Italy in Abyssinia

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ITALY IN ABYSSINIA

By Robert Gale Woolbert

The spring of 1936 will see the fortieth anniversary of Italy's defeat at Adua by the armies of Emperor Menelek of Abyssinia. A resounding victory over Abyssinia by that date might well be pleasing to Fascist amour propre. Is any such plan really being matured at Rome, and, if so, will France and Great Britain, acting with or without the League, permit it to be carried out?

The Italo-Abyssinian situation forms an integral part of the general European diplomatic picture and has a particular bearing on Italy's relations with France. France has been Abyssinia's chief support since the days of Menelek. It was France which furnished him with officers, munitions, and diplomatic support against Crispi's effort to impose an Italian protectorate upon Abyssinia in accord with the Italian interpretation of the Treaty of Uchiali (May 2, 1889). It was France which, against the desires of both Italy and Great Britain, secured Abyssinia's admission to the League on September 28, 1923. Two-thirds of Abyssinia's foreign trade passes over the French railroad from Addis Ababa to Jibuti, the capital of French Somaliland. This virtual monopoly on Abyssinia's external commerce is protected by an agreement forbidding the concession of any rights to another company that would compete with the Addis Ababa line.

One might suppose that Abyssinians would resent this stranglehold on the economic life of their country and that France's paramount diplomatic position at Addis Ababa would be impaired. That this is not the case has been due to the thorough realization on the part of the Abyssinian ruling caste that without the aid and comfort of at least one Great Power they are at the mercy of the others, and that France, since her defeat at Fashoda in 1898, has put aside any ulterior designs on Abyssinia's territorial integrity. Diminutive French Somaliland touches Abyssinia for not more than 250 miles, whereas the possessions of England and Italy hem her in along thousands of miles — on all her other frontiers, in fact.

Manifestly, then, any aggressive move in Abyssinia on the part of Italy presupposes a preliminary arrangement between Italy and France. It is for this reason that in the recent pourparlers
between Signor Mussolini and M. Laval the affairs of Abyssinia occupied an important place. As these lines are written, the exact terms of the agreements entered into at Rome are still unpublished, as indeed they are likely to remain for some time. We have, however, the official summary issued on January 8. The first impression given is that Italy by no means got the best of the transaction. Mussolini, in fact, was not in a strategic position for effective bargaining. His revisionist policies in Central Europe had, after twelve years, proved infeasible as a result of Nazi ambitions among the Danube and the solidarity of the Little Entente. He may well have wished, then, to counterbalance this check by diplomatic, and perhaps even military, victories in Africa. M. Laval, however, seems to have begrudged him any substantial consolation.

In Tunisia, the Fascist Government has always held out for a perpetuation of the right of Italians there — over 100,000 in number — to preserve their Italian nationality and hand it down from generation to generation. Such a claim was possible only because Tunisia is not a French colonial possession but a protectorate. The status of Italian citizens and Italian government schools in Tunisia has been governed by the agreement of 1896, entered into shortly after the battle of Adua when Italy was in an unfavorable diplomatic position. This agreement was denounced by France on September 9, 1918, but has continued in vigor since then by "temporary" tri-monthly extensions. According to the agreement just reached at Rome, all children of Italian parents born in Tunisia before 1965 may retain Italian nationality, though any born after 1945 may choose French citizenship if they wish. The Italian governmental schools in Tunisia, long a thorn in the side of the French administration, will continue as at present until 1955, when they must assume a private character. Certain other privileges enjoyed by Italians will be gradually abolished after 1945. This settlement represents a compromise à longue échéance, with every possibility that before the time comes to execute it the European scene will have so changed that it will be inapplicable. From this point of view Mussolini has won a partial success.

The French concessions along the southern frontier of Libya turn out to be very puny indeed. Instead of obtaining a corridor to Lake Chad or a recognition of her rights in Borcu and Ennedi, Italy receives but half of the mountainous Tibesti region, which
ITALY IN ABYSSINIA

is just about the most god-forsaken and useless area one can well imagine. Similarly, France's surrender of a minute speck of desert along the northern boundary of French Somaliland (400 to 500 square miles, facing the Strait of Bal-el-Mandeb) has little value other than moral. The only really valuable concession given Italy is a 20 percent share in the ownership of the Jibuti-Addis Ababa railroad. This, it is held, will give Italy a much better chance at the Abyssinian market, now being vigorously invaded by the Japanese, who are reported to have won 80 percent of Abyssinia's import trade. More important, it will give Italy a control over the arms traffic to Abyssinia. This is the most significant of her gains under the Rome agreements. If Mussolini were in fact preparing to fight Abyssinia, he would be wise to arrange for shutting off his enemy's supply of munitions.

On the whole, then, the concessions received by Italy in Africa
FOREIGN AFFAIRS

are not very extensive and certainly do not represent for her a very satisfactory liquidation of her claims to compensation arising out of the Treaty of London (April 26, 1915). Two explanations are possible. In the first place, Mussolini had not been able to exculpate Italian policy completely from any responsibility for the Marseilles assassinations. Croatian exiles not only were permitted to use Italy as a refuge from which to plot, but they apparently were given billets and military instruction. Very little has been said publicly about these things, but to secure that silence must have been costly for Italian policy. Certainly, M. Laval is not the man to shrink from using such a weapon in diplomatic bargaining. The other explanation for the apparent paucity of French concessions to Italy rests on the supposition that in certain secret articles Laval gave Mussolini, if not carte blanche in Abyssinia, at least wide latitude in “adjusting frontiers.” It is not inconceivable that the French Foreign Office would throw over the Abyssinians in order to immobilize Mussolini in Central Europe. If the French have given Mussolini permission to go ahead, that fact will soon be revealed by events.

To make French permission of real value, Britain would also have to acquiesce. In the accord signed by representatives of Great Britain, France, and Italy on December 13, 1906, after declaring in the preamble that “L’intérêt commun de la France, de la Grande-Bretagne, et de l’Italie étant de maintenir intacte l’intégrité de l’Éthiopie . . .,” it is stipulated in Article 3 that “En tout cas, aucun des trois Gouvernements n’interviendrait d’une manière et dans une mesure quelconques qu’après entente avec les deux autres.”

As a matter of fact, the British Government has already committed itself. In a note delivered to Premier Mussolini by the British Ambassador on December 14, 1925, we find the following:

I have therefore the honour, under instructions from His Majesty’s Principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, to request your Excellency’s support and assistance at Addis Ababa with the Abyssinian Government in order to obtain from them a concession for His Majesty’s Government to construct a barrage at Lake Tsana, together with the right to construct and maintain a motor road for the passage of stores, personnel, &c., from the frontier of the Sudan to the barrage.

His Majesty’s Government in return are prepared to support the Italian Government in obtaining from the Abyssinian Government a concession to construct and run a railway from the frontier of Eritrea to the frontier of Italian Somaliland. It would be understood that this railway, together with all the
ITALY IN ABYSSINIA

necessary works for its construction and for its running, would have entirely free passage across the motor road mentioned above.

With this object in view the necessary identic instructions should be sent to the British and Italian representatives in Ethiopia to concert for common action with the Abyssinian Government in order to obtain that the concessions desired by the Governments of Great Britain and Italy regarding Lake Tsana and the construction of a railway to join up Eritrea with Italian Somaliland, should be granted contemporaneously. It remains understood that, in the event of one of the two Governments securing the concession sought for while the other Government failed to do so, the Government which had obtained satisfaction would not relax their whole-hearted efforts to secure a corresponding satisfaction for the other Government concerned.

In the event of His Majesty's Government, with the valued assistance of the Italian Government, obtaining from the Abyssinian Government the desired concession on Lake Tsana, they are also prepared to recognise an exclusive Italian economic influence in the west of Abyssinia and in the whole of the territory to be crossed by the above-mentioned railway. They would further promise to support with the Abyssinian Government all Italian requests for economic concessions in the above zone.¹

These, and other provisions, were accepted by Mussolini in a note of December 20, 1925.

In the tripartite accord of 1906 Italy had been given the right to construct a railway unifying Eritrea and Somalia, west of Addis Ababa. By the 1925 agreement, the Italian trans-Abyssinian railway is not required to pass to the west of Addis Ababa. Furthermore, Britain surrenders to exclusive Italian economic influence not only all of western Abyssinia, but also the territory traversed by the projected trans-Abyssinian railway. These notes were communicated to Parliament by Austen Chamberlain on April 16, 1926. On June 9, the Abyssinian Government received identic notes from the British and Italian ministers at Addis Ababa, informing it of the terms of the new agreement. Ras Tafari (later to become the Emperor Hailé Selassié) saw in this joint démarche an intention to exercise pressure on him, and on June 19 vigorously protested to the League. As a result of this step, both Chamberlain and Mussolini had to seek refuge in assurances that nothing was farther from their minds than diminishing by an iota the sovereignty of Abyssinia or interfering in any way with the rights of a third power. The "third power," was, of course, France, which had quite properly protested that the 1906 convention explicitly forbade any agreements à deux.

Besides, the clauses giving Italy exclusive economic rights in

¹ British State Papers, 1926, vol. XXX, Command paper 2680.
certain parts of Abyssinia were contrary to the terms of that
convention, which guaranteed to Abyssinia her territorial status
quo and to foreign powers the open door. In a communiqué issued
by the Quai d'Orsay on July 4, 1926, following an interview
between Briand and the Italian Ambassador, it was stated that
"En ce qui concerne les stipulations d'ordre économique, celles-ci
ne portent aucune atteinte au régime de la porte ouverte en
Abyssinie." If this means anything, it is that the Italians had
had to abandon their claims to that "exclusive economic influ-
ence" which the British had promised to help them obtain from
Abyssinia. Thus, thanks to France and the League of Nations,
Italy was deprived of even her "unlimited right of expectation."

Britain, on the other hand, had lost little if anything. Her great
interest had been to prevent a change in the régime of the Blue
Nile waters, essential to the very life of Egypt. In this she had
been successful.2

This business of marching up the hill and down again had
amply demonstrated, in case it had not been obvious before, that
it was futile for Italy to make any plans concerning Abyssinia
without first coming to terms with France. One therefore feels
fairly safe in supposing that the Italians were assured of France's
benevolence before embarking on their present policy.

The evidences that Italy is preparing to go ahead in Abyssinia,
in case the way finally becomes cleared for her diplomatically,
have been accumulating for some months. On November 3
King Victor Emmanuel arrived at Mogadishu for a sixteen-day
visit to Somalia. In the first week of December there took place
at Naples an extraordinarily impressive reunion of the veterans
of colonial wars. Shortly thereafter, General De Bono relinquished
to Mussolini his post as Minister of the Colonies and went out
to assume the combined governorships of Eritrea and Somalia.
This in itself is symptomatic of impending change, for adminis-
tering Eritrea and Somalia as a unit is about as simple as would be
administering Alaska and Hawaii as a single territory.

Most significant of all have been the military preparations
being carried out in Italy's East African colonies. Last summer the
Ministry of Colonies at Rome admitted that Italy was "sending
both soldiers and munitions to Eritrea and Somalia."3 Ostensibly
this movement was to guard against Japanese economic pene-

2 For an accurate account of this whole diplomatic episode from December 1925 to August
1926, see Rouard de Card, L'Ethiopie au point de vue du Droit International (Paris, 1928).
ITALY IN AYBSSINIA

Invasion into Abyssinia and to equip the colonies to defend themselves from Haille Selassie's army of 150,000 (recently modernized by a Belgian military mission) in case Abyssinia should attack while Italy was engaged in Europe. In an attempt to allay the alarmist rumors bred of these warlike preparations, declarations of pacific intentions and mutual friendship were issued at Rome by the Abyssinian chargé d'affaires and the Italian Foreign Office on September 29. Cynics were inclined to remark that such perfunctory protestations were unerring signs that trouble was brewing, and predicted that a series of diplomatic "incidents" would soon take place, to be followed, after public opinion had become properly exercised, by a war to defend the national honor. In other words, it was forecast that the story of Manchukuo was to be repeated in Abyssinia.

Such incidents are, in fact, a constant occurrence in that part of the world. Law and order, as defined in more highly developed states, does not exist in Abyssinia, especially around the periphery, far from the personal control of the Emperor. Under normal circumstances reports of border skirmishes and acts of violence against Europeans in Abyssinia indicate not so much an increase in lawlessness or xenophobia as a desire on the part of European governments to exploit these "incidents" as pretexts for bringing pressure to bear at Addis Ababa. But there cannot be much question as to the recent increase in the gravity of these incidents. An attack on the native troops guarding the Italian consulate at Gondar, in Northern Abyssinia, on November 17, was kept from becoming a possible casus belli by Abyssinia's action in promptly acceding to all Italian demands for indemnity and official apologies. Emperor Haille Selassie can be depended upon to go to considerable lengths to avoid trouble.

Much more serious was the battle at Ualual in early December. This time Haille Selassie felt that he could not and need not back down, in spite of Mussolini's very unbending attitude. The facts of the case, in so far as they are at present ascertainable, seem to be as follows. On December 5 there took place an engagement between Italian colonials and Abyssinian troops at the Ualual wells in the semi-desert region of Ogaden, which has hitherto been generally regarded as the southeast corner of Abyssinia. The Abyssinians are reported to have had 110 killed, and the Italians 30. The Italian Government claims that Ualual is in Somalia, and that they have been in possession of it for the last five years.
The crucial question is, then, not who was technically the aggressor in the passage at arms, but to whom does Ualual belong? According to a convention signed at Addis Ababa, May 16, 1908, the boundary between Abyssinia and Somalia was to be established “on the ground and in the shortest time” by representatives of the two governments. The convention set up certain rules for the general guidance of the boundary commissions. Articles 1, 2, and 3 provide that the frontier is to start from Dolo on the Juba River and proceed eastward and northeastward (in general paralleling the coast at a distance of about 200 miles) in such a way as to place the territories of certain specified tribes on the Italian side, and those of others on the Abyssinian. Article 4 stipulates that from the Webi Shebeli the boundary shall be drawn northeastward in such a manner that “all the territory belonging to the tribes toward the coast will remain to Italy; all the territory of Ogaden and all that of the tribes toward Ogaden will remain to Abyssinia.”4 Now to delimit such a frontier on the basis of the areas inhabited by semi-nomadic tribes was not easy. In 1910 a joint boundary commission initiated its task at Dolo, but, according to the Italian version, was prevented from proceeding very far by difficulties raised by the Abyssinian Government.5 In any event, the boundary has never been drawn on the spot as article 5 of the 1908 convention provides. The Italians, unable to obtain a boundary by negotiation, have apparently set out to secure it by military occupation.

The occupation of Ualual, Rome insists, has been effective for several years. If this is so, it is worth noting that as late as November 16, 1934, there appeared a map of Somalia in the Corriere della Sera of Milan, with boundaries coinciding with those claimed by Abyssinia today. This sketch was no doubt copied from a map in the “Atlante delle Colonie Italiane” (pages 27–28) published in 1928 “under the auspices of the Ministry of Colonies,” which places Ualual forty miles on the Abyssinian side of the tentative frontier. This same map, incidentally, includes part of Ogaden in Somalia, contrary to Article 4 of the 1908 convention. On a map that appeared in the Stampa of Turin, December 16, 1934, in connection with an article supposed to demonstrate conclusively the justice of the Italian stand, Ualual was located in Abyssinia.

5 Italian note to the League of Nations, December 24, 1934.
ITALY IN ABYSSINIA

This error was corrected by a new map appearing in the same paper on December 25. The battle of the maps extended to Geneva, where the League was forced to withdraw several that the Italian delegation found offensive. Prior to the Ualual incident, Italian colonial publications preserved a discreet silence concerning any Italian military penetration into Ogaden.

But the Imperial Court at Addis Ababa does not have to depend upon Italian periodicals for information as to what is happening in Ogaden. If it is true that the Italians have been at Ualual and nearby posts long enough to construct forts, roads, habitations, and radio stations, why, then, have the Abyssinians only now protested to Italy or the League? The chances are that they had protested to Rome, and failing to receive any satisfaction, had resolved to await some favorable juncture for carrying an appeal to the League.

The favorable moment arrived when the Ualual incident broke at the very time an Anglo-Abyssinian boundary commission was near at hand. The presence of neutral witnesses makes every difference when there is a question about events which transpire in such a remote and inaccessible region as Ogaden. On December 14 the League received a report of the clash at Ualual from Addis Ababa. The League Covenant was not invoked, for Abyssinia was waiting to see if Mussolini would arbitrate under the terms of the Italo-Abyssinian Treaty of August 2, 1928. According to Article 2 of this treaty "the two governments reciprocally undertake not to carry out, under any pretext, any action that might prejudice the independence of the other." In Article 5 "the two governments undertake to submit to conciliation or arbitration the questions that shall arise between them and which could not be solved by the normal diplomatic means, without having recourse to the force of arms." But Mussolini said there was nothing to arbitrate, and demanded apologies and indemnities from Abyssinia for its unprovoked aggression on Italian territory. There followed a series of notes to the League reiterating the customary charges and counter-charges. Finally on January 3, Abyssinia invoked Article 11 of the Covenant, thereby throwing the whole matter into the lap of the League just as M. Laval was starting for Rome.

To have haled Italy before the League Council and asked her to give an account of her actions in Ogaden would have been to

*The Italian text of the Treaty will be found in Oriente Moderno, February 1929, p. 58.
create a situation loaded with diplomatic dynamite. Mussolini could be expected to rebel proudly against appearing before the bar on charges by Abyssinia, of all nations. England and France, on the other hand, for numerous reasons could not afford to have Italy threaten to leave the League—as indeed the Grand Council of Fascism over a year ago had favored, in case that international body were not drastically renovated. Much pressure was brought on both sides by France and Britain, with the result that the issue was put over until the next meeting of the Council, on the understanding that the two interested governments in the meantime negotiate directly. To get Abyssinia to drop her call for League action, Italy is reported to have given in all along the line on her demands for apologies and reparations.

The explanation of Mussolini’s capitulation is due, more than to anything else, to the reports of Colonel Clifford, British member of the Anglo-Abyssinian Boundary Commission, present in the vicinity of Ualual before and after the battle. This Commission, after three years of arduous labors, had demarcated the frontier between Abyssinia and British Somaliland. All that remained was the knotty problem of the grazing grounds used by the tribes, who naturally are not sufficiently sophisticated to appreciate the sanctity of international boundaries. It was while on a survey of these grazing grounds that the Commission came into contact with the Italian garrison at Ualual before December 5. Colonel Clifford in his report substantiates practically all the Abyssinian charges and concurs in the opinion that Ualual is in Abyssinia. He furthermore openly accuses the Italians of provocation. With this document to prove his case, the Abyssinian delegate at Geneva, M. Hawariate, was in a position to wait for the Great Powers to come around to the Abyssinian point of view if they wished to prevent the question from being thoroughly aired before the Council.

In the end, however, the Abyssinian tactical victory at Geneva may well prove to have been Pyrrhic. Within a few weeks other incidents in Ogaden had led to further diplomatic tension and to an Italian press campaign against Abyssinia’s barbaric incompetence as a state. By February the Italian military preparations had assumed such proportions and the official positions of the two governments had become so apparently irreconcilable that the possibility of finding a peaceful formula consonant with the prestige of both parties did not seem promising.