin Mahoney, 'The Geographies of the Conference: Knowledge, Performance and Protest', *Geography Compass*, Vol. 8, No. 6 (2014), p. 414 and 426.
2. See Leila Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 170.
3. Vanessa Lincoln Lambert, 'The Dynamics of Transnational Activism: The International Peace Congresses, 1843–51', *The International History Review*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (2016), p. 127.
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5. 'Appel aux Femmes du monde entier!' (1938), Pandor, 543_2_26, Doc. 7; [Chapter 4](#) covers the CMF's response to these international events in further detail.
6. 'To the Women of Britain' (1934), p. 2.
7. *Ibid.* p. 3.
8. Laura Beers, *Red Ellen: The Life of Ellen Wilkinson, Socialist, Feminist, Internationalist* (London: Harvard University Press, 2016), p. 306.
9. 'Aux femmes de tous les pays!' (8 April 1934), Pandor, 543_2_2, Doc. 5.
10. 'Appel aux Femmes du monde entier!' (1938), Doc. 7.
11. 'Aux femmes de tous les pays!' (8 April 1934), Doc. 5.
12. *Ibid.*
13. 'Enquête auprès des FONCTIONNAIRES', Pandor, 543_2_1, Doc 30; and 'Enquête auprès des OUVRIERES de l'Industrie et du Commerce', Pandor, 543_2_1, Doc. 32.
14. 'Enquête auprès des MÉNAGÈRES', Pandor, 543_2_1, Doc 44.
15. 'Enquête auprès des PAYSANNES (Petites Propriétaires)', Pandor, 543_2_1, Doc. 40.
16. 'Enquête auprès des FONCTIONNAIRES', Doc. 30.
17. 'LES FEMMES DU MONDE ENTIER AU SERVICE DE LA PAIX! Compte rendu de la Conférence Internationale des Femmes, Marseille 13-14-15 Mai 1938' (1938), Bernadette Cattaneo archives, 1-BC-2L (1), p. 6, CHSVS.
18. 'Appel aux Femmes du monde entier!' (1938), Doc. 7.
19. Sue Bruley, *Leninism, Stalinism, and the Women's Movement in Britain 1920–1939* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 277.
20. 'To All Mothers, to All Women' (1939), Pandor, 543_2_34, Doc. 3.
21. [Chapter 5](#) analyses how the CMF utilised maternal rhetoric and imagery in its national campaigns.
22. 'To All Mothers, to All Women' (1939), Doc. 3.
23. Prezeau, 'Le mouvement Amsterdam-Pleyel (1932-1934). Un champ d'essai du front unique', pp. 89–91.
24. Marie Sandell, *The Rise of Women's Transnational Activism: Identity and Sisterhood Between the World Wars* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), pp. 83–84.

25. 'Rassemblement Mondial des Femmes! Contre la guerre et le fascisme: Compte rendu des travaux du congrès' (1934), Bernadette Cattaneo Archives, 1-BC-2(A), p. 4, CHSVS, p. 31.
26. [Table 2.1](#): National Composition of CMF Congress Delegates (Paris, 1934); *Ibid.* p. 31.
27. Alan K. Henrikson, 'The Geography of Diplomacy' in Colin Flint (ed.), *The Geography of War and Peace: From Death Camps to Diplomats* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 381.
28. 'La conférence internationale des femmes a commencé ses travaux à Marseille', *L'Humanité* (14 May 1938), p. 2.
29. These countries were Argentina, Bulgaria, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Indochina, Indonesia, Norway, Romania, the Saar, and the Soviet Union.
30. 'La conférence internationale des femmes scellera l'union des amies de la paix: Une interview de Bernadette Cattaneo', *L'Humanité* (11 May 1938), p. 4.
31. 'LES FEMMES DU MONDE ENTIER AU SERVICE DE LA PAIX! Compte rendu de la Conférence Internationale des Femmes, Marseille 13-14-15 Mai 1938' (1938), p. 6.
32. *Ibid.* p. 6.
33. For more on the women's section of the Comintern, see Jean-Jacques Marie, 'The Women's Section of the Comintern, from Lenin to Stalin', in Christine Fauré (ed.), *Political and Historical Encyclopaedia of Women* (London: Routledge, 2003).
34. Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 146.
35. 'Rassemblement Mondial des Femmes! Contre la guerre et le fascisme: Compte rendu des travaux du congrès', 1934, p. 4; Marjorie Pollitt, 'WORLD MEET OF WOMEN AGAINST WAR', *The Daily Worker* (6 August 1934), p. 2.
36. 'Plus de 1.500 déléguées de tous les pays au Rassemblement des femmes', *L'Humanité* (5 August 1934), p. 1.
37. Mineke Bosch and Annemarie Kloosterman (eds.), *Politics and Friendship: Letters from the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, 1902-1942* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1990), p. 18.
38. Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, pp. 108-109.
39. Leila J. Rupp, 'The Making of International Women's Organisations', in Martin H. Geyer and Johannes Paulmann (eds.), *The Mechanics of Internationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 218-219.
40. Marie Sandell, 'A Real Meeting of Women of the East and West: Women and Internationalism in the Interwar Period', in Daniel Laqua (ed.), *Internationalism Reconfigured: Transnational Ideas and Movements Between the World Wars* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), pp. 174-175.
41. 'Plus de 1.500 déléguées de tous les pays au rassemblement des femmes', *L'Humanité* (5 August 1934), p. 1.
42. [Table 2.2](#): Social Composition of CMF Congress Delegates (Paris, 1934); 'Rassemblement Mondial des Femmes! Contre la guerre et le fascisme: Compte rendu des travaux du congrès', (1934), p. 31.
43. *Ibid.* p. 31.
44. *Ibid.* p. 11; Marjorie Pollitt, 'Soviet Delegates in Paris', *Daily Worker* (8 August 1934), p. 2.
45. *Ibid.* p. 2.
46. Rupp, 'The Making of International Women's Organisations', p. 229.
47. Sandell, *The Rise of Women's Transnational Activism: Identity and Sisterhood Between the World Wars*, p. 67.
48. Marjorie Pollitt, 'First Great International Rally of Women against War and Fascism', *Daily Worker* (11 August 1934), p. 3.

49. **Table 2.3:** Political Composition of CMF Congress Delegates (Paris, 1934); ‘Rassemblement Mondial des Femmes! Contre la guerre et le fascisme: Compte rendu des travaux du congrès’ (1934), p. 37.
50. To Madam Waern-Bugge from Emily Greene Balch/Clara Ragaz/Gertrud Baer (13 October 1934), WILPF Microfilm, Reel 2:1680.
51. For further reading on the Amsterdam International, see Geert van Goethem, *The Amsterdam International: The World of the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), 1913–1945* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).
52. ‘Rassemblement Mondial des Femmes! Contre la guerre et le fascisme: Compte rendu des travaux du congrès’ (1934), p. 6.
53. To Madam Waern-Bugge from Emily Greene Balch (18 December 1934) WILPF Microfilm, reel 2: 1702.
54. To Members of the Executive Committee of the WILPF (16 July 1934), WILPF Microfilm, reel 2: 1674.
55. To the Vice Presidents from Cor Ramondt-Hirschmann (20 July 1934), WILPF Microfilm, reel 20: 1981.
56. To Mrs Forsythe from Miss A. Honora Enfield (2 November 1933), WILPF Microfilm, Reel 33: 0285.
57. ‘Rassemblement Mondial des Femmes! Contre la guerre et le fascisme: Compte rendu des travaux du congrès’ (1934), p. 2.
58. Anna Hillyar and Jane McDermid, *Revolutionary Women in Russia, 1870–1917* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 172; for more on Aleksandra Kollontai and her views on women’s emancipation, see Alix Holt (ed.), *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai* (London: Allison and Busby, 1977); Joan Roelofs, ‘Alexandra Kollontai: Socialist Feminism in Theory and Practice’, *International Critical Thought*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2018), pp. 166–175; Christine Sypnowich, ‘Alexandra Kollontai and the Fate of Bolshevik Feminism’, *Labor/Le Travail*, Vol. 32 (1993), pp. 287–295.
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62. Donny Gluckstein, ‘Deciphering the Internationale: The Eugène Pottier Code’, *International Socialism*, Vol. 120, No. 2 (2008) [available on Marxists.org].
63. ‘Plus de 1,500 déléguées de tous les pays au Rassemblement de femmes’, *L’Humanité* (5 August 1934), p. 1.
64. ‘Henri Barbusse a salué hier au nom du Comité Amsterdam Pleyel le Rassemblement mondial des femmes’, *L’Humanité* (7 August 1934), p. 2.
65. ‘Un exposé précis d’Elena Stasova sur le ‘Pays de la femme libérée’, *L’Humanité* (6 August 1934), p. 1; Marjorie Pollitt, ‘WORLD MEET OF WOMEN AGAINST WAR’, *Daily Worker* (6 August 1934), p. 2.
66. ‘Plus de 1,500 déléguées de tous les pays au Rassemblement de femmes’, *L’Humanité* (5 August 1934), p. 1.
67. ‘Les déléguées des pays capitalistes acclament les travailleuses soviétiques’, *L’Humanité*, (8 August 1934), p. 2.
68. Marjorie Pollitt, ‘Soviet Delegates in Paris’, *Daily Worker* (8 August 1934), p. 2.
69. ‘Un exposé précis d’Elena Stasova sur le ‘Pays de la femme libérée’, *L’Humanité* (6 August 1934), p. 1; and Marjorie Pollitt, ‘First Great International Rally of Women against War and Fascism’, *Daily Worker* (11 August 1934), p. 3.

70. 'Un exposé précis d'Elena Stasova sur le 'Pays de la femme libérée', *L'Humanité* (6 August 1934), p. 1.
71. To Madam Waern-Bugge from Emily Greene Balch/Clara Ragaz/Gertrud Baer (13 October 1934), WILPF Microfilm, reel 2: 1680.
72. *Ibid.*
73. 'Rassemblement Mondial des Femmes! Contre la guerre et le fascisme: Compte rendu des travaux du congrès' (1934), p. 6.
74. 'Le rassemblement mondial des femmes', *L'Humanité* (5 August 1934), p. 2.
75. 'Rassemblement Mondial des Femmes! Contre la guerre et le fascisme: Compte rendu des travaux du congrès' (1934), p. 6.
76. 'LES FEMMES DU MONDE ENTIER AU SERVICE DE LA PAIX! Compte rendu de la Conférence Internationale des Femmes, Marseille 13-14-15 Mai 1938' (1938), p. 7.
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78. Gabrielle Duchêne, 'RAPPORT: la situation des femmes au 20eme anniversaire de la guerre' (1934), Pandor, 543_2_1, Doc. 54, p. 1.
79. *Ibid.* p. 5.
80. *Ibid.* p. 7.
81. *Ibid.* p. 15.
82. *Ibid.* p. 16.
83. *Ibid.* p. 6 and 15.
84. *Ibid.* p. 9.
85. *Ibid.* p. 29.
86. 'LES FEMMES DU MONDE ENTIER AU SERVICE DE LA PAIX! Compte rendu de la Conférence Internationale des Femmes, Marseille 13-14-15 Mai 1938' (1938), p. 8.
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93. 'LES FEMMES DU MONDE ENTIER AU SERVICE DE LA PAIX! Compte rendu de la Conférence Internationale des Femmes, Marseille 13-14-15 Mai 1938' (1938), p. 9.
94. *Ibid.* p. 10.
95. *Ibid.* p. 10.
96. *Ibid.* p. 12.
97. *Ibid.* p. 11.
98. *Ibid.* p. 12.
99. Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, p. 71.
100. *Ibid.* p. 73.

3 The Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme, the Soviet Union, and the Comintern

Understanding the nature of the relationship between the *Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme*, the Soviet Union, and the Comintern is crucial for contextualising the group's ideology and work. Communist women constituted a larger portion of the group's membership than any other political group. The group's leadership was overwhelmingly communist too; Bernadette Cattaneo, Maria Rabaté, and Charlotte Haldane were all members of the party, while Gabrielle Duchêne supported communist politics as a fellow-traveller. It is clear that the CMF was a communist front organisation, but how this relationship manifested and was maintained through personal connections and interactions has yet to be established. This chapter will examine the nature of CMF communications with Comintern representatives and consider how these relationships facilitated CMF business. Did the Comintern seek to dominate the affairs of the CMF in the same way as the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement? Did the group's inherently gendered focus make it less of a priority for the Comintern, providing the freedom that other communist front organisations did not have? Müzenberg was not closely involved in the administration of the CMF as he was in the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement. Rather, the CMF leadership (some of whom, including Duchêne, had worked in the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement) created the organisation with the Comintern to confront the largely ignored threats posed to women by fascism and war, in tandem with its role as a communist propaganda organisation.

The CMF was certainly financed by communists to some extent. This funding was unsubstantial and was provided directly to the international executive committee. Cattaneo often complained that the CMF was not being supported enough in financial terms by the PCF. National sections relied on the membership fees that they collected to fund their work, and smaller national sections scaled back their activities and appealed to the executive committee for funds in the direst situations. Between 1 January and 30 June 1935, the CMF generated an income of 95,903 francs and 46 centimes but incurred expenses of almost 159,178 francs and 43 centimes. In addition to this, the committee had regular debts totalling 15,345 francs a month which were owed to the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement, the CGTU,

and to committee staff who had not yet received their wages.¹ As this report of expenses chronicled an early period for the CMF's work (January 1935 was less than six months after the founding congress in August 1934), it was likely that the income of the committee increased as its popularity grew and its membership base increased. The CMF seems to have been largely funded by its own income and supplemented by external communist groups. The PCF was not directly involved in channelling money to the CMF, which offered plausible deniability against accusations of direct communist funding.

This chapter will consider two key examples of collaboration between the CMF and Soviet women: private correspondence between key CMF activists and Soviet women acting on behalf of the Comintern, and political tourism to the USSR. This twofold structure will expose the power dynamics between the Soviet government and the CMF by investigating the varied nature of interactions with Soviet citizens and the Soviet Union itself. In the first part, we can identify genuine friendships between communist cadres which permeate correspondence, even on the most serious of topics. The latter section of this chapter offers a view of the CMF-Soviet relationship which is almost the inverse: an amiable and welcoming façade that masked the true conversion and propaganda goals of political tourism to the USSR. CMF members experienced a propagandised vision of life in the Soviet Union which could be (and was) reproduced for audiences on the women's return home as both propaganda and legitimation for both the CMF and the USSR. Further, the Comintern monitored some of the most prominent rank-and-file members of the CMF to identify potential problems, opportunities for conversion, or women useful for their links to socialist parties.

Personal Communications between the *Comité* and Soviet Women

The Comintern was closely involved in CMF business from the earliest plans to hold a women's world congress against war and fascism in late 1933. The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom had organised a consultative conference in November 1933 on the possibility of organising a large anti-fascist meeting which was attended by Bernadette Cattaneo. After this endeavour failed, Cattaneo was approached by Comintern leader Georgi Dimitrov to organise a separate movement of women against war and fascism because of her prominent role in the PCF.² Soviet women attended CMF meetings (both in the form of congresses and international executive meetings) and regular contact with the Comintern was maintained by the CMF leadership until the committee's dissolution.

Cattaneo was the main author of correspondence between the CMF and the Comintern through its representative Elena Stasova. Stasova was an 'old Bolshevik', revered for her active role in the revolutionary struggle and her work in the Soviet government. She was a Comintern representative to the

KPD during the 1920s and the head of International Red Aid (MOPR) from the 1930s, in addition to sitting on the International Control Commission of the Comintern from 1935. However, she nearly succumbed to the paranoia of the Stalinist terror: Stalin told Dimitrov in a private conversation in 1937 that Stasova was 'scum' and would 'probably' be arrested.³ Shortly after this statement was made, Stasova was removed from her post at MOPR but managed to retain her position on the International Control Commission until the Comintern's dissolution in 1943, despite her apparent fall from favour. Cattaneo's written correspondence with Stasova lasted until 1939, with Stasova acting as the main conduit for information from the Soviet Union for the CMF, and vice versa.

The CMF archives contain a file that consists entirely of correspondence between Cattaneo and Stasova. It is largely made up of CMF information bulletins, but there are also several examples of direct correspondence between the two. In her book of letters between IWSA activists, Mineke Bosch demonstrated that letter writing helped to develop a language of international solidarity among women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This practice of letter writing ensured that activists of different nationalities could communicate ideas and cultivate friendships and intimacy across great geographical distances.⁴ This solidarity and amity can certainly be seen in the Cattaneo/Stasova correspondence. A letter from Cattaneo to Stasova in 1934 expressed gratitude for advice and pictures that Stasova had sent for publication in CMF journals. The initial letter that Stasova sent to Cattaneo is not contained in these archives, but the advice was likely related to CMF work. In Cattaneo's letter, some sections are wholly professional: for example, Cattaneo commented on the CMF's spectacular growth in France, where 'more than 600' groups had been created and others were still being set up. She also complained that French newspapers would not publicise *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* and that this had harmed subscription numbers. She specifically mentioned that the French communist newspaper *L'Humanité* had not covered a recent CMF meeting, unlike other left-leaning, non-communist papers that had, including *L'Oeuvre* and *Quotidien*. Cattaneo estimated that if *L'Humanité* and *Le Populaire* had publicised the event, the audience 'would have been double' the number who attended.⁵ Cattaneo's complaint fits a broader pattern of frustration about general communist disinterest in the CMF and its growth. By mentioning these issues, Cattaneo was implicitly asking Stasova to highlight this indifference about women's work to the Comintern, which would then, hopefully, direct the national communist parties and their organs to support their women comrades more, both financially and morally. Cattaneo also updated Stasova on the growth of the CMF in countries outside of France, praising the Spanish national committee as 'magnificent' because 'unity had very much been realised' there, to take one example.⁶

Cattaneo's letters were also characterised by a clear fondness for Stasova, though. She wrote that she 'loved and admired Stasova' and that she was

‘very proud of this friendship and the affection’ between them. Cattaneo regarded Stasova as a ‘true communist’, who was ‘absolutely devoted’ to the cause. She believed that Stasova had the purest communistic intentions and was, therefore, the ‘most strictly human’ politician in this period.⁷ The level of comradeship between the two was demonstrated at its most dramatic in 1939 when Cattaneo visited Moscow. She met with Stasova who, with ‘tears in her eyes’, told her that the Soviet government believed her to be ‘treasonous’ and thus that they would likely never meet again. The potential purge of one of her closest allies shook Cattaneo to the core. Cattaneo wrote: ‘We kissed each other, and I had the certainty that I would not see Hélène Stasova and the USSR again – something broke, and my ideal collapsed miserably’.⁸ Cattaneo eventually broke with the Comintern and the PCF because of her disillusionment following the Nazi-Soviet Pact but witnessing ‘true communists’ punished for imagined treasons undoubtedly had an impact on her communist faith.

Stasova acted as a mentor and a confidante to several key CMF women. For example, Marcelle Leroy, a communist activist, the president of the Belgian WILPF section, and the founder of the Belgian CMF section, wrote to Stasova in 1936 about the growth of the Belgian committee.⁹ She asked for advice on increasing the circulation of the Belgian CMF journal, *Femmes*; they had sold 5,000 copies, but Leroy believed that this ‘was not enough’. These two activists also had a close comradeship, demonstrated as Leroy thanked Stasova with ‘all her heart’ for the ‘kindness’ she had shown Leroy’s daughter on a recent visit to Moscow. Leroy wrote that, with Stasova’s help, her daughter’s stay in Moscow had taught her ‘many things and... [she] continue[d] her studies with great courage’ on her return to Belgium.¹⁰

Stasova also received letters from women in countries that had not set up a national CMF section. For example, American anti-fascist activism was not as gendered as in Europe. Although an American League against War and Fascism (ALWF) was established in the 1930s, the reaction to the spread of fascism was slower due to a strong existing anti-war movement, as well as a growing fear of communism among the general populace. There was also seemingly a disdain among American communists of both sexes for separate women’s organisations, something that was consistently mentioned in CMF reports on the state of the movement.¹¹ Consequently, an American section of the CMF was never created. Regardless, several American women who were in communication with the CMF sent letters to Stasova. The most prominent of these women was Ella Reeve ‘Mother’ Bloor, a labour organiser, feminist, and member of the CPUSA. Bloor joined the CPUSA in 1920 and was one of only two women to serve on the Central Committee of the party for more than a decade between 1921 and 1961.¹² She led the American delegation to the CMF’s 1934 congress in Paris and had been elected to the International Committee of the Struggle Against War at the 1932 Amsterdam congress.¹³ In Bloor’s correspondence with Stasova, she mentioned the ‘very good Congress against War and Fascism’ held in

Cleveland, Ohio in 1936, but expressed her disappointment that the ‘women’s commission’ was ‘not as large as it should have been’. She explained that due to a recent jail sentence and a 9,000-mile propaganda trip through the farm districts of the United States, she was unable to contribute to building a specifically female anti-fascist movement in the country. Bloor worried that her interest in the movement had been underestimated by CMF women ‘because of the long silences of the American women’ on the topic and committed to ‘taking a more decisive part’ in anti-fascist activism.¹⁴ Continued correspondence by American women with Stasova on the topic of women’s anti-fascism demonstrates her contribution as a respected Soviet colleague in trying to facilitate the expansion of the CMF movement into thus far unconquered territories.

Stasova was one of several Soviet women who corresponded with CMF representatives. Maria Krylova was another. Krylova worked in the cadre department of the Executive Committee of the Comintern from 1932 to 1938, working closely with Dimitrov.¹⁵ Cattané wrote lengthy, amiable letters to Krylova: she regularly spoke of the committee’s successful work in Spain, highlighting the ‘extensive effort’ of the French and Belgian committees in collecting ‘thousands of kilos of goods, clothes, provisions, and sanitary materials’. Cattané regularly closed these letters with expressions of friendship and comradeship. In one letter, she wrote that she hoped

... to be able to take a few days off at the end of January and would gladly spend them with you, as you invite me to do. My best wishes to Hélène [Stasova], to Kir, and to all our friends. See you soon, I hope. I embrace you wholeheartedly.¹⁶

Another letter from Cattané to Krylova concluded:

Write to me quickly. Give us news of Hélène [Stasova], to whom we all wish with all our hearts a speedy recovery. Kisses to the little ones, who must be at such a nice age, when you start walking alone and trying your hand at talking.

All of your friends have charged me with giving you their well wishes and I myself embrace you affectionately.¹⁷

This type of informal information was also sent by Krylova. For example, she ended a letter about CMF business by telling Cattané that she had a new granddaughter and that she had a ‘great desire to see all of you, and especially you and Maria’ (Rabaté).¹⁸ Relationships between CMF women and Soviet representatives went beyond that of colleagues; they were often close friends who spoke candidly to one another, and this, in turn, influenced how Soviet women advised on CMF business.

The letters mentioned here are not the only examples of correspondence between the Soviet Union and the CMF; there are hundreds of similar letters in the CMF archives. These letters to female Soviet political activists demonstrate a tangible link between CMF women and the Comintern; they show a level of influence exerted over the committee by Soviet representatives, which was manifested through requests for advice by CMF women and a constant stream of information on committee work to the USSR. The CMF was never given specific orders to follow in these letters, but Soviet women did represent authority for the committee's leadership, acting as intermediaries between the CMF and the Comintern. The amiable tone of the letters was indicative of the close collaboration between the women, which facilitated CMF business and led to long-term relationships.

Anti-Fascist Women as Political Tourists

CMF women were also employed as direct witnesses to the successes of the Soviet state. While the CMF leadership often made official visits to Moscow (in some cases, annually) as part of their roles as communist cadres, this section will focus on examples of political tourism: specifically propagandised journeys designed to impart an idealised vision of the Soviet Union for Western audiences, many of whom were not communists, and to generate support for the Soviet government. The Soviet mystique compelled many intellectuals to travel to the USSR in the interwar period. The Soviet socialist critique of capitalism provided left-wing Westerners with what Paul Hollander has labelled as 'an impressively coherent explanation of all the disturbing phenomena of the time: the Depression, unemployment, poverty, and the rise of Nazism'.¹⁹ These crises highlighted the inherent flaws of the capitalist system for many intellectuals, making the supposed benefits of state communism all the more attractive. This was further reinforced by the Soviet Union's open opposition to fascism at a time when most European nations were unwilling to denounce it. The Comintern harnessed this interest by organising delegations of political tourists to the USSR to experience communist society first-hand. The CMF were eager to undertake these types of trips as propaganda exercises: delegations of intellectual and working-class women from the French, Belgian, and Swiss sections visited the USSR several times during the 1930s. Political tourism offered women a way to forge and maintain international contacts and to imagine themselves 'as part of something larger than the nation...dedicated to common goals of social transformation'.²⁰ In this case, the visits also allowed the Comintern to monitor the women involved with the CMF to identify those who could potentially be converted to communism or were otherwise politically useful. The propaganda aspect was twofold. First, the publicity generated by high-profile visits to the Soviet Union (in this case, a large group of Western women) could generate positive depictions of the country in the Western press, thereby stimulating support. Second, visitors themselves would

openly discuss their experiences on their return home, which were often overwhelmingly positive because of the strict control of what visitors saw and did by the Soviet government. For the CMF, it also strengthened its connections in both image and fact: it legitimised the committee's claims to internationalism, and it allowed rank-and-file members to develop written communication with their Soviet guides.

In this chapter, I will be focusing on two delegations to the Soviet Union: a group of 48 French and Belgian women in 1935 and one of 16 French women in 1936.²¹ Both of these groups were characterised by the diverse social and political backgrounds of their delegates; the majority were rank-and-file members of the CMF, workers, and non-communists.²² Some women from the CMF leadership did travel with delegates, including Belgian CMF leader Marcelle Leroy in 1935 and the secretary of the Parisian committee Wanda Landy in 1936. Both of these women were communists and acted as the heads of their respective delegations, ensuring that the visitors conformed to their itineraries. The delegations travelled across the Soviet Union broadly following the same itineraries as those created by the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS), a body that organised visits by foreigners to the country and strictly controlled what they were exposed to. The 1935 visit was extensive, with delegates travelling on a specially chartered train between Moscow, Kharkiv, Rostov-on-Don, Baku, Mineralnye Vody, Sochi, Ivanovo, the Bolshevo prison commune, and Leningrad, as well as several smaller towns and villages.²³ The 1936 delegation also travelled on a specially chartered train, but to fewer cities: Moscow, Baku, Sochi, Leningrad, Kyiv, and Zaporizhzhia.²⁴ Both delegations visited a variety of sites designed to demonstrate the superiority of Soviet politics, society, and culture, including schools, factories, prison communes, sanatoriums, kolkhozes, and entertainment spaces.²⁵

It was not the norm for women to embark on long, politically motivated trips in this period. Angela Kershaw has argued that women who went to the USSR were usually defined more by their class than their gender, because 'they were either financially independent intellectuals for whom travel was already a habit, or they were worker delegates whose presence in Soviet Russia was justified by their proletarian identity and communist commitment'.²⁶ Some CMF delegates fit these descriptions of political tourists, but a third category was present. Women worker delegates to the Soviet Union in the 1930s were occasionally socialist or non-party too; therefore, it is useful to include a third category of women travellers: those non-communist women who were prime for political conversion. Soviet guides generated short reports on the 1935 CMF delegates that highlighted relevant information for this purpose, including their employment, place of residency, political affiliation, and defining personality traits. These reports provided a qualitative description of each woman's political seriousness, expertise, and susceptibility to communist thought, resembling the VOKS reports on foreign visitors in the same period.²⁷ Copies of these reports for the 1935

delegation can be found in the CMF papers, but similar reports do not exist for the later visit. Whom the reports were created for is unknown; they were likely received by Elena Stasova who utilised them in the course of her work with the CMF. Because of the similarities with VOKS reports too, it would not be unreasonable to assume that they were created for or by VOKS or another agency.

The reports give a detailed insight into the lives of these rank-and-file activists who would otherwise not receive much attention in the CMF papers. Eight of the delegates were teachers, seven were involved with trade unions or reformist organisations, and five were authors or journalists. Commentary on personal traits often exposed defects that did not fit with the Comintern's ideal communist activist. Several teachers were described in negative terms. For example, Camille Ringard, a French communist teacher, was described as 'lazy', 'violent', and as not taking an 'active part' in the delegation's work, while Suzanne Pinot, whose political identification was unknown, was identified as 'passive and politically weak'. Even women who were heavily involved in CMF business were highlighted as needing improvement. Yvonne Kanya, a member of the French CMF's national committee and a leading activist in the World Youth Committee against War and Fascism, was described as 'unstable' and as having an 'undisciplined attitude'. Further, socialist women were often the subject of much criticism. Madeleine Giroux, a member of the French Socialist Party (SFIO), was noted for distancing herself from the other delegates because she was 'nervous', and thus was absent when the delegation discussed 'important questions'. As a result, she was deemed unsuitable for political conversion. One of the more surprising anecdotes regarded Eugénie Peniakova-Querstens, a Russian socialist who was married to a Belgian man. Her 'bold and hostile character' was highlighted, traits that made her unpopular with the rest of the delegation. The report claimed that 'no-one wanted to sleep in the same room with her' during their stay in Moscow. Her attitude and her role in the POB marked her out for special observation by the communists in the CMF after the delegates had returned home.²⁸

Information on the women on the 1936 trip to the Soviet Union is far more limited. If these women were the subject of reports in the same way that the earlier delegation was, the material has been lost. However, we know the names and the employment of delegates and thus some information on their political affiliation can be uncovered. All of the delegates were professionals of some persuasion: at least ten were teachers, one was a lawyer, one was a 'bachelor of science', and one was described as an 'art critic'. This woman, Anita Esteve, was an arts and culture journalist who wrote for several French newspapers and magazines, including *Le Populaire*, *Caliban* (an entertainment newspaper), and the French CMF's journal *Femmes dans l'action mondiale*.²⁹ If we extrapolate from the politics of the newspapers that she wrote for, Esteve was at least socialist-leaning in the 1930s. However, she did begin to contribute to *L'Effort* during the Second World War, a daily

newspaper ‘for national reconstruction’ that supported the Vichy regime.³⁰ If she was a formal member of the CMF, there is no surviving evidence.

There was, of course, a strong communist presence too. Take, for example, Wanda Landy, the secretary of the CMF for the Paris region and the leader of this 1936 delegation. However, her commitment to the communist cause was often deemed to be ‘suspect’ because of her close contacts in the bourgeois women’s movement; for example, she was accused by the communist activist Pierre Brossard of ‘quickly arriving at a place hoping to collect interesting information’, and he advised the PCF not to use her. Landy would eventually leave the CMF on bad terms, with rumours that she had come into conflict with Cattané. She specifically disagreed with the choice to temporarily make Héléne Langevin-Solomon the secretary of the CMF while Cattané was in Moscow, ‘believing that this role belonged to the person in charge of the [Paris region]’, which would have been herself. Landy subsequently made work difficult for Langevin and failed to appear at the CMF’s Parisian regional congress, leaving the committee later in 1937.³¹ Other delegates of note were the feminist lawyer Andrée Lehmann, who campaigned for equal pay for equal work, the right to maternity leave, and universal suffrage, and Henriette Dheilly, a militant trade unionist in the CGT and secretary of the Seine-Inférieure (now Seine-Maritime) CMF group.³²

The itineraries of both delegations were varied but were constructed with the gender of the visitors squarely in mind. The women on the 1935 trip expressed a desire ‘to study the construction of socialism, the living conditions of manual workers and intellectuals, and particularly the place given to women and children’ in this new society. The delegates chronicled their visit in short articles and a longer ‘open letter to women around the world’, which covered their journey from the ‘North to the South’ of the USSR. They visited ‘the countryside, towns, capitals of Republics and national districts, spas and seaside resorts’, touring ‘huge new or reconstructed factories, oil wells and refineries, tobacco factories, a dairy factory, a bread factory [and] collective farms (kolkhozes)’. The delegates also visited several social institutions, including crèches and kindergartens full of ‘beautiful, clean and chubby babies’, schools, libraries, and sports clubs.³³ The later delegation, of which the majority were teachers, were primarily exposed to examples of the Soviet Union’s educational facilities, including crèches, kindergartens, Soviet schools, and the Moscow Pioneers Palace. There was limited exposure to women’s and cultural organisations and spaces, and even less to industry.

Several delegates wrote of their awe at simply being in the Soviet Union. Teacher Marie Guyot described the ‘verdant summits’ of the Caucasus and the ‘huge rocks of red sandstone’ bathed in the purple, gold, and pink of the sunset, which reminded her of Wagner’s musical masterpiece *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.³⁴ It was a highly emotional journey for the communists of the group. In another, equally descriptive piece, Guyot linked the ‘starry sky’

of the Russian plain with the Soviet Union's 'ardent and lucid soul, strong and tender, which guides us through the new world and whose memory will always remain in my heart'.³⁵ Another delegate wrote of her excitement at her first glimpse of Soviet citizens when crossing the border from Poland.

My emotion is more and more intense. I want to be able, in the absence of speech, to shake their hands, to embrace them, to express to them everything that I feel by entering the USSR and what the great Red Republic represents for us, coming from capitalist absurdity and barbarism.³⁶

For many of these delegates, their journey to the Soviet Union was something akin to a religious pilgrimage, an opportunity to worship its achievements and to preach about the miracles that they had witnessed on their return home. For others, it was a covert opportunity for conversion.

As female delegates, the CMF visitors were expected to want to see how the Soviet government had improved conditions for women. Gender was at the forefront of delegates' minds, even when the places that they visited were not intended to demonstrate gender equality. The second CMF delegation in 1936 highlighted the presence of women in factories, Soviets, and the Red Army in its report about the visit. For example, Andrée Lehmann noted meeting a 19-year-old parachutist and pilot, Kameneva, 'the only woman amongst the 19 master parachutists of the USSR'. However, they did not accept their experiences without question. Lehmann directly challenged a teacher at the Moscow military academy who stated that women could no longer access the higher ranks in the Red Army 'because their physical force was insufficient'. Lehmann argued that as women were largely employed within the Army's technical services and the use of physical force was not necessary, women should be allowed to achieve the highest ranks; to this, she received no response. Nonetheless, the delegates came away from the USSR with an appreciation for how women were portrayed in Soviet media above all. Lehmann wrote that Soviet films 'always glorified the revolutionary action of women', presenting them 'not as a doll, but as a being capable of heroism in the same conditions as men', an important cultural change that Lehmann wished to see in France.³⁷ Madeleine Giroux, a French socialist active in the women's movement, was most impressed by how the Soviet government had vastly improved the lives of women, which had previously been 'worse than [that of] a slave'.³⁸

The CMF women were particularly struck by the progress made in the emancipation of women in the Soviet Union's Muslim republics. Both delegations attended spaces specifically reserved for women in these countries. In 1935, CMF women visited the Ali-Bayramov Club in Baku, an organisation described as the 'New Human Factory', which offered Azeri women 'literacy, vocational, and university access courses', as well as cultural and leisure facilities and legal counsel.³⁹ After they visited the Club, Suzanne

Pinot, a teacher from Le Havre, lauded the development of Azeri women in 20 years of Soviet rule from 'unhappy, true slaves' to 'completely free equals of men, not only in principle but in fact, as some of them are engineers, pilots, presidents of Soviets or Kolkhozes'. While attributing part of this progression to the intelligence and 'heroism' of the women of the Ali-Bayramov Club, Pinot argued that without the Soviet government, 'all of these efforts would have been in vain'. Further, she compared the Soviet Union's successes in its 'civilising mission' in the Muslim republics to France in Algeria where, in over 'one century of capitalist occupation, the fate of women had not been improved appreciably'. Pinot concluded by advocating that a similar regime be instituted for more 'oppressed' populations across the globe, presumably to institute a project of 'civilisation' as the government of the USSR had in Azerbaijan.⁴⁰ The 1936 delegation visited the 'House of Turkish Women', a museum and educational space situated in a hotel in Baku. Previously owned by an oil magnate and repurposed to chart the history of women in Azerbaijan, it covered the pre-Soviet period (epitomised by a model of a priest explaining the proprietary nature of marriage to a wife, specifically that a husband had the unreserved right to kill her) through to the modern-day: unveiled, removed from the 'harem', and actively engaged in the social and political life of the country. Lehmann even expressed the belief that 'Aziyadé is dead', a reference to the novel by French author Pierre Loti about a French naval officer who falls in love with the titular Aziyadé, a woman in a Turkish harem. In Lehmann's opinion, the confined and oppressed woman of Loti's novel was no longer a reality in 1930s Azerbaijan, because of the actions of the Soviet government.⁴¹

The CMF itineraries were further gendered by the inclusion of several visits to institutions concerned with the welfare of children, a realm traditionally viewed as women's concern. As a teacher, Marie Guyot of the 1935 delegation praised a crèche in Ivanovo that allowed mothers to work in 'tranquillity', knowing that their 'dear little darling' would be well looked after. She 'had a deep sense of admiration for all the magnificent achievements accomplished in the Soviet Union', particularly for mothers and children.⁴² Berthe DuJardin and Gil Valente from the 1936 delegation, both primary school teachers, wrote positively of their visit to the crèche at the Kyiv Arsenal factory, highlighting the female director and 'great love that the crèche personnel had for the children' as particular delights. The delegates had a preoccupation with the atmosphere in which the children were brought up, consistently emphasising how clean, spacious, and well-lit each room was. Even the 'rest room' where the children napped was 'airy and lit by large glass bays'. The Soviet crèche seemed to be influenced by contemporary theories about the health benefits of clean air and heliotherapy (as practised by Dr Auguste Rollier in Switzerland, for example), as an outdoor terrace was reserved for the weaker children to 'sleep in the open air'.⁴³

Conversely, Mireille Loubet, a director of a nursery, was ambivalent about Soviet kindergartens. While lauding the clean, airy spaces in the facilities

they visited, she stressed that the quality of 'kindergarten' was not much different from those in France and suffered from the same issues. She stated, 'we also have pretty schools like the USSR. We do not have enough, that's a fact (and neither do the USSR, by the way!)'. Loubet subverted her hosts' expectations and did not assume universal quality from her observations of the 'show' institutions: 'in the USSR, there are kindergartens that we have not visited, and which are still set up with makeshift means'. However, what Loubet did admire was the spirit of these schools. She mentioned the 'experienced, friendly, and calm women, who are both intelligent mothers and maternal pedagogues', characteristics which should be exported to French nurseries.⁴⁴

Both delegations interacted with the Young Pioneers, a constant in Soviet youth. The 1935 delegation, which otherwise did not focus on childhood, visited a summer camp constructed for the Young Pioneers, children aged 9–15. This camp resembled Western scouting organisations, boarding 330 workers' children, with a focus on discipline and health in the outdoors: in this case a 'well-located camp in the middle of the woods'. One delegate noted that these Young Pioneer camps were much more overtly political than scout groups, however, as they were an 'excellent means of developing... the vigilance and precise self-criticism' of the 'future builders of socialism'. One way that these qualities were instilled in the children was through political exercises during which children would copy and comment on Comintern reports to stay abreast of current world events.⁴⁵ The 1936 delegation, on the other hand, visited the Pioneer Palace in Moscow. Pioneer Palaces were dotted across the Soviet Union in many of the major cities, with numbers exploding in the period after the Second World War. In 1936, however, they were still new institutions, with the first Pioneer Palace inaugurated in Kharkiv in October 1935.⁴⁶ The Palace visited by the CMF delegation would have been inaugurated less than a year after this. A large house formerly owned by a wealthy Muscovite merchant had been transformed into a 'fairy tale mansion for hundreds of children'. Luce Cogne, a teacher at a nursery school, noted the iron staircase, the 'splendid parquet floors', the garden, a fountain 'filled with fish and turtles', the mosaic-covered walls, and even an aviary 'where blue parakeets chatter'.⁴⁷ What better setting for the youth of Moscow to develop 'collectivist communist values... to temper [their] will and physique, and to develop their initiative'?⁴⁸ For the CMF delegates though, the Palace was primarily a social, cultural, and leisure space where children could read, write, and play in a warm and welcoming atmosphere. Cogne unintentionally exposed the true purpose of the Palace, however, when she argued rather unconvincingly that the Soviet child was 'attracted by the serious things', preferring a wall map of the Soviet Union complete with mining and agricultural production centres marked by 'bulbs of colour illuminated by simply pressing buttons' next to samples of raw materials, to traditional toys. Communist control was visible here too, as portraits of communist party secretaries who had 'participated in the rebuilding of Moscow' lined the walls, watching the young socialists.⁴⁹

Assumptions about women's proficiency for care (and thus their supposed desire to witness Soviet approaches to it) were reflected in the inclusion of visits to several sanatoriums to the 1935 delegation's itinerary. Delegates spent a day in the mountains near the rest town of Kislovodsk at a sanatorium for 'Academics and Teachers'. Situated near to the curative Narzan mineral waters and a 'circus of mountains that stretch out to the horizon', the sanatorium was constructed to ensure the physical and mental recuperation of the Soviet Union's academicians, to relax the 'overworked spirit', and encourage the 'preparation of new works' by connecting exposure to nature with good health.⁵⁰ The women also visited a Red Army sanatorium in Sochi and witnessed the building of still larger health resorts, which reinforced the propagandised idea of the Soviet Union as deeply concerned with the health of its citizens as its 'most valuable capital'. Camille Ringard, who wrote the report on this visit, linked the health of the populace with the health of the proletarian state; she quoted Stalin when he said that 'the cadres decide everything' and posited that by 'caring for the cadres... the peasant worker's power will consolidate socialism in peace and security'.⁵¹ They also visited an outpatient clinic in Kharkiv that treated more than 100,000 people with modern techniques in airy rooms 'decorated with green plants', in a 'friendly and pleasant' manner.⁵² One 1935 delegate stated that the Soviet Union's approach to health had 'left an indelible impression' on her. She characterised these efforts as 'formidable, intelligent, and enthusiastic' and argued that 'in the Soviet Union, they manage to make life, even in death'.⁵³

At Kislovodsk, the CMF delegates had dinner at the sanatorium with the philosopher Abram Deborin who gave them a 'course on Marxist philosophy', which greatly impressed them. They also had the good fortune to meet with a music professor from Moscow who spoke fluent French. She was enthusiastic about life in the USSR, highlighting the government's 'concern' with widening access to culture and musical education, as well as commenting favourably on her stay in Kislovodsk.⁵⁴ It is unlikely that this meeting was an accident. The CMF delegation was constantly accompanied by guides who controlled what they saw and whom they spoke to. Conversations with a fluent French speaker who was not sanctioned to speak to the delegates would have been avoided by the guides, as when a similar situation occurred during Gabrielle Duchêne's visit to the Bolshevik prison commune in 1936.⁵⁵ Thus, to have a sustained conversation, it is reasonable to assume that this music professor was pre-chosen to promote the Soviet Union's cultural achievements to the visitors.

In addition to sites chosen because of assumptions about the interests of the delegation based on their gender, they also visited factories and industrial developments that had been constructed since the Soviet government had gained power. The 1936 delegation visited the Dneprostroi Dam, for example, a 'futuristic' structure that was one of the largest dams in the world at the time of its construction.⁵⁶ Both groups of women also visited the oil

refineries of Baku, marvelling at the imposing ‘pyramidal frameworks’ of the oil wells on the Azerbaijan landscape. The women received technical explanations about how the oil wells worked and even were able to ‘assist in the drilling of a well’. There was an emphasis on the departure from the bleak ‘sordid factories’ of the Tsarist period towards the ‘model factories’ and ‘powerful furnaces’ of the Soviets. Delegates were concerned about reports of ‘terrible fires’ at the refineries but were assured by their guides that such catastrophes were exceedingly rare under the Soviet regime. The women wrote that the government had worked to ‘alleviate the horror’ of the ‘burnt’ and ‘foul-smelling’ landscape too, by planting trees and ‘small flower gardens around the canteen’ where workers could eat and rest.⁵⁷ The decision to visit Baku’s oil refineries was a tactical one by VOKS to present ‘a positive image of the Baku oil industry to “capitalist” and intellectual circles’ by demonstrating the achievements of Soviet power through contrast with the comparably ineffectual Tsarist past.⁵⁸

In addition, delegates participated in cultural activities. In particular, both delegations observed the intersection of visual culture and the Soviet youth. For the 1935 delegation, this was a Moscow film festival featuring films by different Soviet youth groups.⁵⁹ The 1936 delegation watched plays written for Russian children. These artistic works were described as a way to make art and culture ‘accessible’ for all, a ‘decentralisation of dramatic art’ to ‘elevate’ the Soviet populace. The delegates were informed that children chose which plays they would see through an artistic council elected to ‘express the desires of their comrades’; Anita Esteve wrote approvingly that these children’s plays were effective ‘propaganda pieces’ which provided political ‘education’ to the ‘largest mass’ possible, while simultaneously accurately ‘reflecting collective life and common preoccupations’.⁶⁰ They were clearly aware of the Soviet government’s use of propaganda among its own citizens but viewed this favourably and as necessary.

Delegates also participated in physical activities during their stay. For example, in Rote Fahne Park (now Nizami Park) close to Baku’s seafront, several delegates jumped from a wooden parachute tower used by the Soviet Union’s experienced parachutists to practise their jumps. One unnamed delegate recalled how she only climbed the tower because the other delegates had accepted enthusiastically. She wrote:

I went into the parachutist trousers which guarantee my proper descent. I was buckled into the belts... and in front of the little door that opens to the emptiness, I remember that I have no more confidence. Happily, I am pushed out, which exempts me from jumping.

During the few seconds that my descent lasts, I savour the satisfaction of being brave and I admire at the same time from above the magnificent park where an enthusiastic crowd is gathered and proud to celebrate its aviation, its heroes, and its people.⁶¹

Nevertheless, these types of cultural activities were rare. For the most part, the CMF delegates acted as observers and not participants in Soviet life; they were largely considered by their hosts to be witnesses charged with reporting a propagandised version of how ordinary life had been improved by a communist government based on a series of heavily controlled excursions.

These CMF delegations to the USSR left a lasting impression on each woman. Among others, Émilienne Steux, a young Belgian socialist, was moved by the reaction they had received from Soviet citizens:

what we will remember is the warm welcome we received, not only from activists, because that is not what has value for us, but in the factories, in the rest homes, workers who took us into their home and who told us: “Tell the truth at home, what you saw, what you know about our lives.”⁶²

Another Belgian delegate said that ‘when we return to Belgium... when I relate our beautiful journey through the USSR, what I will see will be bright eyes, happy eyes’.⁶³ Similarly, Madeleine Giroux wrote, ‘we do not know whether we should admire the achievements [of the USSR] or the mystical enthusiasm that drives the people the most’.⁶⁴ This was often contrasted with the prevailing situation of the working classes in France and Belgium and used as a motivator for the women’s work when they returned home. Steux pledged to adopt the Soviet sense of ‘enthusiasm which lifts the people’ and to encourage the ‘working-class psychology’ not present in their own countries.⁶⁵ Many of the women were inspired to reinvigorate their work among women and the proletariat. Madeleine Langevin, the daughter of the prominent physicist Paul Langevin, told those present at a party on the final evening of their visit:

What better propaganda argument can we have than all we have seen?

...What comparison will better draw women to anti-fascism than the comparison between the existence of women [in the USSR], of all that has been created for her, of all the possibilities of ascension to a more beautiful life, and the state of women in fascist countries, for whom every moment is a regression?

...We return home with the conviction that soon, we will succeed in achieving the emancipation of women and work for the realisation of a broader united front than we have already partly achieved.⁶⁶

There is little to suggest that the CMF delegates were aware that the Soviet government used ‘perceptual filters’ to control their experience in the country.⁶⁷ Some delegates, including Claire Baril, were aware that their freedom in the Soviet Union was restricted; Baril consistently qualified that the delegates did not ‘pretend to have seen everything and understood

everything', and as such, she was unwilling to make a judgement about the USSR as a whole.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, complaints about what they did see were negligible.

These CMF visits were beneficial for the Soviet Union for two reasons. First, CMF delegates generated their own propaganda for the Soviet Union, which could encourage others to take a closer interest in the country and potentially lead to conversion to communism. CMF journals published several articles which chronicled the women's experiences in the USSR. French chemistry professors Madames Ponteuil and Mazurier wrote an article about the 'magnificent achievements' of the Soviet Union in public health, while Valentine Lacoste, a French trade unionist and anti-war protester, wrote of the 'transformation of Baku' in 'only ... 15 years of Soviet administration' through the 'well perfected' exploitation of oil.⁶⁹ In addition, the later delegation published a pamphlet that chronicled their time in the USSR and provided figures from the Soviet government to demonstrate quantifiable progress made in the country since 1917. Meetings were also arranged on their return to inform the public on what they had observed. Belgian women held a meeting on 17 September 1935 in Brussels on the 'equality of rights' of women and children, at which the delegates praised Soviet legislation on the protection of maternity and infancy, married women's work, maternity leave, abortion, and broader health as examples of women's emancipation. Delegates told the meeting that 'economically, legally, and politically', they could not 'tell the differences between men and women' in the Soviet Union.⁷⁰ The main goal of this Belgian meeting was propagandistic. Baril, one of the most sceptical delegates, even excused herself for the fact that her speech was not entirely positive about the USSR's achievements.⁷¹

These delegations also saw some success as exercises in the conversion of non-communist women. Take, for example, Jeanne Beaufeise. A member of the SFIO for over 20 years, she took an active role in the 1935 delegation by speaking in Baku, Ivanovo, and Moscow despite her 'advanced age'. However, by the conclusion of their visit, Beaufeise was noted for her deep 'love and enthusiasm for the USSR and Soviet comrades'.⁷² Her speech on the final evening reflected this, even directly advocating a Soviet-style government in France:

I think that the time may not be far when France and the Soviet Union will walk hand in hand in the shadow of the Red Flag as the sun rises over humanity.

I end by saluting your beautiful country.

Long live your head [of state], your great leader Stalin!

Long live the USSR! Long live peace, down with fascism!⁷³

Beaufeise was considering leaving the SFIO and joining the PCF, but her membership of the socialist party was marked as useful because she could

provide opportunities to ‘intervene often’ in French socialist business.⁷⁴ The conversion of Beaufeise was a victory for the Soviet Union: either in propaganda terms by converting a formerly committed socialist or in practical terms by using her as an infiltrator. However, it is not clear what Beaufeise did next. Visits like these were thus indispensable for helping to create a positive perception of the USSR in the West.

Conclusion

The CMF held links with the Comintern until its dissolution in the Second World War. CMF women and women not officially engaged in CMF work used committee frameworks to correspond with Soviet women in the Comintern in a mutually beneficial manner. Elena Stasova was the most popular Soviet correspondent, but other women in the Comintern apparatus also maintained lengthy personal correspondences with CMF leaders. These correspondences were not strictly business; Bernadette Cattanéó was personally close to both Stasova and Maria Krylova which could have impacted how Soviet influence was exercised over CMF proceedings. In addition, the committee organised several visits to the Soviet Union for some of its rank-and-file members, which were acts of propaganda intended to positively portray life in the Soviet Union and to demonstrate that the CMF was intimately involved in international politics. The visits were also attempts at conversion, however, as these trips (as with other visits made by Westerners in the interwar period) were used to convince visitors to support the Soviet Union and potentially even convert to communism.

Certainly, the CMF held objectives that centred on the promotion of the Soviet Union and communist ideals, but the personal relationship between CMF women and the Cominternians seems to have been based largely on mutual respect, rather than any sort of obligation to the international communist apparatus. The relationship between Comintern members and the CMF manifested itself largely through influence and suggestion, rather than coercion and control. This was then used to leverage broader support for the USSR among CMF members – directly, by visits to the country or indirectly, through resulting propaganda. A 1937 CMF report emphasised the political importance of ‘these delegations which help our work enormously and create a current of sympathy for the USSR and the PCF and against Trotskyism’, while underlining that ‘the waste’ of these endeavours was minimal.⁷⁵ The committee asked that the Comintern approve further delegations and that links with the Soviet Union be reinforced. However, delegations of this scale were evidently deemed by the international communist apparatus to be not politically useful enough to justify the time, money, and effort to host them. Only a few, smaller CMF delegations would travel to the USSR after 1936, but close written communication would continue until the group dissolved during the turmoil of the Second World War.

Notes

1. 'Recettes/dépenses/déficit du 1er Janvier au 30 Juin 1935' (1935), Pandor, 543_2_4, Doc. 77–79.
2. Pudal and Penetier, *Le souffle d'octobre 1917: L'engagement des communistes français*, p. 167.
3. Georgi Dimitrov, 'Private Conversation with Stalin', in Ivo Banac (ed.), *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov, 1933–1949* (London: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 69.
4. Bosch and Kloosterman (eds.), *Politics and Friendship: Letters from the International Woman Suffrage Alliance*.
5. From Bernadette Cattaneo to Elena Stasova (1934), Pandor, 543_2_2, Doc. 31.
6. *Ibid.*, Doc. 31.
7. 'Notes Manuscrites : Stasova et Kollontai' (1939), Bernadette Cattaneo papers, 2-BC-1(A), CHSVS.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Leroy had been on the 'temporary secretariat' to organise the first world congress of women against war and fascism in 1934 and edited the Belgian CMF journal *Femmes*; José Gotovich, *Du Communisme et des Communistes en Belgique: Approches Critiques* (Brussels: Éditions Aden, 2012), p. 403 and 407.
10. Letter from Marcelle Leroy to Elena Stasova (15.02.1936), Pandor, 543_2_14, Doc. 86.
11. See Bernadette Cattaneo, 'Rapport au présidium du C.E. de l'I.C.', Pandor, 495_2_259, Doc. 14 (13.3.1937), pp. 34–35 for an example.
12. Harvey Klehr, 'Female Leadership in the Communist Party of the United States of America', *Studies in Comparative Communism*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (1977), p. 401.
13. Kathleen A. Brown, 'Ella Reeve Bloor: The Politics of the Personal in the American Communist Party' (PhD: University of Washington, 1996), p. 343.
14. Letter from Ella Reeve Bloor to Elena Stasova (16.01.1936), Pandor, 543_2_14, Doc. 1.
15. Banac (ed.), *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov, 1933–1949*, p. 82, 83, and 99.
16. Letter from Bernadette Cattaneo to Maria Krylova (21.12.1936), Pandor, 543_2_14, Doc. 133.
17. Letter from Bernadette Cattaneo to Maria Krylova (19.02.1938), Pandor, 543_2_29, Doc. 47.
18. Letter from Maria Krylova to Bernadette Cattaneo (31.01.1939), Pandor, 543_2_36, Doc. 4.
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4 The European Campaigns of the Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme

As a ‘world’ organisation, which structured its identity around the transnational cooperation of women along social and political lines, the *Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme* provided a specifically gendered approach to the international crises of the mid- to late 1930s. Its responses to the impact of fascism, imperialism, and war on women and children employed a rhetoric which blended the traditional discourse of women’s unique role as a mother with modern ideas of the ‘New Woman’ and communist ideals of the woman worker. This chapter will examine how the CMF interwove traditional and contemporary rhetoric on women, politics, and colonialism to engage their members in international activist work and to create humanitarian strategies in an oftentimes contradictory, but nevertheless effective, way. The committee organised aid and information campaigns on all of the major international issues posed by the growth of fascism and militarism between 1934 and 1939, including the Spanish Civil War, the Nazi dictatorship in Germany, the Second Sino-Japanese War, and the Italian invasion of Ethiopia (Abyssinia).

The CMF’s campaigns on these issues were heavily gendered, focusing on the impact of growing militarism and far-right-wing ideology on women and children, rather than the generalised approach of many international activist organisations in this period, including the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement. As such, these campaigns are essential for understanding how the committee utilised language and images to propagandise the cause of peace for a female audience. I will take the four case studies mentioned above to examine how the CMF employed a consistent dichotomy which positioned women as either ‘mothers’ or ‘fighters’, with little intersection between the two to encourage women to contribute materially or morally. For example, Spanish women were categorised as either *mujeres* (women, mothers, wives) who did not directly contribute to the war effort, or *milicianas* (female Republican fighters) who took on a masculinised form to fight for the anti-fascist cause. Similarly, the German and Chinese campaigns too invoked maternalist arguments to ask women to invoke their role in the family to challenge policies which negatively impacted them. Again, women who took an active physical or clandestine role in these struggles

were revered separately; for example, women like Liselotte Herrmann, the German communist anti-fascist, were elevated as the ideal emancipated woman by the communists in the organisation.

This chapter will focus on the language utilised by the group to stimulate feelings of unity and sisterhood between its members and the European targets of its campaigns, specifically in the context of the Spanish Civil War and German fascism. This rhetoric was used to achieve important moral, monetary, and material support, often drawing on themes of difference, separation, and violence to achieve these goals. [Chapter 5](#) will pick up these themes once more in the context of the CMF's global campaigns (the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Italian invasion of Ethiopia), as well as the implications of using a rhetoric that emphasised racial difference to formulate an effective humanitarian strategy.

Mujeres and Milicianas: The Spanish Civil War Campaign

The Spanish Civil War was one of the defining events of the interwar period for activists of all shades. The conflict was divided along ideological lines; the fascist forces led by General Francisco Franco, backed by the German and Italian fascist states, clashed with the anti-fascist, Republican Popular Front government supported by the resources of the Soviet Union. The ideological conflict was not limited to Spain though, as those on opposite sides of the political spectrum engaged in debates and established aid campaigns for the Spanish population globally, in the face of large-scale non-intervention by democratic nations. According to Perry Anderson, the Spanish Civil War stimulated an activist 'internationalism perfected and perverted as never before'.¹ Europe's activists launched a transnational humanitarian action and political advocacy, the magnitude of which was without precedent. Women often donated to Aid Spain campaigns which utilised images and anecdotes of violence against civilians to encourage donations of material and monetary aid. As activists too, women were integral to the success of Spanish Civil War campaigns. Sian Reynolds has argued that some activist leaders thought that women were 'less refined public speakers than males and were, therefore, better able to speak from the heart to describe emotions or private suffering'.² For the CMF, the skills of its internationally renowned activists synthesised with a concern characterised by 'a gendered and a political resonance' to sustain a lengthy campaign to alleviate the suffering of Spanish women and their children.³ The group was also concerned by the erosion of the political rights of Spanish women in fascist territories, including attacks on women's right to work and reproductive rights (Franco had promised to 'liberate married women from the workshop and factory' and criminalised abortions).⁴

Laurence Brown used a phrase coined by the CMF in the title of his article on French women and humanitarian aid in the Popular Front era: '*Pour aider nos frères d'Espagne*'. Brown highlights the interesting choice

of the word *'frères'* in this slogan, arguing that the committee 'deliberately drew on an older language of proletarian brotherhood and Socialist solidarity' which did not reflect the gendered context of the slogan's usage. The slogan was employed in a fundraising exhibition held by the Villejuif committee which displayed posters that exclusively depicted Spanish *women* as victims and participants in the war.⁵ However, whether this was a considered vernacular decision by the Committee is debatable. Sue Bruley has argued that communist women were less concerned with political language than their male counterparts, choosing to devote 'far more time and energy to relief work' and ensuring that the humanitarian 'was always in the forefront'.⁶ This connects with contemporary assumptions about women's proclivity for peace activism and humanitarianism as potential mothers. The CMF's work on the Spanish Civil War is a good example of this, as the maternal potential of women dominated committee discourse and political rhetoric played a secondary role in campaign material. CMF journals carried articles which portrayed women and children in territories under Franco's control as victims, but women's active roles in the conflict were not neglected; writing in *Woman To-Day*, Magda Gellan emphasised that Spanish women were all 'working in some way, some are making garments for the militia, some spend their days nursing the wounded or running homes for child refugees'.⁷ This section will consider two aspects of the CMF's work on the Spanish Civil War: the construction of images of Spanish women in CMF propaganda and the form that CMF activism took.

The CMF's propaganda strategy for the Civil War was based on the division of Spanish women into active and passive participants in the conflict. The committee used the Spanish word for women, *mujeres*, to refer to those who played traditionally feminine roles in Spanish society. The suffering of *mujeres* and their children was consistently depicted in committee journals to stimulate support from readers, blending violent imagery and maternalist language with first-hand testimonies from women who had observed the gendered impact of the fighting. For example, Leah Manning, a British former Labour MP and the Secretary of the Spanish Medical Aid Committee, spoke about her experiences in Madrid before the battle for the city on 6 November 1936 in *Woman To-Day*. She explained how women and children had 'set out quite early to take their stand in the food queues' which were subsequently bombed by fascist planes, leaving 'one hundred-and-twenty-seven mangled and bleeding bodies... in this one queue when the raid was over'. Manning considered this a premeditated, gendered attack on the women and children of the city. Further, she recounted a visit to the city morgue in harrowing and emotive terms, describing how she has seen 'the crushed and mutilated bodies of baby victims of Fascism' on the 'cold slabs of death'. She explained that she 'was too overcome... to penetrate further into the Morgue and see the bodies of the women who had given these babies life'.⁸

Manning also related anecdotes from other people to further impress the extent of the violence on women and children as unwilling participants:

A friend of mine told me later that the sight which most moved him on that dreadful day was that of a lovely baby girl, she couldn't have been more than two years old, who had her right arm severed by a piece of bomb casing, and who, although dying, was making weak and futile efforts with her left hand and arm to reach her doll, which had fallen beyond her reach. That baby died soon afterwards from her frightful wounds.⁹

The suffering of women and children was thus linked to fascism through emotive language to appeal to the assumed maternal instincts of the readers and to foster solidarity between women. Carmel Haden-Guest discussed similarly distressing personal experiences in Malaga, where she witnessed 'a little girl of twelve years whose parents have been killed, [who] has lost her power of speech and can only babble incoherently' and a mother who looked around 'dumbly' for her deceased children 'as though she were still searching for them and listening for their voices'. This harnessed the fears of mothers regarding the advance of fascism to stimulate sympathy and encourage support. Perhaps the most disturbing image was that of a 'young mother' who had laid under a tree, 'killed her baby and cut her own throat' because she was unable to get onto the transport to flee Franco's forces.¹⁰

Photographic depictions of the swift, violent, and numerous deaths during the Civil War also created a certain kind of shock value that was essential for inducing readers to offer financial and material support. However, the publication of these images in CMF journals varied from country to country. The French journal, *Femmes dans l'action mondiale*, published four separate special editions on the Spanish conflict, all of which heavily used images of dead, dying, or severely injured individuals. However, the British journal, *Woman To-Day*, tended to avoid such graphic photographs of death. For example, in the February 1937 edition of *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (a special edition on Spain), several graphic images of children killed or wounded by fascist bombings were published. Another page entitled 'the cruel exodus of mothers' was filled with photographs of grieving women who had been forced to 'leave their homes, populated with memories so dear, to safeguard the most important: their children'. These graphic images were consistently juxtaposed with maternalist calls for the most effective possible philanthropic action. For example, one page contained the plea: 'Mothers of France! Come help them!'¹¹ In the same vein, Caroline Ann Brothers has noted a national split in depictions of violent images from the Spanish conflict in the mainstream media; she identified that the French public was more likely to be exposed to violent images in newspapers, including those of civilians 'contorted in pain as they fell, or... lying open-eyed in death'.¹² The CMF also printed images

of specifically gendered violence in their propaganda. The November 1936 edition carried an image of two women with shaved heads was printed with the caption:

Above two victims of the Spanish fascist savagery... Their hair was cut short. Only a small lock is left, in front of which is attached a red ribbon. A sign hangs on their necks. Then, dressed in a *cache-sexe*, with their hands behind their backs, they must go through the villages. After which they are shot!¹³

These special editions were remarkably successful in terms of circulation: the November 1936 edition of *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* sold 100,000 copies compared to the usual circulation of 70–80,000 copies.¹⁴

The CMF encouraged British women to make jumpers, scarves, and cardigans, 'to send bandages to the medical aid committee', and to generally 'rouse sympathy among [their] friends so that they too will aid those who are fighting heroically in the cause of humanity and progress'.¹⁵ For example, one CMF appeal called for 'Food, Milk, Clothes and Money for Spain' and carried the signatures of 17 prominent British women activists, philanthropists, novelists, and lawyers.¹⁶ The appeal urged women as newly 'democratic British citizens... as mothers and parents...[and] as friends of freedom' to aid the Spanish people in their fight by sending milk for infants. Food was scarce and milk stocks were extremely low in Bilbao in particular which posed a real risk of starvation for children. The appeal was thus constructed to expressly address women in a maternal context; it asked women to let their 'love of childhood and freedom... [and] warm affection for all that is best in society see that woman responds to woman by assisting with this appeal'.¹⁷

Maternalism was a common theme in women's activism in the first half of the twentieth century, as it was assumed that women had a natural 'disposition' towards caregiving and thus peace work because of their potential to be mothers.¹⁸ Molly Ladd-Taylor has defined the key ideas of maternalism as

1. that there was a uniquely feminine value system based on care and nurturance, 2. that mothers performed a service to the state by raising citizen workers, 3. that women were united across class, race, and nation by their common capacity for motherhood... and 4. that ideally men should earn a family wage to support their 'dependent' wives and children at home.¹⁹

The CMF harnessed some aspects of this definition of maternalism, but it could not be described as a maternalist organisation. While the group employed rhetoric on women's inherent caring nature, lauded women as the educators of the next generation of workers, and used the 'common capacity of motherhood' to surmount class, racial, and cultural barriers to engage

with its audience, it also insisted on the importance of women's economic independence. Even for the CMF, with the political, anti-fascist context in which it operated, 'the pain and sacrifice of motherhood' marked women's lives as 'deeply as any political event' and it was thus utilised as a connecting theme which could be deployed transnationally.²⁰ Leila Rupp has argued that 'violence against women, like motherhood, had the potential to unite women across cultures, since all women were fair game, especially in war', both of which were blended in CMF rhetoric.²¹ The Spanish CMF journal, *Mujeres*, defined motherhood as an integral aspect of women's 'collective identity'. However, it also conceived of maternity in militaristic terms, in a way specific to Spanish women living through the Civil War:

Women in the Basque Country today form part of a vanguard. It is the vanguard of mothers... This vanguard is invincible. Neither life nor death will detain us... We are under a commitment to defeat fascism, to crush it like a harmful animal caught in a snare. And we will carry it out.²²

CMF propaganda contrasted *mujeres*, who were caring, non-violent, and often presented as victims, with *milicianas*. *Milicianas* were women who had stepped outside the bounds of traditional femininity by taking up arms in the war.²³ They were often from 'left-of-centre political and syndicalist organisations', had received 'rudimentary military instruction, were encouraged to expand their physical sphere of existence by changes as prosaic as wearing pants... and generally to participate in the making of a revolution'. Gina Herrmann has argued that the *miliciana*, 'for a short time, actually became the icon of the anti-fascist cause'.²⁴ Mary Nash has argued that the deaths of *milicianas* were harnessed in propaganda to represent the 'glorious' struggle against fascism.²⁵ The CMF did not create this image of the liberated, gender-subverting Spanish woman at arms, but actively adopted it as a propaganda figure. While celebrated in some circles, the *miliciana* was criticised as dangerously deviant in others: the British *Daily Mail* portrayed *milicianas* as 'atrocities', while other newspapers argued that they contributed to the 'destabilisation of society' through the deconstruction of traditional womanhood that they represented.²⁶

Milicianas served as a 'call to arms, as a way to encourage (or shame) men' to join militias in Spanish republican propaganda, but anti-fascist activists outside Spain positioned them as valued combatants, respected by the left-wing Spanish government for their war efforts.²⁷ The image of a woman taking up arms in defence of her country was deployed as evidence of active moves towards the emancipation of Spanish women because they contributed on the same level as men militarily. Women had various motivations for joining militias: their affiliation with republican parties, their opposition to fascism, and the deaths of loved ones because of the conflict were just some of the reasons that women chose to fight. Dolores Ibárruri quoted

one militia woman who joined ‘to show the fascist scoundrels that when men die, women take their place... [and] fight with the same enthusiasm and courage as the men’.²⁸ The motivations of women fighters were reported in the Spanish CMF journal *Mujeres* to elicit support for the Republican side among ordinary Spanish women. For example, the journal highlighted Maria Elisa Garcia, a woman who joined a militia with her father who died while fighting on the Lugones front. In response to the suggestion from a male soldier while on night guard duty that she ‘should return inside their temporary quarters to warm herself’, Garcia stated

No, no, I’m staying here, with you. Yes, I will stay right here. I have to avenge someone. I have to avenge my father.²⁹

The publicising of personal motivations was a key tactic for encouraging steadfast support for Spanish women in combat roles, which, in turn, was important for the survival of the Republic.

The word *miliciiana* was used in non-Spanish CMF journals to demarcate militiawomen from women who held traditionally feminine roles during the war (*mujeres*). The committee often emphasised the more masculine qualities of the *milicianas*, comparing them to ‘Amazons’ who were ‘suppressing their femininity by taking up arms’ and who were ‘the icons of a revolutionary break with tradition’.³⁰ Images of women shoulder-to-shoulder with their male comrades in CMF journals did, on occasion, inspire British women to try to emulate their Spanish counterparts. The author Jessica Mitford, for example, wrote of her reaction to seeing *milicianas* in *Woman To-Day*:

I cut pictures out of the papers, determined, steady-looking women, wiry, bright-eyed, gaunt-faced, some middle-aged, some almost little girls. How to take my place at their side?³¹

Nonetheless, the feminine qualities of the *milicianas* were not neglected in the CMF’s representation of these women, particularly the female body. These descriptions established that, despite fighting on the same level as men, *milicianas* were still obviously female. For example, Ramona, a militiawoman who had fought in the Majorcan campaign, was described as ‘bright-eyed.... aged twenty-four, her solid thighs and round bosom filling out her brown dungaree uniform, a revolver in her belt, her quarter-master’s badge on her breast’.³² Sometimes, it was the maternal potential of the *miliciiana* which made her distinct from her male comrades. The committee described an Asturian militiawoman as

Simply a woman who understood the duty that the time imposed on everyone, without distinction of sex. A woman who is profoundly, exquisitely wife and mother, and who... wanted to contribute all her

strength and all her effort, to avoid a future oppressed by fascism for her children.³³

In this description, motherhood was presented as the militiawoman's primary role, with her decision to join the fight motivated by her desire to save her children from fascism. Cynthia Enloe has argued that the propaganda image of the mother-*miliciana* suggested that 'as soon as the immediate threat recedes, as soon as the "war is over" the woman in the picture will put down the rifle and keep the baby', thus discordantly establishing the idea of the 'can-do-everything superwoman' and reinforcing traditional hierarchies.³⁴

CMF journals harboured traditional notions of femininity while promoting emancipatory potential of the *miliciana* for two reasons. First, the group believed that motherhood was essential for establishing a connection between CMF members and Spanish women which was key for effective activism. Second, this rhetoric mirrored the prevalent gender norms of socialism at the time which expected women to be mothers alongside their modern roles. Presenting women as mothers first and fighters second was considered to be the most effective strategy for appealing to non-political women.

Woman To-Day reported in December 1936 that *milicianas* had been recalled to the rear-guard by the Republican government and was quick to point out that fighting women were not at fault. Rather, the journal cited the reactions of their male comrades as the cause of the recall:

These men, seeing their women fellow-soldiers fall dead, or lie writhing, lost their heads. Horror, or furious rage, took possession of them; forgetting caution... they would rush upon the enemy, calling them Butchers and Fascists, and get needlessly killed themselves. And since there was no time to train away this instinctive chivalry, it was thought best to withdraw women from the fighting ranks.³⁵

However, this was not the narrative in internal CMF reports, nor those delivered to the Comintern. In these documents, the committee explained that it had held talks with members of the PCE, Comintern secretary André Marty, and battalion commanders while in Spain on the importance of women on the home front for 'the maintenance of morality'. The CMF actively supported the return of women who had joined militias to 'more regular tasks in the factories, the workshops, the hospitals, the canteens, [and] social work'.³⁶ Cattaneo stated in her report to the Comintern in March 1937 that while the initial 'departure of women to the front was very beautiful', it had raised several logistical difficulties which could be solved by moving women into roles in factories, ambulances, and broader health-care, away from combat. Cattaneo acknowledged the conflicting nature of

the CMF approach, which ran contrary to ‘all [their] feminist spirit’, but nevertheless saw women’s role as ‘to assume morale, to organise supplies, [and] to look after the children [and] the injured’, reflecting essentialist notions of women’s assumed nurturing characteristics. André Marty supported Cattaneo’s position, exclaiming to the presidium: ‘No woman at the front!’³⁷ Thus, despite recognising the propaganda value of the *milicianas*, neither the Comintern nor the CMF were pleased by their actual presence at the forefront of this immense struggle.

For the brief time that she was sanctioned to fight, the *miliciana* served an integral propaganda purpose for women’s activists outside of Spain. The *miliciana* was an emancipatory icon that women could idolise and emulate and was used to encourage women to contribute aid in lieu of fighting themselves. Although overlap did occur, women as combatants were generally subordinated to their potential to be mothers.

The Spanish Civil War was the focus of the CMF’s most comprehensive campaign by far. When the conflict broke out in July 1936, the committee generated a ten-step plan to organise its fundraising and propaganda strategy.³⁸ The detailed and ambitious plan proposed actions on the transnational, international, and national scales to ensure maximum effectiveness in humanitarian and political terms. These included general instructions on sending circulars and appeals, creating special editions of national journals on Spain, and addressing telegrams to key figures (including General José Miaja, the president of the Madrid Defence Council, US President Roosevelt, and Ernest Hemingway, addressed as ‘Papa’). Further, the group discussed their plans to visit Spain and the concrete results they had achieved while there. Bernadette Cattaneo’s solo delegation to Spain at the end of September 1936, for example, led to an agreement ‘for the organisation of aid and the evacuation of children’. She was later joined by Isabelle Blume, Marthe Huysmans, and Clara Malraux, who as a group spoke on UGT Radio and set up a coordination committee for the reception of goods from different countries in collaboration with the Spanish Prime Minister Francisco Largo Caballero.³⁹ Marthe Huysmans was chosen to remain in Alicante to organise the incoming aid and to facilitate communications between Madrid and the International Committee of Information and Coordination based in Paris, of which the CMF was part. Two meetings in Paris in October 1936 attracted 800 and 500 women, respectively, while a meeting at the Mutualité in November drew around 1,800 attendees. Several exhibitions were also facilitated by the international committee, including displays of speeches by Oserio y Gallardo, the Spanish ambassador to France and an appeal from Spanish women, as well as an exhibition entitled ‘three dead children’. Copies of these displays were distributed extensively in Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and England.⁴⁰ Between March 1938 and March 1939 alone, the committee raised 55,000 francs for Spain, a testament to the efficacy of the committee’s activism.⁴¹

CMF activism was thriving within Spain too. The Spanish anti-fascist women's committee, the *Mujeres contra la Guerra y el Fascismo* (MGF), was set up in 1933 as part of the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement. It became part of the CMF from its foundation in August 1934 but was almost immediately made illegal in Spain due to its participation in the Asturian miner's strike in October 1934. The group survived in a limited manner as the *Comité Pro-Infancia Obrera*, an organisation that worked for the protection of children. According to Spanish CMF member Encarnación Fuyola (as quoted by Laura Branciforte), the *Pro-Infancia* committee raised 50,000 pesetas and accommodated 500 children in the course of its work.⁴² Cattaneo travelled to Spain in April 1936 to formally reconstitute the Spanish section of the CMF but confronted several difficulties, paramount of which was the intense sectarianism of Spanish communist and socialist women. Cattaneo quoted Dolores Ibarruri who claimed that 'there was nothing to do with the socialists' and mentioned that Margarita Nelken 'pretended that we could not reach the Catholics, who were all fascists in her opinion'. However, she was convinced that despite this 'the women's committee had undergone a great development across Spain'.⁴³ According to Cattaneo, the MGF had 50,000 members before it was outlawed. She claimed that it was 'impossible to give a figure' in 1937, although the group's influence was 'very large'. She also highlighted the 'united front of women' that the MGF had created in the Asturias and Basque country with the aid of the Executive Committee of the CMF, which included Catholics, anti-fascist women, liberals, socialists, communists, trade unions, and other women's organisations. Cattaneo posited that the MGF was the 'largest auxiliary for the organisation of the home front' during 1936.⁴⁴

The Spanish women's committee was assigned several tasks by the Executive Committee of the CMF, specifically regarding the expansion of the group's influence geographically and professionally. In 1935, for example, the *Pro-Infancia* organisation was charged with reinforcing its work in industrial regions (specifically in Madrid and Catalonia), forming 'professional women's committees' in anarchist and reformist trade unions, agitating among 'peasants', and 'energetically' supporting them in their struggle against landowners and the Church. However, the CMF felt that prominent Spanish women were unsupportive about its attempts to extend the influence of the group over women. In a meeting with Palmiro Togliatti in Moscow, Cattaneo complained about the lack of communist support for the women's movement in Spain and the potential danger arising from it, singling out Ibarruri for criticism. Cattaneo stated:

See even in Spain where, taken by her political tasks, Pasionaria is disinterested in this work without having trained other comrades to devote themselves to it... which demonstrates to us how negligence can be dangerous and even compromise the future of the Spanish revolution... Since our dear Comrade Pasionaria occupies herself more with politics

especially, our movement, which was forced to put itself in illegality and to transform itself into an organisation for the defence of children has, in my opinion, very great difficulties.⁴⁵

The lack of support from national communist parties for CMF work was a consistent theme of the committee's reports to the Comintern, posing difficulties for the group. Cattaneo's disappointment that this was the case 'even in Spain' reflects concerns about how far other national parties were likely to help the CMF. If even Spanish women anti-fascists were abandoned in their cause despite being important for defeating the fascists, would communists in other countries dedicate the time needed to improve work among women? The CMF leadership certainly did not feel that women were a priority for the communists at the national level at this time.

The French section of the CMF experimented with several different fundraising techniques in its efforts to generate aid for Spain. The committee held successful meetings, protests, exhibitions, and collections on the local and national scales. According to the report of the CMF's work for 1936, 'whole trains of goods and donations' were sent from 'all corners of France'. The money collected from French donors was utilised to 'generate propaganda', to buy medical materials like stretchers, dressings, and 'serums', and to purchase wool which was knitted into jumpers to be sent to Spain by women who could not contribute financially. Around 1,500 francs was collected, and 4–500 kilos of goods were sent from France in 1936 alone.⁴⁶ At a meeting of the Presidium of the Executive Committee of the Comintern on work among women held in Moscow on 13 March 1937, Bernadette Cattaneo gave a report which emphasised how the CMF had done the 'most for solidarity' and had sent more 'goods of all kinds' than other French organisations. At this point, Georgi Dimitrov, the leader of the Comintern, asked why André Marty was shaking his head. Marty stated that it was 'a little exaggerated' to suggest that the CMF had sent the majority of goods, to which Cattaneo responded that she was not speaking in terms of purchased goods, but 'of that gathered from among the people, in the villages, by women', which she claimed was 'enormous'.⁴⁷ This was not queried by the presidium, suggesting that the CMF did extensively contribute to fundraising for Spain, especially among women.

One example of French fundraising efforts for Spain was the selling of postcards at local CMF events. These postcards typically featured an image of pathos alongside a slogan calling for women to act. One set of postcards featured a photograph of a crying Spanish child with the slogan '*Au secours des enfants Espagnols!* (Help the Spanish Children!)' and a message on the reverse explained how purchasing the card would help a child in need:

Would you leave a beautiful child to suffer hunger? By buying this card, you are giving them a bowl of milk. With two cards we can give one

pound of bread, eight cards we can give one kilo of sugar, ten cards we can give one can of condensed milk for the Spanish children.⁴⁸

Christmas 1936 was also an important moment for French fundraising as local committees organised parties to ensure that Spanish children had a Christmas. One party organised by the committee of the 9th arrondissement (Opéra) in Paris gathered 3,600 francs. As a result of the success of these parties in France, other national committees were instructed to organise 'Christmases for Spain', although no other section mentioned such events in their reports.

Meetings were one of the most useful avenues for fundraising and the development of the women's anti-fascist movement, specifically in the Northern and Eastern regions of France. One meeting, held by the CMF in January 1937 in Paris, asked, 'Fascism is installing war in the Mediterranean, will we let it happen?'. Speakers included Isabelle Blume, the radical sociologist Albert Bayet, the communist deputy Florimond Bonte, 'an Italian', and representatives from the Ligue des mères et des éducatrices, the Ligue des femmes pour la paix et la Liberté, the Jeunes filles de France, and 'Paix et Liberté'. Maria Rabaté highlighted the 'considerable financial and material effort' contributed by miner's wives in the North of the country at regular fundraising meetings in her report to the Executive Committee of the Comintern. The impact of CMF propaganda reached women across France, though, because of its unique gendered interpretation of the Civil War. Rabaté also told an anecdote about a 'peasant' from the Massif Central, 'one of the poorest' and most rural départements in France, who walked five kilometres to a meeting to donate money to Spain and to 'give ten francs to the speaker to pay [the CMF] for the good work that we have done for Spain'.⁴⁹ However, the French section did experience difficulties in its work for Spain. Despite Gabrielle Duchêne's role in the committee, it met opposition from French pacifists who were against 'giving any help to the militias, then against Spanish women participating in the Civil War' because it encouraged militarism. They also criticised a special edition of *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* for including images of 'women there with guns' and praising Pasionaria. Nevertheless, the French CMF effectively and consistently generated monetary and material aid for Spain by utilising diverse fundraising techniques.

CMF women outside of France were similarly captivated by the plight of Spanish citizens. Representatives of the committee in Egypt organised an exhibition using material sent to them from France and sent 'a number of packages to Spanish women and children', while the Rotterdam section in the Netherlands raised 170 guilders, knitted 60 jumpers, and gave 163 kilos of 'rations and toys' for Spanish children.⁵⁰ The Italian committee of women against war and fascism (which consisted of Italian émigré women living in France) showed real initiative in its fundraising efforts for Spain. Along with 'thousands of warm clothes' and 'thousands of francs' raised

by Italian women for the cause, the committee also initiated a drive for the donation of gold. Of note were the ‘many golden “wedding rings”’ which were sent to the section from women within Italy. A delegation of Italian émigré women delivered these personal items in a ‘small bag embroidered in the Italian (Tricolore) and Spanish Republican flag’ to the Spanish ambassador in France. A report on the work of this section acknowledged that although the value of the gold was important, the ‘symbolic significance of the initiative itself’ as a demonstration of female solidarity across national and political borders was even more so.⁵¹ The British section created a ‘Food for Spain Fund’ that received messages often citing motherhood as the primary motivation to contribute. One message explicitly linked the plight of Spanish mothers with that of Austrian Jewish refugee mothers:

Motherhood knows no barriers... I am an Austrian Jewish refugee. My husband has died in a German prison... I cannot give you more, but I send it with my love to the Spanish women, whose children are being starved and murdered by the same people who have broken up my home and made me a widow. Motherhood knows no barrier of race or creed.⁵²

Another Austrian Jewish woman seeking refuge in Britain sent £2, the first money that she had earned in the country.⁵³ However, not all national sections of the CMF were supportive of the Spanish campaign; Františka Plamínková of the Czechoslovakian group expressed her ‘disinterest’ in the Spanish question and suggested that action should primarily be taken by the Red Cross and the Comité des secours aux enfants, likely because of the growing threat to her own country posed by Germany.

‘The Return of the Housewife’: Campaigns against the Nazi Party’s Policies on Women

Although the CMF and the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement were formed primarily in response to the rise of German fascism, Nazi policies actually had a much smaller place in CMF campaigning than the Spanish Civil War. The Civil War was seemingly a more immediate problem with highly visible and violent acts being committed daily against innocent victims, while the situation in Germany developed over time. The impact on German women was even less noticeable as policies eroding women’s role in public life were enacted gradually. Women living under the Nazi dictatorship existed in exceptional circumstances which saw their rights dismantled as the government attempted to return women to the home.⁵⁴ For the Nazi Party, men and women existed in entirely separate spheres. For example, the Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels argued that ‘the mission of the woman is to be beautiful and to bring children into the world’. Thus, the Nazi ‘resurrection’ of the German state was envisioned as an entirely male event.⁵⁵

The death of millions of German men in the First World War had created a vacuum of empty jobs that women filled both during and after the war. After the war, it became preferable to hire women in white-collar positions like typists or secretaries as they were willing to accept lower wages, were less likely to belong to a union, and apparently had less desire to be promoted.⁵⁶ This economic emancipation combined with increased access to family planning materials drastically changed how women envisioned their lives. This, in conjunction with the declining birth rate, led to a rise in anti-feminist thought in Germany during the 1920s, which often drew upon anti-Semitic ideas to apportion blame. One anti-feminist organisation, the German League for the Prevention of the Emancipation of Women, argued that the 'women's movement was part of an international Jewish conspiracy to subvert the German family and thus destroy the German race', for example. In this argument, women were encouraged to neglect their 'proper task' of producing and rearing children in favour of economic independence which would facilitate the downfall of German society and allow Jews to take control.⁵⁷ These ideas were adopted by Hitler as Nazi policy; a Belgian CMF information bulletin quoted his speech to 35,000 German women in September 1934 in which he stated:

The idea of the political and economic equality of women is a product of Jewish intellectualism and is unworthy of the German woman. There can be no antagonism of the sexes if each remembers the mission and the function that God himself has conferred! We only have a single message for women: it is the child. The two worlds must not mingle. The world of men, that is the nation. The domain of woman, that is the husband and child.⁵⁸

Historians have often debated the impact of Nazi policies on women and the extent of their culpability for the atrocities committed in this period. Gisela Bock has argued that the Nazis pursued a highly racialised 'policy of birth-prevention or anti-natalism' through forced sterilisation, abortion, marriage restrictions and genocide, rather than the 'common assumption' that the Nazi party emphasised pro-natalism and 'a cult of motherhood'.⁵⁹ She posited that German women were victims of violent policies which restricted 'undesirable' people from reproducing: that the goal was not 'children at any cost', but rather, 'racially worthy, physically and mentally unaffected children of German families'.⁶⁰ However, Claudia Koonz has argued that 'Aryan' women largely benefitted from the Nazi dictatorship through the establishment of incentives like marriage loans, while 'undesirable' women faced coercive, violent policies, including forced sterilisations and abortions. Koonz has also assigned blame to mothers and wives, who 'made a vital contribution to Nazi power by preserving the illusion of love in an environment of hatred'.⁶¹ Jill Stephenson has suggested that the Nazi policies of gender segregation could be seen as actually providing Aryan

women with the 'space' to empower themselves.⁶² However, Nazi policies towards women were complex and changed depending on a multitude of factors, including, but not limited to, 'race'.

Although women had begun to be stripped of rights which were fundamental to maintaining economic independence during the late Weimar period (in May 1932, legislation was passed which allowed the dismissal of married women public servants if 'their financial maintenance seemed... to be guaranteed in the long term', for example), Hitler's government extended these policies. In June 1933, the dismissal of married women from public service if their husband was in state employment was made mandatory.⁶³ However, women's employment was essential to the success of the German economy and so no efforts were made to exclude women from low-level or private sector jobs. Almost 90% of single German women were employed in some manner according to the 1939 census, and women were often viewed as a 'reserve army' whenever shortages of workers arose, particularly as Germany prepared for war in the late 1930s.⁶⁴

The CMF's anti-fascism was founded on the idea that German and Italian fascism attempted to 'instil in women and girls petty, reactionary, and degrading ideas on the family, education, people, and race' representing the ideology's 'incapacity, lying demagoguery, [and] rottenness'. Its initial goal was to prevent the spread of these dangerous concepts to non-fascist European states but warned that some aspects of fascism could already be identified in the policies of western states: the committee targeted France, Britain, the United States, Belgium, and Spain for 'attacking... democratic freedoms and promoting fascist gangs' and ultimately 'lead[ing] a bloody struggle against the labouring population'.⁶⁵ The committee did its best to permeate the female masses of fascist states, despite the challenges caused by its illegality in these countries. A resolution on the CMF's anti-fascist work from the Comintern dated 14th March 1935 dictated that the committee must extend its 'legal and semi-legal forms of work amongst the female masses' in Germany, Italy, Poland, Hungary, and Austria through participation in cooperatives, trade unions, women's groups, and cultural organisations. The clandestine dissemination of propaganda materials in fascist states was one of the main ways that the committee tried to influence women in these countries, but the group also generated strategies for Germany specifically. The committee planned to undertake opposition work in women's fascist organisations, to create non-party committees based on Popular Front ideals and to 'energetically train social-democratic women in this activity', to demand the reintegration of women into professional roles, and 'to require suitable conditions for domestic staff'. It also aimed to edit 'an illegal journal for women without party' which could be distributed in Germany.⁶⁶ We cannot be sure to what extent the committee achieved these goals. The illegal nature of the CMF's work certainly made it difficult to conduct business in an effective manner. These ambitious goals were not entirely feasible considering the resources available to the committee and the lack of support

it felt from national communist parties. The CMF did succeed in setting up a small national section in Germany, but this was short-lived. By 1936, Cattanéó complained to Togliatti that the German group 'no longer regularly functions', in part because the KPD were reticent to collaborate on women's work. The CMF was also unable to create any type of organisation in Austria because of its anti-fascist designation.⁶⁷

The international executive committee of the CMF consistently reacted to international events involving Nazi Germany swiftly. In response to the remilitarisation of the Rhineland, for example, the committee convoked a European conference to establish a common line to follow for the defence of peace in the face of successive fascist attacks. The committee claimed with pride that it was 'the first international organisation to act on this question' by holding this meeting on 19 March 1937, just 12 days after the event.⁶⁸ There was also concern among some CMF women about the decision to hold the 1936 Olympiad in Germany; a Swiss CMF report highlighted the contradictions in the obvious desire among Nazis to use the Olympics to glorify German fascism and the Olympic motto of 'solidarity of all nations and races in an honest fight'. This report argued that everyone who contributed to the staging of the 1936 Olympics in Germany, sportsperson or otherwise, should be considered a 'traitor to international solidarity' and that all had a duty to act 'before it is too late' by contacting the International Olympic Committee to ask them to either remove Germany as the host of the event or to delay until 1937 so that Germany could alter its racist policies towards non-Aryans.⁶⁹ In this way, the CMF designated those who gave implicit support to the Nazi government through neutrality or passivity (including participating in the Olympics) as false internationalists. Tacit acceptance of nationalism through participation in an expressly international sporting event held on fascist ground was the antithesis of international solidarity and cooperation for the committee. Those who contributed to the 1936 Olympics in any way, actively or passively, were damaging the cause of internationalism.

Due to the substantial number of German refugees who had escaped to France after Hitler's rise to power in 1933, there was a strong community of German anti-fascist women living in Paris who undertook work on behalf of the CMF. Various conferences were organised by German women, treating topics, including Nazi literature, education in the Third Reich, and 'methods of terror against women'. The committee also held several 'soirées' for German women; one, at the end of 1936, had 180 attendees, only 30% of whom were French. A 'soirée of friendship between German and French women', the gathering raised around 600 francs for aid which was sent into Germany and established a three-month programme for work on the German cause. More soirées were planned (one of which was attended by popular German opera singer Marianne Oswald) and new sponsors were sought. In addition, the group decided to organise holidays in Switzerland for 20 German refugees and foresaw the creation of analogous movements

in other emigration centres to coordinate work among German women: particularly Prague, Amsterdam, Brussels, Zurich, and ‘eventually’ London.⁷⁰

The CMF viewed Nazi attempts to remove women’s right to work in any capacity as particularly insidious and aggressive. Attacks on women’s right to work were central to the first CMF congress in August 1934, particularly Gabrielle Duchêne’s extensive report about women since the First World War. For Duchêne, ‘the most basic right of all humans, the right to work... the right to bread and independence’ was threatened for all women because of Nazi policies. First-hand evidence from German women was integral to the construction of the CMF’s German campaign. Several anecdotes were cited to demonstrate how women had been forced out of work in Germany to provoke outrage among the audience. The report claimed, for example, that German women who worked in offices, shops, or factories had to ‘return to domestic service’ and claimed that in Landeshut in Silesia, all waitresses had been ‘replaced by men’ over the course of three days. Duchêne argued that this was ‘pure demagoguery’ intended to

- 1 ‘To create situations and spaces for the Nazis
- 2 To lower the salaries of the whole of the working class...
- 3 To develop artificial competition between men and women
- 4 To confine women to the home, to enslave them in a state of absolute economic dependence’.⁷¹

In the committee’s opinion, the Nazi government were attempting to return women to ‘the slavery of primitive times’, to make them depend ‘economically on men in order to force them into submission’ and to force them to ‘return to and remain in the home’. The CMF was concerned that the Nazis were attempting ‘to secure women in a state of inferiority and deprive them of education’ and that this ideology would gain traction among other European governments.⁷²

Duchêne’s report to the congress drew upon testimony from German women in the magazine *Die Deutsche Kämpferin*. The CMF described the magazine as ‘published in Berlin by bourgeois women’, but it was in fact edited by the fascist Sophie Rogge-Börner. Jennifer Meyer has identified Rogge-Börner as one of the leaders of the racist *völkisch* movement, which started in Weimar Germany as ‘a reaction to the democratic and (partially) internationalist impetus of the “old” women’s movement’.⁷³ According to Meyer, Rogge-Börner believed that ‘the restoration of original gender equality through female emancipation was the necessary pre-condition for the renewal of the purity and the superiority of the Nordic-Germanic “race”’. She also expressed that Jewish women ‘could not escape their “racial” destiny’, thus reinforcing the exclusion of German Jewish women from the women’s movement which had occurred since its beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century.⁷⁴ It would be surprising if the CMF knowingly publicised content from a pro-Nazi magazine and it is difficult to believe

that the well-connected committee was unaware of the racial ideologies of its founder. We cannot be sure what Duchêne knew about *Die Deutsche Kämpferin* or its editor. She may have known only that the magazine supported women's parity with men. However, she may have been aware of the magazine's links to fascism but considered the testimonies from individual women as an indispensable resource in the anti-fascist fight. Regardless, Duchêne cited the magazine throughout her speech.

In particular, Duchêne used testimonies from *Die Deutsche Kämpferin* which explored reactions to Nazi policies that stripped women of their livelihoods. Quoted in Duchêne's speech, Rogge-Börner expressed disapproval of Nazi family policies which would, in her opinion, ensure that 'child-loving women would not be able to preserve German blood alone, if it was spoiled... by men accustomed to not taking responsibility [for their children]'. Another woman cited, 'Frau Berner', related these restrictive family policies to attacks on women's right to work, stating that 'women should not again be reduced to the level of animal reproducers; the problem of work must not become a problem of sex'.⁷⁵

The CMF's German campaign centred around the actions of women as mothers; in its founding manifesto, the committee warned that 'the future of people is at stake in 1934 as it was in 1914, and more than in 1914'. It suggested that the only way to combat discriminatory Nazi propaganda and policies was for mothers to 'instil in their children the love of all people of the earth, without distinction of race or colour'.⁷⁶ German women were addressed as the mothers, wives, and daughters of men who had been killed during the First World War to do everything in their power to avoid a new conflict. An article in *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* established a link between German and non-German mothers by memorialising 'our brothers, our husbands, our sons killed, millions wounded. We recall our fears as mothers and wives, the horrors of aerial bombardments'. This common memory of emotion and loss was used to encourage German women to expose Nazi rearmament plans to the international community by relating it to a potential future world conflict.

Are we close to recommencing these years of misery, those bloody sacrifices? Will we allow each other, you and us, our husbands, and our children to kill each other for the cannon and ammunition merchants? Will we see in our cities your children and our people dying, asphyxiated or burned alive by gas and incendiary bombs?⁷⁷

Despite the rapid increase in militaristic aggression by the Nazi government, the CMF identified a strong pacifist current among German civilians who 'hate the methods of their government'. It encouraged women to 'stretch out our hands over borders' to establish solidarity and the 'certainty of not being alone', to strengthen opposition to the looming militarisation represented by German policies; the author of this appeal argued that if women

could ‘unite to defend their children, their husbands, and their brothers, to impose on governments the pacifist will of people, we could avoid bloody and useless collisions where yours and ours have already lost and would continue to lose, their lives’. While the appeal encouraged German women to use their ‘exceptional’ position in the Nazi family to express their opposition to militarism and effect change through social channels, it also stressed the importance of international cooperation in fighting fascism to women across the globe. As tensions between the French and German governments increased because of the German remilitarisation, the CMF increasingly encouraged French women to continue their work with their German sisters in the name of anti-fascism. Similarly, *Woman To-Day* made it clear that no ‘attempts [would be] made here to stir up hatred of our German sisters’. Regardless of nationality, if a woman wanted to ‘make an end of Nazism and all the horrors it has brought in its sadistic train’, she was a friend to British anti-fascists.⁷⁸

As we have seen with the Spanish Civil War, the CMF tended to dichotomise the experiences of women into that of the traditionally feminine mother and the strong female combatant. This was also true in the case of Germany. The active struggle of women in political or clandestine terms was reported separate from attempts to return women to the home. The committee highlighted the public and covert resistance of German women to the Nazi regime several times and told its members that this resistance was ‘manifesting itself more and more’. To take one example, the group cited reports of women workers who had protested outside of government buildings to secure the release of political prisoners, ‘sometimes with success’. The CMF argued that women’s resistance was more public than men’s as ‘women reacted more quickly than men and show[ed] a tenacious resistance’ to Nazi policy.⁷⁹ This seems to have been the case; Richard Evans has similarly noted that female resistance was ‘generally more outspoken, more violent and more widespread than male resistance’, a fact which Claudia Koonz attributes to the fact that women were less likely than their male counterparts to be sent to concentration camps, due to the Nazi perception of women as not ‘sufficiently intelligent or independent’ to rebel politically.⁸⁰

The CMF consistently campaigned on the cases of women who had been killed in the course of their resistance to the Nazi dictatorship, including Helene Glatzer and Liesel Paxmann. These women shared left-wing ideologies; Glatzer worked for the Comintern and studied at the International Lenin School in Moscow for three years before her return to Germany in 1934, while Paxmann was a member of *Neu Beginnen*, a social-democratic anti-fascist group.⁸¹ Alongside writing about these women in its journals, the CMF also organised delegations to visit Germany to advocate for imprisoned women. CMF women and collaborators went to Germany on occasion to investigate the lot of female victims of Nazi actions. To take one example, British Labour MP Ellen Wilkinson travelled to Germany to investigate Nazi activity and reported that, ‘while the causes of Nazi

violence against women are as yet fewer than the number of their male victims', women were increasingly becoming the victims of political violence and internment.⁸² A British CMF delegation included Monica Whately, the leader of the feminist Six Point Group, Selina Cooper, a political activist allied with the Labour Party, and 'Mrs B. Pierce-Jones'. This delegation travelled to Germany in October 1934 to plead the case of Centa Beimler, the imprisoned wife of the communist Hans Beimler, and her family.⁸³ Hans Beimler was detained in Dachau but had escaped in 1933 and Centa Beimler remained in Nazi detention.⁸⁴ The delegation went to Germany to 'persuade the authorities to set Mrs Beimler and her sister free – or give them a chance to state their case in a trial; to get permission to take the children out of the country where they were regarded with suspicion, and to provide a home for them abroad'. A report from the group chronicled the myriad issues that arose during their visit, especially those that occurred because of their status as women activists. Because they advocated for a political prisoner, the women had to be 'doubly careful' not to invoke the wrath of the Nazi regime.⁸⁵

The delegation failed in its primary aim of meeting with Centa Beimler because she had been in contact with another international women's organisation in recent months. A delegation from WILPF had been allowed to meet with Beimler and, according to the information received from the German government, 'some of their members had carried on anti-government activity in Germany'. They were thus unwilling to grant further permission to conduct advocacy activism to women whose organisation had worked closely with WILPF. They were also denied access for political reasons; as Centa Beimler was a communist, the Nazi government argued that she 'should not be allowed to continue their further propaganda abroad'. In response to comments from the delegation about how a refusal to see Beimler would be interpreted negatively outside of Germany, the government responded that

apart from being deprived of permission to work against the state, [she] was better off than many free persons in their home... Preventative custody did not mean that she had been guilty of a criminal offence, but – "there were other ways of working against the State than holding a gun in your hand".⁸⁶

For these delegates, the outcome of the trip was highly dissatisfactory and did nothing to reassure them of the fate of female political prisoners under the Nazi regime. They felt that it was essential for British women to 'voice their protest in a very definite form' for the sake of German women and their own futures. The authors ended their report by asking their readers whether the 'women of England [would] be silent, while their German sisters are being subjected to imprisonment, torture – and even death?', harnessing feelings of solidarity and the violent realities to implore women to act.⁸⁷

The Swiss section was particularly focused on ensuring the release of women imprisoned by the Nazi regime and pursued several avenues to achieve their goals. It composed a protest prayer for recital at meetings of local sections and undertook letter-writing campaigns in the quest to convince the German government to release political prisoners like Else Steinfurth and Madame Rudolf Claus, whose communist husband had been executed in 1935. The Zurich section also organised a coordinated telephone campaign, in which committee members and other concerned women phoned the German consulate simultaneously to advocate for the release of these women. The group reported with disdain that a consulate civil servant responded to one of the callers by relegating her to a non-political role; he told the woman to 'Occupy yourself with what concerns you. You would do better to mend your stockings'. Nevertheless, the Swiss committee were steadfast in their conviction that it was the duty of women to act; it reported that 'our telephone calls, our letters, our delegation are just the beginning... the tormented women are waiting for us'.⁸⁸ The Uruguayan committee lead a 'very active' campaign for the 'liberation of women from German prisons and from those in other fascist countries', while other South American sections, including the Argentinian group, increasingly developed its work in order to combat Hitler's economic expansion in the region, and the 'increased political activity' that was associated with it.⁸⁹ German refugees living in Paris also organised sponsorships and donations for women and children in German prisons and consistently developed their fundraising tactics throughout 1937 to ensure consistent monetary aid for imprisoned women.⁹⁰

The CMF was particularly taken by the plight of Liselotte Herrmann and focused much of their advocacy work on her. Herrmann was another female political activist who was imprisoned by the Nazis for her anti-fascist activism. She represented the ideal subject for the CMF's work in this area for three reasons. First, she embodied the figure of the emancipated woman for feminist members of the group. Herrmann had attended technical universities in Stuttgart and Berlin to study chemistry and biology and held regular employment as a stenographer in her father's engineering office, exemplifying the model of the economically emancipated, educated New Woman.⁹¹ Second, Herrmann represented the 'communist ideal' because she was active in communist politics even under the Nazi dictatorship. She was linked to the head of the illegal KPD in Württemberg, Stefan Lovacz, and she fed information to the Swiss communist party about the secret production of armaments in Friedrichshafen and Celle as part of her resistance. Third, and perhaps most important for the CMF, she was a dedicated mother. Herrmann had a son in May 1934, whose father was a communist activist who died before he was born, leaving her a young, working, single mother.⁹² Her son was only a year and a half old when she was arrested at the end of 1935 and sent to Plötzensee Prison in Berlin, the infamous centre for Nazi executions. According to Claudia Koonz, Hermann was

consistently threatened with the idea that her son would be brought up in a 'fanatical Nazi home' if she did not provide information on the activities of her comrades, although she did not break. She wrote in a letter from prison that she found it 'very difficult... to leave and also to say good-bye to a child, knowing that Germany will be destroyed by war', mirroring much of the rhetoric that the CMF employed in its appeals to women as mothers.⁹³ Herrmann was tortured in prison for over a year before she was sentenced to death for 'treason and preparation of high treason'.⁹⁴ She was executed in June 1938 by guillotine.

The CMF made a concerted effort to convince the German government to release Liselotte Herrmann in the year before her execution. The committee portrayed Herrmann in heroic terms, highlighting her background as a student of the natural sciences and role as a 'loving and vigilant mother'. In Herrmann's case, the committee utilised appeals as their main campaign strategy; relations with Germany had deteriorated far enough by Herrmann's imprisonment from 1935 to 1938 to make a visit impossible. Instead, the committee presented her as 'a brave and loyal woman... full of uprightness and honesty, a character of radiant gaiety, of warm heart, open to all that is beautiful and good' in appeals to contrast with the violent suffering of her imprisonment and garner attention to her plight. This depiction was used to question the morality of the German government in detaining Herrmann under the constant threat of torture for her political beliefs. An appeal penned by Duchêne asked readers:

What did this young woman do to be put to death under the axe of the executioner? What crime has been committed for a human being to be exposed to such a moral martyrdom? Can such a being do something dishonourable or commit acts which, according to current conceptions of civilisation and good morals, deserve the death penalty?⁹⁵

Her only crime, according to the appeal, was being a 'sincere' person who had 'always opposed the politics of fascism, [the] policy of destroying culture and preparing for a frightful war', all of which did not merit execution. The group even linked Herrmann to a tradition of female strength and resistance by comparing her to Joan of Arc. Both women were punished for defending their beliefs and refused to renounce them in the face of death. It also served another purpose: this appeal was written for circulation in France and linking Herrmann's situation to that of a French national hero would have had an emotional impact. However, the CMF wanted to avert the same outcome for Herrmann by agitating for her release; the key slogan for this campaign expressed that 'Lilo Herrmann must be saved' from execution.⁹⁶

Letters by German women were published to highlight just how important the campaign to free Herrmann was. For example, a letter written to the CMF by Martha Berg-Andre, the wife of the executed KPD politician

Edgar Andre, explained that no anti-fascist woman had been executed in Nazi prisons; previously, when women had been sentenced to death, their sentence had always been commuted to either 15 years or life in prison. This had not dissuaded women from joining the clandestine anti-fascist struggle against the Nazi dictatorship and its policies. However, Berg-Andre argued that Herrmann's case was different from those who had come before because the Nazi government intended to use her as an example of their new punishments for female communist activists. She claimed that 'the death of Liselotte Herrmann is expected to frighten the voices of other women and mothers into silence'.⁹⁷ Herrmann's case caused perturbation and confusion among Nazi women as much as among communists; women did not understand why an 'Aryan' woman, whose only crime was to support a political cause in opposition to the Nazi regime, was executed. This ran contrary to the propaganda about the importance of Aryan motherhood to which they were consistently exposed. Claudia Koonz cited a letter written by one loyal female Nazi who asked if it was 'really necessary... to kill a German mother because of her opinions? With 99 per cent of the *Volk* solidly on Hitler's side, why did someone choose to make her baby motherless?'⁹⁸

The CMF encouraged its rank-and-file members to contribute on a personal level to the campaign through letter-writing. Women were asked to send her letters to boost her morale, although it cannot be verified if she ever actually was able to read them. In addition, the group asked its members to send letters to the wives of high-ranking German officials to plead the cases of women detained in prisons and concentration camps. They were encouraged to address 'clemency petitions and protest letters' to the wives of Hermann Goering, Hitler's closest ally, and Joseph Goebbels, the Reich propaganda minister.⁹⁹ The organisation believed that their best chance of securing Herrmann's release was through the wives of major government officials, who, it was hoped, would use their close relationships with the most powerful men in Germany and maternal sympathies to influence them to release female political prisoners. It was assumed that both Emmy Goering and Magda Goebbels would feel a level of sympathy towards the imprisoned mother who had been separated from her young child because they were mothers and wives. This tactic was not successful; Liselotte Herrmann was executed for her opposition to the regime and her connections to the KPD regardless. However, the letter-writing campaign was unique among the campaigns organised by the CMF in that it directly engaged its rank-and-file members in the anti-fascist work of the group; by asking women to write letters of support and letters of protest, this campaign encouraged a personal engagement that was different to the fundraising work that they did. The goal was to encourage women to invoke their shared experiences of motherhood to stimulate an emotional response in the receiver, be it through support (Herrmann) or empathy (the wives of Nazi officials).

Conclusion

The CMF's campaigns in Europe were heavily based on rhetoric that emphasised a shared sisterhood created simply by being women. Integral to this were violent and emotive depictions of war and oppression and a belief in the binding nature of motherhood; this was not only in terms of familial ties between mother and child, but also between women as mothers regardless of social or cultural differences. Even when women acting outside of the bounds of traditional femininity were portrayed (see the *miliciana* or activists like Liselotte Herrmann), maternity was often emphasised. This was an effective tactic, bringing in substantial monetary and material aid and encouraging CMF members to contribute to the campaigns on a personal level. In the next chapter, we will see how campaigns based geographically further afield were framed in similarly gendered terms and consider the implications of the use of rhetoric based on difference to construct effective international activism.

Notes

1. Perry Anderson, 'Internationalism: A Breviary', *New Left Review*, Vol. 14 (2002), p. 15.
2. Siân Reynolds, *France between the Wars: Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 176.
3. Laurence Brown, "'Pour Aider Nos Freres d'Espagne": Humanitarian Aid, French Women, and Popular Mobilisation during the Front Populaire', *French Politics, Culture and Society*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2007), p. 34.
4. Julia Biggane, 'The Rewards of Female Fascism in Franco's New State: The *Recompensas Y* of the *Sección Femenina de la Falange, 1939–1945*', *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, Vol. 90, No. 8 (2013), p. 1335.
5. Brown, 'Pour Aider Nos Frères d'Espagne', p. 30.
6. Sue Bruley, *Leninism, Stalinism, and the Women's Movement in Britain 1920–1939* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 282.
7. Magda Gellan, 'The Women's Front in Spain', *Woman To-day* (November 1936), p. 5.
8. Leah Manning, 'Bombs on Madrid', *Woman To-day* (January–February 1937), p. 12.
9. *Ibid.* p. 12.
10. Carmel Haden-Guest, 'Victims of Malaga', *Woman To-day* (April 1937), p. 7.
11. 'Après les bombardements... ce que les fascistes en font!', *Femmes dans l'Action Mondiale* (February 1937), p. 2; and 'Le cruel exode des mères', *Femmes dans l'Action Mondiale* (February 1937), p. 4.
12. Caroline Ann Brothers, 'French and British Press Photography of the Spanish Civil War: Ideology, Iconography, *Mentalité*' (PhD: University College London, 1991), pp. 236, 213, and 221.
13. Bernadette Cattanéo, 'Massacre des innocents', *Femmes dans l'Action Mondiale* (November 1936), p. 14.
14. Bernadette Cattanéo, 'Rapport au présidium du C.E. de l'I.C', Pandor, 495_2_259, Doc. 14 (13.3.1937), p. 18.
15. Gellan, 'The Women's Front in Spain', p. 5.

16. These women were Margaret Corbett Ashby, Katharine Atholl, Vera Brittain, Elizabeth Cadbury, Stella Churchill, Dorothy Gladstone, B. Anne Godwin, Barbara Duncan Harris, Storm Jameson, Naomi Mitchison, Flora Robson, Virginia Woolf, Margery Fry, Helen Darbishire, L. Susan Stebbing, Elizabeth M. Jebb, and Eva M. Hubback.
17. 'Food, Milk, Clothes and Money for Spain', *Woman To-day* (March 1937), p. 12.
18. For a discussion between historians of what 'maternalism' means in different contexts, see 'Maternalism as a Paradigm', *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1993), pp. 95–130.
19. Molly Ladd-Taylor, 'Toward Defining Maternalism in U.S. History', *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1993), p. 110.
20. Kristine Byron, 'Writing the Female Revolutionary Self: Dolores Ibárruri and the Spanish Civil War', *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2004), p. 147.
21. Rupp, 'The Making of International Women's Organisations', p. 223.
22. Mary Nash, *Defying Male Civilisation: Women in the Spanish Civil War* (Denver: Arden Press, 1995), pp. 56–57.
23. For a full examination of the role of *milicianas* in the Spanish Civil War, see Lisa Lines, *Milicianas: Women in Combat in the Spanish Civil War* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2012).
24. Gina Herrmann, 'Voices of the Vanquished: Leftist Women and the Spanish Civil War', *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2003), p. 12 and 13.
25. Nash, *Defying Male Civilization: Women in the Spanish Civil War*, p. 50.
26. Cynthia Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You?: The Militarisation of Women's Lives* (London: Pandora, 1988), p. 127.
27. Herrmann, 'Voices of the Vanquished: Leftist Women and the Spanish Civil War', p. 13.
28. Dolores Ibárruri, 'Women at the Front', First published in *Défense* (4 September 1936) [<https://www.marxists.org/archive/Ibarruri/1936/09/04.htm>] Last modified June 2007.
29. Lisa Lines, 'Female Combatants in the Spanish Civil War: Milicianas on the Front Lines and in the Rear-guard', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (2009), p. 176.
30. Angela Jackson, *British Women and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 127.
31. *Ibid.* p. 128; Jessica Mitford was a writer and a member of the Mitford sisters who gained notoriety in Britain as the family split into communist or fascist supporters during the 1930s. Her sister Diana was married to the leader of the British Union of Fascists Oswald Mosley.
32. 'A Girl of the Spanish People', *Woman To-day* (December 1936), p. 6.
33. Margarita Nelken, 'Une Combattante des Asturies', *Femmes dans l'Action Mondiale* (May–June 1935), p. 11.
34. Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You?: The Militarisation of Women's Lives*, p. 166.
35. 'A Girl of the Spanish People', p. 6.
36. 'Rapport du Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme', *Pandor*, 543_2_21, Doc. 1 (25.2.1937), p. 24.
37. Cattanéo, 'Rapport au présidium du C.E. de l'I.C.', pp. 30–31.
38. See the [Appendix: The CMF's Political Action Plan for Spain, 1936/1937](#).
39. Marthe Huysmans was the daughter of the Mayor of Antwerp and future Belgian Prime Minister Camille Huysmans. Clara Malraux, while an author in her own right was also married to the French novelist André Malraux.
40. 'Rapport du Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme' (1937), pp. 16–19.

41. 'Angleterre - Rapport sur le Comité pour la Paix et la Démocratie', Pandor, 543_2_35, Doc. 1, pp. 2 and 4.
42. Laura Branciforte, 'Legitimando la solidaridad femenina internacional: el Socorro Rojo/Legitimizing the women's international solidarity: the Red Aid', *ARENAL*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2009), pp. 27–52, 45.
43. 'Rapport du Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme' (1937), pp. 2–3.
44. *Ibid.* pp. 24–25, 27.
45. Bernadette Cattané, 'Question féminine mondiale – Réunion avec le Comrade Ercoli', Pandor, 495_12_7, Doc. 1 (25.2.1936), pp. 3 and 43.
46. 'Rapport du Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme' (1937), pp. 16 and 19.
47. Cattané, 'Rapport au présidium du C.E. de l'I.C.', p. 22; in attendance at the meeting of the Presidium were Georgi Dimitrov, Bernadette Cattané, Maria Rabaté, Hilda Vernon, Alice Degeer, Marcelle Leroy (all CMF representatives), 'Bogdanow' (the pseudonym of the Bulgarian Comintern representative Anton Ivanov), 'Maria Ciobanu' (Romanian representative to the Comintern Elena Filipovici, who was killed in Stalin's purges later in 1937), 'Randolph' (US representative to the Comintern William Weinstone), Otto Kuusinen (Finnish member of Comintern Executive Committee), Wilhelm Florin (German member of the Comintern Executive Committee), and Palmiro Togliatti (Italian member of Comintern Executive Committee).
48. 'Cartes Postales', Pandor, 543_2_13, Docs. 112, 113, and 114.
49. Maria Rabaté, 'Rapport au présidium du C.E. de l'I.C.', Pandor, 495_2_259, Doc. 57 (13.3.1937), p. 50.
50. 'Rapport du Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme' (1937), p. 5; and 'Rapport Politique du Comité mondial des femmes (section Néerlandaise)', Pandor, 543_2_24, Doc. 48, p. 1.
51. 'Rapport sur les Comités italiens des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme', Pandor, 543_2_24, Doc. 88, p. 3.
52. 'For Our Dear Sisters and Their Children in Spain', *Woman To-day* (January 1939), p. 11.
53. *Ibid.* p. 13.
54. For more detail on the Nazi rise to power in Germany, see Tim Kirk, *Nazi Germany* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and Jill Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Germany* (Harlow: Longman, 2001).
55. Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in Power: How the Nazis Won Over the Hearts and Minds of a Nation* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 331 and 332.
56. Richard J. Evans, 'German Women and the Triumph of Hitler', *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (1976), p. 136.
57. *Ibid.* p. 141.
58. 'Informations bulletin du Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme (section Belge)', Pandor, 543_2_18, Doc. 3 (1936), p. 6.
59. Gisela Bock, 'Antinatalism, Maternity and Paternity in National Socialist Racism' in Gisela Bock and Pat Thane (ed.), *Maternity and Gender Policies: Women and the Rise of the European Welfare States, 1880–1950s* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 233–234.
60. *Ibid.* p. 240.
61. Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987), p. 17.
62. Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Germany*, p. 5.
63. *Ibid.* pp. 51–52.
64. *Ibid.* p. 53.

65. 'Manifeste: Voté pour le Congrès mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme', Pandor, 543_2_1, Doc. 2 (August 1934), p. 3.
66. 'Projet de Résolution sur le Rapport de la Fraction Communiste du Comité Mondial des Femmes', Pandor, 495_4_340, Doc. 45 (14.3.1935), p. 6.
67. Bernadette Cattaneo, 'Question féminine mondiale – Réunion avec le Comrade Ercoli', Pandor, 495_12_7, Doc. 1 (25.2.1936), p. 41.
68. 'Rapport du Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme', Pandor, 543_2_21, Doc. 1 (25.2.1937), pp. 1–2.
69. 'Bulletin du Comité Suisse des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme', Pandor, 543_2_16, Doc. 47 (January 1936), p. 2.
70. 'Le travail d'unité parmi les femmes allemandes à Paris', Pandor, 543_2_24, Doc. 99 (1937), p. 1.
71. Duchêne, 'Rapport : La situation des femmes au 20ème anniversaire de la guerre', p. 1 and 3.
72. Ibid. p. 15 and 16.
73. Jennifer Meyer, 'Towards Equality for Women and Men from One Race: Sophie Rogge-Börner's Racial-Feminist Philosophy of Education', *Gender and Education*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2017), p. 148.
74. Ibid. p. 152 and 153.
75. Duchêne, 'Rapport: La situation des femmes au 20ème anniversaire de la guerre', p. 26 and 27.
76. Ibid. p. 5.
77. 'Appel aux femmes et aux mères allemandes', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (April 1936), p. 11.
78. Ibid. p. 11 and 13.
79. Duchêne, 'Rapport: La situation des femmes au 20ème anniversaire de la guerre', p. 24 and 25.
80. Evans, 'German Women and the Triumph of Hitler', p. 159; and Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland*, p. 335.
81. Helene Glatzer was arrested, sent to a work camp, and murdered by the Gestapo in 1935 and Liesel Paxmann was found dead in her Dresden prison cell, apparently of suicide. However, some have suspected that Paxmann was in fact murdered by the Gestapo; see Terence Renaud, *New Lefts: The Making of a Radical Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), p. 82; Karl Dietz Verlag, 'Helene Glatzer', Last modified May 2008 [<https://www.bundesstiftung-aufarbeitung.de/wer-war-wer-in-der-ddr-%2363%3B-1424.html?ID=4353&highlight=Helene%20Glatzer>] Accessed 12.12.2017.
82. Beers, *Red Ellen: The Life of Ellen Wilkinson, Socialist, Feminist, Internationalist*, p. 284.
83. Josie McLellan, *Anti-Fascism and Memory in East Germany: Remembering the International Brigades 1945–1989* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), pp. 125–126. This text contains interesting testimony from Centa Beimler on the disappointing realities of being married to a dedicated party functionary.
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86. Ibid. p. 5.

87. Ibid. p. 5.
88. 'Bulletin du Comité Suisse des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme', Pandor, 543_2_16, Doc. 47 (January 1936), p. 2.
89. 'Rapport de l'Amérique du Sud', Pandor, 543_2_16, Doc. 42, p. 1; and 'Rapport de l'Argentine', Pandor, 543_2_16, Doc. 46, p. 1.
90. 'Le travail d'unité parmi les femmes allemandes à Paris', Pandor, 543_2_24, Doc. 99 (1937), p. 1.
91. Karl Dietz Verlag, 'Liselotte Herrmann', Last modified May 2008 [<https://www.bundesstiftung-aufarbeitung.de/wer-war-wer-in-der-ddr-%2363%3B-1424.html?ID=4447>] Accessed 12.12.2017.
92. Carle, 'Gabrielle Duchêne et la recherche d'une autre route : entre pacifisme féministe et l'antifascisme', p. 294.
93. Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland*, p. 336.
94. 'Liselotte Hermann and Hermann Stöhr', Last modified May 2018 [http://www.gedenkstaette-ploetzensee.de/03_e.html], Accessed 28.08.2018.
95. 'La sort d'une mère' (1937), Duchêne Archives, F[^] res 316, Doc. 22.
96. Ibid.
97. From Martha Berg-André to the Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme, Duchêne Archives, F[^] res 316, Doc. 21, p. 2.
98. Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland*, p. 336.
99. 'La sort d'une mère' (1937), Duchêne Archives, F[^] res 316, Doc. 22.

5 The Global Campaigns of the Comité mondial des femmes Contre la Guerre et le fascisme

Some aspects of the committee's international work outside of Europe fit the same pattern as its work in Europe. The target audience of these campaigns were women, and the intended recipients of aid were still women and children. As such, the language used to build these campaigns was heavily gendered and relied on emotive and violent images to encourage CMF members to contribute. However, these campaigns also diverged from the CMF's European work in significant ways. The committee launched a successful child sponsorship campaign for Chinese war orphans, for example, which employed innovative fundraising techniques and moved the focus away from women entirely for the first and only time in committee history. In addition, the campaign against the Italian invasion of Ethiopia did not deploy rhetoric on women's roles as anti-fascist fighters at all, framing the activist roles of women using strictly maternalist conceptions of international peace work instead. Further, there was a consistent undertone of difference based on race and vast geographical space between donor and recipient that was reminiscent of traditional colonialist assumptions about non-European populations. This was often at odds with socialist (and specifically communist) anti-colonialism of the interwar period. The most important campaigns in this regard were the campaigns around the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, beginning in 1934, and the Second Sino-Japanese War from 1937. This chapter will consider how far the language in CMF campaigning outside of Europe diverged from its campaigns within Europe's borders and in what ways. It will also ascertain the impact of this language on the success of these campaigns in monetary and material terms to show that, despite using rhetoric that would be unexpected for a communist women's organisation, the CMF was relatively successful in fundraising and coordinating humanitarian aid.

'The Long, Endless Ordeal of Our Mothers': Feminine Approaches to the Italian Invasion of Abyssinia

The CMF's fears that increasing fascist aggression would lead to another bloody world conflict were compounded by the invasion of Ethiopia

DOI: [10.4324/9781003153634-6](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003153634-6)

(Abyssinia), just over a year after the group was founded. The invasion stemmed in the short term from a confrontation between Italian and Ethiopian troops at the border between Ethiopia and Italian Somaliland in December 1934 but had deeper roots in Italian colonial ambitions and a decisive defeat by the Ethiopian army in 1896. This defeat disrupted long-held ideas about the incontestability of European colonialism and established Ethiopia as one of the few remaining independent states in Africa (with Liberia). However, Ethiopia was still viewed by many Europeans as ‘half-way between savagery and civilisation’, an idea which persisted in Mussolini’s ‘profound hatred and contempt for the Abyssinians’.¹ These ideas, alongside a renewed desire to expand its colonial empire and avenge its loss, ultimately lead the Italian government to launch a second, more successful attempt to impose its will on the country almost 40 years later.

As the first, major international event to demonstrate the strength and veracity of fascist expansionism after the CMF’s creation, the Italian invasion of Ethiopia and the resulting war offered the group an opportunity to put its convictions into practice and to formulate a response that would dictate the committee’s international activism going forward. However, as a predominantly European organisation, the committee had to navigate colonialist discourses and consider its approach carefully. The group was aware that its influence in Africa was limited to the French North African colonies, and even then, it was minor compared to its European reach. As a result, much committee work on the conflict was concerned with encouraging Italian women to resist their government’s foreign policies, as opposed to actively seeking out personal links with Ethiopians. Still, concerted efforts were made to construct extensive information campaigns on the horrors faced by Ethiopian women and children, as well as to raise financial aid for them, both of which met with some success. However, due to increasing international tensions and the outbreak of conflicts elsewhere, Italian expansionism in Africa became less of a focus for the CMF and its work on this topic was eventually abandoned in favour of concerted campaigns on the Spanish Civil War, among others.

This section will consider the CMF response to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia and the committee’s efforts to reach and advocate for Italian women living under the fascist dictatorship. The committee focused on events in Italy much less than in Germany, perhaps because Mussolini and the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* (PNF) had been comparatively quiet in the years following the March on Rome coup d’état of October 1922. The PNF had spent much of the 1920s trying to cement and stabilise its position in the Italian political landscape. Alexander De Grand has argued that in comparison to the Nazis a decade later, the Italian fascists were ‘relatively slow in consolidating their power’. Fascist repression in Italy was also initially more selective than the widespread institutionalised repression practised by the Nazis and thus Italian fascism was less of a priority for the CMF at its foundation in August 1934.²

Before the outbreak of conflict in December 1934, the committee was primarily concerned by the impact of fascist economic policies on Italian women; for example, in Gabrielle Duchêne's extensive report on the situation of women across the globe in August 1934, she highlighted the impact of consistent wage cuts imposed on women by the Italian government, which officially reduced salaries by 49–56% for industrial workers from 1927 to the beginning of 1933. However, Duchêne argued that the real percentage could be much higher because the manufacturers often simply did 'what they want' with the support of local fascist parties. She highlighted the decline in wages of different categories of women workers, such as the women rice harvesters of the Po Valley (from 20 liras 10 a day in 1927 to 9 lira 50 at most in 1934) to underline the dramatic effect that fascist economic policy had on women's living conditions.³ There was also concern in this report about the impact of Italian fascist policies on the societal role of women. Duchêne highlighted the fascist 'poetic' presentation of the housewife and advocacy of high birth rates which she attributed not to any concern about women, but to Mussolini's desire to achieve imperial primacy; she quoted him as saying, 'without the continual increase of the birth rate... *we cannot build an empire, we cannot conquer colonies in Africa and Asia, we cannot beat stronger countries*'.⁴

The CMF's work on the Italo-Ethiopian conflict can be divided into two areas: against the war in Ethiopia and among Italian women émigrés. The Italian invasion of Ethiopia presented the CMF with a key opportunity to demonstrate the strength and coherence of their activism. By the end of April 1935, the French committee had published a pamphlet about Italian 'intrigues' in Ethiopia, which emphasised the importance of preserving 'the right of people to organise themselves'.⁵ The pamphlet was primarily distributed in the South of France (the Midi) which had one of the largest populations of Italian refugees in France. While many Italian political émigrés were concentrated in France's major cities (including Paris), there was a significant community of non-political Italian émigrés living in the Midi due to its geographical proximity to Italy and its 'community of culture'.⁶ Thus, to ensure the greatest possible dissemination among Italian populations in and outside of Italy, it was essential to direct anti-war materials to this region specifically.

The political propaganda effort against the war in Ethiopia centred on exposing Italian imperial ambitions and the collaboration of foreign financiers and governments in Italy's war efforts. The Swiss committee in particular was disappointed by the lack of action from the Swiss Federal Council because of the 'politics of some financial circles', for whom the war was generating significant profits. The committee criticised the Council's 'unfaithfulness to the League of Nations pact' and accused it of having a 'bias for Italy'. The Council had designated the CMF's grassroots efforts to create a Committee for the Boycott of Italian Goods as a response to government inaction as 'dangerous for the state' while allowing Italian fascists

to continue funnelling money through Swiss 'postal check accounts', hypocrisy that the group was keen to highlight.⁷ Even in the face of governmental blacklisting, the Swiss national committee encouraged housewives to refuse to buy Italian goods to support the policy of the League of Nations and the cause of peace.

The French national committee initially found similar difficulties in its attempts to work with the International Red Cross and the French Red Cross to ensure medical aid and funding for Ethiopia. The group accused the International Red Cross of doing 'nothing for Ethiopia' because of diplomatic agreements made between France and Italy in early 1935.⁸ The Franco-Italian agreement, or the 'Rome Accords', was concluded between French Foreign Minister Pierre Laval and Mussolini in January 1935 and clarified each state's position in North and East Africa. France ceded some small territories to Libya and Eritrea (Italian colonies), while Italy allowed for the special privileges enjoyed by Italian nationals in Tunisia to be gradually removed. However, there has been a 'great deal of controversy' about whether Laval also assured Italy a 'free-hand' in Ethiopia: Mussolini argued that Laval had given him 'complete freedom of action as long as Italy did not infringe on those French interests specified in the agreement', while Laval argued that he had 'never given [his] approval to the war which you later considered yourself to undertake'.⁹ Whatever the reality, the CMF in France blamed the Red Cross' perceived inaction on the Rome Accords; after Laval's resignation in January 1936, the group reported that the President of the Red Cross had told them that it was now 'a lot easier to undertake action on the part of the Red Cross'.¹⁰

CMF groups across the globe launched into action as soon as Italy's designs on Ethiopia had become clear. Some helped to organise large-scale demonstrations against the war. In Yugoslavia, CMF women organised mass demonstrations against the war in several major cities and towns, including Belgrade, Zagreb, Skopje, Split, Banja-Luka, Varaždin, Sarajevo, Novi-Sad, and Ljubljana. The demonstration in Belgrade saw 2,500 people gather 'to denounce the Italian fascist aggressor', while the Zagreb meeting attracted more than 1,000 women. The Yugoslav CMF also claimed that Skopje and Split had 'never seen such impressive women's meetings' before, underscoring the success of these meetings in numerical terms.¹¹ In the Americas, CMF activists in Uruguay were also leading mass protests against the conflict. In August 1935, a demonstration against Italian aggression in Montevideo organised by the Uruguayan committee was attended by over 2,000 people.¹² They also organised smaller meetings addressed by two prominent Uruguayan women: the feminist Paulina Luisi and the novelist Maria Paulina Médeiros.¹³ Expressions of solidarity and amity were often central to CMF campaigns on international events and emotional reactions were desirable to ensure an engaged audience that would be more likely to contribute to the campaign's success. For example, at a congress organised by the Uruguayan CMF in early 1936, at which more than 60 women's

organisations were represented, the audience was ‘moved...to tears’ when ‘an Italian and a Negress’ interacted in a fraternal manner.¹⁴

On Armistice Day 1935, the Belgian committee too organised a protest to demonstrate their unity and support for ‘sanctions against the Italian fascist state’ in collaboration with socialist women. Almost 1,500 women attended the meeting, during which the CMF executive committee demonstrated its internationalism by sending an Ethiopian comrade and a Martiniquais comrade to participate, both of whom were ‘frenetically applauded’ and had ‘great success’ with the attendees.¹⁵ The Italian émigré committees against war and fascism in France also contributed to the campaign against the war in Ethiopia; they held women’s meetings to unmask the ‘aggressive character of that war and the danger that it represented for world peace’, published pamphlets against the war in Italian, and organised *fêtes* and *gouettes* for fundraising and consciousness-raising purposes.¹⁶

While other national sections successfully organised events that coordinated women’s opposition and served to raise the public consciousness about events in Ethiopia, the French national section found particular success in the realm of fundraising. In the 24 October 1935 edition of *L’Humanité*, the French committee launched a national campaign to fund the sending of a ‘Peace Plane’ (*l’avion de la paix*) to Ethiopia to ‘bring aid to the injured [and] relief to those who suffer’. Although the group had carried out general fundraising activities for the cause previously, this appeal marked fresh territory for their work. The committee identified a pressing need for both monetary and material aid on the ground in Ethiopia. The committee asked for donations of bandages, medicines, cotton, serums, ‘everything that hospitals need’ to fill the plane, to put ‘technology at the service of peace’.¹⁷ The French section of the CMF chose a plane for this aid project for practical and symbolic reasons: the increasing use of aeroplanes as couriers and a form of international travel was a reflection of the increasingly globalised world, an integral part of the CMF’s international campaigning strategy in general. It also allowed the group to contrast its ‘Peace Plane’ with the destructive Italian planes that ‘unjustly and savagely attack the Ethiopian people’.¹⁸ The ‘Peace Plane’ was a harbinger of solidarity and aid that was capable of ‘heal[ing] the evil caused by the sinister planes of the war’, given the support of the CMF’s members.¹⁹

The initial appeal in *L’Humanité* was not gendered in any particular way, nor did it utilise especially violent descriptions to stimulate sympathy for the Ethiopian cause; however, a communiqué was circulated among local French CMF sections that invoked the misery of the Ethiopian population to garner the attention of its female audience. This document, written by CMF president Gabrielle Duchêne, emphasised the suffering caused by Italian aerial bombings and the specific impact on women and children, highlighting the loss of property and life, for example, the killing of 30 women and 15 children in an Italian bombing raid. However, the communiqué also reflected colonialist understandings of life in Africa, as when Duchêne lamented the

burning of ‘some miserable huts’ by one Italian bombing raid.²⁰ This demonstrated a level of misunderstanding about the geographies of the Ethiopian landscape; although there was a large rural population, by the time of the Italian invasion, several urban centres had developed across the country, many of which had modernised areas. For example, the capital Addis Ababa had a centre composed of permanent and semi-permanent buildings and roads built for vehicular use. The Ethiopian citizens who lived in the more densely populated areas like Addis Ababa lived in ‘urban and peri-urban “villages”’ in traditional thatched cottages.²¹ Duchêne’s reference to ‘miserable huts’ ignores the realities of Ethiopian society during the 1930s; many Italian bombing raids targeted urban areas, and towns and cities were often the sites of executions and massacres of those, military and civilian, who rebelled against the Italian invasion. This choice of phrase was likely a strategic choice on Duchêne’s behalf. The image of African peoples living in huts had long been cultivated by Western imperialist governments, and Duchêne may have deployed it for the same reasons: to create a sense of responsibility. While governments wanted to foster a sense of responsibility for the ‘civilisation’ of colonised peoples (although the real motives were quite different), the CMF wanted to foster a sense of responsibility for the aid of the Ethiopian people among its membership.

However, this was contrasted with references to Ethiopia’s status as a ‘civilised nation’ in CMF propaganda. The committee drew upon a long tradition of discourse and debate about Ethiopia’s ‘civilisation’ to persuade its members that, despite distance and cultural differences, those impacted by the war in Ethiopia were not dissimilar to them. An appeal by the Belgian section asked its audience to donate money for the sending of the Peace Plane to aid ‘Peace and Civilisation’. It labelled Ethiopia as the ‘true civilisation’ and contrasted it with the actions (and inaction) of European civilisation; CMF campaign material asked European women to rectify the image held by Ethiopians of their civilisation as ‘the dark killer of children’ and the ‘horrible sower of death’ and to highlight the principles of ‘life and love’ held by many Europeans by fundraising and donating material for the Peace Plane project.²² This harkened to centuries-old images of Ethiopia as the only Christian nation in Africa and the seat of Prester John, the fabled ‘powerful Christian sovereign’ who ruled ‘beyond the Muslim world’ and who was expected to be the West’s partner in the conquest of the Holy Land during the Crusades.²³ As opportunities for diplomacy grew, European perceptions of Ethiopia and its people changed. European envoys often provided opposing descriptions of the Ethiopian people: Richard Pankhurst cited a British representative to the Ethiopian court who described them as ‘abject slaves to superstition’ while a French envoy expressed the hope that Christianity could be used to ‘join Abyssinia to the general civilisation of the world’. In the most positive light, the West saw Ethiopia as capable of becoming civilised in Western terms, but not yet on the same level. However, after the Italians were defeated by the Ethiopian

army at the Battle of Adwa in 1896, Europeans scrambled to construct new perceptions of Ethiopians as ‘civilised, essentially non-negroid’ and ruled by ‘an extraordinary, almost superhuman monarch’ to explain the defeat of European imperialism by an African country.²⁴

By the interwar period, however, the extent of Ethiopian ‘civilisation’ was once again being debated. Narratives of its status as a civilised nation along Western lines were actively being deployed by the Ethiopian government to justify its admission to the League of Nations. According to Jean Allain, the ‘standard of civilisation which was applied in the Ethiopian case was that of the suppression of slavery and the slave trade’.²⁵ The Italian government thus attempted to portray Ethiopia as less than a civilised nation by highlighting its continued usage of slavery as justification for the beginning of hostilities. This, and the League’s unwillingness to act against a European power once Italy invaded Ethiopia, put debates about civilisation back into the public forum. The CMF was therefore invoking contemporary discussions about the nature of civilisation while reflecting long-held European perceptions of Ethiopia as a Christian civilisation. As a result, the committee was able to draw upon recent debates in international relations and simultaneously refer to historical understandings to construct an effective aid appeal.

Gendered rhetoric was also used to create connections with those suffering in Ethiopia. Ethiopian women were primarily ‘mothers’ and ‘wives’ in CMF propaganda, and the committee argued that ‘the pain of Ethiopian women is our pain; what happens to them today can affect us tomorrow’. Using a tactic deployed in later CMF international campaigns, the group provided anecdotes about the violence endured by the civilian population of Ethiopia to generate feelings of sympathy. The appeal circulated by the Belgian CMF section began by describing the ‘women, children, elderly, [and] men in the full force of life’ who had been ‘killed by the shrapnel and the gas of the Italian aggressor’, giving particular attention to the women and children killed ‘with the help of modern technology’. Another tactic that also resembled later CMF campaigns was the committee’s insistence that it was women’s responsibility to act on behalf of those threatened by war, specifically mothers. The appeal was addressed directly to women with children, telling them that it was up to them ‘to relieve the suffering of the Ethiopian population’.²⁶

One week after the initial appeal in *L’Humanité*, the CMF provided an update on the process of gathering donations for the Peace Plane. They mentioned a woman who wished to remain anonymous who donated an ‘enormous packet’ of cotton, as well as the Caudry committee, who sent 100 francs to facilitate the chartering of the Plane. This endeavour captured the activist imaginations of the local sections of the CMF in France and stimulated an influx of donations to demonstrate the solidarity of women across continents; for example, the Villejuif committee sent a plethora of medical supplies, including 65 boxes of petroleum jelly, 23 boxes of hydrophilic cotton, and 132 boxes of various bandages and dressings. The members of the

Nevers section also sent a large parcel of supplies and anticipated sending a second one because its members were eager to participate in ‘this magnificent international mutual aid’.²⁷ One month after the appeal’s launch, *Femmes dans l’action mondiale* contained a brief note which stated that 1,122 frs. 65 had been received in donations, with some of the largest donations coming from local CMF sections. The Draveil section, on the southern outskirts of Paris, raised 215 frs. for the Peace Plane, while the neighbouring Athis-Mons committee sent close to 100 frs. Individuals pledged donations too, although these tended to be much smaller amounts. However, there were some larger individual contributions. For example, a ‘Mme Horny’ from Geneva also sent 100 frs. in this early phase of fundraising.²⁸ By the December edition of *Femmes dans l’action mondiale*, the amount collected for the Peace Plane and Ethiopia in general had increased five-fold, for a total of 5,784 frs. Consequently, donations were much larger. The largest donation came from the Marseille committee, who sent an impressive 1,000 frs., while the committee in Chalon-sur-Saone (a commune in Eastern France) sent 910 frs. 20. Only one other committee donated over 500 frs.: the highly active Mitry-Mory committee on the north-eastern outskirts of Paris sent two donations totalling 650 frs. Once again, there were several donations from individual women, but by this stage, some non-CMF organisations had also contributed money to the cause. Several women donated 100 frs. apiece, and donations of 220 frs. attributed to the Municipality of Ivry and 60 frs. attributed to the *Fédération Sportive Coloniale* were included at the top of the list. This note also informed readers that a shipment of medicine had been sent to the Ethiopian Red Cross on 11th November because of the generosity of local CMF groups and individual ‘comrades’ but warned that the sending of aid should not be slowed: ‘more than ever, the Ethiopian people need support’.²⁹

To further emphasise this point, various photographs depicting life in Ethiopia were published in this edition of *Femmes dans l’action mondiale*; one image showed Ethiopian troops ascending a steep hill, which was contrasted with a photograph of a group of men and children, a ‘scene of Ethiopian life’.³⁰ This placement was strategic; it perpetuated a narrative that portrayed the everyday life of the Ethiopian people as peaceful, youthful, and community-based and established the ongoing conflict as a substantial threat to this. Images of children were central to CMF propaganda on the Italo-Ethiopian conflict. In a manner analogous to the ‘Warphans’ in the Second Sino-Japanese War, Ethiopian children were used as apolitical figures of pathos to elicit maternal feelings (and therefore aid) from the predominantly female audience. A caption that accompanied a photograph of two young girls read, ‘Children of colour have the same rights to live...’, a clear attempt to assuage any reservations the white Western audience may have had.³¹ In addition, the front cover of the October 1935 edition of *Femmes dans l’action mondiale* was an image of a smiling Ethiopian girl wearing a netela, a cotton headscarf, with the headline ‘Save them...’.³²

Other children were depicted as refugees in their own country. One image of mothers 'leaving their villages at news of the approach of Italian troops' showed women carrying children across a shallow river to escape the Italian advance.³³ Violence was also present in some images to emphasise the devastating impact of the conflict on the Ethiopian people. Articles were accompanied by a graphic image of several dead Ethiopian soldiers after a battle, for example.³⁴ Images of Ethiopian women specifically were also included in CMF campaign propaganda. A portrait of a 'type of Ethiopian woman' with an Afro comb in her hair provided readers with an example of Ethiopian fashions and customs, while a photograph of an Ethiopian delegate speaking at the Belgian meeting of Women for the Defence of Peace demonstrated that Ethiopian women actively advocated for the defence of their country.³⁵

There was also a concerted effort on the CMF's behalf to target Italian women, although the war was not necessarily centre stage in these endeavours. The CMF had a large membership of Italian women émigrés in France and several Italian committees were set up in Paris and the Midi in particular. There was also a successful Italian language journal *La Voce Delle Donne*, which contained articles on CMF business, international events, and news from within Italy. The March 1935 edition of the Italian language journal was a special edition on the Ethiopian war and actions against it.³⁶ *La Voce Delle Donne* was 'the best means of propaganda, agitation, and also the education of Italian women'. It also allowed the CMF to 'extend its voice into Italy' with some émigré readers employing 'semi-legal' tactics to send it there. It had a monthly circulation of 2,000 copies: 1,500 for Italian émigrés living in France, and 500 clandestinely sent into Italy on 'Bible paper'.³⁷ Copies would be covered with highly popular Parisian fashion magazines to be sent to the larger Italian cities and the cover note proclaiming it to be an 'Organ of the *Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme*' removed. Although this could have dire consequences for any women found to be disseminating anti-fascist material in fascist Italy, the committee noted that 'the sending of the review... had not yet given rise to any incidents' by the end of 1936.³⁸

The Italian émigré committees presented a unique opportunity to reach women still living in Italy. Some women with ties to the CMF who had moved back to Italy undertook anti-fascist propaganda and agitation work within the legal limits. The committee knew of Italian women who had delivered petitions to mayors and the Duce. Further, it noted that women utilised the confessional booth as a means of protest too; they would attend confessional and use their time to implore the parish priest to intervene against the war. Cattaneo also highlighted some of the more dangerous anti-fascist tactics, including women who lay down on train tracks to prevent cavalcades of soldiers and war material from leaving for the front.³⁹ The improvement of communications allowed the CMF to build a network of women on both sides of the border who facilitated a consistent flow of

information about events in Italy for publication in *La Voce Della Donne*. The CMF reported that the periodical pleased 'Italian women of all tendencies', but some Italian anti-fascist women had criticisms that articles were too 'nationalist' and relations too 'fraternal' between the CMF and Italian Catholics and women 'influenced' by fascism, which the committee categorised as 'sectarian and restricted'.⁴⁰

This criticism was also present in other aspects of CMF work with Italian émigré and refugee women. Some of the largest events organised by the Italian émigré committees were Christmas fêtes which served humanitarian, propaganda, and fundraising purposes. The primary goal of these fêtes was to provide children with toys and sweets in the period before Christmas and often included the unveiling of a Christmas tree funded by the local CMF section. However, these events also provided the CMF with an opportunity to reach 'hundreds' of Italian mothers and recruit them to their cause. The most successful fête was held in Paris in 1936 and was organised in collaboration with the *Association franco-italienne des anciens combattants* and the *Comité d'aide au peuple espagnol*. Funded by donations of money, toys, or clothing from Popular Front municipal councils, political personalities, various Italian and French organisations, small businesses, trade unions, and newspapers, this fête attracted the presence of 'thousands of children', all of whom were gifted a toy for Christmas. The fête was organised in honour of those children whose fathers had gone to Spain as volunteers, and those children were also given warm clothing. 'Cordial and affectionate letters' in support of the event were sent from the French radical President Édouard Herriot and socialist politician Suzanne Lacore reinforcing the importance of this Christmastime gathering as a 'demonstration of reconciliation and Franco-Italian friendship'. However, there was some controversy on whether to allow the children of fascist workers or adults who could bring 'the fascist insignia on them' to participate in the fête. Some comrades, including a 'very sectarian, ex-Maximalist' Italian CMF secretary and several members of the United Front, were 'scandalised' that fascists were openly invited to the event.⁴¹ Although acknowledging that 'all of our comrades had a just position on this point', the report on this fête stated that all the organisers who were against fascist attendance were 'put in the minority and forced to bow' by arguments that stressed the importance of a 'large reconciliatory character'. This position seems contrary to the CMF's political ideology at first glance; however, it fits with the committee's desire to create and maintain links with women living within Italy's borders. By purposefully inviting fascists to their children's Christmas fête, there was an attempt to conceal the anti-fascism of the émigré groups to avoid suspicion in Italy and thereby prevent any jeopardy for CMF comrades who regularly crossed the border. It also allowed the CMF to forge links with Italian fascist women living in France from whom they could garner information about women under Mussolini's regime. Fascist women in attendance praised the fête's atmosphere of 'fraternity' and the 'affection' shown to them by CMF comrades,

which they did not experience at a similar event held by the Italian consulate in Paris.⁴²

There was also an emphasis on women's transgenerational trauma in CMF propaganda on the Italo-Ethiopian conflict. Their focus was not on the communication of wartime memories and tragedies between generations of *Ethiopian* women who had experienced the war directly though. The Italian defeat at Adwa in 1896 had fundamentally altered the deliberately cultivated Italian national myth and had left deep wounds on the military pride of the nation. It was 'embedded in Italian consciousness'. However, acts of remembrance and the memories of this earlier war with Ethiopia and 'the humiliation of defeat' were not homogenous.⁴³ Rather, gender influenced how Italian citizens were exposed to war, the losses they suffered, and, thus, the type of trauma suffered. Some women experienced the war more abstractly (for example, through newspaper reports), while others lost family members and engaged in prolonged periods of grieving. With renewed conflict with Ethiopia, the CMF saw an opportunity to emphasise the transgenerational impact of war as a propaganda strategy against the invasion. This was primarily achieved in an article written by 'Ada', a woman writing from Milan. She authored the article as a discussion between an elderly woman and her granddaughter, with the content based on personal experience. She used a format that reflected cultural modes of memory transmission (namely storytelling) to impart gendered historical emotions and traumatic memories effectively.

'Ada' emphasised this national grief from the beginning of her article. She lamented the existence of a 'memory, a still-alive distant pain, an imprecation' that haunted every Italian family as a result of the death of male relatives during the war. She argued that the 1935 invasion of Ethiopia by Italian forces was part of a broader pattern of loss coloured by war for women and that the origins of this pattern were in the Italian defeat at Adwa in 1896, to which all wartime loss since had been compared. 'Ada' emphasised the phenomenon of transgenerational trauma by claiming that the 'open wounds of the flesh' caused by repeated Italian excursions into Africa had transmitted across several generations as mental scars which revealed themselves as pacifist sentiment. She explained that Italian women had consistently invoked the traumatic memory of Adwa when faced with similar personal loss during the First World War. When the granddaughter in 'Ada's' article spoke with her grandmother about the death of soldiers on the western front, in the Carpathians, and along the Isonzo River, the grandmother invoked her memories of the earlier war in response, establishing connections of grief across familial generations; the grandmother responded by answering, 'Yes, it is terrible. As in Africa, as in Adwa'. This article presented the pattern of loss as ongoing and seemingly never-ending: 'Ada' stated that those who were grandmothers of soldiers during the First World War were 'the mothers of the soldiers killed in Adwa', while those

who were the mothers of soldiers in 1916 were also 'the daughters of the soldiers of the African campaign of 1896'. Now, when a new conflict that could threaten the return of 'global killing' had begun, it was the sisters, daughters, and wives of the soldiers who perished during the First World War ('who should have been the last') who were witnessing their sons being sent to the 'new African butchery'. 'Ada' argued that this was 'the long, endless ordeal of our mothers', a sentiment that resounded among women globally during this period.

Anti-fascist sentiment was expressed through a comparison between the earlier Ethiopian conflict (as told by the grandmother) and the ongoing conflict (as told by the granddaughter), and how the Italian civilian population received news of the carnage. First, the grandmother speaks, utilising graphic and violent language to state that

Tens of thousands of young people died in Africa, killed because they were compelled to kill, they fell either from thirst or from hunger, or killed by the heat of hell. And we spent millions. We were poor, miserable, we were reduced to bread. And after the carnage, the war over, all we had to do was mourn our dead; and we women were even poorer and more miserable. They had taken millions from us, and the blood that had flowed in Africa was black ...⁴⁴

She emphasised that any knowledge of the events in Ethiopia during the conflict had come from returning soldiers, not from the government. This mirrored the granddaughter's discussion of the outcome of the recent invasion of Ethiopia, which she only knew through access to a foreign newspaper. She quoted that there were

Three nights of blood... The blood of whites and blacks, in brown puddles, was stuck to the walls that had resisted the bombs... Blood and corpses. Corpses of young Italians, corpses of Abyssinians, corpses of black women and children too. Some were lying on top of the others. Three hundred Italians, a thousand Abyssinians, Adwa filled with blood.⁴⁵

The author of this article also emphasised that fascism had not only brought 'misery' and killed soldiers, but it had driven 'Abyssinian mothers to death' and imparted sanctions on Italy's female citizens, who felt the resulting lack of food and fuel particularly harshly. 'Ada' was quick to assure her readers that Italians felt no animosity towards the Ethiopians; their hatred 'was never for the Abyssinian people' and the few soldiers who had returned from the previous war had complained that it was 'a butcher's shop'. The grandmother stated that on their return in 1895, soldiers had argued that 'we went to their house: they defended themselves! What would we have done if the Abyssinians had come to our house to kill us?'⁴⁶

This conversation was presented as a point of anti-fascist conversion for the granddaughter who finally wanted ‘death at last – the death of fascism!’ As in other CMF propaganda, this was presented as a specifically female task; the article told readers that ‘when pain and hatred – hatred against war, against death, and for the love of life – is the cry of collective protest from all of you mothers, and this cry drives your husbands and sons against the executioners of humanity, the ordeal will be over, forever’.⁴⁷ This reinforced women’s agency in staging protests and organising against war, but it also recognised their power within the home in their roles as mothers and wives. This article intended to persuade clandestine readers and regular consumers of CMF publications alike that they could effectively halt the march towards another global conflagration by vocally opposing the fascist expansionist policy, but also by using their domestic position to influence the male members of their families. While focusing on the pain felt by Italian women due to the bereavement of their husbands, fathers, and sons, the committee chose to ignore the additional traumatic impact of injuries, permanent disability, and the destruction of property as experienced by Ethiopian women. In this way, the transgenerational transmission of trauma among Ethiopian women (which would have been just as, if not more, prevalent as among Italian women) was not acknowledged and appeared to be of secondary concern to the committee.

Despite its status as the earliest CMF campaign, the success of the Ethiopian campaign is difficult to gauge. Efforts at fundraising and consciousness-raising were intense, but the campaign itself was short-lived. Whether the CMF ever chartered a specific ‘Peace Plane’ is not known. It certainly sent material aid to the country several times. The committee was one of the first activist organisations to organise a meeting in support of Ethiopia eight days after war was officially declared in October 1935, a meeting that was publicised by the large Parisian newspapers *L’Intransigeant* and *Paris-Soir* which ensured a large attendance. The CMF reported to the Comintern in 1936 that it had sent three shipments of medicine to Ethiopia and had raised 15,000 frs. in monetary aid. It also had immediate plans to send an ‘ambulance tent with all the sanitary equipment’ and stressed the aid campaign’s success in a variety of countries, including Norway, Belgium, and Switzerland.⁴⁸ However, after the Ethiopian defeat in May 1936, efforts to organise relief for the Ethiopian people reduced drastically. Instead, the CMF began to focus on those Italian refugees who had escaped to France in particular. Some of the group’s most fascinating work was done in this area, especially that which saw them interact closely with fascist women to aid Italian children. The acknowledgement of the impact of war-related trauma on women and its transmission across families and generations was also revolutionary, especially as a tool through which to attack fascist policy.

'To-day China Is Near Us and So Are Her People': Responses to the Humanitarian Crises of the Second Sino-Japanese War

The CMF's most intensive campaign on non-European issues was its work for Chinese civilians impacted by the traumatic and violent Second Sino-Japanese War which raged from 1937 to 1945.⁴⁹ Estimates of Chinese casualties in the war vary from 15 to 20 million, alongside an internal refugee crisis on an unprecedented scale as tens of millions of civilians were forced from their homes by the advancing Japanese army.⁵⁰ In many cases, women and children were the focus of aggression from Japanese troops: the most infamous example of this aggression was the massacre in Nanjing over the winter of 1937/38, in which 300,000 civilians were murdered and as many as 80,000 women and girls were raped according to Chinese estimates.⁵¹ The gendered nature of the violence and its impact on children was the main concern of the CMF. The committee deployed rigorous propaganda and modern fundraising techniques to ensure the success of its humanitarian campaign for women and children. In addition, the committee embarked on an innovative child sponsorship campaign for the 'Warphans', which was a strategy unlike anything else used by the committee in its fundraising efforts. The Chinese campaign was one of the CMF's most successful, in part because of the appeals made to women's potential maternity to create commonalities between Eastern and Western women and to create sympathy for the vast number of Chinese children orphaned by the conflict. However, this work also often reflected colonialist ideas about China and East Asia that were seemingly at odds with its anti-colonialism.

The CMF offered Chinese women the opportunity to speak for themselves and to recount their experiences in graphic detail to Western audiences. Of particular importance, the committee provided a space for discussion of the mass rapes perpetrated by Japanese soldiers on Chinese women. The CMF blended its socialist feminism and internationalism to highlight the real impact of sexual warfare on its female victims and their children in its humanitarian propaganda. For example, Loh Tsei, a Chinese Sociology student, gave a speech on the Nanjing Massacre in late 1937 at the CMF's Marseille Congress in 1938. She had gained a reputation as 'China's Joan of Arc' in the American press for her role in the Chinese student movement and was particularly well-known for her contribution to the demonstration against Japanese imperialism which took place on 16 December 1935 in Beijing.⁵² Arrested and 'beaten with gun butts', she became a leader in the Chinese student movement after her release and was sent to Europe and the United States to advocate for support.⁵³

Loh Tsei spoke of the 'humiliations which exceed the imaginations of civilised peoples' suffered by Chinese women. In a 'moving' speech, Loh Tsei told of how 'Japanese soldiers... search from house to house for all the women and inflict a terrible fate on them: raped, tortured, sometimes almost killed',

with husbands shot if they tried to help their wives.⁵⁴ She utilised emotive and violent language to expose the horrors of the massacre, citing a missionary who wrote that he had seen a woman in the hospital who 'had been raped twenty times' and whose head the Japanese soldiers had attempted to remove, 'resulting in a serious throat injury'. Tsei stated that '100 cases of rape' at the University of Nanking were reported in just one night, including two girls of 11 and 12 years of age.⁵⁵ She utilised this language not only to accurately report the incidents of violence towards Chinese women but to induce a response in the women who were in the audience and who read the congress report; it was intended to create a sense of horror among the audience which would propel them to act on behalf of the victims.

The kidnapping of Chinese women by Japanese soldiers was similarly highlighted by the CMF during its humanitarian activism. During the 'Warphans' campaign the committee revealed that some of the children orphaned by the Second Sino-Japanese War had witnessed a particularly gendered, violent attack on their families, in that they saw their mothers kidnapped (and sometimes killed) by Japanese soldiers. Japanese soldiers kidnapped Chinese women, girls, the elderly, and pregnant women frequently during the Second Sino-Japanese War to rape, use as sex slaves, or force them to work in 'comfort stations' established for institutional sexual slavery.⁵⁶ Chinese women were not only targeted for mass sexual violence because of the sexual deviancy of the Japanese forces but also because they represented the 'body of the nation' and thus rape stood as a 'gesture of conquest'.⁵⁷

By March 1939, it would have been known by Western observers that sexual violence was occurring on a mass scale in China. However, it is not clear how far CMF members would have understood the subtext of rape in the description of mothers being 'abducted' or 'taken away' by Japanese soldiers. The result was horrifying nevertheless, even if the reader did not fully understand that the kidnap of Chinese women likely meant their sexual assault. Four of the children who had seen their mother kidnapped by the Japanese soldiers had also witnessed their murder by their abductors. This suggests that the children interviewed for this article had witnessed the entire attack on their mother, from kidnap to rape and murder, a fact which some of the more informed readers would have understood and which may have encouraged them to act out of horror and sympathy for the children.⁵⁸

Although it publicised a traumatic and often overlooked aspect of war and gave Chinese women the opportunity to discuss it on their terms, the group limited these descriptions of gender-based atrocities to propaganda for its humanitarian work. It did not engage with feminist politics to examine the motivations behind these atrocities or to suggest solutions, nor did it collaborate with other international groups on campaigns for civilian protection. The CMF tended to work unilaterally with occasional collaboration with organisations like WILPF, for example. Despite the group's resolute commitment to exposing all the horrors of the war in China,

its frank portrayal of sexual assault thus served little more purpose in practice than consciousness-raising among Western women.

The involvement of several Chinese women provided a sense of internationalist legitimacy to CMF campaigning. The most renowned name attached to the CMF work in China was Soong Ching-ling. As the wife of the first President of the Republic of China, Sun Yat-sen, and an important figure in Chinese politics in her own right (including being named the Honorary President of the People's Republic of China shortly before her death in 1981), Soong had broken with the nationalist Kuomintang party in 1927 after its leader, Chiang Kai-shek, expelled communists from the party and ordered the slaughter 'thousands' of communist cadres in Shanghai.⁵⁹ She spent a few months in 1927 in Moscow and Berlin making contact with representatives of the Comintern through whom, it is likely, she became involved with the CMF. She held a position on the *Comité d'honneur* for the group's founding congress in 1934, although neither she nor any other Chinese delegate attended the meeting in person.⁶⁰ Her involvement ensured the success of CMF initiatives; for example, the Cantonese pottery that she provided for the CMF's China Bazaar in the winter of 1938 raised £400 to send to the Chinese International Hospital.⁶¹ When Charlotte Haldane travelled to China under the auspices of the Comintern, Soong Ching-ling travelled from her home in Hong Kong to Canton (Guangzhou) to meet her, demonstrating a personal commitment to the CMF. The two had 'several long and intimate talks' about the Sovietisation of China and Soong's concerns about the growing 'fascist' nature of the Kuomintang under Chiang's leadership.⁶² These discussions were not published at the time, as the committee focused entirely on the threat of Japanese imperialism.

Depictions of Chinese women's experiences during the war in CMF journals often reinforced the Western stereotype of Chinese women as having 'little or no freedom', which had, by the interwar period, transformed into a 'more complete political and social freedom than any country in the world excepting the Soviet Union'. Charlotte Haldane, for example, emphasised the contribution of women to the war effort with their 'unsurpassed record for physical valour and courage', evidenced by the 'Chinese Florence Nightingales, Joan of Arcs, Judiths, Boadiceas, and Nurse Cavels by the dozen'. However, even here Haldane described Chinese women as serene and unassuming, performing their valiant actions with a 'quiet "take it for granted, it's all in the day's work" type of heroism'. She also made claims which were disputed by Chinese women themselves. Haldane asserted that the Second Sino-Japanese War had 'hastened the development [of Chinese women's rights] which began in 1919', while some Chinese communist women writing for a Chinese audience claimed the opposite; for example, Pan Yihong cited Jun Hui, a member of the Chinese Communist Party, who argued that the men 'responsible for defending the country' had established 'tighter supervision and control over women's every move' alongside their withdrawal in the face of Japanese troops.⁶³

The dual conflicts running concurrently between the nationalists and the communists, and between China and Japan made women's emancipation less of a priority than the emancipation of the nation, even for women. Vivienne Xiangwei Guo has noted that 'party-political cleavage was never a defining feature of elite women's public communication and engagement in the 1930s' in China, as women's groups formed a 'united front' to fight for national salvation regardless of party.⁶⁴ Still, this desire for national sovereignty clashed with the main principles of international women's organisations. Many non-Western women supported military action to achieve independence, which was inherently at odds with the total pacifism of the largest women's groups. Mona Siegal has identified 'feminist orientalism' on the part of Western women activists, the 'recalcitrant nationalism' of Chinese women, 'differing understandings of war and political violence, and the relationship of each to feminism' as barriers to collaboration between WILPF and Chinese women in the interwar period.⁶⁵ However, these factors did not present much of an impediment to collaboration between the CMF and Chinese women; although there were orientalist and nationalist aspects to CMF work on China, it did not negatively impact the cooperation of women from one group with the other. Further, Chinese women and the CMF shared a much closer understanding of the use of warfare than WILPF did, as the CMF actively encouraged violent struggle against fascism and imperialism and for revolutionary purposes. Thus, the CMF's Chinese campaign had an integral consonance and alignment of philosophies which was lacking in previous associations between Chinese women and international women's groups.

Chinese women were eager to dismantle the orientalist image of the Chinese woman as 'ethereal and dainty creatures [...] with eyebrows as thin as that of a moth, and feet that move so light that they, under the rustling silk, would not even leave footprints on the dust'. The playwright Yang Jiang condemned this image of her countrywomen to the 'dead and irrevocable past', asserting that Chinese women had possessed 'indomitable will and courage' during the war.⁶⁶ Similarly, Mrs Tsui-Tsing Chang refuted the 'erroneous, but popular, notion among Western people that Chinese women are inferior to men, that they are helpless and always dependent', a notion solidified by early twentieth-century missionary reports which emphasised Chinese women's 'victimization and weakness'.⁶⁷ Instead, she argued that the modern Chinese woman desired higher education, a profession, and to make contributions to society.

For many Chinese correspondents, national salvation was key to their conceptions of feminism: only when the nation was emancipated could women be. In a letter to the CMF published in December 1936, nine prominent Chinese women argued that resistance was necessary to 'support world peace and freedom by a brave national liberation war' and asked for support from anti-fascist women across the globe. He Xiangning, a committee member on the All-China National Salvation Association and a former minister

for Women's Affairs, explained that the 'only right we should strive for is the right to save the country', for without that there would be 'no women's rights left to strive for'.⁶⁸ This letter was also signed by Shi Liang, a lawyer who was the liaison director of the Women's Advisory Council, a 'cross-party national women's organization for national resistance', and a member of the People's Political Council, an official 'forum for public opinions'.⁶⁹ Here, Japanese imperialism was presented as an extension of capitalism and the women acknowledged that only after the expulsion of the imperialist aggressors could women work effectively to achieve gender equality.⁷⁰

Much of the CMF material generated from late 1938 focused on the plight of Chinese women. Images of Chinese women and children with expressions of sadness or pain often accompanied this material alongside questions like 'Will You Let This Child Be Bombed?' which constructed a spectacle for European readers. This exploitation of Chinese women's suffering was designed to elicit a strength of feeling which would galvanise the audience into action, either through protest or donation. Chinese women writing for the journal also utilised this tactic, however. Yang Jiang wrote an article for *Woman To-Day* in late 1937 in which she deployed violent and emotive language to obtain sympathy from readers. Labelling the Second Sino-Japanese War 'the cruellest war the world has ever seen', Yang described the 'thousands of peaceful homes [which] have been reduced to ruins, women and children... murdered in cold blood, and... [those who] survived have seen their dear ones tortured and killed before their very eyes'. Yang emphasised the 'meaningless atrocity' of the war and argued that this was why Chinese women participated in the conflict.⁷¹ This allowed European readers to confront the real suffering of women and children and to feel sympathy based on their shared gender.

Maternalism was by no means the dominant discourse employed by Chinese women, but they did, on occasion, utilise the commonality of motherhood and the potential suffering associated with that experience to surmount cultural differences between them and their European audience. They deployed maternalism to create sympathetic images of Chinese women as non-violent and unwilling spectators to the suffering of others. For example, 'Madame Quo Tai Chi', the wife of the Chinese ambassador to Britain, wrote that Chinese mothers had seen their sons struggling 'against the invader' and their daughters 'meeting the national crisis with every ounce of aid they can give'. She used motherhood as a common identity by asking British women to understand that their Chinese counterparts hoped to witness the development of their children without interference from a foreign power, because 'surely that is what all mothers desire for their sons and daughters'. Similarly, the poet Lu Jingqing, who was living in Britain at the time, wrote of the millions of Chinese children 'torn by Japanese bombs and shells', utilising emotive, violent, and graphic language to appeal to the maternal instincts of the reader. She extended her sympathy to Japanese women as mothers too; she stated that, 'millions of Japanese mothers

mourn their sons, and wives grieve for their husbands who have been driven to war by the Japanese militarists and Fascists and have lost their lives in Chinese territory'. In this depiction, Japanese women had little agency and were simply unwilling spectators in the conflict.⁷² This emphasis on the pain of women as mothers losing children during wartime was deployed by the CMF to create connections between women with few cultural bonds separated by great geographical distance, to generate support and material and moral contributions to the campaign.

The CMF combined these essentialist assumptions with imperialist stereotypes in its shortest, but most successful, humanitarian campaign. The 'Warphans' child sponsorship campaign combined a focus on European women as potential mothers and inherent carers with the rhetoric of otherness to develop a charity strategy that presented Chinese children and by extension the Chinese population, as passive and in need of direction. It utilised a child sponsorship strategy that sometimes deployed rhetoric influenced by colonialist understandings of China which occasionally infantilised China. Further, the CMF's 'Warphans' campaign severely underplayed the role of Chinese women in organising support for at least two million orphans created by the conflict before 1945, as well as giving them little credit for the initial creation of the propagandised image of 'Warphans' as a fundraising tactic.⁷³ However, these strategies were incredibly effective and made a substantial contribution to the humanitarian effort surrounding the crisis.

The charitable strategy of child sponsorship was still in its infancy by the late 1930s, although its exact origins have been the subject of debate. Henry Molumphy traced the origins of child sponsorship to the Foster Parents Plan for Children in Spain during the Spanish Civil War in 1937 (later Plan International), while Larry Tise asserted that the China's Children Fund was the originator of child sponsorship initiatives during the Second Sino-Japanese War (later ChildFund).⁷⁴ However, recent scholarship by Brad Watson and Emily Baughan has presented Save the Children as the true innovator of the child sponsorship model. Formed in response to the 1919 famine in Austria, Save the Children presented children as apolitical, passive actors to encourage its British patrons to donate to citizens of their recent enemy; Save the Children portrayed children as innocent and helpless, surmounting difficulties of 'nationality', 'ambition', and 'material wealth'.⁷⁵ Baughan has argued that Save the Children positioned children as 'objects of innate pathos' and 'extra-national figures[...] entirely removed from questions of nationality or politics', which fostered the myth that child sponsorship strategies 'existed beyond self-interest, political concerns, and international diplomacy'.⁷⁶

Save the Children heavily inspired the CMF's child sponsorship activities. By April 1938, 37,253 children were reported as orphans by the China War Orphans Relief Commission, creating a humanitarian crisis that fit the CMF's *raison d'être* as an activist organisation.⁷⁷ The CMF effectively

utilised the sympathetic figure of the child not only to place children in an apolitical space that existed beyond national borders but also to elicit a gendered response from its membership based on maternal feeling. For the CMF too, these children represented ‘the standard-bearers of “internationalism”’, both politically and geographically; the sponsorship of Chinese children not only reinforced CMF claims of being ‘international’ but contributed to ideas of a socialist internationalism which wanted to safeguard the next generation of humanity.⁷⁸

The British section of the CMF appealed to its members for aid for Chinese children through *Woman To-Day* by stressing the increasingly globalised world of 1939:

China – so far away, people say – what has it to do with us? That may have been so many years ago, but to-day China is near us and so are her people. (Charlotte Haldane, Special Delegate to China from the Women’s Committee for Peace and Democracy, flew from London to Hong Kong in five and a half days.)⁷⁹

The first mention of the ‘Warphans’ in CMF material came in the January 1939 edition of *Woman To-Day* in an article penned by Charlotte Haldane following her visit to China, during which she visited an orphanage in Chengdu, Sichuan province. Her account alternates between graphic, violent language when recounting the experiences of the orphans and sympathetic descriptions of the orphans themselves, thereby constructing the children as tragic symbols deserving of compassion. With the ‘Warphans’, this violent language was inherently linked with the idea of children as innocent witnesses. Haldane wrote:

Imagine the plight of one little child, which has seen its home bombed, its mother raped and then murdered by the Japanese soldiery, its father clubbed on the head, or shot in cold blood, when trying to defend her. There are millions of little Chinese children whose eyes bear the memory of such sights that no child should ever be allowed to look upon.⁸⁰

The refugee status of the children was key to this construction of children as objects of pathos. Haldane explained how the orphans had undertaken a nearly 2,000-km journey between Anhui province (where most of the children originated from) and the orphanage in Sichuan, as it was the only option ‘to save their poor little lives and limbs from the pitiless massacre of Japanese bombs’.⁸¹

Haldane’s construction of these violent experiences and her construction of individual children as figures of pathos were inextricably linked. She attempted to create a sense of familiarity for her readers based on their experiences as mothers and carers. For example, Haldane described an 11-year-old boy as a ‘pale-faced, keen-eyed little chap; intelligent but not in the least

precocious', stating that the Chinese orphans were 'not in the least different from our own children, except that they are somewhat quieter and better behaved, a concomitant, unfortunately, of all that they have been through'. Here, she constructed a personal connection between her readers and the children of China; she was encouraging women to view the 'Warphans' as reflections of their children and children they knew to foster certain maternal, and subsequently charitable, feelings. However, these descriptions of children were also infused with stereotypes about the Chinese nationality influenced by imperialist assumptions about race. Haldane demonstrated her Western prejudices by claiming that a boy who related his story to her had the 'natural dignity and politeness of his race, but without a trace of conceit or self-satisfaction'. Haldane then demonstrated some explicitly hierarchical attitudes towards the children. She wrote of how impressed she was that the boy chosen to talk to her had 'no trace of vanity' for being chosen and that his 'comrades' showed no 'envy' that they were not, suggesting that she felt that the child was lucky to talk to her, a European woman with important international contacts.⁸²

The origin of the term 'Warphan' was in Chinese nationalist propaganda. The nationalist Kuomintang needed to convince the Chinese people that the welfare of children was a national responsibility, not solely the responsibility of the family as traditional discourse had asserted. Traditionally, the family system instilled appropriate behaviours in children within the home, which were then extended to interactions with society. However, during the war, orphans were 'elevated to a national priority' for whom the state was responsible and around whom a concomitant debate was formed. M. Colette Plum has traced how attitudes towards orphans in China developed during the war with Japan and argues that they became a 'potent cultural symbol infused with nationalist ideology' as they became threatened by Japanese influence or extermination. Before the war, orphans were often seen as problematic for the state as they represented a threat to societal harmony. They came to be viewed as especially open to manipulation by the Japanese occupiers which would threaten the *minzu* (nation, the building of the nation) that the Kuomintang had carefully cultivated since the 1911 Revolution. Those orphaned by war were placed into children's homes and instilled with values to create an inherently nationalist society; this had long-term effects on orphans who lived in the state children's homes who grew to maturity with a 'strong sense of national belonging and with images of themselves as contributing members of what was described to them during their childhoods as a "future China"'.⁸³

The 'Warphan' was the focal point of child sponsorship initiatives by Chinese women activists before European women launched their campaigns. Key to these initiatives was Soong Mei-ling, who was the first woman to harness the propagandised image of the 'Warphan' for foreign fundraising opportunities. The wife of Chiang Kai-shek and the sister of Soong Ching-ling, Soong Mei-ling's most important public work during the

conflict was with war orphans; she set up the first orphanage for the children of soldiers in Nanjing and established the Chinese Women's National War Relief Society to care for them. It was, in fact, Soong Mei-ling who coined the name 'Warphan' to refer to those children who lost their parents during the war. She shaped the ideological direction of the children's homes, ensuring that the children felt a belonging to the nation through their common experiences. According to Soong Mei-ling, 'Warphans' all spoke Mandarin, dressed uniformly, ate 'the same food, [sang] the same songs, [and recited] the same lessons'. She directed the 'Warphans' campaign in China itself, imploring her fellow Chinese to care for the 'future citizens' of the nation and asking them to 'Adopt a warphans for a month!' or to 'Adopt as many warphans as your income will allow!'.⁸⁴ She was also a frequent visitor to the number one children's home in Chongqing where she ensured 'that money and food allocated to the refugee children were not embezzled by corrupt officials'.⁸⁵

The CMF gave Soong Mei-ling little credit for her activism for 'Warphans'. Beyond acknowledging that Soong Mei-ling had coined the term, the CMF ignored her role in campaigning and fundraising among the Chinese people, giving the impression that the origins of Chinese child sponsorship lay with the CMF. This perpetuated the idea, intentionally or otherwise, that the Chinese people depended on European activism and aid to protect their children, reflecting negative images of Chinese people as helpless, depoliticised, and unable to direct their aid. The criticism of the CMF's erasure of Chinese activism towards children can, and has, been levied against modern child sponsorship organisations, particularly those operating in the 1980s, which deployed 'destructive stereotypes' of those in need of aid in the Global South which did not reflect the true extent of their agency.⁸⁶

One of the key narratives in the CMF's 'Warphans' campaign positioned donors as 'foster parents' who had some level of parental responsibility to their 'adopted' child. The 'Warphans' child sponsorship scheme was inaugurated in the March 1939 editions of *Woman To-Day* and *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* with a brief article couched in terms of parenthood and the discourse of adoption. Potential 'foster parents' were encouraged to give three pounds a year to adopt a 'Warphan', which would ensure that the parental task of making sure a child was 'well-looked after' was carried out by securing 'food, shelter, education and medical attention' for their chosen orphan.⁸⁷ Potential donors were approached by deploying language which positioned European 'parents' as the saviours of these children; articles told readers 'why you must rescue them', to convince them that they could, as white Europeans, positively alter the course of a child's life by giving only three pounds a year.⁸⁸

The structure of these articles was simple: a short paragraph informing the reader what a 'Warphan' was, several images of Chinese children accompanied by a sentence or two explaining their situation to the audience, and a final paragraph explaining how those interested could find out

more information about adopting a 'Warphan'. These articles, like other CMF campaigning on the Second Sino-Japanese War, used language which reflected the emotional and violent experiences of the children to appeal to the common identity of motherhood that was so integral to the CMF's attempts to create connections across continents.

In this case, though, the CMF also deployed images of children to reinforce efforts to personalise its child sponsorship campaign. The committee went to great lengths to depict the children as presentable and well-looking after by the orphanages. *Woman To-Day* published images of girls in traditional Chinese dress with neat hair trimmed into a bob, while *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* published photographs of both male and female orphans dressed in the uniform of their orphanage, with bobbed hair for the girls and shaved heads for the boys. This was standard in child sponsorship initiatives in the interwar period; Save the Children provided 'respectable headshots' of children who were 'properly clothed and groomed' so that potential donors could visually link the child in need with their own child. These images encouraged potential 'foster parents' to select their child personally based on the idea that, provided 'food, clothing, nurture, and a reason to smile', the child would be like their own children.⁸⁹ The CMF borrowed this tactic because it ensured that 'foster parents' would take a greater interest in choosing a child, thereby increasing the effectiveness of the campaign in attracting sponsors.⁹⁰

The CMF similarly found that including images of orphans for sponsorship allowed potential 'foster parents' to envision the child they wanted, based on the limited photographs that they had seen. Letters received from potential sponsors, which emphasised the child's appearance as the reason for choosing them above other factors, reinforced the importance of the image of the innocent, youthful orphan for European audiences. For example, one sponsor asked for an orphaned girl but lamented that he supposed that 'all the chubby boys and pretty girls have been taken', supposing that other sponsors would already have asked for children fitting this description, leaving only the 'less desirable' children. In response, the committee found a girl whose 'face portrayed the suffering she had gone through' for the donor.⁹¹ That the CMF provided sponsors with photographs that amplified the pain of the child commodified them in a way that was predicated on concepts of pity and patronage, resembling the 'pornography of poverty critique'.⁹² The sponsor responded to the photograph of his 'Warphan' by comparing her experience to the experience of children in the West; he wrote of the 13-year-old Chinese girl that he had adopted that, 'In this country, a parent would be waiting until their children are 14 so that the money they earn will swell the family pool. This Chinese girl will have a better chance in life'.⁹³ The sponsor of this child genuinely believed that his five shillings a month or three pounds a year would dramatically improve the child's situation and affect her life for years to come, showing a lacklustre understanding of both the war itself and the corresponding political situation.

Although it did not publish graphic images of injured children, the CMF can certainly be accused of perpetuating Chinese children as spectacle; the CMF created a contrast between photographs that portrayed them as innocent and ‘naturally dignified’ and the accompanying paragraphs which often deployed graphic, emotive language. Miriam Ticktin has argued that innocence became ‘the necessary accompaniment to suffering, required in order to designate the sufferer as worthy’, with children, as blameless figures, representing the ‘ideal recipients of care’.⁹⁴ However, Timothy Brook has argued that many children came out of the Sino-Japanese conflict relatively unscathed, beyond having their ‘innocence exploited for propaganda photographs’.⁹⁵

Still, there were differences between how the British and French journals presented the children they featured. *Woman To-Day* preferred to keep the ‘Warphan’s’ stories short and avoided explicit language. For example, Yu Lan Tuan, a 14-year-old girl from Henan province, told the publication that her ‘village was flooded by the Yellow River’ and she had been sent to the orphanage as a result. This description neglects to explain the circumstances around the flood and drastically underplays its catastrophic nature; the Chinese military command had ordered the breaching of the southern dyke of the Yellow River in an attempt to stop the Japanese army from advancing further west, which killed somewhere in the region of 500,000 people and further exacerbated the refugee crisis.⁹⁶ For the majority of the children featured, they became orphans because their fathers had joined the army as their mothers had died before the war; an eight-year-old boy from Sichuan province and a ten-year-old boy from Henan were both sent to government orphanages for this reason. However, some children had witnessed the violence of the conflict first-hand, like 12-year-old Yu Fang who had witnessed the kidnap (and presumably the murder) of her mother by Japanese soldiers. Despite her happiness at being in the government orphanage, she wanted desperately to see her mother. The author of the article commented pityingly that Yu Fang did not understand that ‘she will never again see her mother’, again utilising language designed to appeal to shared motherhood to alleviate the suffering of the Chinese ‘Warphan’.⁹⁷ Even when the language used by *Woman To-Day* to tell the individual stories of ‘Warphans’ was not graphic or explicit, it was emotive and designed to elicit maternal sympathy from readers. In the case of Fu Mao Wei, a 14-year-old boy from Hubei province, this attempt to create a link based on the potential motherhood of the readers was clear. Fu Mao Wei recounted that he had been forced from his mother who, ‘with tears in her eyes kissed [him] goodbye because she was too ill to be evacuated from the city’, a story designed to affect CMF members emotionally as mothers or potential mothers.⁹⁸

However, the article introducing the ‘Warphans’ in *Femmes dans l’action mondiale* was more graphic in its quest to stimulate support for the cause. Every story described some level of violence personally witnessed by the child. Five of the 12 children featured in the March 1939 issue had survived a Japanese aerial bombing on their home in which either or both of their

parents or guardians had died. Children from Anhui and Jiangxi provinces experienced their houses being ‘burned down in the course of a bombing by plane’; two of the children featured had seen their mother die during the attack, two had seen their entire families perish, and one witnessed his aunt die while she was acting as his guardian. Chang Hsun Lo, a 13-year-old boy from Jiangxi, had seen his father leave to join the army, and used his story to reflect the isolation that many ‘Warphans’ felt: he expressed that he remained all alone following the death of his family with ‘nobody to take care of me’.⁹⁹ A solitary child with no parental support was a particularly effective tactic for appealing to the maternal instincts of women, who, it was assumed, would want to alleviate the damaging isolation of children like Chang Hsun Lo. Lone children presented what Emily Baughan has described as a ‘logic of incompleteness’ which generated a feeling of ‘parental responsibility’ from the sponsor to the child.¹⁰⁰

The ‘Warphans’ campaign yielded excellent results. Within a month, women’s organisations, university students, school teachers and pupils, and convents had already adopted more than fifty orphans out of the one hundred funded by the committee.¹⁰¹ A group of women from the central branch of the Association of Women Clerks and Secretaries adopted a ‘Warphan’ as a collective, ‘several sections’ of the Labour Party adopted ‘Warphans’ through the CMF, and some students from Oxford University sponsored Chinese children. Somewhat surprisingly considering the inherently gendered nature of the CMF, several men also came forward to be ‘foster parents’, a trend which the committee was keen to encourage. Highlighting the inequality for men when adopting domestically, the CMF wrote that the British authorities

did not encourage men to adopt children, but our committee does. We do not mind who adopts a ‘Warphan’; from the lowest to the highest-paid worker. We would not refuse the Prime Minister, nor his wife.¹⁰²

The committee did not want to be exclusionary in whom it targeted, despite their entirely female, left-leaning membership. It was more concerned about the success of the campaign in general, including engaging traditional opponents of communism and socialism; for example, the British committee wanted to extend their ‘Warphans’ activism to the public by targeting churches, through whom they could ‘obtain the aid of their congregations’. The ‘Warphans’ campaign received donations and sponsorships totalling 17,500 francs in March alone, rendering it a rousing success. Compared with the monetary aid collected for Spain by the CMF between March 1938 and the end of March 1939, the CMF collected around 30% of the amount collected for Spain in a year for China in a month.¹⁰³ In addition, the China Bazaar that Soong Ching-ling contributed pottery to raised 50,000 francs because of her involvement.¹⁰⁴ The Chinese campaign was one of the CMF’s most successful despite lasting eight months at most, compared with the three years of the Spanish campaign.

Conclusion

The campaigns led by the CMF give a new perspective on how socialist women engaged in international activism during the 1930s. The CMF was a transnational communist front organisation that subverted communist rhetoric on gender equality by utilising traditionally feminine symbols to yield what it expected to be the best outcomes. The processes of information exchange and mobility resulting from increasing international communications gave non-CMF women the unique opportunity to publicise the specific hardships that they faced and to enhance Western understandings of various conflicts. It also exposed European women to gendered violence perpetrated against women in warzones, including graphic sexual violence in some cases. The committee raised consciousness among its members and effectively fundraised for aid. It also engaged in innovative fundraising initiatives to ensure the success of its work, including child sponsorship, for example.

However, the CMF also relied on both stereotypical and essentialist tropes to achieve this success. This presupposed that European women involved with the organisation would be more likely to respond to emotional appeals based on motherhood as opposed to more rational appeals based on politics or the international situation. Criticisms can also be made of the group's decision to present the experiences of women and children as a spectacle for their readers, to create pathos to encourage people to commit financially. The activism of the CMF, which was supposedly predicated on socialist notions of equality among races and genders as well as class (if we are to be somewhat reductive about the ideology's fundamental tenets), was much more influenced by traditional gender discourses than would initially have been expected, to attract the greatest number of supporters and therefore the largest amount of money. In addition, the group also used rhetoric based on colonialist assumptions about race and difference to emphasise the dire situations faced by Chinese and Ethiopian populations to a European audience. However, the Ethiopian campaign was as much permeated with concern for Italian women as it was for Ethiopian women, despite the brunt of the violence being targeted towards the Ethiopian population. Although concerned with the impact of war and fascism on non-European populations, the CMF can be accused of a Eurocentrism that designated the group's non-European campaigns as a secondary concern.

Notes

1. Harold G. Marcus, 'Racist Discourse about Ethiopia and Ethiopians before and after the Battle of Adwa', in Paulos Milkias and Getachew Metaferia (eds.), *The Battle of Adwa: Reflections on Ethiopia's Historic Victory against European Colonialism* (New York, NY: Algora Publishing, 2005), p. 237.
2. Alexander De Grand, *Italian Fascism: Its Origins & Development* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), p. 54.

3. Duchêne, 'Rapport: La situation des femmes au 20ème anniversaire de la guerre', p. 11.
4. Ibid., p. 16; emphasis Duchêne's.
5. 'Le mouvement des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme en France' (29.04.1935), Pandor, 543_2_4, Doc. 1, pp. 8–9.
6. Walter Adams, 'Refugees in Europe', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 203 (1939), p. 39.
7. 'Femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme: Bulletin du Comité Suisse des Femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme', Pandor, 543_2_16, (January 1936), Doc. 47–50, p. 3.
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15. 'Grand Rassemblement des Femmes Belges pour la défense de la Paix', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (December 1935), p. 10; and 'Projet de Résolution sur le Rapport de la Fraction Communiste du Comité Mondial des Femmes', Pandor, 495_4_340, Doc. 45 (14.3.1935), p. 15.
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37. 'Le rassemblement mondial des femmes et les taches du comité italien', Pandor, 495_4_449a, Doc. 71 (25 and 26 May 1935), p. 5.
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6 Campaigning on a National Scale

The periodical as a method of dissemination was crucial to CMF organisation and campaigning. As examined in earlier chapters, the committee used its various national periodicals as vehicles for information on its international campaigns and as coordination tools for its humanitarian work in Spain, Germany, China, and Ethiopia. However, the CMF was not only concerned with international issues. The journals also provided a framework through which the group informed and organised around national issues. By analysing regular articles and columns, we can gain valuable insights into how the CMF framed feminist and socialist concerns about women's and worker's rights in national settings. This chapter will draw upon material from the British CMF journal *Woman To-Day* and the French journal *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* to discuss how the CMF presented women's political and social rights in the British and French contexts. CMF journals consistently translated political topics 'into the language of the domestic and the familial, in a bid to reach women perceived to be immune to appeals to party' in much the same vein that other women's political papers did in this period, and thus, in addition to evaluating what constituted a concern for the CMF domestically, articles on these topics will be analysed in a rhetorical framework.¹ Journals and newspapers were key for influencing readers' perceptions of events in the interwar period, playing 'a significant role in setting the agenda for public and private discussion, and... providing interpretive frameworks through which readers made sense of the world'.² CMF periodicals similarly offered an analysis of global and national crises through a specific political lens to influence its readers' understandings of the issues they faced as women.

Femmes dans l'action mondiale had the largest circulation of any CMF publication by a large margin, with 140,000 copies sold monthly in 1937.³ For comparison, the German language paper, *Die Frau*, had the second largest monthly circulation with 10,000 copies sold a month and the Italian paper, *La Voce Delle Donne*, sold 2,000 copies a month.⁴ The only available figures for *Woman To-Day* state that 6,000 copies were sold across six months in 1936/37; however, it is unclear whether that was in total or 6,000 copies per month.⁵ The 'coordination of all this press' concerned

the executive committee of the CMF. It was publishing or involved with monthly organs on every continent apart from Africa, including Uruguay's *Mujeres* and Argentina's *Vida Feminina* (which it contributed to, but did not publish) as well as unnamed Chinese and Australian periodicals. With commitments to 20 periodicals in 1937 and more forthcoming, the leaders of the CMF wanted each to have a 'national character' which appealed to women in the domestic context, but directed that for 'important international questions, it is indispensable that articles follow a general line'. The international executive committee subsequently complained that they had been 'harassed by desperate appeals for help' from national committees who had set up monthly periodicals without giving 'much attention to their resources'.⁶ For the CMF, 'the financial difficulties were... heavier than the political difficulties' as the group felt that they could overcome political obstacles while financial issues were much more difficult to solve.⁷ Thus, there was a consistent refrain in national and international reports on CMF work that increasing the circulation of journals was a key priority for the forthcoming period. Examining women's issues in the national context of each periodical was one such tactic for achieving greater circulation. This chapter will focus on how the issues of women's suffrage in France, women's right to work, and abortion and reproductive rights were presented in CMF periodicals in Britain and France, evaluating the arguments made by the group and considering how far the committee deployed language that reflected traditional expectations for women in their domestic campaigns.

Universal Suffrage in France

The campaign for women's suffrage before the First World War was the great unifier of feminist activists; the exclusion of women from the franchise 'highlighted the extent to which women shared common interests that could cut across class, religious, political, and national differences and raised the possibility of the development' of activism governed by 'universal sisterhood'.⁸ However, June Hannam has argued that 'the size, activity, and militancy of suffrage movements in England... dwarfed French efforts'.⁹ Others have posited that French feminists were determined to 'maintain the Republic and the social stability it represented' and thus avoided public demonstrations, which made the French suffrage movement appear less dynamic than its British or American counterparts. Charles Sowerwine has argued that French women sought to 'remain women' in their quest for the vote, which meant avoiding suffragette violence, instead simply 'influenc[ing] men in positions of power'.¹⁰ In addition, a disconnect between French and British women activists was created when universal suffrage was legalised in Britain in 1928, while French women remained unenfranchised. Women's priorities had diverged. The unequal acquisition of suffrage across Europe dissipated 'the common bond of political powerlessness' among women.¹¹

Historians have thus tended to view French suffrage activism as a negligible movement, both before and after the First World War.

French women did not receive the vote until 1945 and the struggle for equal suffrage thus remained at the top of French feminist objectives during the interwar period. Women's suffrage bills were passed by the French Chamber of Deputies multiple times in the interwar period as a result of women's agitation but were always ultimately rejected by the Senate. Siân Reynolds has argued that politicians in the Parti Radical-Socialiste were concerned that women's votes would be influenced by Catholic priests, while June Hannam has stated that Republicans were concerned that women 'might wish to restore the monarchy', both of which would undermine Republican principles and threaten the foundations of the French state.¹² However, this argument was not convincing enough to sway right-wing parties from the belief that 'a woman's place was out of politics' either.¹³ As such, women's suffrage in France was trapped in a kind of political no-man's land which very few politicians were willing to traverse, although some parties on the left claimed to support the cause of women's suffrage. The French political establishment, then, fused the debate about how women's votes could potentially undermine Republican principles with the origins of the Republic itself, excluding women's contribution to the state almost entirely from its narrative.

Nevertheless, women activists of all political persuasions continued to agitate for universal suffrage, using a variety of tactics; Karen Offen has argued that French feminists in this period were proponents of 'relational' feminism, which took the family as the 'basic socio-political unit of the nation-state' and 'stressed the rights of women *as women*'.¹⁴ They emphasised their 'difference' from men as 'legitimising grounds for their participation in the public sphere'.¹⁵ They believed that women's 'motherly' characteristics should be employed to 'reform the society beyond the household' which was also a common feature of CMF rhetoric. French feminists often imbued the language and tactics that they used with the prevalent pronatalist discourse in France after the First World War.¹⁶ However, not all the French women expected to support universal suffrage did so. Irene Juliot-Curie and Suzanne Lacore, two of the three socialist women ministers whom Léon Blum appointed to his Popular Front government in 1936, were concerned that if they enfranchised women en masse, they might vote 'the wrong way' and elect a right-wing government.¹⁷

The French section of the CMF advocated strongly for the extension of the franchise to all women. During the municipal elections of May 1935, the CMF published a pamphlet entitled '*La femme doit voter!*' (Woman must vote!), a phrase which was a 'constant refrain' in French feminist literature about 'universal' rights.¹⁸ The pamphlet lamented that:

Despite your will, parliament refused to grant you the right to vote in the next Municipal Elections...You, whose husbands and children are threatened by war. You do not have the opportunity to express your opinion!¹⁹

The pamphlet invoked maternalist discourse alongside pacifist ideas about women's duty to prevent war to assert women's right to participate in the national political process. It targeted working women, housewives, rural workers, and female intellectuals, and argued that women must be able to vote to prevent proto-fascist politicians in France from reducing women's role in society to 'boiling potatoes and raising children'. The pamphlet argued that women wanted the vote to defend 'bread, freedom and peace' and implored 'men and women of heart' and 'fathers and mothers' to participate in the campaign for universal suffrage.²⁰

The CMF was also keen to expose why French politicians were averse to expanding suffrage to women citizens. A March 1935 column in *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* penned by Bernadette Cattané explained the defeat of a universal suffrage bill in the Senate. She squarely blamed the continued rejection of women's suffrage on politicians who claimed that women were 'lacking political education' and would 'thoughtlessly' opt for 'the physical advantages of the candidate [rather] than for his valour or his political sympathies'.²¹ This was also common in the British press after women had received the vote, as some newspapers assumed that women's 'political preferences would reflect [their] superficiality'. They believed that women may have a 'supposed unwillingness, out of sexual jealousy, to vote for their fellow women' and that women had an 'apparent inability to appreciate the gravity of their civic responsibility'.²² However, Cattané instructed readers that this was simply a rhetorical tactic to minimise women and their potential contribution to French national politics to non-serious, superficial decisions.

She also criticised other opponents of women's suffrage in France who envisioned 'the worst consequences for the household [and] feminine morality' while simultaneously taking the left to task for allowing a 'great fear of a vote for the right' by women to dictate their approach to the legalisation of women's suffrage.²³ Cattané stressed that no argument would convince the CMF that women should not be allowed to vote on the same terms as their male counterparts: 'we are asking [for] women's eligibility without any restriction and absolutely the same rights as men in universal suffrage'. The example of the Soviet Union was invoked once more as 'millions of women [had] voted since the first days of the Revolution' and participated in the building of a strong, socialist state. Cattané believed that French politicians could learn the importance of female voters from the Soviet experience.²⁴

A 'family vote' was one proposal made by French politicians that CMF women explicitly rejected in *Femmes dans l'action mondiale*. A 'family vote' would introduce 'proportional voting' allowing every household to vote as one, which meant the enfranchisement of women, but also children.²⁵ Because France was portrayed as 'one large family' by right-wing politicians, proponents of the policy argued that the 'family vote' would 'strengthen each of the basic units of society by granting an additional vote to heads of family'.

In addition, it was envisioned that a ‘family vote’ ‘would compensate the increased weight given to single individuals at elections by giving additional voting rights to Heads of Family’.²⁶ The CMF argued that in ‘the great majority’ of households, a ‘communion of ideas’ existed between partners, and as such, it would be impracticable and wrong to ‘seriously talk about placing women under guardianship’ and to make husbands the ‘absolute sponsor’ of their wives. Besides, this proposal did not tackle the demands of women’s political equality with men and in fact, actually reinforced their political inferiority. There were also concerns about who would speak for widows and young single women who were not married but who still had ‘interests to defend [and] ideas to emit’. They specifically deployed economic arguments to demonstrate their opposition to the proposed policy:

What we want is that the worker, the employee, the civil servant who has had 2% of their wages withheld under the *decrêts-lois* have the right to express... their vote and show their absolute opposition to such proceedings by whom they elect!²⁷

The French section of the CMF viewed the struggle for universal suffrage as a step on the path to women’s emancipation. It would allow women to participate in political decision-making on the same terms as men and provide an official outlet for women’s opinions, but the vote was not necessarily the overarching goal for French socialist feminists in the interwar period as it was for British feminists before the First World War. They were encouraged by ‘socialist rhetoric of equality to demand rights for themselves’ and were committed to the principle of women’s suffrage as a result. However, the suffrage movement was often seen as ‘a competitor for the allegiance of working-class women’ by socialist parties, and some socialist women tried to ‘sabotage feminist efforts’ to remain in control of proletarian women.²⁸ The CMF thought that the vote would provide women with the opportunity to agitate for better living and working conditions to improve women’s position in society more generally.

Women’s Right to Work

The press and several national governments made attacks on women’s right to work in this period. Women in several European countries were systematically removed from governmental and civil service positions in particular. Laurel Forster has argued that women’s work became ‘indeterminate, insecure, and subject to changing legislation’ in Britain as a result of several emergent factors: demobilisation after the First World War, shifts in social class, the uncertain direction of the feminist movement, and women ‘newly come into the larger world’, for example.²⁹ The popular press across Europe deployed rhetoric that reinforced the division of labour along gender lines, ‘with the husband as breadwinner and the wife as *maitresse de maison* and

mother-educator'.³⁰ Married women were frequent targets of legal and rhetorical attacks. The French government, for example, banned married women from joining its civil service but did not force married women who were already employed to quit. The British government also enforced a marriage bar for employment in the civil service. Many women activists in the 1930s were concerned that their government would follow the German example of excluding women from certain professions to satisfy some on the far right.³¹

The early twentieth-century French pronatalist ideology that presented women's primary role as a mother was also a national motivator behind attacks on women's employment. Karen Offen has argued that 'issues concerning the emancipation of French women, including their employment and reproductive practices, were inextricably intertwined with an impassioned debate over the shape and future strength of the French national community', and thus the pronatalist current frequently coordinated attacks on women in the workplace. The need for a strong, healthy population to act as a barrier to a 'resurgent and resentful Germany' in the future was a major concern for politicians and civilians alike, which had the potential to impact women's right to employment.³² The CMF supported traditional expectations of women as mothers who took care of the housework and childcare if the economic situation allowed, while simultaneously supporting the economic independence of women. The relationship between the pro-maternity rhetoric commonly found in *Woman To-Day* and *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* and their ardent defence of women's right to work, despite, or indeed because of their potential as mothers, is the focus of this section.

Whether the full exclusion of women from public service employment was ever a true threat in these two countries is debatable. However, campaigns in the popular press had loudly advocated for the removal of certain women from employment, and the CMF in both France and Britain reacted to the threat accordingly. *Woman To-Day* consistently published spreads that argued that women should be encouraged to actively enter employment not considered to be traditionally feminine. In a photo essay entitled 'Woman's Place? – Everywhere!', women were photographed in a variety of jobs, including factory workers, typists, dancers, fisherwomen, and nurses. Traditionally feminine roles (mothers) were juxtaposed with traditionally masculine ones (scientists). Captions accompanied the photographs which lauded the achievements of women in the workplace, including discoveries by female scientists and the fisherwomen who had 'struck for better wages'. The periodical argued that, as workers, women had learned that 'progress and strength come through organisation' and that 'they [would] pass [these lessons] on to their children'.³³ *Woman To-Day* did promote the emancipatory potential of work for women, linking women's right to work with the concept of progress and presenting it as a prerequisite of a modern, emancipated woman. However, motherhood was included in discussions about

women and work, implicitly framing emotional and domestic labour as equivalent to employment outside the home.

The expectation that women would become a mother at some point in their lives was standard in this discourse. There was also an expectation that mothers should prepare their daughters for the modern workforce, regardless of whether they would marry or not. The CMF still expected mothers, whose role had historically included the education of children to perform this function despite moves towards women's emancipation. Women's role as a mother was still the most important that they could hold because they were responsible for socialising the next generation of workers. Monica Pearson, a journalist who worked primarily for the Sunday newspaper *Reynold's News*, argued in *Woman To-Day* that daughters needed 'training, congenial work and good prospects just as much as your son, whether she marries or not'. Pearson provided practical advice in preparing young women for employment: first, she stated that the work chosen must 'not only develop her natural talents', but also engage her with 'a certain amount of training and technical knowledge'. She then offered suggestions for work suitable for young women: she described domestic work as 'drab' but recommended it if the girl could tackle it 'from a scientific point of view'. She argued, for example, that if a domestic worker could add to a knowledge of cookery a knowledge of 'food values', she could qualify as a dietician, or if she became interested in electricity, she could combine that with housework to become a 'demonstrator for a gas or electrical company'. Pearson also advocated taking an interest in electricity more generally, as 'the future prospects of anyone who makes it a speciality... are distinctly promising'.³⁴ Thus, article authors in CMF periodicals combined traditional expectations around women's work with modern technological advancements to encourage women to pursue modern careers.

The rapidly expanding beauty industry also provided opportunities for young women to enter into employment, as Pearson noted the lack of 'really efficient assistants' in hairdressing because of the time it took to train.³⁵ She suggested that practitioners of this work visited clients in their own homes to carry out the treatments. She did worry that it was 'not so feasible now that electrical equipment plays a larger part, but there are still possibilities for the enterprising girl, who can save a little capital'. This linked debates around appropriate female employment with contemporary questions about the emancipatory potential of cosmetics, fusing women's economic and cultural concerns in one.³⁶ She also advocated for women to enter dressmaking, clerical work, civil service work, nursing, and sales positions, as well as primarily physical roles, such as kennel maids, gardeners, or farmers. However, she warned against exploitation from 'sharks', employers who used girls and women for cheap labour without providing the training that had been promised. Pearson warned that 'the girl with real talent is just as liable to be exploited as her less brilliant sister', a reference to broader capitalist exploitation of workers.³⁷

Femmes dans l'action mondiale regularly published a 'tribune libre', an opinion column that discussed the problems faced by working women in France. It explicitly connected the threat posed to women's right to work with the dual purpose of educating readers on employment. In one example, Luce Langevin, a scientist and the daughter in law of the physicist Paul Langevin, interviewed the organic chemist, Pauline Ramart. Langevin argued that Ramart's role as the second female chair of the Sorbonne was evidence of progress towards the broad feminist goal of 'equality of access to professions and functions of state'. The Ramart interview had two purposes: first, Ramart poured extensive praise on the CMF and expressed a feeling of encouragement 'every day by the results you get' in enlightening women who 'do not yet see the danger' of Nazism. Second, it promoted Popular Front strategies; for example, Ramart stated that she saw 'no fundamental difference between [intellectual and manual] workers, who [had been] artificially separated' into the two categories.³⁸ Here too, motherhood was a major theme in the debate on women's right to work. Opinion columns in *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* often stressed how women's employment had the potential to impact the family and children positively and negatively. For example, Ramart stated that she was in favour of women's right to work and that it was not 'incompatible with family life' but added the qualifier that women needed to take 'care of the development, both physical and intellectual, of her children' first.³⁹

Another column stressed the pain of the dual burden of working and being solely responsible for housework and childcare on women; in this case, a woman who was employed as a nurse explained the minute details of her everyday life, which demonstrated the difficulty of reconciling motherhood with a full-time job. The nurse's day began at 5 in the morning, when she lit 'the fire, prepared the breakfasts, the clothes [and] the lunches'. She explained that there was little difference between home and work for her: she had simply 'changed her master' from her family to her boss.⁴⁰ At home, her husband and children demanded her time and effort, while at work the doctor took on the same role, which meant that she never felt in control of her actions.⁴¹ She had limited time available for herself; after a 16-hour workday (she asked, 'does the eight-hour day exist somewhere?'), at nine in the evening she had some time for herself, but even then, she was consumed with concerns about finances, 'family quarrels', and work. This column demonstrated the realities of being a working-class mother in the 1930s, with no choice but to work outside the home to support her family. In her opinion, 'no profession requires more care than that of a mother' and she strongly emphasised that motherhood was the most important, most fulfilling job she could hold; her 'beautiful children' were the 'only pure joy and justification of my hard life'. The shared experience of motherhood and the dual burden that the CMF emphasised was expressed clearly when the author said that she often thought of the fact that 'so many women in the vast world carry... all this human pain... with me in the darkness'.

Despite the portrayal of motherhood as a thankless but positive job, the author determined that 'it is good to be a mother and to be something more, to have a social role and a family role'.⁴²

In another example of the portrayal of the dual burden, journalist Etienne Constant interviewed a young family of women for *Femmes dans l'action mondiale*. The eldest sister, Catherine Mollard, worked as a glass-blower to support her two younger sisters. Constant asked the sisters about their opinion on women's right to work; the two younger sisters agreed that they would prefer to work and make a good living rather than to rely on Catherine's salary, while Catherine was less enthusiastic about it. Constant asked Catherine whether she had ever considered returning to the home instead of working, to which Catherine responded, 'How can we live without working?' The question of the impact of fascism on women's work was present here too. Constant asked the middle sister, Madeleine, if she knew that 'if the fascists succeed in doing what they want in France, they will drive you... out of the shop [that she wanted to open with her fiancé] because you will occupy the place of men?'. Madeleine was shocked by this and argued that if this became the case, the boutique would not pay enough for them to live. In addition, she was firm in her assertion that she was not 'an idler' and she did 'not want to live at the expense of [her] husband'.⁴³ This interview demonstrated two opposing viewpoints of women on their right to work: Catherine Mollard had no choice but to work to support her sisters, while the emancipatory potential of work was demonstrated by the youngest sister Dédé and the middle sister Madeleine. It also served a political purpose, as it explained that fascism in France would pose a threat to employed women, to encourage them to use the influence that they had to prevent such a take-over. Employment was thus variously presented as emancipatory and incarcerating, but its survival was essential for ensuring women's rights in the face of rising fascist opinion.

Full-page spreads were regularly published in *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* chronicling public efforts to remove women from government and civil service jobs; for example, in October and November 1934, it reported that some of the women who worked for the *Société des transports en commun de la région Parisienne* (TCRP) and the *Postes, télégraphes et téléphones* (PTT) were facing unemployment due to the replacement of the tram system with bus lines; one of the articles described a female conductor, 'red with indignation', who had received a letter which read:

Madam, we regret to inform you that the replacement of the tramways by bus lines has the inevitable result of rendering the female staff employed on the trams unusable by the Company.⁴⁴

According to the article, such brazen attacks on women's employment had created an atmosphere of solidarity among Parisian transport workers and that more attacks could further unite workers against their employer's

exploitation. The female conductors were determined that they ‘must not surrender by accepting the reform’ and regularly held meetings ‘in the depots and throughout the Paris region’. They were determined not to be halted in their protests against their dismissal; their spokesperson emphasised, ‘if one hesitates, if one is ready to capitulate and accept the lesser evil, then we are defeated in advance; but if, on the contrary, we take the offensive, if all the exploited workers of the same employer agree to lead the struggle for victory without fail, it is quite another thing’.⁴⁵ These articles publicised the strikers’ cause and offered support, integral for shaping public opinion on the topic.

France in the interwar period was rife with industrial unrest and strikes were common; as we have seen, Bernadette Cattaneo was a prominent strike organiser and by extension, the CMF believed that women’s participation in strikes was crucial for their economic emancipation. One edition of the French periodical was dedicated to the efforts of the ‘*grévistes*’ who went on strike from May to August 1936. The origin of these strikes has been traced to unrest at the Bréguet aviation factory on 1 May 1936, in which Cattaneo played a prominent role as an organiser. Strikes occurred intermittently across France throughout May, but it was from 2 June 1936 that the strikes truly spread, especially in the Paris region. ‘Chocolate factories, printing works, building sites, locksmiths’ and engineering factories, including the Renault plant at Billancourt, went on strike, while geographically, ‘only three *départements* were left untouched’ by strike action.⁴⁶ Even the formation of the Popular Front government under Léon Blum on 4 June 1936 did not stop the strikes; Julian Jackson has argued instead that the Popular Front victories in the first round of the 1936 election ‘made action seem possible’. In addition, Popular Front candidates elected in municipal elections a year earlier often ‘provided free provisions’ to strikers. The Saint-Denis municipality, for example, produced ‘130,000 free meals in fifteen days’.⁴⁷

Femmes dans l’action mondiale emphasised the role of women in these strikes as both workers and the wives of male strikers and the impact that they had on the success of the movement. Siân Reynolds has argued that many historical accounts of women’s participation in the 1936 strikes in France suggest that women ‘played mainly a supportive or passive role... bringing food to the factory gate for husband or son, or engaging in womanly pursuits like knitting to while away the time in an occupied factory’.⁴⁸ However, while the CMF represented wives and mothers in this way, it was not the most prominent depiction of striking women in the journal.

The periodical emphasised that strikes with majority female participants had ‘perfect discipline’ with no alcohol permitted and communal kitchens established by workers to feed themselves.⁴⁹ The roles that women played as strikers, fundraisers, activists, and wives were illustrated by a plethora of photographs; it even offered female strikers an original photograph of a strike movement if she found herself in the journal as a souvenir to remember their participation. However, as was broadly the case, the CMF presented motherhood as the primary reason that women should join strikes.

One caption which accompanied an image of a mother holding a young baby read:

The mother, proud and happy, embraces her baby. Not only did she give birth to him, but also, she fought for him, striking on the job, to ensure everything necessary to make this beautiful and sweet child a strong and happy man. What joy on the baby's face. For long days he waited for his mother... and never was his kiss so sweet as it is today.⁵⁰

Women were not striking for better pay and working conditions for themselves, but their children and potential future children. However, it is also evident that the CMF expected that women would happily return to their 'main' role in the home after the strike was over, positioning women's work outside the home as less important than her work as a mother and wife.

The special edition on strikes demonstrated clear links between the CMF's socialism and feminism. The French section organised collections for the strikers throughout France. The Fontenay-sous-Bois committee, for example, raised 300 francs for the cause, served coffee to women on strike, and opened a permanent office of collections for strikers.⁵¹ The Suresnes, Vélizy, Levallois, Paray-Vieille-Poste and 6th, 15th, 19th, and 20th *arrondissements* in Paris all offered practical help to solve 'serious problems' of organisation, including the preparation of *pot-au-feu* (beef stew) for strikers. The women of the Villejuif committee offered to donate 400 francs to a strike committee near them, and the Charonne and 15th *arrondissement* committees provided strikers with 'good blankets' to use while they occupied factories overnight.⁵² Further, CMF women contributed their oratorical skills to the strikes: photographs showed Maria Rabaté mixing with strikers at the Galeries Lafayette, and Madeleine Braun, a communist activist and CMF member, giving a speech at an unnamed factory. These were just two of the examples that the CMF used to convince its readers that it had played a vital role in building and sustaining morale during the lengthy strikes.⁵³

In addition, the CMF used its coverage of the strikes as an opportunity to promote women's membership of trade unions. 36.6% of women were 'economically active' in France in 1931, which had risen to 37.9% by 1946. On the contrary, they only represented around 8% of trade union memberships in 1936.⁵⁴ The last two pages of the '*grévistes*' special edition promoted membership of the CGT, which had only recently begun working with communist cadres again after the election of the Popular Front government. The CMF warned its readers not to forget that the victory of the strikers was 'only possible thanks... to the unified associations of the CGT' and encouraged women who worked in 'factories, offices, ateliers or the Civil Service' to organise themselves. The periodical pointed out that 'before, perhaps, [women] did not want to hear about trade unions', but, as they saw the power of organised strikes, they had begun to consider organising themselves for the betterment of working conditions and salaries.⁵⁵

CMF journals largely presented questions surrounding women's right to work as positive, with *Woman To-Day* encouraging women to seek out new forms of employment to develop their economic security. Women's absolute right to work was never in dispute for the CMF, even when employment was difficult and unfulfilling and remaining in the home would be preferable. Motherhood created a sense of common experience for readers of CMF journals, but it was also largely accepted and even encouraged by the CMF that motherhood would be women's priority over employment. Even strike movements were presented as a step towards better working conditions for their children, rather than themselves. The CMF celebrated working women who had the double burden of also raising children; however, the committee still relied on traditional images of women which positioned their main duty as mothers.

Women's Reproductive Rights

The CMF also used its periodicals to inform women on the political and social issues affecting them as mothers. The CMF's British section in particular often provided their members with discussions around women's reproductive and abortion rights through their journal, *Woman To-Day*. The latter half of the 1930s in Britain witnessed increasing debate about the morality and necessity of legalised abortion. Anxiety about maternal mortality rates (which was around '5 deaths in every thousand births' at the same time as the infant mortality rate had declined) led to the publication of reports on abortion in the British press that alternated between blaming women's emancipation and developments in sexual morality for the number of women who died in childbirth. The 'increased nervous tension' of women (amplified by their 'fashion of slimming') in conjunction with 'an extended use of contraceptive measures and a reputed increase in the practice of abortion' were blamed for the high maternal mortality rate.⁵⁶ In addition, the practice of abortion was 'common' among working women in the interwar period and was to 'some degree' accepted in working-class communities as 'access to abortion was relatively easy', although the actual experience was presumably not.⁵⁷

Writing in July 1939 in *Woman To-Day*, 'a leading woman doctor' discussed the findings of an Interdepartmental Government Committee on abortion laws which had enquired 'into the prevalence of abortion and...consider[ed] what steps could be taken to secure the reduction of maternal mortality and morbidity arising from this cause'. The report of the Committee was published in the wake of the court case of a women's specialist, Doctor Aleck Bourne, who had performed an abortion on a 14-year-old girl who had been raped by five off-duty British soldiers. The author of the article in *Woman To-Day* was critical of the Committee's findings, as the only thing she agreed with was the Committee's recommendation that 'a medical practitioner should be allowed to induce abortion not only if the operation is carried

out to save the life of a woman but in order to prevent her health from being seriously impaired'. However, even this came with the caveat that the abortion records should be available to the police. The legalisation of abortion in cases of rape, incest, or hereditary disease was also not recommended by the Committee. In addition, it rejected the idea that information on birth control should be available through local health centres.

However, the author pointed out that two of the members of the Committee, Dr Watts-Eden and Lady Balfour, had emphasised the 'injustice of withholding knowledge on birth control from the poor, while the well-to-do are able to get all the advice they want on the subject, by paying for it'.⁵⁸ Dr Watts-Eden and Lady Balfour suggested that 'if the practice of birth control for economic reasons is not in the national interest, this fact should be impressed on all classes, independently of social status'.⁵⁹ This was the view of many abortion law reform campaigners in this period, including Dr Helen Wright, a doctor at the North Kensington Birth Control Clinic, who expressed the view that 'the most frequent cause of abortions is an economic one' and that the best way to prevent abortions was to educate working-class women on their birth control options.⁶⁰ The CMF vehemently supported women's right to choose when they had children and consistently linked the issues of abortion and birth control with economic concerns in the same way that many socialist and communist women did in the interwar period. For example, in an article entitled 'To be or not to be?', Anne Fremantle emphasised that 'an unlimited family may be for various reasons - housing, money, health - a misery and a danger to the mother', and stressed that 'a planned family, born over a period of years so as to suit the pockets and general well-being of the whole home, is an asset to the nation'.⁶¹ Like their counterparts in the Labour Party, CMF women presented birth control and abortion as an issue of class inequality, 'rather than the emancipation of women and their sexuality'.⁶² Middle-class women were more able to access therapeutic abortions in cases of medical necessity than working-class women, who 'relied upon abortifacient pills... the insertion of implements such as crochet hooks and knitting needles, or folk remedies such as slippery elm bark'. These methods varied from ineffectual to fatal, as unsafe abortions 'amounted to about 14% of all puerperal deaths'.⁶³ Thus, the CMF wanted to encourage safe solutions for its members, most of whom would have had to resort to such dangerous methods should the situation arise.

Conclusion

Leila Rupp has argued that international women's periodicals 'served as a strong but invisible cord tying women together across national borders', a point which can certainly be applied to the CMF; the organisation had goals for their journals that transcended national boundaries, aiming to inform women on politics, their rights, and their domestic concerns and to

rally women against injustice.⁶⁴ The rhetoric of motherhood ran throughout CMF publications, as the committee framed their members in primarily maternal terms to create bonds of community and sisterhood. This was a propagandistic tactic to encourage women to act on national concerns too, as the special edition of *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* on the *grévistes* demonstrated; the CMF argued that women should fight for the vote, their right to work, and against low pay and bad working conditions, not only for themselves but for their children and potential future children. Work outside the home was often a secondary concern to motherhood, the 'joy' that should be women's overarching life goal. However, work was considered to be a necessity for achieving economic independence. The CMF's approach to issues faced by women in a national context was often contradictory; their progressive calls for universal suffrage in France and their encouragement to women to enter the workforce and to participate in strikes in large numbers contrasted with their consistent lauding of mothers and housewives as the pinnacle of womanhood. Nevertheless, the committee advocated for abortion and reproductive rights for the physical and economic health of women and staunchly defended their right to participate politically and to work outside of the home, featuring heavily in their publications.

Notes

1. Adrian Bingham, 'Enfranchisement, Feminism and the Modern Woman: Debates in the British Popular Press, 1918-1939', in Julie V. Gottlieb and Richard Toye (eds.), *The Aftermath of Suffrage: Women, Gender and Politics in Britain, 1918-1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 91.
2. *Ibid.* p. 87.
3. 'Rapport du Comité national Français: Assemblée plénière du comité mondial des femmes', 25-27 May 1935, Pandor, 543_2_2, Doc. 32, p. 9.
4. 'Rapport du Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme', 25 February 1937, Pandor, 543_2_21, Doc. 1, p. 6; and 'Le rassemblement mondial des femmes et les taches du comité italien', 25 and 26 May 1935, Pandor, 495_4_449a, Doc. 71, p. 5.
5. 'Report on Activities of the British Committee', 22 February 1937, Pandor, 543_2_21, Doc. 175, p. 4.
6. *Ibid.* p. 7.
7. *Ibid.* p. 8.
8. June Hannam, 'International Dimensions of Women's Suffrage: At the Crossroads of Several Interlocking Identities', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 14, No. 3-4 (2005), p. 550.
9. *Ibid.* p. 544.
10. Sowerwine, *France Since 1870: Culture, Society and the Making of the Republic*, p. 75.
11. Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, p. 12.
12. Siân Reynolds, 'Marianne's Citizens? Women, the Republic and Universal Suffrage in France', in Siân Reynolds (ed.), *Women, State, and Revolution: Essays on Power and Gender in Europe Since 1789* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books, 1986), p. 105; June Hannam, *Feminism* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 73.
13. Reynolds, 'Marianne's Citizens? Women, the Republic and Universal Suffrage in France', p. 105.

14. Karen Offen, 'Body Politics: Women, Work and the Politics of Motherhood in France, 1920–1950', in Bock and Thane (eds.), *Maternity and Gender Policies: Women and the Rise of the European Welfare State 1880s–1950s*, p. 144.
15. Pnina Werbner, 'Political Motherhood and the Feminisation of Citizenship: Women's Activism and the Transformation of the Public Sphere' in Nira Yuval-Davis and Pnina Werbner (eds.), *Women, Citizenship and Difference* (London: Zed Books, 1999), p. 225.
16. For further on the pronatalist current in France between the wars, see Marie-Monique Huss, 'Pronatalism in the Interwar Period in France', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (1990), pp. 39–68 and Geoff Read, "'Citizens Useful to their Country and to Humanity": The Convergence of Eugenics and Pro-Natalism in Interwar French Politics, 1918–1940', *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2012), pp. 373–397.
17. Reynolds, *France Between the Wars: Gender and Politics*, p. 161.
18. Karen Offen, *Debating the Woman Question in the French Third Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 487.
19. 'La femme doit voter !' (1935), Bernadette Cattaneo Papers, 1-BC-2(F), p. 1, CHSVS.
20. *Ibid.* p. 3.
21. Bernadette Cattaneo, 'Le droit de vote aux femmes', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (March 1935), p. 8.
22. Laura Beers, "'A Timid Disbelief in the Equality to Which Lip-Service Is Constantly Paid": Gender, Politics and the Press between the Wars', in Laura Beers and Geraint Thomas (eds.), *Brave New World: Imperial and Democratic Nation-Building in Britain Between the Wars* (London: Institute of Historical Research, 2011), p. 137.
23. Bernadette Cattaneo, 'Le droit de vote aux femmes', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (March 1935), p. 8.
24. *Ibid.* p. 8.
25. Huss, 'Pronatalism in the Interwar Period in France', p. 65.
26. Magali Sudda, 'Gender, Fascism and the Right-Wing in France between the Wars: The Catholic Matrix', *Politics, Religion and Ideology*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2012), p. 24.
27. 'Nous voulons le droit de vote', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (April–May 1939), p. 11.
28. Hannam, 'International Dimensions of Women's Suffrage: At the Crossroads of Several Interlocking Identities', pp. 546–547.
29. Laurel Forster, 'The Essay Series and Feminist Debate: Controversy and Conversation about Women and Work in Time and Tide', Catherine Clay et al. (eds.), *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1918–1939* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), p. 334.
30. Offen, 'Body Politics: Women, Work and the Politics of Motherhood in France, 1920–1950', p. 142.
31. Hatton and Bailey have penned two articles statistically analysing the participation of women in the workforce across Britain, T.J. Hatton and R.E. Bailey, 'Female Labour Force Participation in Interwar Britain', *Oxford Economic Papers*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (1988), pp. 695–718; and T.J. Hatton and R.E. Bailey, 'Household Labour and Women's Work in Interwar Britain', *Explorations in Economic History*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (1993), pp. 229–256.
32. Offen, 'Body Politics: Women, Work and the Politics of Motherhood in France, 1920–1950', p. 140.
33. 'Woman's Place? – Everywhere!', *Woman To-Day* (December 1936), pp. 8–9.
34. Monica Pearson, 'Launching Your Daughter', *Woman To-Day* (March 1937), p. 4.

35. Emphasis Pearson's.
36. A complete discussion of the portrayal of early twentieth-century cosmetics culture in CMF publications can be found in the next chapter.
37. Pearson, 'Launching Your Daughter', p. 4.
38. Luce Langevin, 'Le droit au travail: Ce que nous dit Pauline Ramart, deuxième femme admise à une chaire en Sorbonne', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (June–July 1935), p. 3.
39. *Ibid.* p. 3.
40. 'Tribune libre de "Femme": Travailleuses et mères', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (July 1936), p. 4.
41. For information on nursing in France in this period, see Katrin Schultheiss, *Bodies and Souls: Politics and the Professionalization of Nursing in France, 1880–1922* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).
42. 'Tribune libre de "Femme": Travailleuses et mères', p. 4.
43. Etienne Constant, 'Le droit au travail et le droit à la vie', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (April–May 1935), pp. 4–5.
44. 'Avec les receveuses des T.C.R.P sur les bolides', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (October 1934), p. 3.
45. *Ibid.* p. 3.
46. Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front: Defending Democracy, 1934–38* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 88.
47. *Ibid.* p. 92.
48. Reynolds, *France Between the Wars: Gender and Politics*, p. 122.
49. 'Les mille visages de la grève', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (June 1936), p. 3.
50. 'La grève a gagné toute la France et a touché toutes les industries', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (June 1936), p. 6.
51. 'Femmes grévistes !', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (June 1936), p. 2 and 4.
52. *Ibid.* p. 4.
53. 'Les mille visages de la grève', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (June 1936), p. 3.
54. Offen, 'Body Politics: Women, Work and the Politics of Motherhood in France, 1920–1950', p. 142; Reynolds, *France Between the Wars: Gender and Politics*, p. 119.
55. 'Tiens... c'est moi', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (June 1936), pp. 7–8.
56. Brooke, "'A New World for Women'? Abortion Law Reform in Britain during the 1930s", pp. 435–436.
57. *Ibid.* p. 432 and 434.
58. 'Should Women Have the Right... to Choose Motherhood or...?', *Woman To-Day* (July 1939), p. 17.
59. *Ibid.* p. 17.
60. 'Letter from Dr Helen Wright to the Interdepartmental Government Committee on Abortion', MH 71/25, The National Archives (TNA).
61. Hon. Anne Fremantle, 'To Be or Not to Be?', *Woman To-Day* (August 1939), p. 9.
62. June Hannam, 'Debating Feminism in the Socialist Press: Women and the *New Leader*', in Clay et al. (eds.), *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1918–1939*, p. 381.
63. Stephen Brooke, *Sexual Politics: Sexuality, Family Planning, and the British Left from the 1880s to the Present Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 94.
64. Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, p. 178.

7 Traditional Femininity as a Tool of Women's Emancipation

Monthly journals were an integral mode of transmission for the *Comité mondiale des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme* as well as providing opportunities for recruitment among working-class women. It is unclear exactly how these journals were distributed outside of internal committee channels. Some CMF members bought multiple copies of each edition to distribute locally. The British journal, *Woman To-day*, was sold in the prominent radical bookshop Collet's, which had branches in London, Manchester, Cardiff, and Glasgow. Local sections of the CMF in both France and Britain sold copies of their journals directly, too. As we have seen in previous chapters, the CMF used their journals to inform members and non-members alike on the political issues affecting women in national and international contexts. However, these were not always the most accessible topics for working-class women who had not before been politically engaged. As a result, the committee needed to diversify the topics it published to attract women who did not have a political background, who it hoped to recruit to the anti-fascist (and potentially even the communist) cause. Thus, in each edition, articles were included which eschewed politics altogether for stereotypically feminine topics. However, there have been broader debates about the emancipatory potential of topics like beauty culture in the interwar period in the historiography. This chapter considers these debates in analysing CMF promotion of traditionally 'feminine' social and cultural concerns. There will be a particular discussion of whether the committee engaged with these issues in an emancipatory, feminist manner or in a way that reinforced popular notions about women's frivolity and lack of political seriousness. Further, some of these articles, especially those on fashion, seemed to be written for bourgeois women as they ignored the financial barriers that dictated working-class participation in such pursuits, rendering them largely inaccessible for the working-class audience targeted by the committee. Further, an exploration of how the CMF presented traditionally feminine pursuits allows us to understand how inherently political periodicals attempted to cater to all sections of its readership. The CMF's expectation that their readership was a homogenous group that would be more likely to purchase its journals and engage with its articles because of traditional portrayals of feminine

concerns as opposed to invoking the image of the leftist 'New Woman' is an interesting and contradictory aspect of the CMF's ideology that merits exploration.¹

Advice for the Self

CMF publications were constructed in a specific way to provide for all aspects of a woman's life and personality; while offering a forum for women's political voices, the non-political interests of women tended to emphasise their roles as housewives and beauty consumers. Barbara Green has argued that, as a result of new 'desirable and potentially transgressive feminine identities', the interwar period 'saw a number of dramatic and subtle shifts in the ways in which women used adornment to represent themselves and engage in the modern era'.² Similarly, Leila Wimmer has argued that modern mass consumer culture, including cosmetics and fashion, offered women 'a language through which they could articulate new demands, concerns and desires' at a time that 'women's relationship to the civic, economic and "social" public realm were under renegotiation'.³ Regular CMF publications harnessed this emancipatory potential of cosmetics, fitness, and even motherhood to navigate the evolving female identities of their readership and broader CMF membership to reflect an image of the 'modern woman'.

However, we must consider if the CMF was deliberately reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies or if it was encouraging a kind of destabilisation of these hierarchies through beauty culture. Laura Beers, in her examination of the British popular press in the interwar period, has argued that newspapers 'took for granted that women were less interested in political issues than men, and, consequently, focused on "human interest" and fashion' stories, which could explain the decision made by the CMF to include traditionally feminine interests in their journals.⁴ Did the CMF accept a dominant narrative that women were not as interested in political topics as men and thus included topics of a non-political nature to attract and maintain a readership? Beauty, fashion, motherhood, healthcare, and housewifery were all regular topics in CMF publications. The image of women presented in these sections was largely feminine, maternal, and middle-class. There was some acknowledgement of working-class women in these sections, but women who did not fit the 'norm' (for example, women who did not have families) were ignored. Further, the presentation of these topics sometimes clashed with the reality of the CMF's readership, which was largely working-class and had limited disposable income.

New ways for young women to demonstrate their economic independence stimulated a 'democratisation' of women's consumer culture in the interwar period, which specifically allowed working-class women to utilise beauty and health products that had previously been the exclusive fare of the middle and upper classes.⁵ In addition, cosmetics became a way for working-class women to assert their independence over their bodies, representing the

moves towards women's emancipation made in this period. Sally Alexander has argued that the 'nascent consumer industries of the interwar years offered young women workers the opportunity to fashion a glamorous and rebellious identity that marked a break with childhood and distinguished them' from their mothers.⁶ The CMF recognised the popularity of beauty culture among young women and used it to expand its membership, specifically emphasising its role in developing modern female identities. However, in doing so, the group reflected stereotypical ideals of gender that expected women to be concerned about their personal image for those around them.

In the first four editions of *Woman To-day* published from September to December 1936, three contained a page dedicated to beauty. The September 1936 beauty page opened by stating that the question that preoccupied working-class women the most was 'What can I do to improve my appearance?', demonstrating a distinct lack of awareness of the reality for working-class women. The author argued that this question was not 'an idle one' because 'under the present system of employment, not only are the working conditions in factories against the maintaining of a good appearance, but as one grows older one finds that appearance counts with the employers in getting us a job'.⁷ A low income thus did not excuse neglecting one's appearance; Alice Bolster argued that 'most writers on beauty issue their instructions with a sublime indifference to such questions as time or money', but this did not mean 'that the woman who had her work cut out to earn a living or run a home can afford to neglect herself'. She continued that if she were 'being sensible, [the woman worker] will value her appearance as highly as any reader of the more expensive fashion journals'.⁸ Women who did not put effort into their appearances were portrayed as 'neglecting herself' and beauty experts often advocated that working women should wear at least a small amount of make-up daily to 'feel absolutely at her best'.⁹ For example, *Woman To-day* stressed the importance of a good skincare regime, 'followed by a very little day cream and a dust of powder' which would keep the skin fresh 'for hours'.¹⁰ In another article, the process of applying make-up was described as 'both restful and stimulating' and was framed as women's duty to apply. The author wrote:

No woman need feel guilty about 'make-up'. It enhances natural beauty, leads to cleanly and more hygienic ways of living, and gives that good feeling which enables women to face, with confidence, the many problems of modern life, both at work and play. A woman owes a duty to herself and [her] neighbour to look and feel absolutely at her best.¹¹

There was therefore an understanding of the contradictions between the serious political woman and the 'frivolous' make-up advice. This 'duty to beauty' narrative was not common in CMF periodicals but did appear occasionally. In another beauty article, Leonora Gregory argued that, despite the commercialist exploitation of women by the cosmetic industry,

women should wear make-up because avoiding it would be 'to the sorrow of those who have to look at us'.¹²

The editors of *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* also offered beauty tips for working women. The first beauty tip published in the journal concerned how 'to have a fresh face after work' and how to rectify damage done to the skin in the workplace. This included applying gauze compresses and 'very hot herbal tea' to the face. After 'two or three minutes of this heat treatment', the reader was directed to apply egg white to their face with their fingers and leave it for 'ten or twenty minutes, making the room dark, if possible', before cleaning the face with warm water and applying cold compresses. This type of treatment was easy to fashion out of items commonly found in the home and took about 30 minutes to do and could be fit easily into the leisure time of working women, if they had any.¹³ Another example detailed how to make a steam bath at home for 'oily skin or [skin] spotted with blackheads' which would only take around 10 minutes to use.¹⁴

Political debates over the use of cosmetics were not completely absent from CMF periodicals, however. Leonora Gregory, in an article entitled 'Lipsticks are Politics', likened those who derided cosmetics as 'artificial' to German fascists. She explained that 'it is not without significance that whereas make-up is frowned upon in Germany, lip-sticks are in great demand in the Soviet Union'. Gregory argued that Germany was 'anti-progressive [and] anti-scientific' and that most German citizens were only able to experience 'a minimum share of what the world has to offer', and thus were opposed to 'artificial' means of enhancing beauty. Gregory contrasted this with the Soviet Union, which wanted to utilise 'everything that nature and science can provide in order to improve the lot of all'.¹⁵ This was the only time that cosmetics were presented to express anti-fascist sentiment in any of the CMF's national periodicals and was a critique of attempts to forbid or dissuade women from using make-up. On the other hand, Gregory also warned of the commercialisation of cosmetics and considered whether it should impact the decision of working women to buy and wear them. She concluded that women had a 'natural desire to look [their] best' and capitalism had sought to 'exploit' that. She set out a five-step plan outlining the 'essence of beauty culture' to help women avoid falling into the trap of beauty consumerism.¹⁶

One article, written by Joan Beauchamp, an anti-war activist and co-founder of the CPGB, took an especially negative view of women who wore make-up. Beauchamp was scathing in her attack on women who regularly used cosmetics, and chastised 'even progressive papers' for catering to the cosmetics 'racket' which was only designed to 'lead us all up the garden and make profits out of us'. She even singled out *Woman To-day* as one such 'progressive paper' which 'devote themselves to giving advice on how to "make up"', giving publicity to the exploitative cosmetics industry.¹⁷ Beauchamp was highly critical of the fact that working girls and women were spending their money on cosmetics; she argued that 'oranges' and

'good soap' were cheaper than cosmetics and the 'consistent use' of soap 'with plenty of warm water does away with any need for mud packs, skin lotions, face creams and all the other rubbish out of which beauty specialists make a fat living'. Beauchamp also firmly believed that the woman who worked 'eight or nine hours a day and then does trade union or propaganda work' did not have the time to 'mess about' with cosmetics and lotions, creating a strict delineation between serious political women and those concerned with beauty culture. She argued that a working woman had 'little enough time for recreation as it is and is not taken in by the story that to stand in front of a mirror dabbing stuff on her face is stimulating or restful', suggesting that working women were unlikely to participate in modern beauty consumerism.¹⁸

The editors of *Woman To-day* anticipated that there would be a strong reaction to the Beauchamp article and specifically asked for women's opinions on the piece, which they published the following month. Of four responses printed, there was one positive and two negative responses to the Beauchamp article. The first response applauded the 'courage' it had taken to 'attack the beauty racket', while the second confronted Beauchamp's belief that women activists did not have time to 'make up'. The author of this letter stated that 'when doing trade and propaganda work it is very important to look clean and well turned out'. The third response took Beauchamp to task because 'an occasional sixpennyworth of oranges will not do away with pale cheeks and ill health'. The writer made it clear that working women were aware that they were being exploited by cosmetics manufacturers, but also pointed out that they were also exploited by 'Milk Marketing Boards and their advertisers in everything we buy'. In this case, the answer was not less milk, but a fight for cheaper prices.¹⁹

The final response to the article worried that *Woman To-day* would 'degenerate into the usual women's paper', with articles on children, beauty, and cooking dominating the contents. The editors of *Woman To-day* felt that it was necessary to 'reassure' their readers that they had no intention of following the lead of other women's papers which only supplied articles on 'women's topics'. Instead, it reinforced its role as a 'forum for all progressive women' as the periodical 'of women's struggle for peace and social advance', that simply gave the same 'useful items of information' which other papers provided. This would mean that women would not need to buy two papers when they wanted 'to try a new dish for supper; get help in the care of their children; or... make themselves a new frock'.²⁰ The CMF intended that *Woman To-Day* would be the only newspaper that women would need to buy, so that working women would not have to decide which publication to spend their money on.

From March 1937, *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* regularly published a health and beauty page titled '*Être Belle! Savoir, Connaître!*'.²¹ The content of these pages varied, with much of the advice centring on motherhood and childcare. For example, the first '*Être Belle!*' page in March 1937 featured

two articles on childhood and only one on direct advice for women. In the available examples of these pages, only two have an 'our beauty' section, while the third contained advice on 'our children', 'our health' (specifically breastfeeding), 'our cooking', 'our home' (how to create space for a baby in small homes), and a book review section. The editors of *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* generally linked 'beauty' with healthy skin, with less focus on cosmetics than *Woman To-day*.

CMF periodicals also published articles on physical fitness and health for women. Moving away from the Victorian constraints which dictated how far women engaged in physical culture, the interwar period saw a growing interest in fitness among women which the CMF endorsed on numerous occasions. Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska has argued that 'a modern, actively cultivated body was an aspect of women's liberation', while Charlotte McDonald identified that the healthy female body was the 'prime signifier of modernity' and a 'marker of the disjuncture of this period from what had gone before'.²² Women participated in physical culture for a variety of reasons, including because it provided 'an appealing place to be modern, to have fun in the company of other women ... to enjoy what it was to be modern, but not daring' and through a desire to be 'slim'.²³ However, while some fitness authors of the period presented physical culture as socially and politically emancipatory, others, like the Australian swimmer Annette Kellermann, preached fitness as 'essential for women to find and keep love'.²⁴

According to Patricia Vertinsky, the growing interest in fitness can be traced to the numbers of young women entering the workforce; women 'increasingly felt that they had earned the right to some leisure and that they could spend more time, energy and money in order to improve their health and appearance'. The post-war economic and societal conditions created an environment in which women were able 'to engage with practices of self', including exercise.²⁵ Exercise classes were not only designed to cultivate physical culture among women, but to create a place for working women to 'renew energy' while stimulating 'the thrill of worthwhile achievement through healthful activities'.²⁶ Exercise allowed women to engage in a 'deliberate and active display of themselves as people' which created a 'sense of self' and provided opportunities for socialisation.²⁷

Both *Woman To-day* and *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* regularly published articles on how women could improve their health through the practice of gymnastics, swimming, and cycling. Florence Birchenough, the Vice-President of the British Women's Amateur Athletic Association, penned an article which detailed the positive results from women's participation in 'the most strenuous sports'; she argued that these women had a 'healthier and stronger body' which was less likely to have 'fainting fits and migraines'. In addition, healthy women tended to have a 'freer mental and moral outlook' cultivated by 'a sense of fair play and practice in being a good loser'. Birchenough emphasised that participation alone would help to

'keep one young, active and in good health and give that added interest to what might be a work-a-day or hum-drum life'.²⁸

Woman To-day was a proponent of exercise for health reasons above all; one article written by a medical professional provided advice on how to build 'resistance' after the 'strain of a long winter' through exercise. The article suggested that readers could increase their fitness by 'walking part of the way to the office or by walking to the shops instead of taking that bus or train!' Similarly, the author warned that women should 'avoid overcrowded or stuffy places' so as to avoid infection, especially in spring time, suggesting 'a walk in the park instead of that visit to the cinema'.²⁹ Cycling was also deemed suitable for women to engage in; Billie Dovey, 'Britain's Cycling "Keep-Fit" Girl' who rode nearly 30,000 miles in 1938, wrote an article for *Woman To-day* that argued that cyclists 'eat, sleep, and feel better', in addition to experiencing 'the beauties of unspoilt scenery' and 'travelling silently under your own power'.³⁰

Fashion page '*La Mode*' often appeared as the final page in *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* throughout 1935. Alongside general fashion advice, the journal often provided knitting patterns and guides on how to make the clothes covered. To take one example, the March 1935 fashion page detailed how to make a 'sports bodice' and skirt, which would give 'a thin silhouette without being clingy'.³¹ The content varied based on season and functionality: 'light dresses for sunny days', bathing costumes, sportswear, and 'blouses and jackets' were all featured in the French journal. However, these pages were often adorned with images of thin, glamorously made-up, middle-class women with well-coiffed hair, which was the antithesis of the reality for much of the periodical's readership. In addition, the fashion coverage assumed either an abundance of free time to sew the patterns or disposable income to purchase the clothes featured. The clothing was often impractical for housewives or women working manual jobs, including capes and blouses with large sleeves and bows. The recommended materials were also generally expensive and not suitable for potentially messy work, including 'Chinese crepe' and 'silk', which excluded much of the working-class readership from purchasing them.

The largely bourgeois representation of fashion in a periodical geared towards working-class women was not only an issue in CMF journals. Karen Hunt has examined fashion pages in *Labour Woman*, the British Labour Party's periodical for women, which featured a similar fashion page with associated knitting patterns. However, many were 'technically demanding' and 'all were represented by a line drawing of a glamorous, slim young woman with shingled hair' which sat 'rather uneasily with the continuing representation of the working-class housewife in the text'. These images clashed with the image of the typical reader of *Labour Woman*, who tended to be 'older, less healthy or relaxed, and seemed to be so time-poor that it was hard to see when she could wear all these clothes, let alone find the time to make them'.³² This suggests that the bourgeois influence on fashion pages

in working-class women's periodicals was not unique to those published by the CMF. However, Adrian Bingham has argued that editors in the inter-war period saw fashion as something that 'appealed across the age spectrum and the gradations of social class and status', which 'injected glamour and fantasy into pages often otherwise dominated by mundane realities of domestic life'.³³ The CMF may have been using fashion to provide a sense of escapism for working-class women, as opposed to demonstrating a lack of understanding about the reality for their members.

Cosmetics and skincare allowed women to enhance their features for themselves, lending credence to the idea that the CMF published such articles to demonstrate the emancipatory potential of such practices. The coverage of beauty in CMF periodicals reinforced the idea that cosmetics were for every woman regardless of class or political orientation. The periodicals also largely catered their beauty and health advice to women with limited income and time, in that much of it could be practised quickly with household objects. However, the fashion coverage in *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* generally was heavily influenced by middle-class trends and was overwhelmingly traditionally feminine, including 'light dresses for beautiful days' and polka dot blouses, and thus were generally not suitable for working-class due to cost or practicality. The coverage of fashion trends was perhaps the most exclusionary aspect of the CMF journals; however, it can also be argued that these sections provided a sense of escapism for working women interested in fashion but without the means to devote much time or money to it.

Advice for Women as Mothers

The CMF did not only cater to the individual interests of women, but also offered a similarly gendered coverage of issues surrounding childrearing and motherhood. As we have seen elsewhere, the CMF actively used maternalist language and deployed the concept of motherhood as a unifying characteristic throughout their congresses, campaigns, and periodicals. While motherhood had the potential to empower, the committee tended to present it as the norm and childlessness was not explored. Stephen Brooke has argued that 'motherhood became a valid social category of femininity, a borderland between public and private spheres' after the First World War and some feminists used it to 'cast women as citizens equal to men'. However, he suggests that the emphasis on women's potential role as mothers actually perpetuated the divisions between economic work and work in the home, fixing the concept of motherhood 'as subordinate or dependent'.³⁴ CMF childcare and housewifery columns reinforced the expectation that women would focus on the needs of their husbands and children above their own. They tended to deal with childhood health issues, including the flu, rickets, fainting, and adenoid troubles, but tended not to publish advice about babies. These columns also advocated that children be 'preventatively

vaccinated' after the infection of a family member.³⁵ Sunbathing was also encouraged to 'stimulate circulation and cell activity' and 'increase resistance to infections'. One doctor instructed that

a very strong pigmentation [of the skin] forms a sort of screen against radiation, and those who seek only the therapeutic action of the sun will have to temporarily cease the cure and resume it when the pigmentation has alleviated. But do not believe that pigmentation is a danger.³⁶

The childcare advice in *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* was often situated between knitting patterns and cooking tips. To take one example, a column on childhood rickets was flanked by a pattern for a 'sweater-jacket' and recipes for 'veal or beef heart steak' and 'butter carrots'.³⁷

On the other hand, *Woman To-day's* childcare segments focused almost entirely on information pertaining to infants. These articles were written by an unnamed 'Woman Doctor' who advised readers on the milestones of infancy; for example, the 'woman doctor' suggested that mothers prepare for teething during pregnancy by eating the right 'mineral compounds' (largely milk and vegetables) and by absorbing 'as much sunlight as she can by getting out of doors and allowing the sun to shine on her skin'. Similarly, after birth, the doctor emphasised the necessity of feeding the baby milk and allowing it 'all the sunshine that is possible', even advocating that during wet weather, a mother should 'try and get artificial sunlight treatment' for the baby.³⁸ In addition, the knitting patterns featured in *Woman To-day* were also often intended for babies, like 'a cosy little outfit for Baby's first outing'.³⁹

In 1937, *Woman To-day* announced its intention to publish a monthly advice column for mothers entitled 'Children To-day – Citizens To-morrow'. The first article was intended to be about pre-natal care, while the second was to be on 'artificial feeding' when breastfeeding was not possible.⁴⁰ However, this advice page was soon discarded, with only one page actually published. This page, on ante-natal care, included tips on diet, dress, 'Baths and Care of the Nipples', and bowel movements to keep women healthy post-childbirth.⁴¹ It also briefly provided an outlet for women to ask a nurse advice on the health of their baby. Other articles in *Woman To-day* promoted clinics that offered health checks for babies, questioned whether babies should be allowed to suck their thumbs ('only the straight-laced and the would-be scientific parents oppose it'), debated violence as a punishment for bad behaviour, and demonstrated how to work a respirator for a baby during wartime (an article which was written by *Woman To-day* editor Charlotte Haldane's husband).⁴²

The affordability of milk in interwar Britain was also a concern of *Woman To-day*, which argued for a reduction in milk prices to combat the negative nutritional effect of the lack of milk on mothers and their children. Again, medical professionals offered their opinions on nutritional deficit. In one

article, Dr Elizabeth Jacobs, a women's health specialist, Vice-Chairman of the Women's Committee for Peace and Democracy (the organisation that the CMF would morph into in 1939), and a Borough Councillor, spoke of her experience treating undernourished women who could not afford to buy milk at '2/4 a gallon', and thus became a 'weakened, overworked, expectant mother'. Jacobs referred mothers in need to a Borough Councils scheme to provide free milk, but this was not entirely satisfactory. The mother's health had to be 'undermined to the point of serious illness before she is eligible for a grant' and many mothers, upon receiving the free milk, gave it to their children instead. Jacobs lamented, 'So *her* milk is going to the children and her own health and the chances of her future baby have gone on deteriorating. Already I suspect T.B. Yet when I tried to scold her, I found I couldn't. Could you?' For Jacobs, this was an urgent situation that required more publicity: 'if public-spirited women in every Borough would talk about this scheme and agitate for its improvement, the tragic cavalcade of mothers' and infants' coffins which pass yearly out of our London maternity hospitals might be halved'.⁴³

Femmes dans l'action mondiale also provided advice on breastfeeding. Rima Apple has described women's magazines as the 'most important' source of information in the interwar period for women on infant feeding practices, including breastfeeding.⁴⁴ *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* was staunch in its support of regular breastfeeding for health reasons. They claimed that 'the statistics speak plainly and show that mortality among breastfed children is five times lower than for bottle-fed children', and thus women should participate in the practice for the good of their child. However, the article acknowledged that 'a large number of young mothers do not have sufficient milk' as 'a result of modern life' and offered some solutions, including feeding babies correctly at regular intervals and using 'small appliances [sold] in pharmacies' to pump milk if the baby could not feed directly from the breast. The journal also considered the mother's health while breastfeeding. For example, one article counselled that women 'sometimes feel pain' during breastfeeding which was normal unless it was accompanied by a 'local hardening of the breasts' at which point a doctor must be contacted. In addition, the periodical warned against changing the lifestyle of a breastfeeding woman too much; it advocated a good diet and sleep and advised that women could continue their household work, 'but without going to exhaustion'.⁴⁵

Femmes dans l'action mondiale also carried images of breastfeeding; one image accompanied a short story titled '*Nativité au 6è étage*' written by French author Henriette Sauret. The content of the story did not focus on breastfeeding; the only mention of the practice was when a nurse tries to convince a young woman to feed her baby for just 10 minutes. Nevertheless, the story was accompanied by an image that explicitly showed a woman breastfeeding her baby. The woman is exposing one of her breasts, which may have seemed shocking to much of society at the time. However, the fact

that it was published in a periodical intended for women meant that most readers who viewed the image were not likely to find it as offensive as if it were published in a popular newspaper, for example. The fact that the image has nothing to do with the story it accompanied further reinforced its striking nature; the only acknowledgement of the picture was a caption that read 'Is there anything more beautiful than this child on the breast of his mother?', which positioned breastfeeding as a positive, natural process which was to be revered.⁴⁶ The inclusion of images like this normalised breastfeeding and reinforced the CMF's belief in the supremacy of breast milk over formula for infants.

Conclusion

On the whole, the CMF was not instructed on how to structure the content of their periodicals by the Comintern, and this was especially the case when it came to coverage of non-political topics. Work was presented as a 'liberating force' in CMF periodicals, but the dual burden of women as mothers and wives was still perpetuated. Non-political articles published in CMF journals consistently emphasised the virtues of feminine ideals in health and beauty and provided their readers with advice on how to improve themselves aesthetically. Motherhood was also key here; health articles were often targeted towards women as mothers, and advice for the caring of children and babies reinforced the CMF's image of women as mothers first. This provided a stark contrast between the progressive political concepts put forth by the committee in its journals. In many cases, CMF coverage of non-political topics was contradictory too: the clash between the emancipatory potential of cosmetics and concerns about capitalist exploitation of women through the beauty industry is one such example. This was the result of creating journals that tried to be everything for every woman; there were inconsistencies and sometimes clashes between the socialist ideal of a working-class woman and the traditionally feminine pursuits enjoyed by much of the readership.

Notes

1. See Lynne Attwood, *Creating the New Soviet Woman: Women's Magazines as Engineers of Female Identity, 1922–53* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999).
2. Barbara Green, 'Styling Modern Life: Introduction', in Clay et al. (eds.), *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1918–1939*, p. 121.
3. Leila Wimmer, 'Modernity, Femininity and Hollywood Fashions: Women's Cinephilia in 1930s French Fan Magazines', *Film, Fashion and Consumption*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2014), p. 66.
4. Beers, 'A Timid Disbelief in the Equality to which Lip-Service is Constantly Paid': Gender, Politics and the Press between the Wars', p. 131.
5. Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Managing the Body: Beauty, Health, and Fitness in Britain 1880–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 239.

6. Vicky Long and Hilary Marland, 'From Danger and Motherhood to Health and Beauty: Healthy Advice for the Factory Girl in Early Twentieth Century Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (2009), p. 474.
7. 'A Beauty Talk... By Aline', *Woman Today* (September 1936), p. 7.
8. Alice Bolster, 'Make the Most of Yourself', *Woman To-Day* (December 1936), p. 12.
9. 'As Others See You: A Monthly Guide to Beauty by Aline', *Woman To-Day* (October 1936), p. 5.
10. 'A Beauty Talk... By Aline', p. 7.
11. 'As Others See You: A Monthly Guide to Beauty by Aline', p. 5.
12. Leonora Gregory, 'Lipsticks Are Politics', *Woman To-Day* (January 1939), p. 17.
13. 'Être Belle ! Savoir, Connaître !', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (March 1937), p. 17.
14. 'Être Belle ! Savoir, Connaître !', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (May 1937), p. 17.
15. Gregory, 'Lipsticks are politics', p. 16.
16. *Ibid.* p. 17.
17. Joan Beauchamp, 'Should Women Make Up?', *Woman To-Day* (November 1937), p. 6.
18. *Ibid.* p. 6.
19. 'Correspondence: Some of the Replies to Joan Beauchamp', *Woman To-Day* (December 1937), p. 16.
20. *Ibid.* p. 16.
21. 'Être Belle! Savoir, Connaître!' was no longer printed by March 1939; Gallica has only one digitised edition of *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* published in 1938, so we cannot pinpoint when 'Être Belle!' was no longer a regular part of the journal.
22. Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'The Making of a Modern Female Body: Beauty, Health and Fitness in Interwar Britain', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2011), p. 300; and Charlotte Macdonald, 'Body and Self: Learning to be Modern in 1920s-1930s Britain', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2013), p. 270.
23. *Ibid.* p. 273.
24. *Ibid.* p. 243.
25. Patricia Vertinsky, "'Building the Body Beautiful" in the Women's League for Health and Beauty: Yoga and Female Agency in 1930s Britain', *Rethinking History*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (2012), p. 527.
26. *Ibid.* p. 526.
27. Macdonald, 'Body and Self: Learning to be Modern in 1920s-1930s Britain', p. 275.
28. Florence Birchenough, 'Beauty and Athletics', *Woman To-Day* (June 1937), p. 13.
29. 'Spring Fitness: Are You Tired, Rundown, Nervy?', *Woman To-Day* (March 1939), p. 6.
30. Billie Dovey, 'Cycle for Your Health', *Woman To-Day* (April 1939), p. 4.
31. 'La Mode', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (March 1935), p. 15.
32. Karen Hunt, 'Labour Woman and the Housewife', in Clay et al. (eds.), *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1918-1939*, p. 248.
33. Adrian Bingham, 'Modern Housecraft? Women's Pages in the National Daily Press', in Clay et al. (eds.), *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1918-1939*, p. 227.
34. Stephen Brooke, "'A New World for Women"? Abortion Law Reform in Britain during the 1930s', *American Historical Review*, Vol. 106, No. 2 (2001), p. 434.

35. 'Conseils du docteur', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (April 1935), p. 14.
36. 'Conseils du docteur', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (May 1935), p. 13.
37. 'Notre chez nous ! Nos Enfants !', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (November 1935), p. 15.
38. 'Those Teething Troubles', *Woman To-Day* (November 1936), p. 6.
39. 'For the Littlest One of All', *Woman To-Day* (December 1936), p. 10.
40. 'Children To-day – Citizens To-morrow', *Woman To-Day* (September 1937), p. 14.
41. 'Children To-day – Citizens To-morrow', *Woman To-Day* (October 1937), p. 14.
42. Enid Slater, 'Cynics and Clinics', *Woman To-Day* (April 1937), p. 14; Violet Hoare, 'Should They or Shouldn't They?', *Woman To-Day* (June 1937), p. 12; Joan, 'Are You on the Child's Side?', *Woman To-Day* (October 1937), p. 13; J.B.S. Haldane, 'You Will Have to Learn How to Work Baby's Respirator...', *Woman To-Day* (March 1939), p. 8.
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45. 'Être Belle ! Savoir, Connaître !', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (April – May 1938), p. 15.
46. Henriette Sauret, 'Nativité au 6^e étage', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (March 1937), p. 10.

Conclusion

The conclusion of the Nazi-Soviet Pact in August 1939 provided the biggest challenge for the *Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme* yet. The pact subverted all the committee's expectations about Soviet anti-fascism. In a broad sense, European communist parties presented the pact as a 'gain for peace'; *L'Humanité* published a photo of Stalin on its front page labelling him 'the champion of peace and the independence of peoples', for example.¹ Zara Steiner has argued that the Soviet government acted on 'purely pragmatic and *realpolitik* grounds' by concluding the pact with Nazi Germany as 'German terms offered the USSR a greater measure of security than the western offers'.² Still, many French communists did not predict the agreement and viewed it as a '*coup de tonnerre* (thunderclap)'. Nevertheless, most continued to put their 'unconditional faith in Stalin' in the hopes that the pact would guarantee peace.³ The PCF itself initially continued its policy of anti-fascism until a communiqué from the Comintern on 20 September 1939 directed that the imminent war was not an anti-fascist endeavour but an imperialist war that communists should oppose. The Soviets would come to define the Second World War as anti-fascist only after the Nazis launched their invasion of the Soviet Union with Operation Barbarossa on 22 June 1941.

Many communist parties and party publications were banned in Allied countries during the early stages of the war, driving communist collaboration underground. *L'Humanité* was only published inconsistently and clandestinely under the Vichy regime and the *Daily Worker* in Britain was suppressed for its supposed 'pacifist line' because it was unable to openly oppose German aggression.⁴ David Wingeate Pike has examined how French communists operated during the invasion of France and the establishment of the Vichy regime. He has argued that some French communists did formulate resistance to fascism before June 1941, but that it 'was carried out not in accordance with Party orders but by militants acting on their own initiative'. Those who undertook clandestine resistance did so 'precisely because their moral sense of the anti-fascist struggle told them that these were their natural allies'.⁵ The entry of the USSR to the war on the Allied side in 1941 finally gave national communist parties the impetus

to criticise Hitler. The USSR's collaboration with the Nazis did not drastically impact the relationship between the USSR and other national communist parties. However, those individual communists who prioritised their anti-fascist convictions often had acrimonious splits from their national communist parties and were the subject of slander, as in the case of Bernadette Cattaneo. Further, after the outbreak of war, transnational collaboration of all shades became more difficult, putting a halt to most international women's activism. The CMF was unable to conduct openly anti-fascist campaigns because of ramifications created by the Nazi-Soviet Pact and difficulties establishing links across borders. Committee business from late 1939 to 1941 was primarily printed in German and Russian, after which the committee ceased its work entirely.

The *Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme* was a nuanced organisation unique in the history of international activism in the interwar period. The trajectory of the group from its inception in 1934 until its quiet dissolution in 1941 was characterised by complex and often contradictory strands of internationalist thought. It was created as a response to the greatest ideological threat faced by Europe in the 1930s and in the image of already established 'mixed-gender' organisations like the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement, which ignored how women were impacted by the violence of fascism and war in favour of larger political questions. The CMF, although often perceived as the women's arm of the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement, operated separately from it, with little collaboration between the two. Comintern input was also negligible compared to other communist front organisations. It attempted to raise consciousness about fascism among women by investigating and highlighting the threat posed to women's lives by fascism, particularly Nazism.

The committee's membership was diverse and its ideology was sometimes contradictory, which had both positive and negative impacts on the committee's work. The mass character of the movement, achieved by engaging women from all parties on the left, allowed for the complex interweaving of different tenets of feminism, pacifism, and socialism, which encouraged women to lay aside their preconceived notions about politics and struggle together against fascism. This type of popular unity, which had not been officially adopted as a policy by the Comintern when the CMF was founded in 1934, also came with conflict. Nevertheless, it represented a new type of collaboration that transcended party lines, which would be officially embodied by the Popular Front governments in France and Spain in 1936. Helen Graham and Paul Preston's assertion that 'popular unity was more easily achieved as a slogan than put into concrete practice' is certainly applicable to the CMF as a whole: communist women dominated the everyday organisation of the group, and while some socialist women accepted that the fight against fascism was more important than leftist political divisions, others remained concerned by the level of communist input in committee decisions.⁶ The CMF was not defined by any ideology completely: feminism

was expressed most clearly in the committee's focus on the experiences of women in conflict and on topics that affected women in a national context, including universal suffrage, for example. However, feminist demands were not central to their goals and the group's pacifism was by no means absolute. In addition, its socialism was heavily influenced by communist doctrine, despite attempts to appear open to all regardless of party.

The CMF had thus far not been included in the broader historiography of women's activism in the interwar period for several reasons. It was perhaps numerically too small and communist-oriented to be included in the historiography of interwar women's organisations, while its feminist activism did not fit with the historiography of other, largely male communist and anti-fascist organisations. This book has contributed to the historiography of these themes, but it has also explored how anti-fascist women created political space for themselves through their activism by weaving together different ideologies. The CMF was an elaborate network of women who were involved in different, sometimes overlapping causes which even sometimes transferred because of their role in the committee. The prime example of this would be the socialist Jeanne Beaufeise, who visited the Soviet Union as part of a CMF delegation and returned committed to communist principles.

Until recently, a full examination of the CMF would have been difficult but not impossible. However, with the digitisation of the CMF papers, I have benefitted from access to a wealth of material which has allowed for an investigation into one of the most enigmatic women's organisations of the 1930s. This book has considered three key themes contributing to the committee's importance. First, the CMF was a mass women's organisation that attempted to avoid emphasis on the party affiliations of its members, with the only political stipulation being that those involved must actively struggle against fascism. How far this was the case depended on the context. For example, at the founding congress in 1934, socialists only numbered under a quarter of the communist delegates. However, what non-communist participation in CMF congresses represented was perhaps more important than the reality. Socialist women were involved in various national CMF committees, often against the wishes of their respective socialist parties and the LSI, giving the appearance of a unified mass movement and legitimising the CMF's claims to speak on behalf of women across Europe and the wider world. The CMF did actively attempt to attract non-communist and non-political women into its fold, but the blatant communist influence on the group may have hindered how far they were successful. The CMF found the most success in France, a country with a radical tradition and the home of its international leadership. However, the movement was geographically broad, from the diverse attendance at its congresses to the numerous national journals across the globe published by the CMF. The group also often influenced people outside of their membership, reaching non-members through their journals and their presence at various demonstrations, meetings, and conferences.

Second, the Soviet Union and the Comintern inherently influenced the committee. This study takes communist input in the committee as a fact: the CMF was designated by the Comintern as a mass auxiliary organisation. This does not necessarily imply total control of the CMF, however. It does not imply partial control either. The evidence suggests a more mutual relationship, in which the Comintern and its Soviet representatives provided advice and direction for the committee as well as some financial aid, although we cannot be sure of the extent. On the other hand, the CMF sometimes operated as a propaganda vehicle for the USSR. Soviet anti-fascist activities and its reputation as the country of women's emancipation were often highlighted by the committee to encourage its members to support the Soviet Union. The Comintern were also able to observe socialist women in the CMF framework and created opportunities for communist conversion through official delegations to the USSR, which saw the best the country had to offer while avoiding the negative aspects. There was also a constant dialogue between CMF and Soviet women, which often extended beyond the professional into the personal; their correspondence was never formal and friendly advice was always welcome. In addition, there was open praise for the Soviet Union at CMF congresses and in journals, reinforcing the committee's allegiances.

Third, the CMF utilised gendered language in their campaigns and publications which tended to err towards traditional depictions of femininity to appeal to the broadest possible female audience. The role of the mother was used to appeal to women emotionally and to create bonds of 'sisterhood' between women across borders. Even women who had shed the constraints of traditional femininity, like *milicianas* in Spain, were noted for their dual roles as mothers and fighters. This emphasis on maternity was not a new one; women's organisations and peace organisations, including the ICW and WILPF, used maternal language before the CMF had been founded. Maternal language utilised in pacifist activism did not stop with the end of the interwar period either; Women Strike for Peace's campaign to end the war in Vietnam bore striking similarities to the CMF campaigns against fascism, as they utilised maternity to 'further cement the common bond of motherhood between American and Vietnamese women', much as the CMF did with women in Spain, Germany, Italy, Ethiopia, and China.⁷ CMF engagement with and endorsement of maternalist arguments was part of a long tradition of women's activism that harnessed women's potential for maternity to foster connections between the targets of propaganda and the recipients of aid. The use of maternalist language also shows us whom the CMF perceived their target audience to be: working-class mothers, who were deemed more likely to respond to images of injured children and stories of the communal horrors of war than the intellectuals whom the CMF employed to report on these issues. It also indicates that the committee held some stereotypical views of these women, expecting them to prioritise motherhood (or potential motherhood) over financial independence and work, both morally and in actuality.

The CMF was a small organisation in comparison to other women's groups of the period but was an ambitious movement with lofty anti-fascist aims. It engaged some of the best and brightest women activists, regardless of party, and gained a substantive following among the working classes in some countries. It was also the only international women's organisation to actively struggle against fascism in all its forms. That it was created at all is impressive, due to the early unwillingness of other feminist and pacifist organisations to favour any political party or system. The CMF was a complex organisation, with a web of different ideological interests which always had the potential to create difficulties (and sometimes did), but which also created new opportunities for collaboration among women of different parties.

Notes

1. Angela Kimyongür, 'Louis Aragon: (Re)writing the Nazi-Soviet Pact', *E-Rea* [online], Vol. 4, No. 2 (2006); 'Les pourparlers de Moscou entre l'URSS et l'Allemagne servent la cause de la paix en Europe', *L'Humanité* (23 August 1939), p. 1.
2. Zara Steiner, *The Triumph of the Dark: European International History 1933–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 910 and 913.
3. Kimyongür, 'Louis Aragon: (Re)writing the Nazi-Soviet Pact'.
4. Phillip M. Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Era, 3rd Ed.* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 214.
5. David Wingeate Pike, 'Between the Junes: The French Communists from the Collapse of France to the Invasion of Russia', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (1993), pp. 479–480.
6. Helen Graham and Paul Preston, 'The Popular Front and the Struggle against Fascism' in Helen Graham and Paul Preston (eds.), *The Popular Front in Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), p. 5.
7. Jessica M. Frazier, 'Collaborative Efforts to End the War in Viet Nam: The Interactions of Women Strike for Peace, the Vietnamese Women's Union, and the Women's Union of Liberation, 1965–1968', *Peace and Change*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (2012), p. 345.

Appendix

The CMF's Political Action Plan for Spain, 1936/1937

Since the beginning, we have taken a position against the non-intervention pact and demanded free trade with Republican Spain.

Action

- 1 Calls for solidarity, circulars, and letters to all committees.
- 2 Editing of a special edition of "Femmes", dedicated to Spain, in October.
- 3 B. Cattaneo's delegation to Spain, end of September and October. Interview with the Women's Committee in Madrid and various organisations. Agreement for the organisation of aid and the evacuation of children.
- 4 For the aid of militias: Pasionaria posters pasted throughout France
- 5 Meeting, on 1 September, at the large hall room at the Mutualité. Speakers: radical, socialist, communist, CGT, etc.
- 6 On 19 September, the organisation of the delegation of Isabelle Blume, socialist deputy, Marthe Huysmans, daughter of Camille Huysmans, president of the Belgian chamber and Mayor of Anvers, Clara Malraux, wife of the writer¹, B. Cattaneo.

On 23 September, I. Blume, M Huysmans, B. Cattaneo spoke on UGT Radio launching a call to women across the world.

This delegation raised a flag at the 5th Militia regiment in the name of the French committee.

The decision was taken to sponsor the 5th Militia regiment and the "Paris Commune" battalion.

This delegation also saw different organisations in Madrid: the PCE, PSOE, UGT, CNT, Republicans, SRI, Women's Committee, etc...²

Then [met with] Caballero, minister of the Interior, to set up a coordination committee in Madrid for the reception of goods sent from different countries, by various organisations.

Results

This committee was set up.

Our delegation designated Marthe Huysmans to remain in Alicante to organise the reception of boats at this port in agreement with all local organisations. A coordination committee was also set up in Alicante.

She is in contact with Madrid and with the International Committee of Information and Coordination in Paris.

By the intermediary of Isabelle Blume and M Huysmans interventions were made amongst individuals from the Second International and the FSI.³

- 7 Participation in the work of the International Committee of Coordination. Display of the speech of Oserio y Gallardo⁴, Catholic, throughout France by the committees. Distribution of his pamphlet and a pamphlet on the atrocities and several others on Spain.
- 8 On 24 October, Information and Press Assembly, for sanitary aid and help for children and women. 800 Present.

On 25 and 26 October, National French Conference. 500 delegates from all départements.

The position taken by the Comité National des Femmes for free trade was voted in unanimity.

Some difficulties emerged against our position amongst some integral pacifists, in teaching in particular. But generally, the quasi-unanimity acquired and recruited enormously to us from across the country and gained in influence.

- 9 Organisation of delegation of local committees to Blum⁵ and the minister of Foreign Affairs. Massive mailings of agendas, protests, etc.
- 10 Against the bombing of Madrid, the sending of telegrams:
 - To General Miaja⁶
 - To President Roosevelt
 - To Papa⁷

On 20 November, International Meeting at the Mutualité, full room, delegation to Blum; telegram to the Red Cross.

Speakers: Sonja Branting – Sweden; Louise Branfault – Belgium; A Portuguese woman; Zironski – socialist; G Duchêne; [p. 19] Buissen – CGT; President, B Cattaneo.

In all of France: 1) the display of “three dead children” 2) the display of an appeal from Spanish Women.

This appeal was sent to all local and national committees. It was published in England in several newspapers. A great distribution was made in Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, and in other countries.

Excerpt from ‘Rapport du Comité Mondial des Femmes contre la Guerre et le Fascisme’, Pandor, 543_2_21, Doc. 1 (25.2.1937), pp. 16–19.

Notes

1. Refers to André Malraux.
2. The abbreviations stand for (in order) the Spanish Communist Party, the Spanish Socialist Worker's Party, Unión General de Trabajadores, Confederación Nacional del Trabajo, Republicans, Socorro Rojo Internacional (International Red Aid), and CMF.
3. Abbreviation stands for Fédération syndicale internationale, International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU).
4. Spanish ambassador to France.
5. Refers to Léon Blum, French Prime Minister.
6. Refers to José Miaja, Republican Army Officer and President of the Madrid Defence Council.
7. Potentially refers to Ernest Hemingway.

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