

# Franco-Italian Conflict Over Tunis

By George Padmore

*The author gives here a sketch of the conflict between Italy and France over a portion of Northern Africa*

**B**ISMARCK once characterized the Italians as "jackals who, with furtive glance, rove restlessly hither and thither, instinctively drawn on by the odour of corruption and calamity, always ready to attack anybody from the rear and make off with a bit of plunder. . . . They have a large appetite and such poor teeth." The early Italian imperialistic adventures bear out the truth of this observation.

Having thrown off the yoke of Austrian domination, the Italians themselves soon looked around for other peoples to enslave. Since Turkey was the "sick man" of Europe, it was natural that they should cast covetous eyes upon the Ottoman Empire in North Africa. Here, however, they reckoned without France, who, having lost Alsace and Lorraine in 1871, turned towards North Africa to find territorial compensation for the annexed provinces. The era following Sedan closely resembled in its diplomatic manoeuvring the international gerrymandering since Munich.

Bismarck, hoping to divert France's attention from the European scene and promote the dissipation of her energies in oversea territories, encouraged France in her colonial orientation. At the Congress of Berlin in 1878 the Iron Chancellor told the French Ambassador that "the Tunisian pear is ripe for plucking," and that he would raise no objection. Thus it was with German connivance that the Third Republic annexed Tunis in 1881. This move also had the full approval of Disraeli, who had annexed Cyprus after the Berlin Conference, with the support of France. In prosecuting these colonial adjustments, the Great Powers simply ignored Italy, then an upstart. In her bitter resentment at being left in the cold, she joined Germany and Austria-Hungary, thus bringing into being the Triple Alliance in 1882. Italy hoped by this means to obtain Germanic support for her future imperialistic ambitions in other parts of Africa.

Turning towards East Africa, Italy tried to realize her dreams at the expense of Abyssinia, but this time she met with military defeat at the hands of the blacks at Dogali in 1887 and at Adowa in 1896. Bismarck's description had proved correct, and Italian diplomacy was forced to fall back upon a secret agreement with France, although formal allegiance with the Germanic powers was still maintained. The Franco-Italian *rapprochement*, made in 1902, provided that Italy

should place no obstacles in the way of French supremacy in Morocco, and that she should remain neutral in the event of France being attacked by Germany. In return France gave her a free hand in Tripoli, which Italy annexed in 1911. This accommodation, however, could never wipe out the memory of Tunis, which has always remained a thorn in the Italian imperialist flesh. "We have not forgotten how we were cheated," Signor Gayda, Mussolini's mouthpiece, has declared.

This is the historical background to the sudden territorial claims Italy is now making on France with respect to Tunis. The fact that this territory, when it was known as Carthage, constituted part of the Roman Empire, lends impetus to the Italian demands. For it is no secret that Mussolini aspires to revive and extend the former glories of Rome, and that he hopes to achieve by blackmail what he cannot secure through force of arms.

The French possessions in North Africa—Morocco, Algeria and Tunis—are the most valuable sections of the French Colonial Empire, both from an economic as well as a military point of view. Situated in the temperate zone, they have afforded favourable facilities for white colonization. The proximity of Tunis to Sicily and the Italian shores has always attracted emigrants from these countries. In consequence, out of a total of 196,000 Europeans (mostly French citizens) in Tunis there are today 96,000 Italians. Until recently there were more Italians than French in the protectorate.

By a convention signed between France and Italy in 1896, the Italian settlers were granted economic and political equality with the French. This convention was renewed by the Rome Pact of January 7, 1935, on the occasion of Laval's visit to Mussolini at the time when the dictator was preparing his invasion of Abyssinia. According to the Rome Agreement, Mussolini was granted a free hand in East Africa and in return agreed that Italian schools in Tunis should come under French control after 1945, while Italian subjects should become French citizens after 1965. While it might appear that France gained by this arrangement, Mussolini,

realist as he is, hoped that by then Tunis would be a part of the New Roman Empire.

In the meanwhile Italians enjoy full cultural autonomy. They maintain their own schools and other social institutions, where the youth is indoctrinated with fascist ideology, under the vigilant eye of the Oura (the Italian secret police). Nevertheless, there are many Italians living in Tunis who are anti-fascist. This is especially so among the Jews, whose economic and social life is being steadily prescribed by the recent anti-semitic laws promulgated in Rome. Denied the right to send their children to Italian schools and to obtain employment in institutions subsidized by the fascist Government, thousands of these Hebrews who had previously been stalwart defenders of Italianism in Tunis are now seeking French naturalization. Mussolini hopes to arrest this process by adding this Moslem land to the empire.

**T**UNIS is of vital importance to France. The possession of this territory is indispensable to the safety of Algeria and was one of the motives which led to its annexation. "Could any Bon Français," declared Jules Ferry, addressing the Chamber on November 5, 1881, "allow Italy to acquire a territory which is in every sense the key to our house?" We know the answer.

Today "the key" is even more indispensable than ever. For Bizerta has been transformed into a fortified naval base, the possession of which gives France a formidable position in the middle Mediterranean, a sea which links her to her North African Empire. It is precisely because of these vital colonial interests that all sections of the French press are unanimous in their declaration that the nation will fight rather than surrender to Mussolini's blackmail. Even the pro-fascist "Figaro" waxes lyrical on this subject. "Tunis is one of those sacred things for which, if anyone dares to touch it, France with single accord will fight at once, and that whatever the development of the conflict may be." This, continues the journal, "is a language which the Italians understand very well." It would therefore appear that Mussolini has played the wrong card this time. Inspired by the easy success of Hitler who, by a combination of bluff and a show of force, was able to change the status of Central Europe for the benefit of Germany, the Duce hopes to change the status of the Medi-

terranean for the benefit of Italy. But Italy is not Germany, and it will take more than threats and blackmail to convert the Mediterranean—vital to Britain and France—into a Roman lake.

But what it is important to observe is the intransigent attitude of France towards Italian aspirations in the Mediterranean and North Africa. This, however, should cause no surprise, for while the democratic imperialists are prepared to sacrifice weak nations—China, Abyssinia, Spain, Czechoslovakia—to fascist aggression, when it comes to parting with what "Figaro" so piously describes as "those sacred things"—colonies—then they are prepared to stand up to the dictators, "whatever the development of the conflict may be."

During the Czech crisis, Premier Daladier was too busy to visit Prague, but no sooner had Mussolini's cohorts shouted in the Italian Chamber of Deputies for Corsica and Tunis than this standard-bearer of the Popular Front hastened thither to assure the natives of the devotion and love of France for her children. "We shall resist any attack whether direct or indirect, whether by force or cunning, with a determination which nothing in the world—and these are my last words—shall bend.

"When I said I maintain the integrity of the French Empire, I not only said I would not yield an acre of its territory, but I meant I would not be led into judicial procedures which some people would like to see on foot. I think further words are useless."

With this brave pronouncement, Daladier satisfies the national ego of his countrymen in Tunis and departs in peace. Meanwhile, Italy and France are busy fortifying their respective frontiers along the Tunis-Libya borders.

But the irony of it all is that neither Mussolini nor Daladier cares tuppence for the Arabs. While the Duce proclaims himself the "Defender of Islam" and his agents are busy disaffecting the Moslems of North Africa and the Near East, he has recently expropriated all of the best lands from Arab tribesmen along the Mediterranean coast of Tripolitania to provide mass colonization for Italian peasants. M. Daladier on the other hand assures the Tunisians that "France brings to you order and discipline, which are the surest protection against brute force and tyranny. She also brings to you her own experience of fraternity and freedom."

But these words are just a mockery to the Tunisian people, whose nationalist leaders of the Neo-Destour have been thrown into prison for demanding of France the grant of "fraternity and freedom" of which M. Daladier so glibly talks.

While the Tunisians, especially the



FRANCIS A. TURNER

The appointment of Francis A. Turner to the position of First Assistant in Health Education followed immediately upon his placement on the eligible list in that subject. From approximately one hundred applicants who entered the series of examinations which began with a written one in September, 1937, ten candidates were successful.

Mr. Turner has been appointed to Samuel J. Tilden high school in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn, a school having an enrollment of 8,000 boys and girls. As chairman he will supervise and direct instruction in health education theory, hygiene, swimming and all physical work in that school.

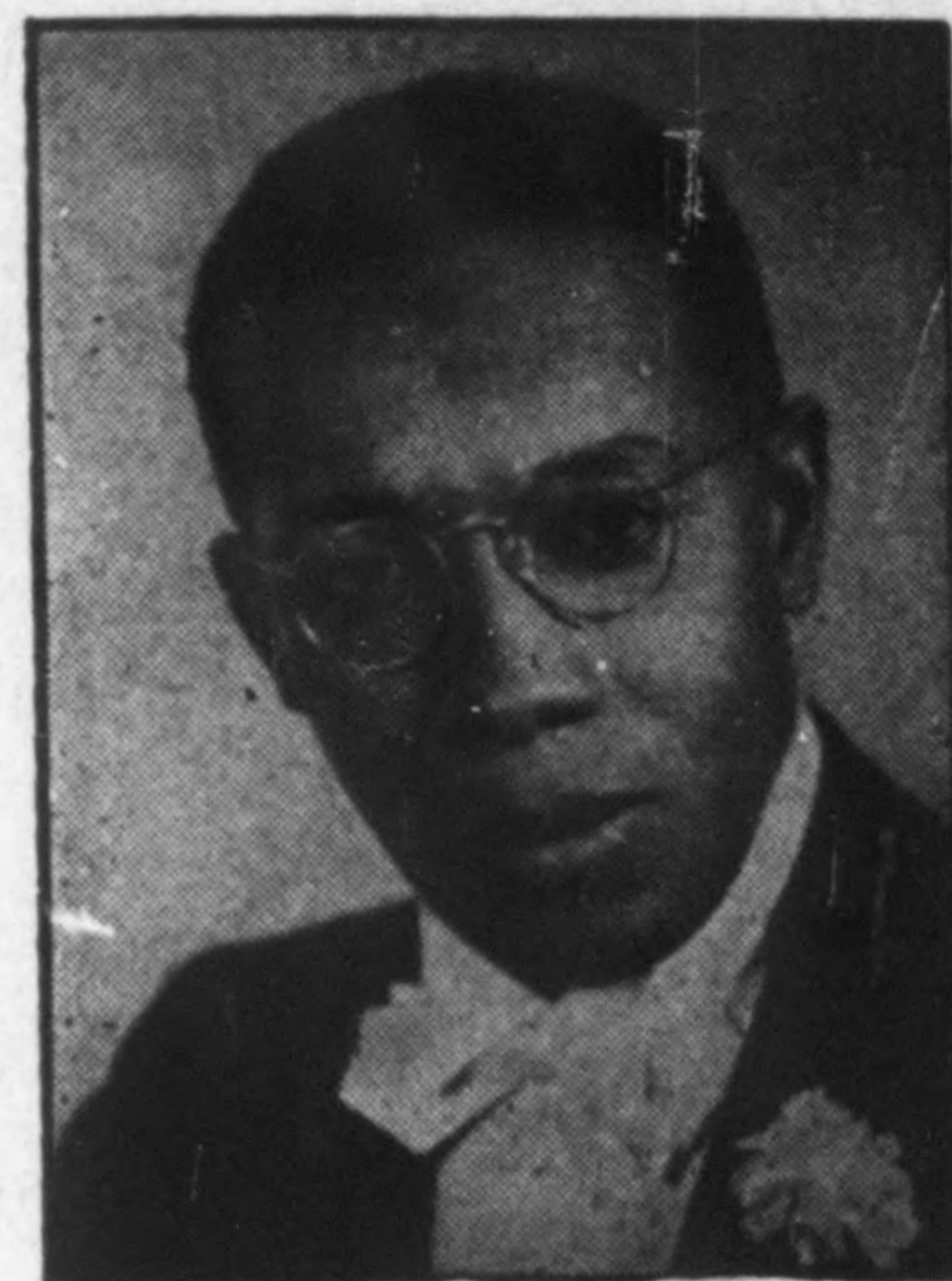
Mr. Turner is the first Negro to hold this position of first assistant in high schools in New York City. He has been a member of the faculty of James Monroe high school in the Bronx for twelve years, going there with a background of experience in elementary and junior high schools.

A New Yorker by birth, Mr. Turner has had all his training in the city schools and colleges, having received his bachelor's degree from City College of New York, his master of arts degree from New York University. His late father, Francis Turner, was one of New

80,000 politically conscious individuals who support the programme of the Neo-Destour, have no desire to change their French masters for Italian overlords, and accordingly protest against Italian pretensions, at the same time it must be understood that they have no wish to continue under the present regime without a change in the administration which will give them a voice in their economic, social and political welfare.

York's pioneer business men, a packer and shipper with offices at 419 Fourth avenue, and treasurer of Bethel A.M.E. church for over twenty-five years. His mother, also deceased, was Mattie M. Lynch of Petersburg, Va.

Mr. Turner is married to the former Miss Menta Turner, a teacher in the junior high schools, also in a special field—art. Mr. Turner's two sisters are teachers, also in junior high school: Mrs. P. Turner Davis, in English subjects; Miss H. Maude Turner (who is chairman of the entertainment committee of the New York branch of the N.A.A.C.P.), in art appreciation.



DR. E. W. TAGGART

Dr. Taggart, of Birmingham, Ala., is the chairman of the executive board of the National Dental Association. The board met in its mid-winter session February 25 in New York City to arrange for the holding of the national convention of the association which will be held early in August, 1939. Dr. S. C. Hamilton, of Chicago, president of the association, has announced that he expects the August convention to be one of the largest in the association's history.

### Housing for Negroes Under USHA Projects

Entering upon its second year, the United States Housing Authority recently announced the approval by President Roosevelt of contracts for \$32,632,000 in loans to local housing authorities in eight cities to construct 14 low-rent housing projects.

Of the estimated 6,452 new dwellings to be erected with the aid of USHA funds, almost one-quarter of them will be occupied by Negro families of low income, according to an estimate of Dr. Robert C. Weaver, Special Assistant to Administrator Straus. These new low-rental dwellings will be made available to families living in Boston, Mass.; Memphis, Tenn.; Pensacola, Fla.; Trenton, N. J.; and Wilmington, N. C.