

WHY ETHIOPIA LOST

An Analysis of the Factors that Led to the Ethiopian
Defeat in the Italo-Ethiopian War of 1935-36

by 45

TEFERI TEKLEHAIMANOT

B. A., Haile Selassie I University, 1965

A MASTER'S THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of History

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1969

Approved by


Major Professor

LD
2668
T4
1969
T4

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
PREFACE	iii
INTRODUCTORY NOTE	1
THE OPENING UP OF HOSTILITIES AND THE ANGLO-FRENCH REACTION.	19
The Hoare-Laval Plan	30
IN THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS.	34
IMPOSITION OF ARMS EMBARGO.	42
U. S. Neutrality	45
INTERNAL INSTABILITY.	51
THE ETHIOPIAN ARMY ON THE EVE	59
GEOPHYSICAL FACTORS	67
THE CONDUCT OF THE WAR.	76
The Northern Front	76
The First Battle of Tembien	83
The Battle of Amba Aradom	86
The Second Battle of Tembien.	91
The Battle of Shire	96
The Battle of Mai Chew.	99
The Southern Front	102
The Battle of Negelle	108
The Battle of Ogaden.	111
CONCLUSION.	117
BIBLIOGRAPHY.	128

PREFACE

On October 3, 1935, Italy invaded Ethiopia in unprovoked aggression and in violation of the Covenant demonstrating thereby that the League of Nations was incapable of maintaining world order. From this point of view, that is from the point of view of its repercussion on the League of Nations, a good deal has been said about the Italo-Ethiopian War of 1935-36.

Historians and political scientists predicted and later asserted that the Ethiopian crisis marked a crucial turning point in the Post-First World War era. According to Sir Winston Churchill, "it played a part in leading to an infinitely more terrible war."¹ And Geoffrey M. Gathorn-Hardy sees that the failure of Britain and France to honor their solemn obligation under the Covenant, and the violation of it by Italy meant a lot of things. To England it meant the destruction of the corner-stone of its policy--that is its policy of opposition to any and all unprovoked aggression. Moveover:

To France it meant that the enemy of whom she stood most in terror was encouraged to fresh audacity and rescued from his previous isolation. And finally by an act of

¹Sir Winston Churchill, The Gathering Storm (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1943), p. 177.

poetic justice it was destined to mean the extinction of Italy's influence on the Danube and the arrival of German forces on the Brenner.²

But very few have written on the war itself and fewer still on the underlying factors that brought about the defeat of Ethiopia. This neglect is perhaps due to the general assumption that in the contest between a modern European state and a primitive non-western state the defeat of the latter was inevitable. Ethiopia was not primitive however and neither was this the first war between Italy and Ethiopia.

As early as 1885 Italy had been preying on Ethiopian territory and although she was repulsed each time she kept on trying till in 1896, she was decisively defeated at the Battle of Adua. After that no further attempt was made until about forty years later Mussolini felt himself called upon by an irresistible destiny to found an Italian Empire in East Africa.

After eight months of war the Fascist invaders had successfully completed their conquest of Ethiopia. The question which this thesis proposes to answer is: why did the Ethiopians suffer an overwhelming defeat at the hand of an enemy which they themselves had overwhelmingly defeated only about forty years before? Several factors are given in

²Geoffrey M. Gathorne-Hardy. A Short History of International Affairs 1920-1939 (London: Humphrey Milford, 1950) 4th ed. p. 418.

the foregoing pages, but three are considered crucial. These are the chaotic internal situation at the time of the invasion, the inequitable imposition of an arms embargo by the great powers and the false hope given by the League of Nations.

In writing this thesis there has been the problem of obtaining adequate materials. Italian official documents and original works such as the writings of Generals De Bono Fadoglio and Graziani, for example are unavailable here. Even in regard to the coverage of the war itself correspondents were seldom allowed to be at the battlefield and see the true situation for themselves.

However, the inadequacy of materials has not seriously hampered this inquiry since the attempt here is to identify the hitherto neglected factors. As an officer in the Ethiopian army, I have some familiarity not only with the theaters of operation and the physical nature of the country but also with its situation and problems. This is, thus, a critical analysis based, to an extent, on my personal acquaintance with the situation and, to some degree, though admittedly to a limited degree, on professional (military as well as scholarly) judgement.

Lastly, mention must be made that Ethiopian names of persons and places are spelled here so as to make them sound as close to their Ethiopian pronunciation as possible.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Ethiopia, which is said to have come into being around 1000 B.C. was nearly three thousand years old on the eve of the Italo-Ethiopian War in 1935. Such a long period of uninterrupted history has given rise to the question: why is it that when most nations at one time or another lost and regained their independence that Ethiopia steadily maintained its for so long? Even more striking is the question how was it that the Ethiopians managed to escape colonization when in the Nineteenth Century European nations had partitioned and occupied in one form or another, almost all the non-western world especially Africa?

The Ethiopian view has always been as Emperor Haileselassie (then Ras Teferi) put it

Throughout history the Ethiopians have seldom met with foreigners who did not desire to possess themselves of Ethiopian territory and to destroy their independence. With God's help and thanks to the courage of our soldiers, we have always, come what might, stood proud and free upon our native mountains.¹

Many Western observers, however, were unwilling to subscribe to the Ethiopian view. Varied explanations are given but the most popular seems to be that no one had ever

¹In a circular note by Ras Teferi addressed to the members of the League of Nations in 1926 as a protest to the secret Anglo-Italian agreement which proposed to divide Ethiopia into British and Italian spheres of influence.

made a serious effort to colonize Ethiopia. Thus, for example, employing one of his impressive generalizations Winston Churchill half in criticism of Mussolini, half in sympathy with the Fascist youth wrote in regard to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935.

To cast an army of nearly a quarter of a million men upon what may well be a series of campaigns against a people and in regions which no conqueror in four thousand years ever thought it worth while to subdue, is to give hostages to fortune unparelled in history.²

A brief sketch of the country's history may be necessary for an understanding of the true situation. From the rise of Islam in the Seventh century to the Sixteenth century Ethiopia lived through innumerable wars from which it emerged triumphant though much exhausted and weakened. Ethiopia's resources and energy did not permit them to regain what Islam had achieved or to carry the Gospel to the Pagans which surrounded it. But for itself it became an island of Christianity in a continent that was otherwise either totally Pagan and or in some areas Islamic. Gibbon was, thus, partially right when he wrote

Encompassed on all sides by the enemies of their religion the Ethiopians slept near a thousand years, forgetful of the world by whom they were forgotten.³

²Winston Churchill, op. cit., p. 173.

³Edward Gibbon, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd. 1957) Vol. V, p. 69.

They were forgotten by Europe but the enemies of their religion could hardly allow them to sleep. At the same time Gibbon is right in asserting that it was after the fifteenth century that Ethiopia emerged from isolation, but as it came into more contact with the outside world more enemies began to appear.

The first serious threat came in the second quarter of the sixteenth century when Mohammed Gran⁴ waged a Jihad. Gran, who was a governor of an area roughly comprising the South-eastern coast of present day Ethiopia, present day Somalia and some regions in the interior of the Somalia Coast, attacked in 1535. His troops were trained by Albanian and Turkish officers and moreover the possession of firearms as well as the help both in material and men which he received from Turkey enabled him to achieve successive victories over the spear wielding Ethiopians. In six years he had reached the Plateau where the King and most of the monasteries lay, burning churches and sacking whole villages as he advanced. At this bleak moment of Ethiopia's history Portugal came to its help in the name of religion. In 1541 Christopher da Gama, son of the famed Vasco da Gama arrived with four hundred men armed with matchlocks. Now the new King Galawdios, whose father Lebna Dengel died a hunted fugitive as Gran followed

⁴His real name was Imam Ahmed Iban Ibrahim al-Ghazi; in Ethiopia he is known as Mohammed Gran or simply Gran. In the Ethiopic language Gran literally means left-handed which, it is said, Mohammed was.

him from one hiding place to another, finally destroyed his muslim enemies.

But the Portuguese did not leave after accomplishing the task for which they came. And the Ethiopians had yet to deal with them. Ultimately the Portuguese were also ousted after which the country relapsed into a dismal and confused state for nearly a century beset by internal disorders. The Emperor had lost control of the country and his powers over regional chiefs even by feudal standards were very weak. In fact the Emperor was only a titular figure made and unmade by powerful regional chiefs. In the meantime successive waves of invasions by Galla Tribes--a Pagan people except where contact had been made with Islam threw the country into more confusion.

But an adventurer named Kasa arose in the Amhara Province (Begemidir)--to put an end to the confusion. He defeated all the major regional chiefs one by one and became the most powerful man in the country. In 1855 he crowned himself--or rather coerced the Abun (bishop) into crowning him King of Kings,⁵ under the name Theodros (Theodore). His next task was to subdue the Galla invaders which he did after a series of counter attacks which brought him close to the Galla homeland itself. But Emperor Theodore died without annexing the Galla lands to his empire. This was done not

⁵Since each major region had a King the national overlord assumed the title of King of Kings or Emperor--a title which is still retained though there are no regional kings anymore.

long afterward by Emperor Menelik. The reign of Theodros is thus a landmark in modern Ethiopian history in that it was he who united the country. Actually there was no real unity and the term is only relative. Perhaps it would be better to say that under Theodros the system was still a feudal one in which, however, the Emperor assumed more power and prestige than his predecessors.

Emperor Theodros was wholeheartedly devoted to the task of modernizing his barbarous country and hoped to achieve it in the shortest possible time. But his ambitions were far short of reality. Regional chiefs who accepted his overlordship through defeat were not willing to cooperate with his reforms. Thus his whole ambitious plan came to nothing. Frustration led to more frustration and in the end Theodros' character became abnormal often reaching the point of madness. At one time he would appear the very personification of goodness and another which was sudden he would become an Ethiopian Ivan the Terrible.

Such abnormality of character alienated his subjects but so long as his personal army was strong there was nothing they could do. The fatal moment came, however, when in one of his violent rages he imprisoned one Cameron the British Consul. Britain had established diplomatic contact with Ethiopia in 1849, the first envoy being Walters Plowden. He was succeeded by Captain V. L. Cameron. The trouble arose when, perhaps through the negligence of the British Foreign

Office, the Emperor's letter to Queen Victoria failed to reach the latter. The Emperor felt that it was an insult to himself as well as to his country that a monarch neglected to reply to another. In retaliation he imprisoned Consul Cameron. When news reached England about the imprisonment another envoy was sent to secure release but the Emperor responded by putting him in prison as well this time along with sixty other Europeans. In Britain the question now was: should steps be taken to rescue the prisoners or was it unworthy to go into so much toil and expense in order to save two British subjects? The answer was typical especially of Victorian England--British honor outweighed all other considerations, and so the first European attack on Ethiopia had come.

In the summer of 1867 an expeditionary force consisting of 29,000 troops commanded by General Sir Robert Napier landed on the Red Sea Coast. From there the columns marched through difficult, rugged and inhospitable mountainous terrains for several months. In April 1868, Napier reached the Emperor's walled city of Megdela and the long awaited battle had begun.

It was a one-sided battle if indeed there was a battle. None of the regional chiefs came to the help of his sovereign. Most military commanders and troops who served under him and who were attached to him by necessity rather than love began to desert him in thousands when the battle was about to begin.

When British guns started hurling their balls, Theodros had with him only very few loyal soldiers. He looked around and said, "I have lost all Ethiopia but this rock" and upon the rock he shot himself rather than fall into enemy hands alive. The battle that was never fought was won by Napier Baron of Megdela.

Having accomplished his mission (which was to free the prisoners) Napier left the country. An interesting question now arises: why did not the British colonize the country? There is, of course, no evidence that Napier had any orders to do so. In fact the British government at that time was not very keen in further acquisition of colonial lands. But even if Napier wanted to he could not have accomplished the task. To begin with the expedition itself could very well have failed if it were not for the indifference of the regional rulers indeed their active disobedience in time of emergency. Many observers who had been eye witnesses like H. Rassam who was sent to Ethiopia by the British government to protest Theodros' action and who was there during the battle as well as Clement R. Markham whose History of the Abyssinian Expedition is the best on the subject maintain that the explanation of the success of the expedition is to be found in the fact that the British were given aid and comfort by regional chiefs who wanted to see the end of Theodros.⁶

⁶Reference to these sources is taken from Ernest Work, Ethiopia: A Pawn in European Diplomacy, (New York: Macmillan Company, 1935) p. 55 and p. 346.

The aid help and comfort received from Kassa-Ras of Tigray was in particular of great usefulness to the success of the Napier Expédition. After the customary exchange of gifts and a full display of military might on both sides Kassa offered Napier all the guides he needed to make his long march easier and quicker. After the meeting Napier proceeded to Megdela, as Greenfield put it "somewhat less confident than before having seen the bearing and arms of Kassa's soldiery."⁷ Disraeli told Parliament as soon as word reached him "we have hoisted the union Jack on the Mountains of Rasselas" and the members who had read Samuel Johnson's Rasselas: Prince of Abyssinia smiled. Actually the Union Jack if at all was hoisted momentarily. For hoisting the Union Jack there would have meant the pacification of so wild a country. No invader from Gran to Graziani has ever succeeded in that exceedingly difficult task.

After the Battle of Megdela and the death of Theodros the country once more lapsed into four years of anarchy during which rival regional chiefs fought and fought again for supremacy. Kassa of Tigray ultimately emerged victorious and was crowned in 1872 as Emperor Johannes IV. His reign was marked by a series of wars in which Egypt and Italy were the main enemies. The first to attack was Egypt. In the very

⁷Richard Greenfield, Ethiopia: A New Political History (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965), p. 86.

year of Johannes' accession to the throne Khedive Ismail had shaken off Turkish overlordship and took the latter's Red Sea Coast possessions as well as the Turkish Muslim outpost of Harar now a province of Ethiopia. Thus Egypt animated by an ephemeral renewal of that imperialism which had gained her the old Turkish possessions attempted to extend her empire even farther, this time at Ethiopia's expense. Egyptian attempts were numerous but on every occasion the Ethiopians repulsed their enemies. The crushing defeat which the Egyptians sustained, however, was at Gundet in 1875 and at Gura in 1876, both in the present day province of Eritrea. While the Ethiopians could have followed their enemies and annexed the much sought port of Massawa they were content with ending Ismail's ambitious designs.

Egypt had not only failed to conquer Ethiopia but also by the first half of the 1880's saw her empire collapse under the onslaught of the Mahdi--a powerful sudanese nationalist who felt himself divinely ordained to create his own empire. Having thus tested his strength with Egypt, he turned to Ethiopia only to share the same fate as his neighbor to the north. But the Mahdist kept on trying even after the death of the Mahdi until 1889 when at the battle of Metema they were routed and again the Ethiopians failed to appreciate the advantage of pursuing a beaten enemy. To the Ethiopian fighting man success in the field of battle was an end not a means. At this battle Johannes lost his life--hit by a stray bullet.

By this time the scramble for Africa was almost over and the major European powers notably Britain and France had little complaint. They had given themselves a lion's share. Italy on the other hand arrived too late and what she found was such barren regions as a strip of Somaliland (later to be extended to the whole of Italian Somaliland), Lybia in North Africa and some trading posts on the Red Sea Coast. These were hardly attractive possessions. But a bigger prize which was still free lay behind her Red Sea trading posts. This was Ethiopia on which Italy cast her covetous eyes and hence forth a series of conflicts would go on between Italy and Ethiopia culminating in the War of 1935-36 and the Liberation War of 1940-41. At the center of this long struggle was the desire of one to colonize; of the other to be free.

As time passed Ethiopia was gaining strategic importance and neither Britain nor France was willing to see the other get control of the country. Equally they were unwilling to give Italy a free hand. The construction of the Suez Canal in 1869 had made the Red Sea a gateway of an East-West commerce and since Ethiopian boundary lay just behind the Red Sea Coast the power in possession of Ethiopia could exert a stranglehold on that throat of commerce. In the case of Britain she had an additional interest. By 1882 England was in defacto control of Egypt and consequently of the Sudan. The Nile River on which life in these two countries largely

depends has one of its most important tributaries flowing from the mountains of Ethiopia. The Blue Nile's importance is not merely in its supply of water but also and perhaps more importantly because of the content of rich soil in the flood which occurs every rainy season. A surveying party sent to study the source by British authorities asserted that Egypt's source of life was in the blue Nile and warned that

all that would be necessary for any rival power to do in order to transform the beneficial Nile which has created Egypt into a destructive flood would be simply to make a breach in the barrier of rock at its source.⁸

With the source of the Blue Nile in the hands of Ethiopia, England had nothing to fear but if an unfriendly power occupied Ethiopia Egypt could be endangered. France too who had the dream of founding a large colonial empire in North Africa would not want a power especially Britain to increase its hold of strategic areas. Thus both Britain and France were competing to get more influence and failing that each was always ready to hinder the other. While the jealous rivals were thus inspite of themselves helping the preservation of Ethiopia's independence Italy was slowly and inconspicuously closing on Ethiopia through the acquisition of ports and coastal strips in the neighborhood.

⁸Great Britain, Parliamentary Papers XCI, Egypt No. 2 (1904).

Already in 1869 a private Italian company had purchased from a local Sultan a trading post called Assab on the Red Sea Coast. In 1882 the company sold Assab to the Italian government. Another chance presented itself to Italy when the extensive but precarious Egyptian Empire fell under Mahdist pressure. The Italians had no difficulty in taking Massawa another port far north of Assab. This time Ethiopia began to fear as to what Italian ultimate motive might be. Besides by the Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty of 1884 Ethiopia agreed to help the evacuation of Egyptian garrisons marooned by the Mahalists in the Sudan. Britain promised to help Ethiopia to annex the former Egyptian territories behind Massawa and free access to the port itself. But unlike Ethiopia Britain did not fulfill her part of the bargain.

The first Italo-Ethiopian conflict had begun when on January 8, 1887, a so-called scientific mission consisting of 500 armed men crossed and occupied parts of Ethiopian territory. The result was the Battle of Dega'ali in which the Italian "Mission" was thoroughly defeated. Consequently all Italian outposts within Ethiopian territory were evacuated. Moreover Italy learned from this small lesson that penetration by armed means was difficult. So then the Italians reverted to the policy of undermining the strength and unity of the

country by infusing enmity among regional chiefs and fostering disobedience. In this they had a considerable success.

In those days jealous regional chiefs were unhesitating in plotting with and aiding foreign enemies if they saw any hope of bettering their position. Hitherto, however, the consequences were not fatal to the independence. At worst internal jealousy had weakened the strength of the nation, and as we have seen in the case of the Theodros it might lead to a humiliating defeat at the hands of foreign invaders, but not to the occupation of the country by a foreign power. But when Menelik, King of Shoa, entered into direct and secret negotiations with Italy, it had resulted though Menelik never intended it, in the weakening of the country and the occupation by Italy of Ethiopian northern territory.

As King of Shoa, away from the central government, in the north Menelik enjoyed unlimited power over his kingdom. He conquered Gallalands to the south and expanded his territory greatly through his large and relatively well armed forces. Thus conscious of his growing power Menelik became less and less obedient to the Emperor, and the Italians were not slow in noticing this. Accordingly after the presentation of gifts and tempting promises the Italians were able to have Menelik sign a secret treaty in which he was promised money, arms, the Province of Tigre and recognition as King of Kings if he allied with them in attacking Emperor Johannes IV. To this

Menelik agreed and the treaty was signed in 1888. What the Italians would benefit from this was little. It meant the annexation of Eritrea the northern most province. But the Italians were solidifying their hold and they were ready to wait for further demands.

When it came to the question of fighting Menelik did not join the Italians but his withdrawn behavior when his country was faced with two enemies at the same time--the Mahdists on the one hand and the Italians on the other--in effect meant helping foreign enemies. Emperor Johannes like his predecessor had to depend on his own regional following. His aim was first to crush the Muslem invaders threatening from the northwest and then deal with the Italians which were on their part threatening from the northeast. He defeated the Moslems but he never lived to defeat the Italians. On March 10, 1889, he died at the Battle of Metema which was otherwise a complete victory for the Ethiopians.

As was always the case when an emperor died, the country lapsed into a brief but greivous confusion.

Upon the confirmation of the death of Emperor Johannes Italy at once sent a telegram to Menelik who in 1889--the same year the Emperor died had assumed the title of Emperor, stating that it was time that a more solid friendship should be established between the two countries. The new Emperor Menelik II who had not resisted Italy's occupation of Eritrea seemed to fall into every trick Italy devised. On May 2, 1889, the

Treaty of Uccialli was signed between Menelik and Italy. The treaty was destined to be of no duration. Soon discrepancies were found between the Italian and Ethiopian (Amharic) versions. But the controversy centered more on the interpretation of Article XIV. In the Italian version the Article read: "His Majesty the King of Kings of Ethiopia consent to avail himself of the Italian government for any negotiations which he might enter into with other powers."⁹ In the Amharic version the clause made it optional. The verb used conveys the sense that the Emperor might--if he so desired--avail himself of Italian help in foreign matters.

But as far as the Italians were concerned Ethiopia was, by this treaty, made an Italian protectorate. And this they were quick to inform European powers. Thus Menelik unaware of the situation his treaty had created continued his diplomatic correspondence. He was then informed, much to his amazement and shock, that since Ethiopia was a protectorate of Italy they could not treat with him directly but that any communication that he might wish to make should be channelled through the government of Italy. Menelik's response was quick in which he strongly asserted that he had made no such agreement. To the King of Italy he wrote:

When I made the treaty of friendship with Italy in order that our secrets might be guarded and that undertaking should not be spoiled, I

⁹Work, op. cit., p. 86.

said that because of friendship our affairs in Europe might be carried on with the aid of the sovereign of Italy, but I have not made any treaty which obliges me to do so; and today I am not the man to accept it. That one independent power does not seek the aid of another to carry on its affairs your majesty understands very well.¹⁰

For three years Italy labored to achieve its aim by peaceful means. But having come to the realization that no amount of intrigues, promises and entreaties would work anymore, it prepared to go to war. In 1896 General Baratieri with a force of 25,000 troops invaded from Eritrea. He was stopped at Adua in Tigray Province where he suffered a crushing defeat and that battle ended Italy's dream of creating an empire--at least until the rise of Mussolini.

To the Ethiopians the Battle of Adua of 1896 marked the most decisive chapter in their history since the defeat of Gran some three and a half centuries before. In some quarters in Europe the news was received with alarm. Germany complained that England should have come to Italy's aid.¹¹ General Kitchner expressed his desire to support Italy but that the British government would not allow him to do so. And The Times lamented in an editorial:

You may be sure that from one part of Africa to the other the defeat of Italy is already known, or will be tomorrow--that Africa has conquered Europe. This is the reason why the whole

¹⁰Ibid., p. 107.

¹¹Ibid., p. 152.

business is so serious and nothing could be more heedless than to rejoice at the defeat of the Italians. That defeat is also ours.¹²

The mutual suspicion of the three powers Britain, France, and Italy and the fact that Ethiopia was a difficult prey prompted the powers to agree to maintain its territorial integrity. The three powers met in 1906 to decide the fate of a country which was not even represented at the meeting and in this tri-partite treaty of 1906 they agreed that in matters that might affect the status quo the signatory powers could not act independently but that they had to consult and act together.¹³

The three powers were thus fighting over Ethiopia partitioning it on paper, sharing it together or losing it together. Yet, all the while the country was actually sovereign independent. But not by virtue of its martial prowess had the country always preserved its independence. We have seen that in the case of the Gran invasion the task of repulsing the enemy would have been exceedingly difficult without the Portuguese. During the scramble for Africa the policies of jealous powers enabled it to get encouragement from one or the other of them, and moreover there was no problem of getting arms from Europe.

¹²The Times, London, March 5, 1896.

¹³France: Ministere Des Affaires etrangeres, Documents Diplomatiques: Affaires d'Ethiopie (1906).

So by a combination of her courageous defenders, inaccessible mountain barriers, favorable international situations and the availability of allies when that became necessary Ethiopia was able to maintain its independence. This is not to suggest that Britain or France could not have conquered her. But to begin with if one attempted to do so the other would try to forstall the attempt. Even without this consideration it was clear that Ethiopia was by no means an easy victim. Would the powers risk so much effort and expense over Ethiopia when easier prizes were available elsewhere? In this sense only can we agree with Churchill, whom we have quoted at the beginning, that subduing Ethiopia was not worth the effort. History does, however, abundently show that many wished to possess her.

THE OPENING-UP OF HOSTILITIES AND
THE ANGLO-FRENCH REACTION

Depending on his audience Mussolini offered varying justifications for his actions in Ethiopia. If his audience was the world at large, for instance, it was for the noble cause of carrying the torch of civilization to a barbarous country. But, of course, this hardly impressed even the most naive listener. If on the other hand, the audience was the Italian public or others who might see some logic in this argument, he was moved by stark economic necessity to colonize Ethiopia. Forty million Italians crowded in a small peninsula would eventually explode unless a safety-valve was sought and a source of raw-materials found. Actually the economic conditions in Italy had improved under Fascist leadership and life was better at that time than before. Even if the economic explanation was true, it was not the only motive. Mussolini who by word and action attempted to pose as a latter day Caesar had to try to revive "the glory that was Rome," and in order to do so he had to match Britain and France in colonial possessions which to him was a yardstick by which a nation's prestige was to be measured.

Then too there was what Kirkpatrick called "primitive itch for vengeance."¹ The Duce was deeply impressed by the Italian

¹Ivone Kirkpatrick, Mussolini: A Study in Power (New York: Hawthorne Books Inc., 1964), p. 305.

defeat at Adua which occurred when he was twelve. On October 2, 1935, one day before the invasion, he announced to his people and the world

Con l' Ethiopia abbiamo pazientato 40 anni
ora basta²

meaning thereby that forty years of patience was enough.

Whether the prime motive for Mussolini's action was economic, fulfillment of prestige or vengeance he was long determined to invade Ethiopia. The idea came to him in 1925 as he himself told the Chamber in May 2, 1935.

This problem does not date from today nor from January 1935. . . .it goes back to 1925. Three years later it seemed that is when the Italo-Ethiopian Treaty of Friendship was signed that a political treaty was the instrument best suited to assist our pacific expansion in that vast world, still enclosed in its prehistoric system and yet capable of great progress.³

By 1932 he had made up his mind. Early in 1932 De Bono was sent on a secret mission to Eritrea to study the possibility of using that colony as a springboard for an attack on Ethiopia. In 1933 the Duce had definitely decided that the invasion would have to be conducted before 1936. This was a tightly kept secret as De Bono says in his The Conquest of an Empire

The Duce had spoken to no one of the coming operations in East Africa, only he and I knew

²Cited in Angelo Del Boca, La guerra d'Abissinia 1935-1941, (Milano: Feltrinelli Editore, 1966) p. 30.

³Cited in Kirkpatrick, op. cit., p. 306.

what was going to happen.⁴

Thus Mussolini was only waiting for an excuse, and it was not long to come. On the 5th of December, 1934, a minor border conflict took place between Italian and Ethiopian border guards at Wal Wal--a border town between Ethiopia and Italian Somaliland. Italy immediately branded Ethiopia the aggressor and demanded:

The Governor of Harar to proceed in person to Wal Wal to offer ceremonial apology. Then payment of 200,000 dollars indemnity arrest, dismissal and punishment of those guilty after they shall have honoured the remains of their victims in accordance with Somali custom.⁵

This was evidently meant to create a violent response from Ethiopia so that Mussolini might be provided with further excuses. But Emperor Haileselassie wanted to avoid war by all means. Therefore he expressed his willingness to pay the indemnity and to show the earnestness of his desire for peace offered to deposit the 200,000 dollars in a bank in Geneva as security; but first the fact must be established, and this by an international commission in accordance with Article V of the Italo-Ethiopian Treaty of 1928 which provided that any dispute arising between the two parties should be settled by arbitration.⁶ Italy vigorously refused to submit the case

⁴Ibid., p. 307.

⁵Cited in Anthony Eden, The Eden Memoires: Facing the Dictators, (London: Cassell, 1962) p. 194.

⁶For the full text of the Treaty see Giuliano Cora Attualita de trattato citalo-etioipico del 1928 (Florence: Stet, 1948).

to arbitration and began preparing to settle the matter by force. Ethiopia immediately appealed to the League of Nations (of which both Italy and Ethiopia were members) charging that Italy was taking aggressive steps in contravention of the Covenant.

But Britain and France who, as we will see, did not want the matter to be discussed in the League prevailed upon Italy to agree to arbitration. Mussolini by now had decided to agree to anything that might cause delay of decision while he made his preparation for the invasion. Thus Ethiopia withdrew the appeal made to the League and an arbitration commission was formed. After a long and detailed study the commission eventually came to an agreement that the Wal Wal incident was not an intentional provocation but an unpremeditated accident for which neither party was to be blamed. The case was thus to be dropped.⁷

This was far from satisfying to Italy. In fact Mussolini was not willing to settle on anything short of total occupation of Ethiopia and so he resumed his troop movement to Eritrea and Italian Somaliland. Again Ethiopia appealed to the League of Nations but the main actors here were Britain and France and they were careful not to offend Italy. Thus while it was clear that Italy was taking aggressive steps and

⁷The report was submitted by the Commission of nine of whom Potter, whom is quoted below was a member. See Pitman E. Potter The Wal Wal Arbitration (Washington: Rumford Press, 1938)

expressing its ill-intention the two big powers led the way in (to use an American term) filibustering the case now in the League of Nations. On the second day of October 1935, 20,000,000 Italian men, women and children were called by sirens and church bells to hear their Duce declare war on Ethiopia. The next day the invasion began.

But Britain and France were still endeavoring to find a settlement that could satisfy both sides although it is hard to conceive of any compromise between Mussolini who wanted to annex Ethiopia to his East African Colony and Haileselassie who wanted to be free. But then they were in a dilemma and had to try something. On the one hand their conscience would not allow them to let naked aggression have its way. On the other they desperately needed the alliance of Italy in view of the growing German threat. If they showed hostility towards Italian action in Ethiopia Mussolini might swing towards Hitler.

At the time of the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis Hitler's defiant violation of the Treaty of Versailles, his warlike activities and utterances and his vast rearmament program had reached such menacing proportions that the victims of the First World War were spurred to seek help against the dangerous enemy. The reason why Britain and France were doing all they could to stop the Italo-Ethiopian dispute from being taken by the League, stems from this fact. They would be in an embarrassing situation if the League branded Italy

the aggressor. This would require them either to take the necessary measures according to the Covenant or refuse to do so and thus destroy an organization in which together with President Wilson of the United States they had been the principal supporters.

Of the two big powers France had indeed more reason to fear German resurgence and was therefore more willing to go to any extent to appease Mussolini. Germany had been France's age-old enemy and Hitler had made it unmistakably clear both in his private utterances and in Mein Kempf that he was out to destroy France as a power and build a German hegemony in Europe. On the other hand he spoke with conciliatory tone in regard to Britain. So long as Britain did not hinder his ambition in continental Europe, he was willing to accept, or rather not to contest, her maritime superiority.

British foreign policy in regard to the Ethiopian Crisis was not at any rate so bent as to appease Italy unconditionally. In public statements both in the League as well as outside it, Britain had always expressed her support of the League Covenant. On September 11, 1935, Sir Samuel Hoare, British Foreign Secretary declared

In conformity with its precise and explicit obligations the League stands, and my country stands with it, for the collective maintenance of the Covenant in its integrity, and especially for the steady and collective resistance to all acts of unprovoked aggression,

adding, however,

if risks of peace are to be run, they must be run by all. The security of the many cannot be assured by the efforts of the few, however powerful they may be.⁸

But France was not willing to say or act in a manner that might incur the displeasure of Mussolini. M. Pierre Laval the French Prime Minister set out for Rome in early January 1935 and on the 8th signed an agreement with Italy--an agreement which might have surprised even its Italian beneficiary. By this rapprochement--commonly known as the Rome Agreement--Italy received from France territorial concessions in Tunisia and French Somaliland. Furthermore France agreed to transfer to Italy 2,500 shares of the Jibuti-Addis Ababa railway jointly owned by France and Ethiopia.⁹ It was also generally believed that during this meeting Laval gave Mussolini the Carte blanche for his aggression in Ethiopia. This argument was later contested by Laval himself but in the light of his attitude it was not unnatural that Mussolini believed that France would not be concerned with what happened to Ethiopia.

In the meantime conditions in Europe were becoming tense. On March 16, 1935, Hitler declared his intention to rearm Germany vowing that the Fatherland would no longer remain

⁸League of Nations, Records of the Sixteenth Ordinary Session of the Assembly Plenary Meetings, Text of the Debates, p. 46.

⁹See Royal Institute of International Affairs, Documents on International Affairs (1935: Vol. I) (London: Humphrey Milford, 1937).

claimed by the Versailles Treaty. France was getting more frantic at every German move, though that is not to suggest that Britain and other European powers were not concerned.

Under French insistence Britain, France and Italy met at Stresa to discuss what should be done and after a meeting which lasted from April 10 to 14, 1935, the three powers found themselves

In complete agreement in opposing by all practicable means any unilateral repudiation of treaties which may endanger the peace of Europe and will act in close and cordial collaboration for this purpose.¹⁰ (Italics supplied)

But when on June 18, 1935, Britain and Germany signed the Anglo-German Naval Accord, Laval felt that the Stresa Agreement had been watered down by Britain. Actually the Anglo-German accord merely set the ratio of German and British navies. By this it was agreed that the British and German navies were to be kept at the ratio of 35:100 and that Germany would be allowed to possess as much submarine tonnage as the British Commonwealth. But to France it appeared that any Anglo-German understanding would strip her of her allies and eventually lead to the death blow which Hitler had long sworn to give her.

After this shocking news Laval did not waste a single day. Next morning he succeeded in signing with Italy a military pact in which it was agreed that if Germany attacked

¹⁰Documents on International Affairs, Ibid., p. 58.

either party the other would come to its aid. Thus the Franco-Italian solidarity which had existed since Laval had rushed to Rome and made more lavish concessions had become firm. He must have felt justified in his appeasement of Italy at all costs, believing that by doing so he was averting a greater danger. L' Intransigeant, a French news paper, said that Britain should be warned that France would stand by its Latin sister and that Italy should not be hindered in its "work of civilization of Ethiopia."¹¹ This sentiment was echoed by many French Fascist sympathizers as well as true nationalists who felt that their country's best interests were served by befriending Italy. As for Laval himself it is hard to determine why he was so unconditionally pro Mussolini. Lord Vansittart then Permanent Under Secretary in the foreign office hints that Laval "one of the few in whom the microscope has revealed nothing but more teeming decomposition" was already in 1935 a traitor in the service of Hitler and Mussolini.¹² But Gathorne-Hardy giving the Premier the benefit of the doubt describes him as perhaps a patriotic man who did not hesitate to resort to unscrupulous and dishonest means of effecting his narrow-minded patriotism. Indeed:

¹¹Intransigeant, June 19, 1935.

¹²Cited in G. M. Gathorne-Hardy, A Short History of International Affairs 1920-1939, (London; 1950) 4th ed. p. 392.

The French made no concealment of their naively unprincipled hope that they might be able to sabotage the application of the Covenant against Italy in order to preserve this self-same Covenant intact for future use against Germany with a triumphant Italian Covenant-breaker helping France, in the name of the Covenant, to hold Germany in check!¹³

In the case of the British it was like trying to eat one's cake and have it too. The conservative party headed by Mr. Baldwin wanted to avoid war and at the same time it wanted to uphold the League Covenant--an impossible contradiction because the application of the theory of collective security meant war, and this the party was not willing to do. Moreover Mr. Baldwin was cautious not to alienate Italy by taking bold support of the League although apparent British support of the League had already annoyed Mussolini. But then a large number of the British public was annoyed by Italian aggressive mood. This was particularly prevalent among the Laborites and Labour unions as well as many individual men and women. The Conservative Party in power could not publicly disagree with the public view. It knew fully well that in 1922 Lloyd George was forced out by possible public opinion when he insisted on going to war with Turkey. Thus the government had to go through the motion of appearing to be resolutely opposed to Mussolini's aggressive designs. Consequently mutual suspicion between Britain and France increased mostly through misunderstanding. Thus at first

¹³Toynbee, op. cit., p. 4.

Mussolini thought that Britain meant business when Hoare declared that "the League stands and my country stands with it."¹⁴ Consequently Italian radios and news papers started a violent anti-British propoganda charging that Britain was playing a dog-in-the manger-role denying Italy her livelihood in Ethiopia. When Italian anti-British propoganda increased and Mussolini began massing troops in his East African colonies there was a growing apprehension that Italy might attack British possessions in north and east Africa. The government of Great Britain had to take precautions. By September 20, almost the entire British Home Fleet was concentrated in the Mediterranean between Gibraltar and the Suez Canal. This in turn caused more suspicion in Italy and so continued a chain reaction of suspicions and counter-suspicions.

Mr. Baldwin's government in spite of its outward motions was, of course, not intending to do anything that might bring about war and this Mussolini eventually realized. If the Italian dictator did not come to know about this (through informal Anglo-Italian conversations) perhaps the British hard line stand could have had a strong effect on him. That is, the threat of sanctions would have sufficed to deter him from risking a war with Britain and other League members. But when he found out that Britain did not mean to support word with action he went ahead with his invasion of Ethiopia.

¹⁴See above pp. 24-25.

THE HOARE-LAVAL PEACE PLAN

The Italo-Ethiopian War had been going on for two months and the League had come to the conclusion that Italy was the aggressor, but it was still undecided what steps to take. In the meantime Britain and France were trying to find a settlement outside the League--a decision that might be acceptable to the League, to Ethiopia and above all to Italy--whose friendship was necessary to these two powers. What settlement there could possibly be that would satisfy the three parties?

Nevertheless Sir Samuel Hoare and Pierre Laval did ultimately come out with a solution--the Hoare-Laval Peace Plan. On December 9, 1935, the plan was duly communicated to the Italian and Ethiopian governments. It was as humiliating to Ethiopia as it was unacceptable to Italy. Part one of the proposal demanded the cession to Italy by Ethiopia of Eastern Tigrai in the North and part of the Ethiopian territory adjacent to Italian Somaliland in the South. The second part dealt with Italian economic expansion and settlement in Ethiopia. This proposed the formation in Southern Ethiopia of a zone which would form an integral part of Ethiopia but where Italy would enjoy exclusive economic rights which might be administered by a privileged company or by any other like organization to which would be recognized--subject to the

acquired rights of natives and foreigners--
the right of ownership of unoccupied territories,
the monopoly of the exploitation of mines, forests
etc.¹⁵

The plan also provided that in return Ethiopia should be given an outlet to the sea through the part of Asab which Italy was to cede together with a corridor giving access to that port. In short the Hoare-Laval Plan meant that in return for the cession by Italy of a short corridor and a small port, she would get 60,000 square miles of territory in direct gift and another 160,000 in the form of an exclusive commercial development sphere. In effect the proposal was asking Ethiopia to cede to its Italian aggressor in a more or less disguised form and under the pretext of a fallacious territorial exchange half of its national territory pending the annexation of the other half.

On December 10, the Principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs telegraphed the British Minister in Addis Ababa to use his utmost influence to induce the Ethiopian Emperor on no account to reject the Hoare-Laval Plan. The Secretary even ventured to hope that the Emperor would "give further proof of his statemanship by realizing the advantage of the opportunity of negotiation."¹⁶

But it was hard to see what advantage, if any, Ethiopia

¹⁵Great Britain, British and Foreign State Papers--1935, Vol. 139, p. 291.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 294.

could get out of the negotiation unless, of course, they were asking her to choose between total annexation or partial absorption of her territory by the aggressor. Nor could the British public see the justness of this plan. British public opinion was in fact so hostile that the Baldwin government was on the verge of resigning, but was forstalled by the resignation of Sir Samuel Hoare.

Mussolini did not accept the plan either in spite of the fact that it was generous to Italy. Actually why should he accept? If the two powers went that far to appease him, it was a clear proof of their weakness or of his importance-- at least in their eyes. In that case they would eventually yield to his full demand and his duty was to stick to a hard line. He knew that France--Italy's "Latin Sister" was sympathetic to him. As for Britain he considered her "as a frightened, flabby old woman, who at the worst would only bluster and was, anyhow, incapable of making war."¹⁷

Mussolini produced his own version of what the compromise should be. According to him Ethiopia proper consisted of most of Eritrea, Tigrai, Begemidir, Gojam and Shoa. These he was willing not to occupy directly. Even then the position of Ethiopia proper was to be like that of Egypt under the British. Moreover he was totally opposed to the idea of giving Ethiopia an outlet to the sea saying that this would

¹⁸Churchill, op. cit., p. 168.

make her a maritime power "thus heightening the real threat she constitutes to Italy."¹⁹

The two powers had thus failed to appease Mussolini. A policy of appeasement does not satisfy the appetite of an aggressor; it only wets it. At the same time it is, as Sir Anthony Eden puts it "more likely to breed doubting friends than daunt would-be enemies."²⁰ Actually what Britain and France for all their pains made out of Mussolini was a doubting friend. When the supreme test came at the outbreak of the Second War, Mussolini threw in his lot with a comrade-in-dictatorship--the other German dictator.

¹⁹Cited in Vera Michales Dean with the aid of the staff of Geneva Research Center, "The League and the Italian-Ethiopian Dispute," Geneva Special Studies 1934-35.

²⁰Eden, op. cit., p. 245.

IN THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

The Hoare-Laval plan had been dropped and the matter fell back to the League where Ethiopia's last hope lay. It was, after all, the promise of the theory of collective security that prompted Ethiopia to seek membership in 1921 and fight for two years despite strong opposition. Britain was for one, opposed to Ethiopia's membership on the ground that the latter could not qualify as a civilized nation because she allowed slavery. Ironically it was Italy which strongly supported her membership stating that if the Ethiopian government could assure the League of Nations that it would do everything to completely abolish slavery, introduce reforms into the country and thus meet the requirements in the Covenant, then Ethiopia's appeal for membership should not be denied. Actually, Mussolini was the last person who would want Ethiopia in the League of Nations as this meant that nations would be required to participate in a collective action should she be attacked. Thus, at first he was opposed to the idea, but remembering that admission was made by a two-thirds majority, his attempt to block her would be of no avail. Under such circumstances it was better to pose as a friend than as an enemy.¹

¹For documentary evidence of Italian policy towards Ethiopian participation in International Conferences see George W. Baer, The Coming of the Italian Ethiopian War (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1967) pp. 9-10.

In 1923 Ethiopia was admitted.

Yet when the League of Nations found Italy guilty of aggression and Ethiopia invoked Article XVI of the Covenant (an article which required the League to take economic sanctions or military action or both against an aggressor) Mussolini did not feel that he was contradicting himself when he argued that a barbarous nation like Ethiopia had no right to invoke the Covenant against a civilized state. As for his support in the admittance of Ethiopia to the League of Nations, he was prepared to plead that he was mistaken but that a single error of judgement should not inhibit civilization from breaking the last stronghold of barbarism. Moreover he assumed that colonial wars differed from European wars both on the plane of ethics and the plane of expediency. Thus he warned:

If the League of Nations were so reckless as to expand a remote colonial campaign into a general European war. . . it would cost this time, not millions but tens of millions of lives. Then it would be upon the League that the guilt would rest.²

Actually this was precisely what the big powers were trying to avoid, but Mussolini made it difficult for them to keep quiet and watch indifferently. He had rejected their good offices and moreover he launched his invasion in an obvious violation of the Covenant. By his unveiled and bold

²Quoted in The Times, London, October 4, 1935.

violation of the League Covenant Mussolini left Britain and France no chance except to support the opinion of almost the entire member states who found Italy the aggressor. These powers, especially France, had no intention of going all the way to make it hard for Mussolini, and he knew it. The French Prime Minister had already made it clear as the Manchester Guardian reported that he would not agree to any military action. The Manchester Guardian correspondent who dispatched this information from Geneva added:

M. Laval has, I understand, given an understanding to Mussolini that France will not join in any but economic and financial sanctions, so long as, he M. Laval is Prime Minister, and Signor Mussolini has said that he would not regard French participation only in economic and financial sanctions as an unfriendly act.³

Actually France was not doing what Britain would not do. In fact only three days before the Manchester Guardian correspondent sent his dispatch the British and the French governments had agreed to do just what M. Laval is accused of in the above quotation. On December 28, 1935, Laval told the French Chamber that on September the French had agreed:

to rule out military sanctions, not to adopt any measure that might lead to a naval war and thus not to contemplate the closure of the Suez Canal. In a word we have agreed to rule out everything that might lead to war.⁴

³Manchester Guardian, September 13, 1935.

⁴France, Journal Officiel: Chamber des Deputes, December 1935, p. 2863.

In effect this meant that Mussolini arrogated to himself the right to decide what sanctions might be taken. And so he allowed Britain and France to adopt sanctions against him, but not sanctions that, in his judgement could lead to war. This fact is made more evident by Mussolini's reaction towards these powers. On May 5, 1936, Mussolini said in an interview that even though Britain and France had imposed economic sanctions against Italy, he did not consider them as unfriendly nations and that, therefore, he was willing to allow them a share in economic ventures in Ethiopia.⁵

The question of military measures was ruled out and what Ethiopia could hope for was some kind of economic sanctions. In October 1935, the League of Nations enforced economic sanctions. The following items were considered by economic experts as appropriate.

1. Arms embargo: prohibition of arms and ammunition to Italy, including materials for chemical warfare, all aircraft and aircraft engines, rubber, iron and such other items.
2. Financial embargo: ban of all loans, shares issues, banking credits and advances for or on behalf of the Italian Government.
3. Import embargo: prohibition of importation of all goods (except gold or silver bullion) consigned from, grown, produced, or manufactured in Italy.⁶

⁵Daily Mail, March 6, 1936.

⁶Taken from Leonard L. Leonard, International Organizations, (New York: McGraw Hill Company, 1951), p. 151.

But oil without which Italian invasion could not have continued for long was not included. The spraying of poison gas over combatants and non combatants alike by Italian aircrafts and the consequent mutilation of men, women, and children would not have been possible if the oil fuel for aeroplanes had not been supplied by the member states from whom Italy imported 75% of its oil. Whatever oil resources might have been stored would have been exhausted long before the use of poison gas reached its height in March and April 1936. Mussolini himself later confessed to Hitler in 1938 that "if oil sanctions was imposed, I would have had to order a withdrawal from Abyssinia in a week."⁷

Even the sanctions which were agreed upon on paper could not be applied effectively. In the first place the preparation, adjustment, coordination, and a host of other consideration that had to be taken made it practically impossible to enforce the sanctions at the time when they could have been effective. Thus, at first the application of economic sanction had to be discussed by subcommittees, expert groups and committees of coordination. Then governments were faced with problems in carrying out an effective program of sanctions. The actions of fifty nations had to be synchronized, and each had its own constitutional procedures, its own internal political and economic problems.

⁷Quoted in Frederick Hartmann. The Relations of Nations (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1957) p. 373 n.

Then too a time limit had to be set for all states to begin sanctions at the same time lest some should suffer more than others. Consequently monthly reports had to be issued on the results of sanctions by each state, ambiguities had to be cleared away and steps had to be taken to insure that those member states that had close economic ties with Italy did not suffer disproportionately. The result of all this was that the Fascist armies were given time to complete their conquest before effective sanctions could be imposed.

Moreover in the League of Nations itself four members refused to impose any sanctions at all, on the pretext that they were economically so interdependent with Italy that they could not do so without hurting their own economy. Among those who agreed seven states did not apply the arms embargo, eight did not take financial measures, ten simply pretended as if there were no sanctions and continued their normal trade and thirteen did not prohibit imports from the Italians.⁸ Then too there was the United States a non League member with whom Italy could trade and so she did on a grand scale as will be seen in the Chapter of "Arms Embargo."

To add insult to injury the League of Nations lifted the sanctions on July 4, 1936. The sanctions were, of course, ineffective, but to lift them only two months after the war was over on the battlefield meant condoning Fascist aggression

⁸Ibid.

against Ethiopia. Had the sanction, half-hearted as they were, continued, Italy's economy might have suffered in the longrun and this might possibly have pressured Mussolini to come to some negotiated settlement.

If not the sole, at least the main reason for the existence of the League of Nations was to end aggression and all armed conflicts as means of settlement of international differences. In letting Italy invade Ethiopia with impunity, it had failed in its prime duty. The Theory of Collective Security demanded that first peaceful means such as economic sanctions should be tried to bring the aggressor to his knees. But if this failed then military measures had to be taken. The League only irresolutely tried the first and not at all the second.

From its beginning the League of Nations had not been conceived as the preserver of world peace as such. It was primarily the work of the allied powers of the First World War. Hence the drafters of the Covenant were immediately concerned with the establishment of a status quo of their own making which was designed to keep Germany from disturbing them again. Thus

The functions envisaged for the League was not so much to keep peace, but to keep a specific peace--to legitimize and stabilize a particular world settlement based upon victory.⁹

⁹Inis L. Claude Jr. Swords into Ploughshares (New York: Random House, 1964) p. 44.

But conflicts are like wildfire and once peace was threatened somewhere it proved difficult to keep that specific peace. For if an European aggressor could not be checked in Ethiopia what guarantee was there that he would not run amok in Europe? We might even go back and argue that if Japan's aggression in Manchuria was prevented Italy might not have dared to invade Ethiopia. By the same token Hitler would probably never have committed such flagrant aggressions as he did following Mussolini's success. Again if Germany was resolutely opposed earlier Japan might not have been presented with the temptation which Hitler's early successes made possible.

But because of the uncertainties of the new system of collective security the great powers could not feel safe and so they could not abandon the system they were used to--the balance-of-power system. The result was, however, as the Ethiopian crisis well illustrated, that there was no system that could restrain aggression.

IMPOSITION OF ARMS EMBARGO

If the great powers could not live up to their solemn duty, at least they should not have facilitated the aggressor's path by denying the victim all means of self-defense. Yet this is what actually happened when Britain and France--from whom Ethiopia bought most of its arms--imposed an arms embargo on both belligerents equally. But Italy was an industrialized country which manufactured most of its own war supplies and so long as it could import the necessary items in the form of raw materials the measure hardly affected Mussolini's efforts. At the same time it meant that Ethiopia, a non-manufacturing country, could not buy arms for its self-defense even though Italy was declared the aggressor--and Ethiopia the victim.

Britain and France were moreover bound by an additional treaty to help Ethiopia in obtaining "all arms and munitions necessary for the defense of her territories from external aggression and for the preservation of internal order therein."¹

In spite of a strong sentiment in the British public, favoring the sale of arms to Ethiopia, the Baldwin Government would not do anything that might anger the already angry Mussolini. Among influential authorities there were men like Mr. Anthony Eden--then Minister for League of Nations Affairs--

¹Eden, op. cit., p. 288.

who felt that the arms embargo was a breach of a treaty as well as inequitable, but to no avail.² Lloyd George suggested that if the British government could not have the nerve officially to endorse the sale of arms to Ethiopia it should at least "drop a hint to Vickers"--an armament company. Only when Mussolini had invaded and firmly secured his beachhead did the British drop a slight hint. Even then very few licences for arms export to Ethiopia were granted with unnecessary caution--unnecessary because this did not abate Mussolini's anger. In his eyes the mere fact that, however restricted, Britain was selling arms to Ethiopia was bad enough. The Ethiopian request was to purchase surplus war office stocks of rifles and aeroplanes; what the British allowed was six million rounds of ammunition.

But Laval of France was more careful not to incur Mussolini's displeasure. In June 1935 three months before the invasion several hundred boxes of ammunition and rifles destined for Ethiopia had arrived at Jibuti--a port in the French Somaliland. But the French Customs Director would not allow the arms to go to their destination, and when someone reminded him of the existence of a treaty which allowed Ethiopia to import arms via Djibuti he is reported to have replied:

²Ibid., p. 252.

Yes, but under the condition that such entry should be accompanied by several licences and many permissions. It always happens that one or the other is missing.³

On the other hand Italian troops and armaments were allowed to pass through the Suez Canal to perform precisely what the League of Nations including Britain and France had condemned. Some even tried to justify the British action by arguing that if Britain closed the Canal to Italian warships the latter's suicide squadrons of dive-bombers would have hurled themselves upon the fleet lying at Alexandria. But Mussolini had neither the power nor the nerves to risk a war with Britain. The Italian navy was one-fourth of that of Britain and much less in quality. Its air power was likewise inferior and its conscript army--though numerous--did not have the capacity to challenge the British. That is why Sir Winston Churchill remarked that "if ever there was an opportunity of striking a decisive blow in a generous cause with the minimum of risk it was here and now."⁴

The difference between this and previous Italo-Ethiopian armed conflicts was that in the past Italy was well equipped and Ethiopia less equipped but not completely unequipped. Now it was a war between a fully-armed modern army and an almost

³Cited in Ministry of Information, Liberation Silver Jubilee 1941-1966 (Addis Ababa: Publications and Foreign Languages Press Department, 1966), p. 6.

⁴Churchill, op. cit., p. 177.

unarmed feudal host. When the war started, there was a general feeling in Europe that it would take Italy a long time to conquer Ethiopia.⁵ In the first place when the rainy season came in June, the invaders would be bogged down in mud for its five-month duration. As it turned out the rains hampered the defenders rather than the aggressor.⁶ Then too the Ethiopians in accordance with their past tradition were expected to put up a stout resistance. But a stout resistance without arms can hardly last long and the Fascist armies were able to complete their conquest in May 1936 before the rainy season began. Had the arms embargo been lifted the resistance would, as Mr. Anthony Eden observes, in his memoirs, have been immeasurably stiffened. To make matters worse the Suez Canal was opened for the Italian armies to pass through and kill a disarmed people.

U.S. Neutrality

Herbert Feis who was economic advisor to the Department of State and advisor on international economic affairs at the time of the Italo-Ethiopian War remarks: "There was only one country strong enough and free enough to turn the balance against Mussolini if it so willed--the United States."⁷

⁵For example See Eden, op. cit., p.

⁶See below p. 72.

⁷Herbert Feis, Seen From E.A.: Three International Episodes (New York: Alfred A. Knopp, Inc., 1947), p. 218.

True the United States was not a member of the League of Nations and thus should not, ordinarily have been expected to have applied sanctions. But it was a member of the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928 which renounced war. The philosophy underlying the pact was that there could not be neutrality in matters affecting international peace. If the pact had outlawed war, anyone who resorted to it was an outlaw and should not be treated with neutrality.

However, immediately after Italy launched its invasion of Ethiopia President Franklin D. Roosevelt spoke in San Diego: "Despite what happens in continents overseas, the United States of America shall and must remain...unentangled and free."⁸ The speech was actually an assertion of the Neutrality Act he had signed on August 31, 1935. This prohibited the shipment of arms to warring nations and barred American vessels from carrying war materials to belligerents.

On the surface this neutrality affected neither of the belligerents since neither Ethiopia nor Italy imported arms from America. But again Italy was a manufacturing country and Ethiopia was not, so that while Italy could import raw materials and produce its own armaments Ethiopia got the worst of the Neutrality Act.

Italy's military effectiveness depended, to a significant extent, on imports of American raw materials such as iron

⁸The New York Times, Oct. 6, 1935.

ore and oil. These strategic materials were exported in far greater quantities during the war than before it. Thus according to U.S. official statistics 62,169 tons of scrap iron were shipped to Italy in July 1935 as against 21,803 in July 1934.⁹ Shipment of oil to Italy also increased during the war by 600%.¹⁰ Thus by prohibiting the sell of arms to Ethiopia while increasing the export of strategic supplies to Italy, the U.S.A. was in effect supporting the aggressor. Recognizing the inequity of the Neutrality Act as it existed Senators Nye and Clark and Congressman Maverick on January 6, 1936 introduced a bill proposing the limitations of the export of strategic materials to both belligerents.¹¹ Soon after Congressman Ludlow introduced a more strict embargo on all trade with belligerent states.¹²

If either of these bills were passed the Italian war effort would have been hurt. But the bills failed to receive endorsement. In the first place those men in Congress who opposed U.S. participation in international cooperation (the opponents of U.S. membership in the League of Nations for example) felt that cutting trade with Italy was participating in the sanctions imposed by the League, and this they could not

⁹Hartman, op. cit., p. 374.

¹⁰The New York Times, November 6, 1935.

¹¹Congressional Record 74th Cong, 2nd Sess. pp. 87-89.

¹²Ibid., pp. 163-64.

accept. Others like the famous isolationist Senators Borah and Johnson opposed strict embargoes because it appeared to them as a surrender of American trading rights. There was another group of legislators who entertained pro-Fascist sympathisers. These were especially prevalent among legislators whose constituents contained large numbers of Italian-Americans.¹³

But there were also many Americans who felt that the U.S. should not and ought not remain neutral when peace was threatened. Bishop William T. Manning of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine of New York City, for example wondered whether the nation could claim that it was fulfilling its share of the obligation to uphold world peace.¹⁴

The fact that the United States was not a member of the League of Nations posed in theory as well as in fact, several problems. Thus even if the League of Nations took military actions against Italy for example it could not count in the support of the United States for the supply of weapons if such a need arose. Or if on the otherhand, it applied effective economic sanctions it was doubtful whether the United States would not offset the effort by increasing its trade with Italy as it actually did.

¹³For broader discussion of pro-Italian feelings in the U.S.A. See Manfred Jonas, "Pro-Axis Sentiments," The Historian (Feb. 1967) Vol. 29.

¹⁴The New York Times, Oct. 7, 1935.

Although the Neutrality Act of 1935 specifies that an embargo would be imposed only on munitions of war--meaning finished instruments of war--Secretary of State Cordell Hull gave indications that America would consider widening the definition of embargo items if the League of Nations adopted economic sanctions.¹⁵ But the Pittman Bill which proposed to give the President the mandate to use his discretion in imposing embargoes was opposed by the isolationists who feared that Roosevelt might use the power to cooperate with the League of Nations. Such an act, according to the isolationists was unneutral and might bring the U.S. into entanglements in world affairs--a situation which they had always wanted to avoid.

So in the end the only interest the U.S. government showed in the Italo-Ethiopian war was in regard to the air bombardment of Addis Abeba and Dire Dua. Secretary Hull in a telegram to the U.S. ambassador in Rome expressed his concern over the bombardment of these cities and instructed the ambassador to inform the Rome government of U.S. disapproval of the Act. Hull did not say that the United States disapproved of air attacks on all civilian centers although many open cities were being bombed. The reason why he was particularly interested in Dire Dua and Addis Abeba was, as the New York Times indicated, because large European population lived

¹⁵Eden, op. cit., p. 283.

in these cities.¹⁶ There were only few Americans in Addis Abeba and fewer still in Dire Dua.

¹⁶The New York Times, October 8, 1935.

INTERNAL INSTABILITY

Fighting one another and even aiding a foreign enemy against their own national leader was a common thing among jealous Ethiopian feudal chiefs. Emperor Johannes IV, then a powerful feudal lord in Tigrai watched with quiet satisfaction the destruction of Emperor Theodros at the hands of the British Expeditionary Force. Similarly Menelik King of Shoa, later Emperor, entered into a secret agreement to aid Italy against Johannes. But in both cases as in all others, the chiefs never cooperated with a foreign enemy if he meant to conquer and hold their country. Indeed when such a situation arose they forgot their rivalries and stood solidly behind their emperor. In the first place the occupation of the country by a foreign power meant the destruction of their privileged positions. At best they would be reduced to the status of the English barons under their Norman conquerors and at worst to that of the Nigerian chiefs under the British system of indirect rule.

But the most driving force behind this unity was their religion. The Ethiopian church is, of course, fundamentally within the fold of the Eastern Orthodox Church; however, an isolation of over a thousand years had naturally resulted in the Ethiopianization--indeed the barbarization of ritual and dogma. Yet to the Ethiopian there was only one true faith and that was his. Thus as in their food, their costumes

their script and their calendar, the Ethiopians also made their church unique. Thus when an emperor uttered the formula "for country, religion and King" the response was always almost unanimous but the magic word in the formula was not so much "King" or "Country" as "religion."

There is a general tendency to date the breakdown of feudalism in Ethiopia from the reign of Menelik. It is true that he had the desire to modernize the country, but neither conditions, nor his own imagination measured up to the task, so that the reforms he introduced such as the establishment of ministerial department, the building of the Djibuti-Addis Ababa railway and the introduction of telephone communication in certain areas were nothing more than rare rudimentary signs of modernization in a country that was otherwise thoroughly feudal. The task of genuine reforms had to wait until Haileselassie came to power.

After Menelik's death in 1913, his grandson Lij Eyasu ascended the throne but he was not destined to stay long. His irresponsible behavior and his leanings towards Islam aroused the suspicion of the church as well as the jealous nobles. Ras Teferi one of the most ambitious young nobles and by far the shrewdest of the lot continued to get the support of the church and influential groups to deal with the unruly Emperor. In 1916 Ras Teferi led an army against supporters of Lij Eyasu and defeated them, captured the Emperor himself and put him in prison. Menelik's daughter, Zewditu, was crowned

empress and Teferi became Regent and heir to the throne.

Starting with the regency of Ras Teferi, serious and genuine steps were attempted to westernize Ethiopia. As a regent Teferi lacked the authority to carry his ambitious reform plans, and although in 1928 he became Negus--the highest rank below emperor--still his efforts met strong resistance from influential groups of the old-guard nobility. In 1930 upon the death of Empress Zewditu Negus Teferi was crowned Emperor under the name Haileselassie I. Now he was legally in a position to launch his reform plans. But to reform a country whose archaic values had been hardened over many centuries was an exceedingly difficult task that could not be achieved in a short time. The Emperor had been in power barely four years and his reform plans had created dissensions, alienations, and even cessionist tendencies when the Italo-Ethiopian conflict started in 1934 following the Wal Wal incident.

The church that had supported the Emperor (then Ras Teferi) against Lij Eyasu now resented his westernizing efforts. The Ethiopian clergy seldom distinguished dogma from custom and any novel idea that undermined the traditional way of life appeared to them irreligious. The feudal chiefs for their part had an added reason to oppose the reforms. The establishment of a modern centralized government meant they would be stripped of the virtually independent status which they had hitherto enjoyed.

Thus revolts sprung up everywhere. The Governor of Sidamo Province in southern Ethiopia, Dejazmatch Balcha had rebelled as early as 1928 and great effort was required to subdue him. In 1930 the Governor of Begemidir, Ras Gugsa Wolie, revolted and again it took much bloodshed to suppress him. Lij Eyasu who had been in prison since his deposition in 1916 also escaped and with the help of loyal troops tried to regain the throne. He was, however, recaptured and put back in prison. In 1932 a revolt had to be put down in Gojam. In 1934 the very year Italy was preparing to attack Northern Tigre revolted and was put down only after severe fighting. In the same year Fitawrariy Biru an avowed reactionary of the old-guard circles also tried in vein to overthrow the Emperor Haileselassie's regime. All these incidents made the country unstable--a situation which was and is fatal in time of war.

It was well to replace traditional rulers by westernized and younger men, but these men almost exclusively came from Shoa, the ruling province and this was resented by the other provinces, more so by the non-traditional Ethiopian regions¹ that felt that the establishment of a centralized government under exclusive Shoan leadership was another device for perpetuating the tyranny of that province. Thus the Italian government was actually right (though for its own selfish

¹Traditional Ethiopia consisted of Tigrai, Begemidir, Gojam, Wollo, and Shoa. Ethnically the people in these regions are generally of the Hametic-Semetic aiad mixture--

motive) when in a memorandum of September 4, 1935, when it told the League of Nations that:

The elimination of important chiefs who wielded an extensive influence in certain regions, and the substitution of Shoan officials of the central government for the traditional chiefs, while failing to strengthen the central government's power in the frontier regions, have, at the same time, disorganized the provincial administrations and helped to make internal conditions in Ethiopia even more unstable than they were in the Emperor Menelik's time.²

Italy had thus struck at the most appropriate time. Once the war started various dissatisfied groups who had hitherto been suppressed by force or threat of force found the chance to revolt openly. In Gojam a cousin of Ras Hailu whom the Emperor deposed and imprisoned in 1932 revolted against the central government just as the war with Italy started. Ras Imru who was then the governor of that province could not suppress the rebellion without shifting forces from the front. Thus the governor had to go to the northern front leaving the rebellion to take its own course. It was suppressed in due time but with much waste of effort and troops which could have been better used against a common enemy.

In Tigray Dejazmatch Haileselassie Gugsa ruler of the northern half of the province defected to the Italians with

hence the term "Abyssinia" from the Arabic for mixture. The rest of the provinces annexed in the Nineteenth Century are inhabited by Nilotic groups mostly and in some areas by Hametic people.

²League of Nations Official Journal (November, 1935) p. 1391.

a force of 10,000 troops. Haile Selassie Gugsa was embittered towards the Emperor who, in order to avoid the potential threat of a united Tigray, divided it and gave half to Ras Seyoum. The man had hopes of ruling the entire province and by feudal tradition he had the right since he was the legitimate grandson of Emperor Johannes IV whose native province was Tigray. Haile Selassie Gugsa's defection had a disastrous effect upon the Ethiopian defense plan according to which the 10,000 troops he commanded were to hold Mekele with the Army of Ras Seyoum who would join him from the north. The scheme of defense of the north and consequently of the entire plan of defense was thus affected.³

Everywhere subject peoples who were held tyrannically--almost to the point of enslavement by the ruling class--felt that the Italians had come to liberate them. The nomadic Danakils and Somalis in the south and southeast enlisted as mercenaries by Italy made the position of the Ethiopian defenders in those areas highly insecure. The soldiers had to defend themselves against native raids and engage in mop-up operations before meeting the actual enemy. By then they had suffered a number of casualties. To engage a strong enemy after having been exhausted in local engagements was, to be sure very demoralizing. The Sultan of Biru and the

³Steer for example considers that the defection was in fact fatal to the Emperor's plan of defense. See George Steer, Caesar in Abyssinia (Boston: Little Brown, 1937) p. 63.

Sultan of Ausa both of whom were rulers of important sultanates in southeastern Ethiopia submitted to the Italians without resistance thereby giving the enemy an easy foot-hold in this area.

In the north Ras Mulugeta the Ethiopian Minister of War after having been defeated at Amba Aradom had retreated to Amba-Alagie--a key mountain pass where he built a formidable defense. The Italians also felt that it was indeed formidable and had thrown everything they had into this attack. But it was unnecessary. The Galla contingents deserted before the Italian columns reached the defensive position, thereby, exposing Ras Mulugeta's left flank and making it impossible for the defenders to hold their ground. Ras Mulugata withdrew without giving battle and Amba Alagie was captured without a shot. Yet Marshal Badoglio called it a glorious achievement. "That mountain which had been lying on our stomachs has been won,"⁴ he told the gathered correspondents pointing towards the direction of Amba Alagie.

After the retreat from Amba Alagie the Ethiopians regrouped and fought their last battle on the Northern Front at Mai Chew. Here too, they were defeated but not destroyed. They could reorganize and offer another resistance, however, this was made impossible by the harassing Azebo and Wollo⁵

⁴New York Times, February 17, 1936.

⁵Azebo Gallas lived as they live now in the northern extreme of Tigray and the Wollo Gallas as their name indicates are in the province of Wollo.

Gallas. Thus not only could the Ethiopians not reorganize and counterattack but they found it hard to make their retreat good due to the sudden raids by the rebellious local population. As the war progressed the rate of desertion became extremely high and the consequences ominous. Not only did they make the Ethiopian position untenable but since they were now better armed than the Ethiopian troops and had better knowledge of their areas they inflicted nearly as much damage as the Italian invaders themselves.⁶

There is no more disaster that can befall an army than to fight against a vastly superior enemy and at the same time have to defend itself from the people whom it was supposed to protect.

⁶Vahib Pasha a Turkish general who was advisor to the Ethiopian forces in the South said that in his view the problem of wholesale desertions was a decisive factor in the breakdown of the Ethiopian resistance. See Arnold Toynbee, "Abyssinia and Italy," Survey of International Affairs Vol. II 1935.

THE ETHIOPIAN ARMY ON THE EVE

Writing in 1935 just before the war started, Robert Woolbert described the Ethiopian army as "an anachronism in a world where war has become an intricate science."¹

The description was very fitting. The Ethiopian feudal army differed from the Italian Army not only in weapons and mechanized transport but also in quality and organization. In 1896 the difference between the two antagonists was not very sharp. While Italy had more arms, Ethiopia did not severely suffer from lack of them. In terms of the art of warfare both, more or less, fought by the old book; that is, in the classical manner where battle orders took the form of a modified Phalanx formation. Where the difference was not so great, therefore, the test was one of martial prowess.

But as Woolbert has said, war had become an intricate science and in the forty or more years that elapsed between Adua and 1935, Fascist Italy had caught up with the times. New systems had rendered the old system of warfare useless--indeed suicidal. The experience of the French in the early phase of the First World War, for example, had amply demonstrated the fatality of massed attack in the face machine-guns. Tanks and aircrafts had further neutralized the shock

¹Robert Gale Woolbert, "Feudal Ethiopia and Her Armies," Foreign Affairs (An American Quarterly Review) (Oct., 1935, July, 1935 Vol. 14 Nos. 1-14,) p. 77

effect of relentless attack. The art of Camouflaging, fortification and combat formations had been improved. Thorough training and good discipline became essential, and this in turn needed the establishment of a permanent army. Where one of the belligerents had modernized its army on these lines and where the other had not the contest would be like that in the movie "Zulu."

In Ethiopia little had changed since 1896. As was to be expected of in a feudal system, the bulk of the troops was raised and led by provincial governors. The levy usually consisted of three types: first, the governor had his own personal following whom he armed and led in battle. This type of warrior group usually received land and occasionally money and lived near or in the household of the governor. This by Ethiopian standards constituted the professional soldiery. Indeed, the soldiers themselves felt so, for they knew they could only win such rare reward of close attachment to and protection of a great man by the demonstration of their personal bravery.

The next group of soldiers were those, like the Fyrds of pre-Norman England, were called in to do service for a specified time usually two to three months. The third and largest group, which would only be called in times of national emergency was the mass levy.

The Emperor for his part, had his own personal following like the other feudal lords except that in his case his

position would enable him to support larger number of troops. Also in his case his troops would normally be given some kind of rudimentary training. Moreover in time of war the Emperor assumed, at least in theory, the role of the commander-in-chief of all the armies and the various chiefs and provincial governors held their posts under him, their rank in the field depending on their status in normal life.

When general mobilization was ordered the soldiers were supposed to provide themselves with food for so many number of days--depending on the official estimate when the campaign was expected to be completed. The soldiers ration usually consisted of flour, dried beans and peas, butter and red pepper. But this ration seldom lasted for more than few days and the soldier would, as we have already seen, take to the countryside. The question of medical care never existed. If the wounded soldier was lucky, he would make it to the camp where he would find no treatment in the modern sense, but where he would be given some traditional aid. In the 1935-36 war, however, Red Cross organizations from Britain, Sweden, Egypt and others sent help. But because of transport difficulties and lack of adequate personnel they found it hard to cope with the civilian victims of poison gas and the increasing military casualties.

When the feudal levies started moving they resembled a mass of people vacating their village carrying all their belongings with them as if their village is threatened by

some natural disaster. Soldiers marched followed by transport mules and slave servants. Depending on the amount of his wealth, each feudal chief would also have a number of goats and cattle to be slaughtered in rest camps. The richer he was the bigger household he would have in his camp. Yet in spite of the seemingly disorderly manner of movement confusion in the ranks seldom occurred. Each corps of the army represented a region and followed its traditional leader, and each person within the various smaller groups was related to one another by ties of neighborhood or kinship.

In terms of weapons, the majority of the levy carried swords and shields. The amount of arms possessed by Ethiopia in 1935 is not known for certain, but it is estimated that of the 280,000² troops that were mobilized some 60,000 carried rifles of all makes. In addition there were few hundred machine guns and a few dozen of cannons, the last being "nothing but museum pieces."³

The enemy was, of course, well equipped and highly mechanized. Even in sheer numbers Italy had more troops at the front. According to Ethiopian sources the figure is given at 875,000⁴ officers and men. But the figure may be

²Ibid., p. 78.

³The estimate was made by Marshal Badoglio commander-in-chief of the Invasion Army in his War in Abyssinia and cited in Margery Perham, The Government of Ethiopia (London, Faber and Faber, 1948) p. 166.

⁴Ethiopia, Liberaticn Silver Jubilee (Addis Abeba: Publications and Foreign Languages Press Department, 1966) p. 42.

misleading since a large number of this included non-combatants who were mostly engaged in road buildings. The enemy arms and transport facilities may be broken into the following categories:⁵

Transport animals	144,000
Rifles	930,000
Machine guns	618
Artillery pieces	2,120
Tanks and carriers	3,700
Infantry rifle rounds	570,000,000
Artillery shells	3,071,000

And an undetermined air fleet of several squadrons.

This was a totally different kind of war to which the Ethiopian soldiers had never been accustomed. In the first place he had no experience in a protracted war conducted on wide theaters of operation and on two fronts such as he faced in 1935. He was never used to counterattacking nor to pursuing his beaten enemy. He had developed neither the patience nor the capacity for a long campaign. The longer the campaign lasted the more problem of obtaining supplies. Then his war--like enthusiasm--would rapidly diminish. Moreover it was distasteful to him to remain underarms during the rainy season. What he looked forward to was a short campaign climaxed by resounding victory. If the enemy was once crushed, the army disintegrated and the troops went home on their own.

⁵Ibid.

This is what happened in 1875 and 1876 when the Egyptian armies were decisively defeated at Gundet and at Gura. The Ethiopians did not exploit their victories with a drive towards Massawah--the possession of which would have given land-locked Ethiopia an outlet to the sea. Again after the Italian defeat at Adua in 1896, Eritrea lay open, but the army feeling its mission accomplished in the destruction of the enemy simply dishanded. It was only that General Baratieri who had not quickly recovered from the shock of the defeat that he did not counter-attack. Had he done so even with a very small force, there was nothing left of the Ethiopian army to stop his thrust. It had melted away.

Clearly the Ethiopians were ill-prepared to face a modern army. The only method that they could successfully use was the guerrilla way of fighting. It would be foolhardiness to attack an enemy with vastly superior arms en mass. Attack had to be done in small bands and preferably at night when enemy air power would be ineffective. The invading army would then be forced to employ large detachments to combat small bands. This would have proved expensive to the enemy. Military experts everywhere expecting the Ethiopians to follow this method predicted that it would be a long war indeed. The defender had a decided advantage of mobility on his own ground, whereas a mechanized enemy was theoretically ill-prepared for a campaign in a country of mountains and deep ravines. Emperor Haileselassie who seemed

to have understood the futility of engaging the enemy in big battles had advised his troops:

Be cunning, be savage, face the enemy one by one, two by two, five by five in the fields and mountains. Do not take white clothes, do not mass as now; hide, strike suddenly, fight the nomad war, steal, snipe, and murder singly. Today the war has begun, therefore scatter and advance to victory.⁶

But it is always hard to make a sudden change from an age-long practice and thus the emperor was unable to restrain leaders, who following their old habits, disastrously massed their forces thereby offering an ideal target for enemy machine guns and aerial bombs while they themselves could not respond in kind.

There was also an added problem arising out of the age-long hatred of the soldier by the local population over which he operated. The army lived on the people. It seldom carried its supplies and if at all they would not last for more than a few days. After that the feudal levy would form into groups and order the villagers to provide all the food and drinks demanded.

Emperor Haileselassie while in exile in England admitted this. He said that "the country folk were ordered under compulsion to give to the soldiers food, grass and wood, supplying them without payment,"⁷ claiming, however, that he himself

⁶Toynbee, op. cit., p. 372.

⁷Richard Pankhurst, "Some Factors depressing the Standard of Living of Peasants in Traditional Ethiopia," Journal of Ethiopian Studies, (July 1966) Vol. IV, No. 2, p. 75.

had abolished this system. But a problem could not be solved by order unless the causes that gave rise to the problem are solved. When the Emperor gave his orders not to ravage the country, the soldier was poorly supplied or not at all. The result was, as always, that wherever the troops operated or passed through whole villages were depredated, the local population impoverished and insulted. The army moved as Steer observes like a "trail of brown ants eating up everything."⁸

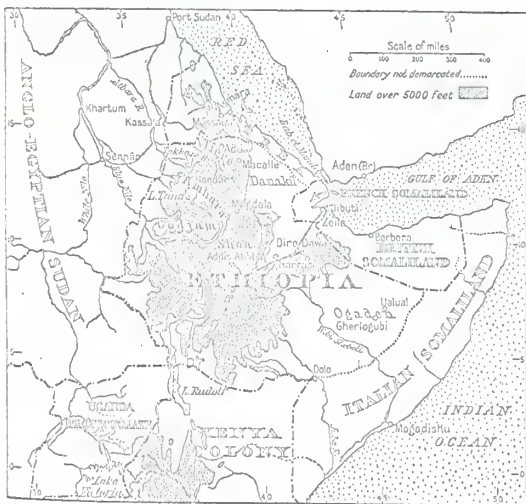
⁸Caesar in Abyssinia, op. cit., p. 137.

GEOPHYSICAL FACTORS

Physically Ethiopia embraces two major escarpments--namely the Northern Plateau and the Southern Slab. The two escarpments face each other across the Rift along the valley of the Awash River. The plateau is inclined north-eastward reaching an altitude of more than 8000 feet in the north and abounding with numerous mountains rising occasionally to fifteen thousand feet. The slab on the other hand slopes down southeastward to the Indian Ocean until it reaches the great desert depression of the Danakil region and the arid lowlands of Somalia.

Climatically the country can be divided into four zones. The first is the DEGA or cold zone comprising all land above 8000 feet. It includes the northern part of the Plateau as well as some isolated regions in the northern section of the slab where the land rises abruptly. Here the annual mean temperature varies between 40 to 60 degrees Fahrenheit. To the Italian invaders coming from southern Europe it does not afford suitable climate. Cattle and sheep prosper here as pasture is available all year round.

The next is the WEINA DEGA or Temperate Zone consisting of the Plateau between 4,800 and 8,000 feet and with an annual mean temperature varying from 60 to 68 degrees. A large part of the plateau and the upper basins of the Juba and Wabi Shebeli Rivers fall within this zone.



Physical Feature of Ethiopia

Source: Taken from H. Scaetta, "Geography Ethiopia's Ally" Foreign Affairs XIX Nos 1-14 (October, 1935- July, 1935).

Tropical forests abound and in some places three crops could be harvested in a year. The region is ideal for such Mediterranean fruits as citrus and grapes as well as cereals. It is also the most suitable place for European settlement.

The third, KOLLA or hot, zone lies between 2,500 and 4,800 feet with an annual mean temperature varying between 68 and 77 degrees. In the higher parts of this belt coffee is grown. The land is rich and could be made richer still by irrigation since it does not get adequate rain. Sugar cane and cotton can be grown in the lower part of this belt. It is less suitable for European habitation than the WEIMA DEGA, but its economic importance to Italy was great. Staples such as cotton, which Italy lacked, could, for example, be exploited here.

Lastly, we have the intensely hot lowland regions with a mean annual temperature of over 86 degrees. It is a desert tract of practically no economic value and inhabited by turbulent nomadic tribes.

Italy, on her part, was also in possession of parts of the plateau and the slab. Her colony of Eritrea formed the northern extremity of the plateau and Italian Somaliland in the south formed the southeastern edge of the slab. In itself Eritrea was of small economic value, as agriculturally or otherwise it produced little. Its chief economic value to Italy was, thus, in the fact that it controlled the principal outlet for the trade of Northern Ethiopia. However, it

affords suitable temperature for settlement except of course, for the coastal region which is extremely hot. Militarily it was important because it provided Italy a foothold on the Ethiopian Plateau. Moreover, by virtue of her possession of a good part of the Red Sea Coast Italy could get a stranglehold on the Red Sea through East-West sea traffic by blockading the Bab-el-Mandeb--the narrow neck of the sea.

Italian Somaliland was different from Eritrea in that the former was semi-desert. The inhabitants were mostly nomadic subsisting by primitive agriculture and pasturing. The only hope in this region were the JUDA and the WABI SHEBELI Rivers whose waters could reclaim adjoining lands. Otherwise there was little that could be desired of Italian Somaliland in terms of economy. Militarily, however, it offered a base from whence Italy could launch a mechanized attack against Ethiopia.

For Mussolini, there were two considerations which governed his plans to invade Ethiopia. The first, of course, was economic. But he was also driven by the need for a geographical consolidation of his possessions. If Ethiopia could be annexed Eritrea and Italian Somaliland which had been hitherto isolated could have been united and an Italian East African Empire created.

In accordance with this aim Italy attacked on two fronts--from its Eritrean base in the north and Somaliland base in the south. The Fascist armies advancing from opposite

directions were eventually to join hands at Addis Ababa. The two lines of approach differed from each other in climate and topography.

The only practical route open for an invader approaching from the north was along the brow of the eastern escarpment of the plateau--a mountain ridge with a mean height of 7,000-8,000 feet running north and south. The right side of the ridge is cut by deep revines and on the left lies the burning Danakill depression. Swerving either left or right meant falling into these natural obstacles. Thus if the enemy wished to avoid this he would have to engage every line of defense on the brow of the escarpment by frontal attacks.

Ordinarily the defender who was supposed to have an advantage of mobility in his own mountainous habitat was expected to put up a stiff resistance even with the moderate arms he had. Many observers had anticipated this. A Scaetta, for one, writing before hostilities opened felt that "the Ethiopians can organize virtually impregnable positions for defense or for hurrying the enemy's rear."¹

Militarily speaking the observation would be correct if other factors did not intervene. As it happened the natural advantages on which the Ethiopian fighter had depended for so long had now been stripped away from him by the advent of modern technology. Italian engineers were able to construct

¹A. Scaetta, "Geography--Ethiopia's Ally," Foreign Affairs, op. cit., p. 68.

serviceable roads with amazing speed. Moreover, the aeroplane pursued the defenders over hill and dale dropping poison gas and bombs. All these had turned the scale against any ill-equipped army, but in the case of Ethiopia, the situation was worsened by the defenders themselves. Instead of taking cover in the abundant shelters which nature had provided, they massed themselves in large groups in the open; instead of disrupting the construction of roads and harassing the enemy in small bands they allowed themselves to be drawn into big battles. Thus through their own lack of ingenuity the Ethiopian defenders failed to maintain their superior mobility, and once they forfeited that in their own country, their military power was hamstrung.

The Italians were expected to meet with yet another difficulty. Thus whenever rain fell, the Italian advance would have to be halted, for in addition to the virtual non-existence of roads rainfall would immobilize wheeled transport, while the Ethiopian army by virtue of its light equipment, modest necessity and marching endurance would be able to harass its immobilized enemy at will. As it turned out, however, the contrary was true. The Italian engineers successfully constructed roads that could withstand rain. Moreover aircraft were used as a supplementary means of supply transportation. On the other hand the Ethiopians who depended on primitive tracks found it difficult to maintain constant communication. Whenever heavy rain fell rivers, great and

small, became raging torrents and districts were cut off from one another by impassable waters. Thus the climate proved to be in favor of the motorized and airborne invader rather than the defenders.

The topography of the southern front is markedly different from the northern one. Here the land is generally flat gradually rising towards the north. In this region of sand and scrub full use could be made of mechanized transport and tank warfare so long as there was no rain. But once rain falls the soil turns into a soapy paste making passage, even on foot, very difficult. The rain which comes in down-pours compresses rather than penetrates the soil so that motorized transport especially vehicles of high tonnage would be immobilized. Here road making requires stone foundation and the clearance of a sea of sand which is blown back by wind and covers the road anyhow. If the war on this front could not end before October, when the rainy season begins in this region, the campaign would necessarily have to be halted until the end of the rains. But was Mussolini prepared to sustain a long campaign?

Another disadvantage that the enemy had to overcome on this front was the heat and scarcity of water. The only way of overcoming the problem of water was to keep close to the JUBA and WABI SHEBELI Rivers. But only one column could take that approach and others had to advance through waterless desert. Several columns of the enemy had thus to traverse

a two-hundred-mile belt of barren lands before reaching water wells at WALWAL, GERLE GUBI and other such points.

The odds, however, were decidedly against the defender on this front. To begin with the Ethiopian troops were caught in a position where natural cover was unavailable and thus tanks and aeroplanes pounded him with deadly effectiveness. In matters of mobility the situation had become like the story of the Hare and the Tortoise except that in this case the Hare was no fool.

Moreover, an army without a planned supply system could not operate on a desert where leaving on the countryside was out of the question. Still more the highlander was poorly suited for a war in such lowland regions. His ineffectiveness had already been seen in 1898. At this time an Ethiopian expeditionary force was sent to the Valley of the Nile to occupy Eastern Sudan which Emperor Menelik had long coveted. Actually the expedition was sent under the encouragement of the French ostensibly to help Ethiopia, but in fact the French intension was to use the force as a protectory guard against any attempt by the British to reach the Nile from the south. Then French forces under Marchand who had been approaching from the west coast of Africa would be able to occupy the Nile Valley as far as Fashoda and thus carve out for France a North African Empire. Nevertheless, an Ethiopian expeditionary force did set out to the claimed territory and on June 20, 1898 reached the Nile Valley where the

Sobat River meets the White Nile. But the soldiers could not stand the climatic conditions of the region. It soon became evident that they could not maintain their position and thus a withdrawal had to be ordered. Diseases, heat and low altitude overcame the highlander and defeated his purpose.

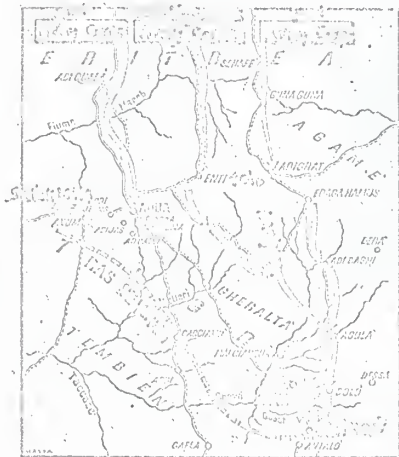
THE CONDUCT OF THE WAR

The Northern Front

At 5 a.m. on October 3, 1935, General De Bono's armies crossed the Ethiopian boundary at the Mereb River and advanced in three columns. The center column consisting of the Indigenous Army Corps (Colonial troops) commanded by General Pirzio Biroli pushed towards Entitcho. The left column--the First Army Corps under General Sanfini--took the Sen'afe'-Adigrat-Mekele Road. And on the right the Second Army Corps advanced on Adua. De Bono's plan was to capture Adua first and while the occupation of this town had not much military benefit yet it had a tremendous political significance on the eyes of the Italian public who now felt that the humiliating defeat in 1896 was at last avenged. After the capture of Adua the right column was to proceed to Axum--the historic capital and religious center of Ethiopia. From there it would continue its advance to Gondar--another historically significant town. The capture of Axum and Gondar would, the Italian strategists felt, cause a morale breakdown in the Ethiopians.

The Center Wing advancing from Entitcho and Hawzien would eventually make contact with the First Army Corps and march southward to Addis Ababa.

By November 8th, De Bono's forces had occupied the greater part of Tigrai. Adua, Axum, Adigrat, Mekele, Norther Tembien



De Rono's Initial Plan of Invasion on the Northern Front

Source: Angelo Del Boca: La guerra d'Abissinia 1935-1941, Milano: Feltrinelli, 1966.

and portions of Eastern Shire had fallen almost without resistance. De Bono had expected Ras Seyoum to put up a fight at Adua but the Ras retreated the night before the Italinas entered the town. The whereabouts of Ras Seyoum was not immediately known to De Bono. In fact he did not know where the whole of the Ethiopian forces were located. This did not deter De Bono from extending his occupation boldly. In so doing he neglected the military consideration that with each extension the area under his occupation became vast. His armies had, thus, to spread more widely and so more thinly.

But the Ethiopians did not make use of De Bono's weakness. Up to this time the Ethiopians did not confront their enemy, and it was a wise move since to attack three heavily equipped army corps within supporting distance of one another would have proved suicidal. But once the enemy had spread out so thinly the defenders best chance lay in making massed attacks on the separate dispositions. This, the Ethiopians failed to do. On the contrary they allowed the enemy to consolidate his gains and waited quietly until he felt ready to attack them.

Regardless of De Bono's fast and bold advance Mussolini did not think that the war was going fast enough. Thus three days after the capture of Mekele he cabled De Bono ordering him to proceed without delay and capture Amba Alagie.¹

¹Angelo Del Boca, La Guerra d'Abissinia 1935-1941, (Milan: Feltrinelli Editore, 1966) 2nd ed. p. 53.

Mussolini's order sprung from the belief that at Amba Alagie (a vital mountain fortress commanding the only good passage to the south) Ethiopian forces were strengthening their defenses. Hence they had to be thrown back before they were firmly entrenched. But De Bono had already overstretched his forces and was not willing to take any hasty steps that might endanger the whole operation. His motto had now become "safety first" and advance gradually and in irresistible strength. Thus after occupying an area he would order a halt, organize his communication and consolidate his forces. He was also careful not to interfere with the normal life of the people of the occupied territories. This type of operation although evidently slow nevertheless pacified the people and thus made it difficult for the Ethiopian counter-offensive. Moreover, in 1896, the Italians made a frenzied dash on the very same place and had lost. De Bono did not want to repeat it.

Mussolini was in a hurry however; and he was not going to risk speed for safety. At that time the League of Nations was considering economic sanctions against Italy, and if imposed--even partially--the Fascist troops in Ethiopia would be faced with considerable difficulties. Time was thus a factor of the utmost importance. On November 15, De Bono was replaced by Marshal Pietro Badoglio as commander-in-chief of the Italian Armies on both fronts.²

²Although Badoglio was officially commander-in-chief of all the Italian armies, General Graziani, commanding the

Reversing De Bono's method of relative fairness to the populations of the occupied territories Badoglio "staked his fortunes on obtaining quick returns by an intensive campaign of totalitarian frightfulness."³ During De Bono's command the Italian air arm was used against troop movements, military installations and for reconnaissance missions, though occasionally it was used against civilian centers as well. But no poison gas was sprayed even against military targets. When Badoglio took over he used his air power to the maximum. Aeroplanes rained poison gas and high explosives against military as well as innocent civilians. Ironically it was Badoglio--a non-Fascist, who, for the first time used poison gas which the Fascist De Bono refrained from using.⁴

Yet after several weeks of strenuous effort Badoglio had not made much headway. In fact during the early days of his command his armies suffered several reverses. For some time it seemed as though the Italians had no chance of winning. The Ethiopian Northern armies had by this time occupied three main defense positions. On the left were Ras Immiru's forces operating in the Shire district through which the Italian right column had to pass if it were to capture Gondair. In the center the armies of Ras Kassa and Ras Seyoum had

armies on the Southern Front was for all practical purposes independent of Badoglio.

³Toynbee, op. cit., p. 369.

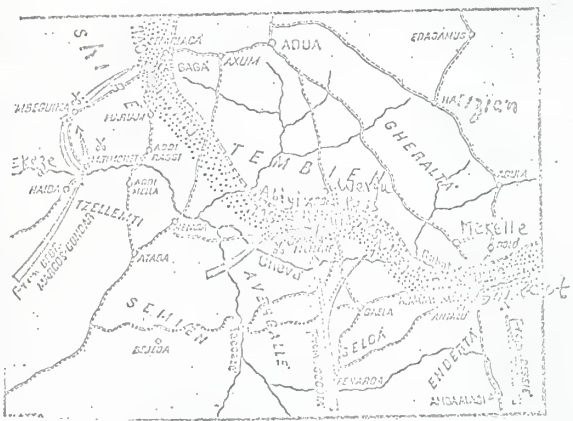
⁴Del Boca, op. cit., p. 54.

entrenched themselves in the rugged terrain in the Tembien district. At Amba Aradom another fortress controlling the Mekele-Addis Ababa road was occupied by Ras Mulugeta--an Adua veteran now Minister of War.

So far there had been little activity on the Ethiopian side. Now aggressive tactics started against all Italian dispositions. On the night of the 3rd and 4th December the enemy position at Shelikot, South of Mekele, was attacked with considerable losses to the enemy. The right wing was also attacked on the 15th by detachments of Ras Immuru's forces. Italian outposts on the Tekeze River were routed. In another engagement at the Dembaguina Pass they were forced to retreat. All in all the Italian right wing had lost twenty kilometers of ground.

In the center too the Ethiopians succeeded in penetrating the center of the Italian line near the town of Abiyi Adi. The town itself was soon recaptured. By this success the Ethiopians were now placed in a position to threaten the Adigrat-Mekele road which was under Italian control. From the left it was already open to the forces of Dejazmatch Kassa Sebhat still at large northeast of Mekele, and from the right it lay open to the forces of Ras Kassa and Ras Seyoum who were now in control of the Adua-Adigrat road.

At the beginning of Badoglio's command neither his flanks nor his lines communication was secure. With their main communication line thus cut off the Italian armies would have



Ethiopian Defense Organization on the Northern Front

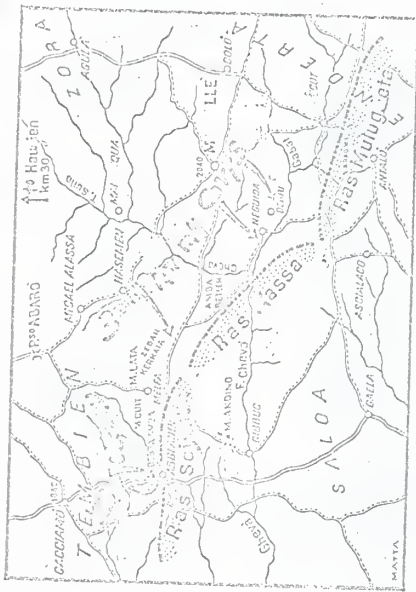
Source: Del Boca

been immobilized by their own weights and disabled to cope with continued "pin prick" attacks which, in view of the high altitude, would have proved particularly trying to Italian nerves. But the Ethiopians fought according to the antique idea that wars must be decided in pitched battles. It did not occur to them that where it was impossible to win in pitched battles, it might be possible to do so by repeated hit-and-run raids at separate enemy positions. Badoglio had now become aware of the unfavorable situation he was in and ordered a halt to consolidate his gains and improve his lines of communication, while roads were being built and the enemy left column reinforced by the arrival of the Third Army Corps. The Ethiopians waited almost without concern. Thus when Badoglio resumed his drive the Ethiopian attempt to stop him was destined to fail since he was now fighting from an improved strategic position.

Apart from the many minor skirmishes five main battles were fought and lost in the Northern Front.

The First Battle of Tembien

It will be remembered that De Bono's Central Column had advanced as far as the Tembien district capturing Abiyi Addis its capital. However, the greater part of the district was still in Ethiopian hands and in the southern part--a terrain of rugged mountains and deep ravines--were the forces of Ras Seyoum and Ras Kassa. On the 22nd of December these forces



The First Battle of Tambien.

Source: Del Boca

launched a counter offensive against the Italian held territory in the district. The battle was indcisive in that the Italians were not driven out completely, but the enemy had been forced to abandon Abiyi Addi. By January 9, 1936, Ras Seyoum regained almost all Tembien.

The First Battle of Tembien, (that is the first major battle) began on the 19th of January and lasted until the 23rd. The attack which was initiated by the Italians was executed in the following manner. The Third Army Corps was to close the gap between Ras Mulugeta and Ras Kassa in order to stop the former from rushing reinforcements to the latter. The actual attack against Ras Kassa's and Ras Seyoum's positions was entrusted to the Blackshirt Division (28 Ottobre) and the Eritrean Division. For five days fierce attacks and counter attacks raged, and having suffered heavy casualties the Italians finally fell back. But from a military point of view the battle was neither a loss to the Italians nor a gain to the Ethiopians. Due to lack of adequate arms the defenders did not dare to leave their natural sanctuaries and occupy the area vacated by the retreating enemy. Indeed the occupation of this open ground by the ill-equipped Ethiopian troops would have provided the enemy with the opportunity of mowing them down with air, artillery and machinegun fire. In this battle, the nature of the ground and the fact that it was fought between small groups over an extensive area had restricted the use of the Italian artillery and air arm.

The First Battle of Tembien was thus fought on more or less equal footing.

The Battle of Amba Aradom

But at the Battle of Amba Aradom the Ethiopians were decidedly at a disadvantage. Badoglio had put every cuncea of his might into this operation. Seventy thousand Italian troops supported by 170 aeroplanes, 280 heavy guns and thousands of automatic weapons were employed against an estimated 80,000 defenders armed with few machineguns, rifles and swords.⁵

One wonders why in the first place, Marshall Badoglio did not attack Amba Aradom rather than Tembien. Militarily this seemed to be the better choice. Amba Aradom is a high mountain with sheer sides, rearing its head to a height of 10,000 feet. It was a formidable natural fortress dominating the Endertera region and controlling the only possible line of approach to Addis Ababa as well as the only good passage to Tembien. With Amba Aradom in their hand the Italians could entrap Ras Seyoum and Ras Kassa from the rear. Badoglio used this manuever after he lost in the First Battle of

⁵These figures are taken from Del Boca, Ibid., p. 115. The same figures were reported in The New York Times February 17, 1936. As for statistics in regard to the Ethiopian side one, has to rely on estimates. Because of the feudal system of Ethiopian army organization nobody, including the Ethiopians themselves, knew for sure how many troops participated in the war or how many casualties there were in the entire campaign. Much less can one hope to know the statistics of individual battles. Similarly the number of weapons and their types possessed by the Ethiopians is hard to know.

Tembien. If he tried Amba Aradom first he might not have lost the battle in Tembien.

Nevertheless, the advance on Amba Aradom began on February 11, with two columns moving simultaneously from opposite directions with the view to squeezing Ras Mulugeta in a pincer. The main attack begun Tuesday, February 15, 1936, at 8 o'clock. Under the cover of artillery barrages of 149 105s and as many 75s as well as air bombardments from 170 aeroplanes the two army corps advanced.⁶ The Third Army Corps advancing from the right was divided into two with the Sabauda Division turning right in order to hold a prominent position on the eastern ridge of the Amba. The remainder of the Corps continued to Antalo to close the only gap left through which Ras Mulugeta might retreat. The First Army Corps moving from the left also split into two with the (January 3rd) Blackshirt Division turning left and climbing the western end of Amba Aradom to hold a prominent mound.

Up to this time Ras Mulugeta did nothing to stop Badoglio's advance. By waiting placidly when the enemy was closing on him under hazardous conditions Mulugeta committed a grievous blunder. Because of the mountainous nature of the area the Italian flanking troops lost contact with each other and thus coordination had become difficult. Later Marshal Badoglio praised his troops for their "perfect discipline,

⁶Del Boca, Ibid.

order and speed across extremely difficult terrain."⁷ Strictly the praise was not due, since a well trained modern army could not be expected to lose discipline in crossing a difficult terrain especially if it encountered no harassment or challenge while doing so. The point is, that if Ras Mulugeta had hit hard at one flank, then at the other he could have made it difficult for Badoglio to capture the fortress. At any rate, he should have fought his way out by attacking one of the flanks before it was too late. As it happened he did nothing of the sort. Apparently he did not think that the enemy would attack him from two sides. But even after realizing that he was being encircled he did not retreat before his position became useless.

Now that he saw the Italian method of attack he divided his forces into two positions facing the two Italian wings. He attached more importance to the enemy's right flank since it was trying to catch him from the rear and cut off his line of communication. But this Italian column which was expected the next day was immobilized by rain and was one day late. Seeing no enemy coming and discouraged by the bombardments the Ethiopians withdrew from this position so that when the column appeared one day later they were completely surprised. They hastily threw their force but it was too late. The enemy had captured the contested position with only nine casualties.⁸

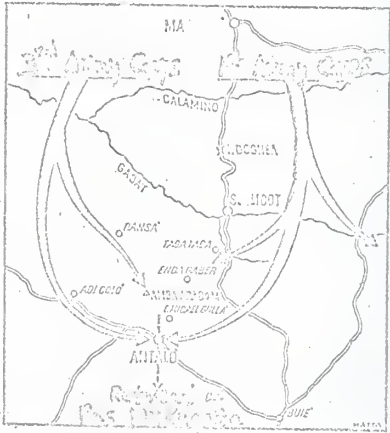
⁷The New York Times, February 17, 1936.

⁸Ibid.

Thus, though not by design, the Italians had executed a tactical master stroke.

While this was happening on the Italian right flank, the (January 3rd) Black Shirt Division was engaged in a bitter fight. Only when two Alpani battalions were rushed up did the Ethiopians retreat fighting step by step.

Apart from Ras Mulugeta's tactical inaptitude the complete absence of mutual assistance between neighboring forces was another problem which the Ethiopians had at the Battle of Amba Aradom and generally in all battles. Emperor Haileselassie had ordered the troops in Tembien to reinforce Mulugeta, but neither could they have arrived in time (the order being given too late) nor were they willing to go out of their natural defense positions and expose themselves to enemy superior arms. Above all they were unaccustomed to the idea of mutual support. In the First Battle of Tembien, for example, neither Ras Immiru on the left nor Ras Mulugeta on the right sent reinforcements or tried to weaken the enemy's strength by harassing his flanks. In fact even in Tembien itself Ras Kassa's and Ras Seyoum's forces did not operate in close cooperation. The enemy dealt with one and then with the other separately. At Amba Aradom it was the same, as it was the same at the Battle of Shire discussed below. Because the Ethiopians neglected or were unaware of this essential military consideration, the enemy had the rare opportunity of isolating and defeating them separately.



The-Battle of Amba Aradam...

Source: Del Boca

At the Battle of Amba Aradom the Ethiopians had suffered the most decisive defeat of the Northern Front. Not only was Ras Mulugeta's army the largest of the Ethiopian armies but it was the best in quality. Whatever modern troops--or rather an approximation of modern troops--Ethiopia had were the Imperial Guards and these were beaten here. This battle was indeed a turning point in the Ethiopian fortune. It served a shattering blow to the defenders' morale and hastened the disintegration of the resistance. Indeed they did not lose this battle due to their military inability. They had, in fact, fought so admirably that an Italian general was moved into paying "glowing homage to them and took off his hat in symbolical tribute to a great foe."⁹

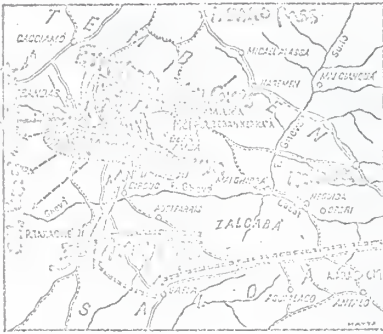
But the cold fact was, they had lost the battle. They also lost 6,000 dead and twice as many wounded, according to Italian estimates. Enemy casualties on the other hand were low. His dead and wounded consisted of 36 officers, 621 national troops and 145 Eritreans.¹⁰ The remnants of Mulugeta's vanquished army had fought their way through Antalo towards Amba Alagie--another natural fortress farther south.

The Second Battle of Tembien

In regard to the situation of the Ethiopian forces in

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Del Boca, op. cit., p.123.



The Second Battle of Tembien.

Source: Del Boca

Tembien after the Battle of Amba Aradom Badoglio cabled Rome,

Caught in a vise by our troops the situation of the Ethiopian forces is becoming hour by hour even more critical.¹¹

To be sure it was. While Badoglio was assiduously laying strategic traps the two Ethiopian leaders--Kassa and Seyoum waited calmly. Then the trap shut on them from two sides. From the south the Third Army Corps, and from the north the Eritrean Army Corps closed on the Ethiopian defenses in Tembien. The defenders were completely cut off. Reinforcement from the southeast (that is from the remnants of Ras Mulugeta's army) could not be had since now the entire area west of Amba Aradom was in Italian hand. Help from Ras Immira (located to the west in the Shire region) was also impossible because the territory between Tembien and southern Shire was held by the Italian Second and Fourth Army Corps. It was clear that unless the Ethiopian troops in Tembien retreated through the only remaining passage in the Southwest in the direction of Secotta, they would be sandwiched between the two Italian army corps. Like Ras Mulugeta, the two Rases waited until it was too late.

In the meantime the First Army Corps had commenced its southward advance to Amba Alagie were Ras Mulugeta had now entrenched himself. Seeing the futility of the effort to

¹¹Quoted in The New York Times, March 1, 1936.

block enemy advance in divided strength the Emperor ordered Ras Immiru in Shire and Ras Kassa and Seyoum in Tembien to abandon their positions and hurry to Amba Alagie to reinforce Ras Mulugeta. But again the order came too late.¹² The Italians with their wheeled transportation had reached Amba Alagie before the Ethiopians even started the march. Speed was of paramount importance here and the army which marched on foot could not have it. So Badoglio occupied two prominent positions overlooking Amba Alagie. He had expected a tough resistance and had thus prepared an elaborate attack plan against this formidable position. There was no need for all this elaboration however. As the Italians were advancing against Mulugeta his Galla contingents deserted at the last moment leaving his left flank exposed. Consequently he was forced to retreat without giving battle. Amba Alagie was, thus, occupied without a shot.

While this was happening at Amba Alagie the Second Battle of Tembien was being fought. On the night of February 26, 1936, a small selected force consisting of experienced mountain climbers scaled the western and eastern peaks of Amba Work where Dejazmatch Beyene's troops were deployed. Amba Work is a precipitous mountain with two peaks of almost equal height projecting out on the west and the east. In between is a hollow saddle-like formation and here slept Beyene's

¹²Del Boca, op. cit., p. 120.

forces certain that they were in a securca position. The exact number of the Ethiopians at this position was not known, but The New York Times correspondent described them as several thousand.¹³ At any rate as they slept the experienced Italian mountain climbers had reached the two peaks. In the morning the Ethiopians were surprised to find the enemy climbing down upon them. At first they were confused but regaining their spirit struck back with ferocity and courage. While they were dealing with these the Eritrean Army Corps launched a frontal attack on their position. Now they were caught between the hammar and the anvil, so to speak. This was an admirable attack on the part of the Italians. Indeed

It was a manoevre of the Ethiopians' own book and accomplished with a cat like precision that the natives themselves could not have surpassed.¹⁴

After two days of stiff fighting enemy artillery and air bombardment finally overwhelmed the defenders. Amba Work was captured on the 27th. In this engagement an estimated 3,000 casualties were sustained by the Ethiopians.¹⁵ Italian official figures give 292 dead and more than 1,000 wounded from the invaders' side.¹⁶

¹³The New York Times, March 2, 1936.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Cited in Toyntee, op. cit., p. 394n.

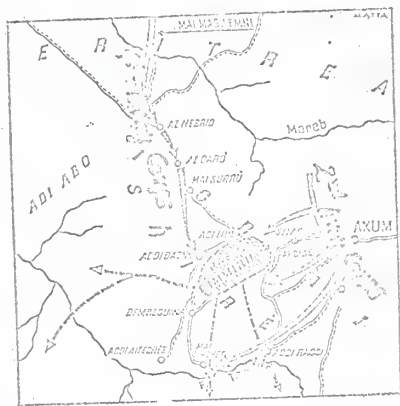
The capture of Amba Work had made the defenders' situation critical. On the 28th the Ethiopians made a desperate attack on Wereyu Pass but were repulsed with heavy losses. Although Abiyi Addi was not, as yet, taken by the Italians, the defeat at Amba Work and Wercyu opened the way to the town. On February 29, the Third and the Eritrean Army Corps approaching from opposite directions reached Abiyi Addi and the final round of the Second Battle of Tembien had started. On the same day the battle was over. The Ethiopians had fought and finally yielded to the inevitable. Ras Kassa and Ras Seyoum retreated in the direction of Secotta. With the Tembien "sore" now relieved and the threat to his left flank overcome it remained for Badoglio to wrestle with Ras Immiru in Shire.

The Battle of Shire

After the Second Battle of Tembien, the Second and Fourth Italian Army Corps converged on Ras Immiru. Preparations for the attack had been going on since the 27th, but actual operation started on the 29th--the day the battle in Tembien was won. The attack consisted of two simultaneously moving army corps aiming to catch Immiru from two sides. The Fourth Army Corps advancing from Eritrea marched southward over a roadless and difficult terrain. The Second Army Corps advanced west from its base around Axum. However, the Fourth Army Corps did not reach its objective the same day as the

Second, because it was delayed by the difficult terrain it has to cross. It was General Maravigna's Second Army Corps (consisting of 30,000 men¹⁷) that first made contact with Ras Immiru's forces. Unlike Kassa, Seyoum and Mulugeta, Ras Immiru did not wait idly until he was encircled. As soon as the Second Army Corps reached Selekleka he sent out detachments who fiercely engaged its left flank. Moreover he fought with better speed and skill than the other Ethiopian commanders on this front. By attacking in waves of fast moving small groups he denied the enemy the easy target which the other commanders offered him. The Second Army Corps was thus pinned down and it took some days before the enemy could gain the initiative. When he did however, he was able to push Immiru back. But the Ethiopians did not suffer much from this push. Realizing that the odds were against him Ras Immiru retreated to a better defensive position. It was after this that he committed the error which the other Ethiopian commanders had committed and which he had hitherto avoided. After the push back General Maravigna again took a pause to consolidate his position; and the Ethiopian commander satisfied that the enemy was not pursuing him sat idly in his new defensive position. By this time the Fourth Army Corps had joined hands with the Second. Like the others in Tembien and Amba Aradom his position was surrounded and the only way

¹⁷Ibid., March 5, 1936.



The Battle of Shire

Source: Del Boca

so far uncontrolled by the enemy was the western sector of the circle through which he eventually made his retreat. The pressure from two army corps as well as concentrated artillery and air bombardments finally broke Immiru's resistance.

But the defeat was, in any case, inescapable. Surely, an enemy that had crushed almost the entire northern defensive positions could hardly be expected to be defeated by one remaining portion of an army that had been destroyed piecemeal. After the Battle of Shire the road to Gondar was laid open. From then onwards the Italian columns met no serious resistance in their drive to that town.

The Battle of Mai Chew

This was the last battle fought on the Northern Front. In Ethiopia this battle is considered the most decisive not only of this Front but of the entire war. Ethiopian historians speak of Mai Chew as a Frenchman speaks of Waterloo. The date of the battle is officially observed every year. But, in actuality, the war was lost at Amba Aradom when the biggest and the best Ethiopian army was defeated. It was not only a military defeat it was also a psychological defeat. Since that battle the Ethiopians had lost their will and were fighting a hopeless war. It required the Second Battle of Tembien and the Battle of Shire to confirm this fact. The importance of Mai Chew is exaggerated probably because the

Emperor personally conducted the Battle. Otherwise it was no more than a formidable holding operation. Neither could it be justified as holding operation either since there was no main body in the rear for whose benefit this might be conducted. In short the Battle of Mai Chew was superfluous. It only succeeded in having more Ethiopians killed gallantly but in vain.

Devoid of rational purpose though it was the battle, in itself was big and bloody. After the defeat of Ras Mulugeta the Emperor had moved his headquarters from Dessie to Korem. The Ethiopian forces which the Emperor now personally commanded, were concentrated on the southern side of Lake Ashenge and around Korem.

Employing his usual method Marshal Badoglio advanced in pincer movement. The First Army Corps and detachments of the Eritrean Army Corps approached along the edge of the plateau and by the end of March 1936, reached Mai Chew a town few miles north of Lake Ashenge. The Third Army Corps starting from around Abiyi Addi followed the caravan route to Secotta--an important junction where caravan routes from Abiyi Addi on the north, Addis Ababa from the south and Dessie from the southeast converged. In addition to the fear that the Ethiopians might be caught in the teeth of the pincer there was the additional danger that their line of retreat being cut off by the Italian forces operating in the southeast. On March 11, 1936, Italian troops had entered Sardo--the seat of

Sultan of Ausa who accepted the invaders without resistance. It was these enemy troops that might make a thrust from the rear. As far as the thrust was concerned it was improbable because the area between Ausa and Mai Chew was very difficult for such operation. First the enemy had to traverse a desert region, then a rugged mountains region which was under Ethiopian control. Nevertheless the occupation of Sardo, in itself, was strategically important to the Italians. Since the town was about 100 miles from the Addis Ababa--Jibuti railway line and about the same distance from Dessie it served as a base from where Italian aeroplanes conducted raids behind the Ethiopian troops, thus disrupting their communication and supply lines.

Marshal Badoglio's plan was to attack the Ethiopian army south of Lake Ashenge on the 5th of April.¹⁸ But the Emperor invalidated that plan by moving north quickly and striking at the First Army Corps at Mai Chew. In this battle 31,000 Ethiopian troops consisting of 20,000 local irregulars and 11,000 of the remnants of Ras Kassa's and Ras Seyoum's troops were posed against 40,000 Italians.¹⁹

On March 31, the Ethiopians attacked the enemy position at Mai Chew but Badoglio was not taken by surprise. Already

¹⁸Toynbee, op. cit., p. 397.

¹⁹Del Boca, op. cit., p. 149.

his troops had been dug-in in hastily prepared defense positions. Hence though in the face of withering artillery and machinegun fires the Ethiopians penetrated some of the enemy defences. They were eventually repulsed. Attacks and counter attacks raged for six days and on April 4, the battle was over. In this battle the Ethiopians had fought not only with courage but with also such skill and speed that even their assailants could not hide their appreciation.²⁰ But, as always, they finally succumbed before the inexhaustible enemy fire power and thus, lost the battle through no fault of theirs.

The last battle on the Northern Front was fought and lost. The remnants of the Ethiopian army fled in disorder, pursued by every available enemy aeroplane and harassed by rebellious Azebo Gallas. The Italian victory of Mai Chew removed all obstacles from Badoglio's advance southward. The Emperor himself was in flight headed for Jersalem and then to England. On May 5, 1936, Marshal Badoglio entered Addis Ababa--the Ethiopian capital and the occupation of the country which was to last five years almost to the day had begun.

The Southern Front

While Badoglio's northern forces were advancing in force

²⁰The New York Times, March 5, 1936.

and under the cover of concentrated artillery and air bombardments, General Rodolfo Graziani commander-in-chief of the Italian armies on the Southern Front was dashing northward with his comparatively smaller motorized units.

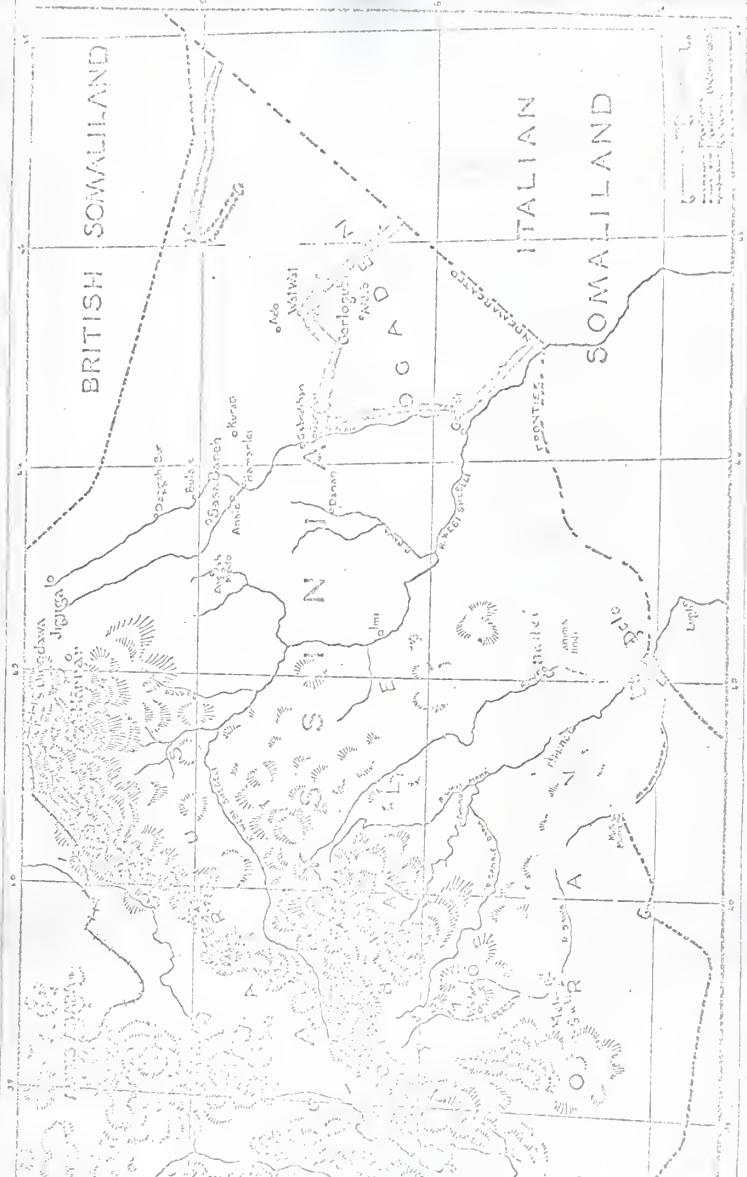
Because of the open nature of the terrain full use could be made of tanks and aeroplanes. Thus in view of the fact that this area was suitable for a mechanized war, Graziani was expected to advance faster and reach Addis Ababa before Badoglio. But Graziani had many difficulties.

The 80,000²¹ troops that he commanded at the beginning of the invasion had to be deployed over a 400 mile front. Hence a concentrated thrust was not possible. Moreover the rain which began about the middle of October and continued sporadically till early December turned the sand into a swamp thus hampering mechanized transport and making contact between the scattered forces difficult.

Graziani's objective was first, to capture Harar and the railway station at Dire Dawa and then proceed to Addis Ababa to join hands with the northern armies. But he had a long way to go and many obstacles to overcome before he could reach Harar.

The Ethiopian Southern armies were deployed in the following manner: on the highlands of the Bale region--that is the area between the Genale Doria, Dawa and Webi rivers,

²¹Del Boca, op. cit., p. 105.



Graziani's Initial Plan of Invasion on the Southern Front, Accepted 1935. Arnold Toynbee, Abyssinia and Italy, Survey of International Affairs, II, 1935.

Ras Desta Damte had taken up defensive positions with his main forces concentrated around Negelle. On the left the army of Dejazmatch Nessibu had been deployed around Giggiga with several strong detachments spread throughout the Ogaden region. In between these two another smaller force under Dejazmatch Beyene Merid was located at Imi in the Bale region not very far from Ras Desta's right flank.

General Graziani launched his invasion in four simultaneously moving columns. In the northeast of Ogaden a small unit moved parallel with the frontier line between Ethiopia and the British Somaliland. Its object being to cut off the caravan route from Berbera through which the Ethiopians imported some ammunition. However, this unit soon came to a halt presumably because of lack of water and difficulties in maintaining contact with the main body. On the left Graziani immediately occupied Dolo--a town which was hitherto half Ethiopian, half Italian. This was to be the base from where the drive against Ras Desta would be launched. However, the column did not start operation immediately. The third and fourth columns were directed against the various defense positions in the Ogaden and eventually against the Ethiopian main forces in the vicinity of Giggiga. One of the two--which was the main column--advanced from the center, first, along the Webi Shebelli River and then along the Fafan River. The fourth column crossed the border at Wal Wal and moved towards Gelegubi--a village with several water wells. From there it

was to continue to Corahai where it would make contact with the main column.

Graziani's first objective was Corahai where a large number of Ethiopian troops under Grazmatch Afework was located. Moreover this place was important for two reasons; it was a junction of caravan routes and it possessed several water-wells the latter being of a special importance in view of the scarcity of water in the Ogaden region.

In the initial stages of the advance Graziani, like Badoglio, did not meet any serious resistance consequently by the end of October, 1935, the whole area between Webi Shebelli and Fafan south of Corahai had fallen into enemy hands. In the meantime almost every town of some significance north of the occupied area and south of Gigjiga, especially Corahai, was subjected to intensive bombardment by Italian aeroplanes. Corahai, for example, fell under pressure from aerial bombardment alone. Grazmatch Afework in command of this position was fatally wounded in one of the air raids and when the troops saw their leader dead they abandoned their position and fled before the enemy reached the position. Corahai was thus taken without a shot on the seventh of November.

However, the capture of Corahai did not clear the way for a rapid drive towards Gigjiga where the main battle was expected. Between Graziani's position and Gigjiga there were several defenses to be dealt with, of these defended areas



The Battle of Negelle
Adopted from Toynbee

Deggah Bur and Sassah Baneh were believed to be the most formidable. And so the Italians had to prepare for the attack of this position. By November 11, 1935, (four days after the capture of Corahai) the Italians had made a rapid advance and reached Anale--only thirty miles from Deggah Bur. On this date their advance columns were ambushed and destroyed at Anale. For the rest of the month fierce fighting took place in the area between Anale and Corahai, during which the Italians suffered several reverses. By the end of the month they were forced to withdraw to Corahai.

Craziani could not, as things stood, continue his northward drive. In addition to the defeat at Anale and the expected stiff resistance his troops were immobilized by the so called "Little Rains" which begin in October and continue sporadically upto December. Even if he did not have these problems it was dangerous for him to advance on Gigjiga when his right flank was exposed to the forces of Ras Desta in the southwest. That is why he decided to have a pause before commencing the advance northward and eliminate the threat to his left flank by attacking Ras Desta.

The Battle of Negelle

So far Ras Desta had not taken any determined steps to relieve the pressure on the Ethiopian troops in the Ogaden region, but now he began to send detachments against Italian positions at Dolo and surrounding areas. It was then that

Graziani was reminded of the danger of advancing north while his flank was subject to a strong thrust from Ras Desta. In attempting to capture the Ogaden defenses and ultimately Gijjiga (which was what he planned before his defeat at Anale) Graziani committed the same military error as Badoglio who attacked Tembien before Amba Aradom. With Negelle in the hands of Ras Desta, not only was Graziani's flank exposed, but also through here the Ethiopians could get arms and supplies brought by caravans from Kenya. The disruption of such source of supply should have been a consideration of prime importance.

By the end of November Ras Desta had started advancing towards Dolo with the intention of penetrating Italian lines and thus cutting the enemy's line of communication. The aim did not materialize however, as the Ethiopians were easily driven back. But Graziani did not feel sufficiently ready to pursue them.

By November 12, preparation had been completed and the advance began in four columns. The main column moved between the Dawa and Genale Doria rivers heading towards Negelle while the three other detachments carried out flanking movements to the left and right. One detachment marched along the right bank of Webi River; parallel to it but along the right bank of the Genale Doria moved a second detachment. These two were to conduct mopping-up operations against possible pockets of resistance on their lines of advance, but

their main mission was to protect the right flank of the main body from Dejazmatch Beyene's threat. The third detachment marched from Dolo close to the Kenya border, its objective being the occupation of Melka Murri and the protection of the left flank of the main body.

In the meantime Italian aeroplanes were pounding Negelle mercilessly. From November 12th--the day the Italian advance began to the 20th--then Negelle fell--141 bombing raids were conducted.²² Under cover of such intensive air raids 40,000 motorized columns advanced on Negelle.²³

Taking the initiative Ras Desta's troops descended from their highland defense positions to threaten the enemy's advance columns, but instead of striking quickly they lingered in the lowlands too long thereby enabling Graziani to make full use of his tanks and aeroplanes. When enemy fire power became too strong for them the Ethiopians decided to return to their defense positions. But it was too late. The motorized columns of the Genoa Dragoons and the Aosta Lancers--known as "The Hell on Wheels" quickly followed them and smashed their barricades. The battle was over on November 20, 1935. The Ethiopians had beaten a hasty retreat westward to the province of Sidamo.

The occupation of Negelle offered Graziani the shortest

²²Toynbee, op. cit., p. 405.

²³Del Boca, op. cit., p. 105.

and the most direct approach to Addis Ababa. But he did not take this. From a military point of view--both strategically and tactically this was the approach because the sooner Addis Ababa was taken the sooner the resistance would have collapsed. An early capture of the capital city was not only important for its political implication and therefore its morale effect on the Ethiopians, but it would have also isolated the defenders on the two fronts completely. With a substantial part of the Ogaden region as well as Borona (of which Negelle was the capital) in Italian hands it was strategically unnecessary to insist on fighting Dejazmatch Nessibu's army in the Ogaden because with the occupation of Addis Ababa it would have been isolated and thus would have collapsed by itself.

Nevertheless the Italian victory at Negelle served two purposes; it revived the confidence of the Italian public which was beginning to be pessimistic as a result of the slow progress on the Northern Front and militarily it meant the end of Ras Desta's threat to Graziani's left flank.

The Battle of Ogaden

Actually Graziani's left flank was still threatened by Dejazmatch Beyene Merid located at Imi with a big force--though not as big as Ras Desta's and this should be eliminated before the advance of the Italian forces in the Ogaden region

should be resumed.

Already in the second half of December, 1935, the Sultan of Olol-Dinle and Hussain Ali (two Somali chiefs who deserted and joined Graziani) were sent up the Webi Shebelli to attack the Ethiopians in Bale.²⁴ These two deserters fell upon the unsuspecting Ethiopian troops at Gabba and routed them, but as they moved farther up the Ethiopians defeated them at Karanli--a few miles south of Imi. For about a month Beyene Merid was not attacked again, but on February 5, 1936, Black Shirt troops reached and hit his position in the Web river not far from Imi. This attack was repulsed and the Italians had yet to make another trial on November 11, at Mount Jigo and again they were beaten back. A few days later another Italian unit attacked but this was also repulsed. Consequently the attempt to drive back the Ethiopians from this salient was abandoned temporarily. Actually Beyene Merid's threat was more theoretical than real. He was too exhausted to attack the Italian flanks. The best he could do was to protect his own position. At any rate there was not much military importance in the position he held, and thus could be by passed. And, indeed, when Graziani tired of trying in vain to drive him back at last ignored him and commenced the Battle of the Ogaden, Beyene Merid had neither the zeal nor the

²⁴Bale was the district (now the Province) which Dejazmatch Beyene Merid, with his main forces at Imi was defending.

resources to undertake an attack against the Italian left flank.

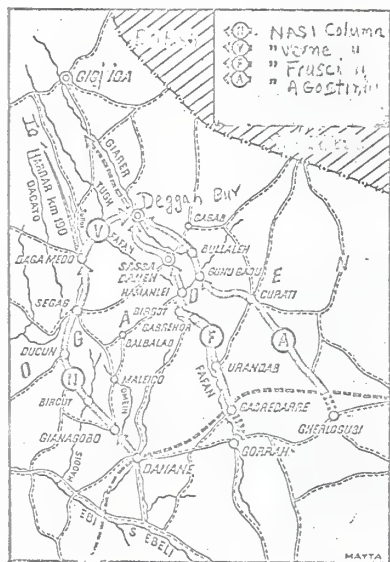
On April 13, 1936, the Italians started moving in force towards their final objective in the Ogaden region. The final objective was Giggjiga where Dejazmatch Messibu was believed waiting in a strongly fortified position. But before that the Italians had to traverse a wide area with several strong outposts spread over the whole region.

The Ethiopian main defense line stretched from Giggjiga south to Sassah Baneh and east to Bulleleh. In this rugged hill country where patches of bare rock alternated with thick scrub he had (with the help of his Turkish advisor General Vahib Pasha) organized what the Italians nicknamed the Ethiopian "Hindenburg Line."

Thirty-eight thousand Italian troops of which 15,600 were Italians by origin, were set out to wrestle with an Ethiopian force of about 28,000 spread over a wide area of defense.²⁵ The advance was conducted in three columns. The first column starting from Denan was to move on the left, capture the Ethiopian strong outpost at Gianagobo and proceed by way of Birkut, Dukun and Segag to Deggah Medo where another force was believed to be entrenched. The center column starting from Gebre Darre was to march through Hamanlei and

²⁵Ibid., p.175.

Note: The Italian troops of non-Italian origin consisted of Lybians, Eritreans and Somalis.



The Battle of Ogaden

Source: Del Boca

Sassah Baneh among other minor outposts. The third column was to proceed to Curati Gunu Gadu and Bullaleh. After accomplishing their initial objectives the three columns were then to wait until each was ready to launch a combined attack against Deggah Bur.

During the two days of advance none of the columns met any incident but on the 15th the left column was engaged in a fierce battle at Gianagobo. The defenders put up such a stiff resistance that the Italians could not break the defenses in three days of fighting even though General Nassi (commanding the Italian left flank) let loose all available machinegun and artillery fires. At the end of the three days fighting however, the Ethiopians were completely crushed and the column continued its advance leaving behind it a battle field covered with hundreds of dead and dying troops. At Deggah Medo the left flank executed a brilliant surprise attack with its motorized units. The defenders were easily routed and the place where a stiff fight was expected had fallen--without much effort. This column was now ready for the assault on Deggah Bur.

The columns in the center and right marched without much resistance until April 23; then the center column met a determined force at Hamanlei; where it was pinned down for two days. On the 25th the defenders of Hamanlei were defeated, but since this column was exhausted as a result of the battle it took four days to regain its momentum and resume the advance.

On the 29th Sassah Banch fell. Similarly the right flank had succeeded in subduing Gunu Gadu and Bullaleh one after the other.

After two weeks of fighting the Ethiopians were too exhausted to withstand the Italian advance. On April 29, 1936, Deggah Bur fell without serious resistance, and now Graziani was ready for the big battle at Gigjiga. But it had now become apparent the Ethiopians were fighting for a lost cause. Supplies were almost completely exhausted, the morale of the Ethiopian troops had gone down to the lowest ebb and the desertion rate had risen fearfully high. Besides in lingering too long in this region Dejazmatch Nessibu was running the risk of being caught between Graziani and Badoglio's rapidly advancing northern armies. Thus the Ethiopian commander retreated without offering the battle for which General Graziani had long waited. On May 7, 1936, Gigjiga was captured, on the following day Harar was taken and on the 9th Graziani's advance guard made contact with troops from the Northern Front at Dire Dawa. The war on the Southern Front was over two days after Badoglio entered Addis Ababa.

CONCLUSION

The Italo-Ethiopian conflicts whether in 1935 or in the nineteenth century had never been fought between equally armed adversaries, but they certainly were not, as some people tend to believe wars between a primitive people and a civilized nation. They were, as The Times on the occasion of the Battle of Adua pointed out, the confrontation of an ancient dormant civilization and a modern technological civilization.¹

The Ethiopian defeat cannot, therefore, be dismissed as inevitable because of the country's backwardness. The answers for the defeat are, as this presentation has attempted, to be sought both in internal conditions and international politics.

One of the most crucial factors was of course, the internal instability that ensued as a result of the Emperor's attempt to build a modern centralized state powerful feudal chiefs who had lost power and prestige by this reform were less anxious, if not totally opposed to stand behind their Emperor. As the war progressed desertions mounted to aminous proportions almost in every province. It is indeed an irony of life that the Emperor's sincere efforts to unify the country should have resulted in precisely the opposite.

¹The (London) Times, March 5, 1896.

Another important factor was the imposition of the arms embargo by Great Britain and France--from whom Ethiopia purchased most of its arms--and the United States of America--to whom it looked for support. The decision of Britain and France to impose an arms embargo on the aggressor and the victim alike was unjust as it was in breach of a treaty. It was unjust because Italy manufactured its own arms and as long as it was free to import strategic materials from the United States (which only prohibited arms shipment to both belligerents) and other non-sanctioned countries it was not actually affected by the embargo; whereas Ethiopia--a non-manufacturing country was denied the right to self-defense through the refusal of these countries to sell her arms in spite of the fact that Italy was condemned as the aggressor.

The third major factor that added to the collapse of the Ethiopian resistance was the League of Nations. It was not, however, the failure of the League to render help to Ethiopia that proved fatal. The fatality lay in the fact that the Ethiopian Emperor took the Covenant seriously and instead of preparing for the imminent invasion he slept under false security. In Ethiopia they say that the death of one's child is more bearable than the dishonor of one's word. To the common man this may be no more than a hackneyed rhetoric, but to the monarch it was an indispensable royal quality. When this is seen against the background that in Ethiopia

the affairs of state were, as they are largely today, the reflections of the monarch's personality, the implication of this antique imperial virtue becomes apparent. The member states of the League of Nations had solemnly pledged themselves to uphold the Covenant and the Emperor took them at their words. His own personal background did not dispose him to suspect that nations do not honor their international obligation if national interests do not permit. After all, if Hartman's analogy of Hitler being a rattlesnake and Mussolini a mosquito, may be taken "one does not--if one wishes to survive--take one's eye off a threatening rattlesnake to menace a droning mosquito."²

Actually this argument is somewhat in error. Could it not be true that Hitler was encouraged to try his expansionist dreams when he saw Mussolini invade Ethiopia with impunity? Nevertheless the fact still remains that nations (quite naturally) worry more about their interests than about their international obligations. But it could not occur to the Ethiopian Emperor that one could break one's word once he had given it even where politics was concerned. Thus he was, in all likelihood, sincere when, in June 30, 1936, he told the League

My trust in the League was absolute. I thought it impossible that fifty-two nations including the most powerful in the world should

²Hartman, op. cit., p. 317.

he successfully opposed by a single aggressor. Relying on the faith due to treaties, I have made no preparation for war.³

A decade and half later he found occasion to show that, for his part, he could not flinch in the fulfillment of an obligation to which he had pledged himself. The occasion was the Korean war. The United Nations had found South Korea the victim of an aggression but still most of the so-called uncommitted nations were unwilling to go beyond sending Red Cross units, probably because they considered it more of a Soviet-American power struggle than an ordinary case of aggression. But Ethiopian troops were quickly sent there, for the Emperor's painful experience with the League of Nations did not let him hesitate once the aggressor was named. Whether his action might not have been based on an irrelevant experience he did not wait to consider.

These three factors--the chaotic internal conditions, the inequitable imposition of an arms embargo and the false hope given by the League of Nations--are the most crucial in the collapse of the Ethiopian resistance. It is, of course, idle to speculate whether Mussolini, could or could not have succeeded if Ethiopia was not beset by these inexorable problems; but it can be said with a fair degree of assurance, that it would have proven a long and difficult war.

³Stephen Heald (ed) Document on International Affairs: 1935 (London: Humphrey Milford, 1937), Vol. II, p. 518.

There are also other factors that should be considered. There was, for instance, the obvious difference in quality between the two armies. A well-trained modern army was posed against Ethiopia's peasant conscripts who did not have even the most elementary military training.

Neither coordination nor the consistent execution of a strategic plan nor unity of command was possible on the Ethiopian side. The feudal chiefs who in accordance with tradition commanded in the field warriors levied in their own provinces, followed their own inclinations rather than the Emperor's instructions. But again such had been the case in the past armed confrontations between the two adversaries, but through his raw courage the Ethiopian warrior had hitherto succeeded in offsetting the advantage of modern training. Now it was no longer possible. This was a protracted war fought on two fronts widely separated from each other--one in the north, the other in the south. Moreover, the aeroplane, the tank and the lorry (which were not utilized in the past engagements) had now outraced the Ethiopian foot soldier and had, thus, forced him to forfeit his superior mobility. The relentless massed attack for which he was reputed was also rendered obsolete by the fact that the war was being fought not in a single battle as in the case of Adua, but over several battlefronts. By its very nature the feudal army was not suited for this kind of extended campaign.

There was also the disparity between the two adversaries.

But again this was true also during the Battle of Adua. But at that time Ethiopia was not without arms although, of course, the enemy had superior weapons both in quality and quantity. Nevertheless the Ethiopians were able to offset the advantage of their enemy and obtain victory by their staying power, their capacity for taking the initiative and their relentless massed attack. But now the contest had become between a heavily equipped and mechanized army on the one hand and almost practically unarmed feudal levies. To be sure, one cannot overwhelm a tank with a hoe, or an aeroplane with an old Hotchkiss rifle, although this the Ethiopians literally tried.

Yet despite all odds the peasant soldiers fought on to the end. For as the correspondent for The New York Times reported from the Battle of Mai Chew

The Ethiopians' courage to which the Italians are the first to pay homage does not acknowledge defeat until death. When they are wounded they struggle to their feet and stumble forward. Decimated by artillery, mowed down by machine guns they still come on and die.⁴

This, however, is not to say that Ethiopia's military problems would have been solved if no arms embargo was imposed. By virtue of his possession of an air force--a force which Ethiopia did not have--the enemy could still maintain his military superiority. He could and did hammer at his

⁴The New York Times, March 5, 1936.

adversaries with almost complete impunity.

That the Italian air fleet of an estimated 300 aeroplanes⁵ had an influence on the outcome of the war no one disagrees; but opinions differ as to the degree of its effect. Liddell Hart, for example, did not think the Italians achieved much with their air arm. In an article to The New York Times he observed:

The offensive value of air power inevitably handicapped by the scarcity of targets in such a primitive country has also been wasted through the inability of the ground forces to follow up the effect that was attained.⁶

Dejazmatch Nessibu Commander-in-Chief of the Ethiopian forces on the Ogaden Front (Southern Front) also told a joke to a correspondent of The New York Times about the ineffectiveness of Italian aeroplanes. Thirteen planes had dropped 200 to 250 bombs and the total result was the wounding of one chicken. As soon as the bombing ceased a soldier rushed out to survey the damage done and finding the dying chicken said, as he wrung its neck, "This is the one good thing the Italians ever gave me." And a fellow soldier agreed but reminded his friend, "Yes, but when you eat it don't forget that it cost thousands and thousands of Thalers."⁷

Even Vehib Pasha, the Turkish General who was an advisor to Nessibu discounted the seriousness of air bombardments

⁵Toynbee, op. cit., p. 379.

⁶The New York Times, January 19, 1936.

⁷Ibid., December 23, 1935.

although his position was constantly harassed by Italian aircrafts.⁸ But his position was not as heavily hit as those on the Northern Front.

Others consider that aerial bombardment especially the spraying of poison gas was one of the most decisive factors in the collapse of the resistance. The Emperor himself in a telegram to the League of Nations on May 10, 1936, confessed that it was the use of poison gas by Italian aeroplanes that forced him to give up the resistance.⁹ The leader of the Dutch Red Cross Unit also stressed this factor. He is reported to have said

Once they had seen the effect of gas the Abyssinians were completely demoralized and behaved like frightened children.¹⁰

Militarily speaking air warfare against a people the vast majority of whom lived in small villages, and in a country endowed by nature with the protection of vast forests, rugged mountains and deep ravines, such as Ethiopia was, would cost the wielder of it more than he would accomplish. Thus, it is true that much damage was not inflicted upon troops by Italian conventional bombings. Nevertheless the effect of gas warfare on the Ethiopian combatant was considerable. The

⁸Quoted in Toynbee, Ibid., p. 371.

⁹Ibid., p. 483.

¹⁰The Times, London, May 19, 1936.

bush and the forests in which he hid from high explosives were now drenched with poison gas which clung in the valleys and forests for days without losing its effect. In some particular cases the impact of the air was immense. At the Battle of Amba Aradam, for example, 170 aeroplanes were used to hammer at a single position that was completely without defense against such kind of warfare. It is hard to believe that the aeroplane could not have played a decisive role in this battle.

Moreover the air arm was specially effective because it was used against civilian centers as well. Ordinarily the more an area is bombed the more the people become used to it and thus the more it loses its effect. This may be true in modern societies, but it was not true in the case of Ethiopia. In the first place Ethiopian houses were made either of dried mud or were thatched huts. Consequently it was easy to destroy them. According to Ethiopian official estimates 525,000 homes were destroyed by Italian bombardment.¹¹ It was indiscriminate destruction by the Italian air force that made the editor of The New York Times wonder

How short a way we have gone in two
thousand years since Philip joined the

¹¹The figure was given in 1945 by the Ethiopian Government as one item of the list for which Ethiopia received 326 million pound sterling from Italy as war reparations. Quoted in Del Boca, op. cit., p. 283.

chariot of the Ethiopian eunuch and read
the prophecy of Christianity.¹²

In the second place in a country where communication even between neighboring towns was extremely difficult and thus where rumour was the only news the destructiveness of the aeroplane was bound to be exaggerated. Especially when the rumour was about something the people hitherto never had seen, this would create more psychological terror. This was what actually happened in the case of Ethiopia. Hence while it cannot be taken as the one decisive factor Italian air power quickened the collapse of the resistance more perhaps through psychological terror than actual damage.

Lastly the failure of the Ethiopians to adopt guerrilla tactics must be mentioned. This was, indeed the only method left to them by which they could try and offset the overwhelming technical superiority of their invaders. Ethiopia with its natural mountain fastness was an ideal nursery for guerrillas, and the Ethiopians with their light equipment and modest needs had, at their disposal, all the requisites for waging guerrilla warfare. Systematized guerrilla forces would assuredly have worn down the enemy's nerves and would have cut up his lines of communication without offering satisfactory targets for his air power.

Then, as Toynbee puts it

¹²The New York Times, March 31, 1936.

Marshall Badoglio's use of poison might have proved a boomerang weapon which would merely have branded the wielder of it with dishonour and have exasperated the victim into a redoubled will to war instead of cowering him into abandoning the struggle as hopeless.¹³

One explanation for this failure may be the fact that in their past encounters the Ethiopians had always succeeded in repulsing their enemies. Consequently they had no need to resort to this kind of warfare. Or it could be, as Captain Liddell Hart observed, that perhaps the Ethiopians were too courageous to be instinctive guerrilla fighters.¹⁴ Eventually, of course, the method was adopted rather ineffectually and this when the main Ethiopian fighting force was destroyed and the enemy had gained control of the greater part of the country. Nevertheless the guerrillas kept the pot boiling till, with the help of Great Britain the country was liberated in 1941.

¹³Toynbee, op. cit., p. 371.

¹⁴The New York Times, February 23, 1936.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abraham, Emanuel. "The Case for Ethiopia," Journal of the Royal African Society, XXXIV, No. 137, London (October 1935).
- Baer, George W. The Coming of the Italian Ethiopian War. Cambridge, Mass., 1967.
- Borchard, Edwin and William P. Lage, Neutrality for the United States. New Haven, 1940.
- Bullock, Raymond L. "The Suez Canal and League Sanctions," Geneva Special Studies VI, Geneva, 1935.
- Churchill, Sir Winston. The Gathering Storm. New York, 1948.
- Claude, Jr., Inis L. Swords into Ploughshares. New York, 1964.
- Daily Mail, May 6, 1936.
- Davies, Lord David. Nearing the Abyss: The Lesson of Ethiopia, London, 1936.
- Del Boca, Angelo. La guerra d'Abissinia 1935-1941. Milan, 1966.
- Eden, Anthony Lord Avon . Facing the Dictators. London, 1962.
- Ethiopian Ministry of Information, Ethiopia: Silver Jubilee 1941-1966, Addis Ababa, 1966.
- Farago, L. Abyssinia on the Eve. London, 1935.
- Feis, Herbert. Seen From E.A.: Three International Episodes. New York, 1947.
- Fermi, Laura. Mussolini. Chicago, 1961.
- France, Ministère Des Affaires étrangères. Documents Diplomatiques: Affair d'Ethiopie (1906).
 _____ . Journal Official, Chambre Des Deputes (1935).
- Gathorne-Hardy, C. M. A Short History of International Affairs 1920-1939. Published under the auspices of the Royal Institute of International Affairs. London, 1950.

- Gibbon, Edward. The Decline and Fall of The Roman Empire, VI, London, 1957.
- Great Britain. British and Foreign State Papers, CXXXIX (1935).
- _____. Parliamentary Papers, XGI Egypt No. 2 (1904).
- Greenfield, Richard. Ethiopia: A New Political History. New York, 1965.
- Harris, Jr., Fric. The United States and The Italo-Ethiopian Crisis. Stanford, 1936.
- Hartman, Frederick. The Relations of Nations. New York, 1957.
- Jonas, Manfred. "Pro Axis Sentiment," The Historian, XXIX (February, 1967).
- Jones, A. H. and Elizabeth Monroe. History of Ethiopia, Oxford, 1960.
- Kirkpatrick, Ivone. Mussolini: A Study in Power, New York, 1964.
- League of Nations. Official Journal, all pertaining to the Italo-Ethiopian dispute have been consulted.
- Leonard, L. Leonard. International Organizations, New York, 1951.
- MacGullum, E. P. Rivalries in Ethiopia, Boston, 1935.
- MacLean, Robinson. Jan Hov of Ethiopia, New York, 1936.
- Manchester Guardian. September 13, 1935.
- Massock, Richard. Italy from Within, New York, 1943.
- Mathew, Herbert. Eyewitness in Abyssinia, New York, 1938.
- Melly, John M. "Ethiopia and the War from the Ethiopian Point of View," International Affairs (January-February, 1936).
- Micheles, Vera ed. "The League and the Italo-Ethiopian War," Geneva Special Studies 1935-36.
- Millis, Walter. Why Europe Fights, New York, 1940.

- Newman, Sigmund. The Future in Perspective, New York, 1946.
- Norman, John. "Influence of Pro-Fascist Propaganda on American Neutrality, 1935-36," Essay In History and International Relations in Honor of George Hubbard Flakeslee, Worcester, 1949.
- Pankhurst, Richard. "Some Factors Depressing the Standard of Living the Peasant in Tradional Ethiopia," Journal of Ethiopian Studies IV, No. 2 (July, 1966).
- Perham, Margery. The Government of Ethiopia, London, 1948.
- Potter, Pitman B. The Wal Wal Arbitration, Washington D.C. 1938.
- Salvemini, Gaetano. Prelude to World War II, New York, 1954.
- Scaetta, H. "Geography Ethiopia's Ally," Foreign Affairs: An American Quarterly XIX, Nos. 1-14 (October 1935-July 1935).
- Schaefer, Ludwig F. ed. The Ethiopian Crisis: Touchstone of Appeasement? Boston, 1961.
- Steer, George. Caesar in Abyssinia, Boston, 1937.
- The New York Times for the period 1935-36.
- The Times (London) March 5, 1896.
- Thompson, David. Two Frenchmen: Pierre Laval and Charles de Gaulle, London, 1951.
- Toynbee, Arnold. "Abyssinia and Italy," Survey of International Affairs II, 1935.
- Wheeler, John and Stephen Head, eds. Documents on International Affairs, 2 vols. 1935. Published under the auspices of the Royal Institute of International Affairs.
- Wolfers, Arnold. Britain and France Between Two Wars, New York, 1940.
- Woolbert, Robert Gale. "Fuedal Ethiopia and Her Armies," Foreign Affairs XIV, Nos. 1-14 (October 1935-July 1935)
- Work, Ernest. Ethiopia: A Pawn in European Diplomacy, New York, 1935.

WHY ETHIOPIA LOST

An Analysis of the Factors that Led to the Ethiopian
Defeat in the Italo-Ethiopian War of 1935-36

by

TEFERI TEKLEHAIMANOT

B. A., Haile Selassie I University, 1965

AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of History

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1969

As early as 1885 Italy had been preying on Ethiopian territory and, although she was repulsed each time she made a move, she kept on trying till in 1896 she was decisively defeated at the Battle of Adua. After that no further attempt was made until about forty years later when Mussolini felt himself called upon by an irresistible destiny to found an Italian Empire in East Africa. In October 1935 he invaded Ethiopia. Eight months later the invasion was successfully completed.

The question which this thesis proposes to answer is, why did the Ethiopians suffer an overwhelming defeat at the hand of an enemy whom they themselves had overwhelmingly defeated only forty years before? Several factors are discussed, but three are crucial.

One was the chaotic internal situation at the time of the invasion. When Emperor Haileselassie ascended the throne in 1930 he took vigorous steps to break up the feudal system and build a modern centralized state. This alienated feudal chiefs who had lost their traditional powers and prestige. At the very time Fascist troops were advancing to invade Ethiopia, two of the most powerful provinces were in a state of revolt. In Gojam a cousin of a deposed Chief had defied the Central government and could not be subdued without switching troops from the Italian front. In Tigray the ruler of half that province declared for Italy taking with him 10,000 troops, thereby disrupting at the last moment the

defense plan on the Northern Front. As the war progressed the numbers of feudal chiefs, who could not, at the beginning, openly defy the Emperor and outlying provinces which did not consider themselves as parts of traditional Ethiopia rose to ominous proportions.

A second crucial factor was the inequitable imposition of an arms embargo on the victim and the aggressor alike. This particularly hurt the Ethiopian cause because it was imposed by Britain and France from whom she bought most of her arms, and the United States to whom she looked for support. In effect what this meant was that the declared aggressor, by virtue of his capacity to produce his own arms, could freely import strategic raw materials and turn them into lethal weapons while Ethiopia a nonmanufacturing country was denied the right to purchase arms for the known purpose of self-defense.

The difference in arms was of course, not peculiar to this war. Such was the case during the Battle of Adua also. But while Italy had superior arms, Ethiopia was by no means without them. There was also the obvious difference in the quality of the two armies. The modern Fascist armies were fighting with Ethiopia's peasant conscripts. But again such was the case in 1896. Nevertheless, the Ethiopians were able to offset the advantages of the modern training and superior arms of their assailants and obtain victory by their capacity for taking the initiative, their staying power and relentless

massed attack. But now the war had become one between a heavily equipped army and almost practically unarmed feudal levies. To be sure, one does not overwhelm a tank with a hoe, or an aeroplane with an old Hotchkiss rifle, although this the Ethiopians literally tried.

The third major factor that accounts for the defeat was the failure of the League of Nations to render effective help. It was not, however, the lack of help in itself that proved fatal to the Ethiopian cause. The fatality lay in the fact that the Ethiopian Emperor took the Covenant seriously and, instead of preparing for the imminent invasion, slept under false security.