



Resolving the Dispute Between Italy and Ethiopia

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Introduction

The rivalry between Italy and Ethiopia (or *Abyssinia*, as it then was officially known) during the time of the League of Nations spans long before the conflict eventually erupted into its second phase of war during 1935. Recorded as the *Second Italo-Ethiopian War*, this conflict retains its roots in European aggression and expansion throughout the scramble for Africa, Ethiopia's fight to maintain its independence, and in the international community's inability to counter imperialist expansionist movements across the globe.



Ethiopian Troops during the Battle of Adwa¹

Arguably initiated with the purposeful mistranslations during the signage of the *Treaty of Wuchale*², which announced Ethiopia as a protectorate of Italy, the *First Italo-Ethiopian War* served as a key turning point during the scramble for Africa with a decisive native victory over a colonial power, and as a symbol of pan-Africanism across the continent. It was this decisive victory over the Italians met with skill and strategy on the hands of the Ethiopians,

coupled with the shame and embarrassment of an Italian defeat that signaled Ethiopia's emergence as an African power, and as a sore subject to be exploited under the power of nationalism and fascism given to Mussolini during his rise to power.

Put to rest during the *Treaty of Addis Ababa*, which had ended the First Italo-Ethiopian War with terms favorable to the Ethiopians such as Italian recognition of Ethiopian independence from colonial rule, the tensions between Ethiopia and Italy had only temporarily healed before the onset of the *Second Italo-Ethiopian War*.

Fueled by Mussolini's fiery speeches stoking the Italian sense of national pride and prestige, the Second Italo-Ethiopian War began with the Italian invasion of Ethiopia through Italian territorial holdings in Eritrea and Somalia. Now fighting a war on two fronts, the Second Italo-Ethiopian War has several implications for stability in Africa, and for the League of Nations:

- First, will the onset of another armed conflict between Ethiopia and Italy spill out into the African continent and threaten other European holdings?
- Second, can Italy be persuaded that the costs of invading and pursuing further military action against Ethiopia such as the overcommitment of manpower and international outcry outweigh the benefits of more territory in East Africa?

¹ AAREG, "Ethiopia Wins the Battle of Adwa," African American Registry (AAREG), accessed January 21, 2020, <https://aaregistry.org/story/ethiopia-wins-the-battle-of-adwa/>

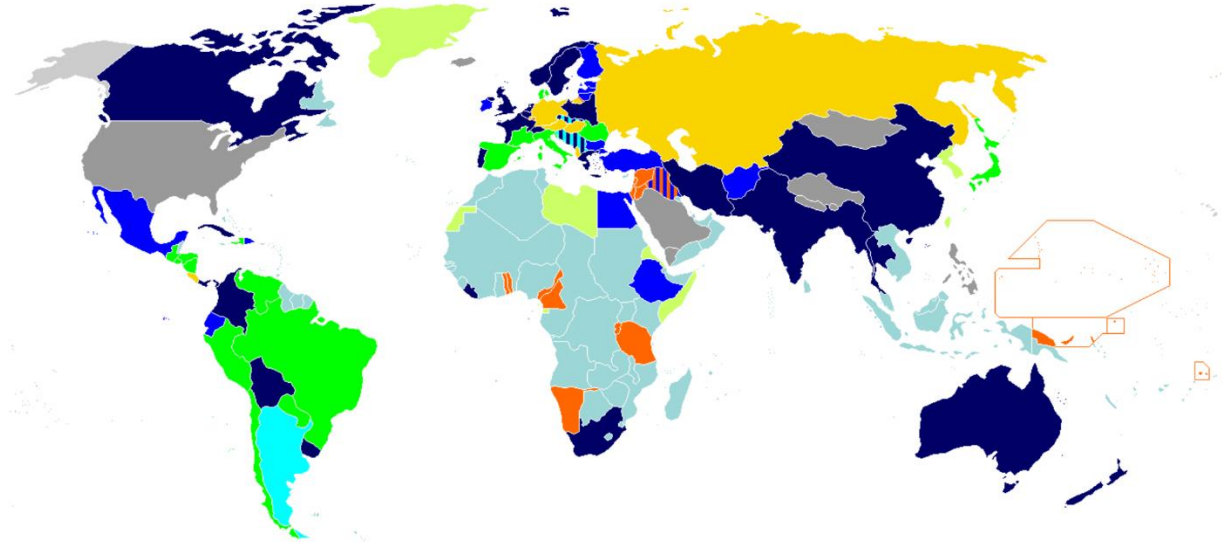
² Richard, Getachew, and Daniel, "Text of Wuchale Treaty: 1889 Ethio-Italian Treaty," Horn Affairs, December 31, 2017, <https://hornaffairs.com/2011/08/17/text-of-wuchale-treaty-1989-ethio-italian-treaty/>




- And third, will the League of Nations remain an effective tool in mitigating international crises and conflicts such as Italian aggression in Africa?

of the League of Nations has proven to be tumultuous if not difficult.

As critics of the League of Nations often believe that the League itself panders more towards



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Founding member that stayed until the end ● Founding member that left and joined ● Founding member that left ● Joined later and stayed until the end ● Joined later and left later 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● League of Nations mandate ● Never members ● Colonies of members ● Colonies of members that left ● Colonies/territories of non-members 	 <p>League of Nations</p>
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A map of Member nations³

The League and Abyssinia/Ethiopia

Applied for under the direction of Ras Tafari, the heir to the Ethiopian throne, Abyssinia (today known as Ethiopia) was admitted to the League of Nations as a Member State in August of 1923.⁴ Supported by every major allied power except for the British, for “not being developed enough,” the relationship between Ethiopia and other member nations throughout the existence

developed nations rather than the majority of its lesser developed members, the same can be exemplified through the League’s inability to take direct action during the entirety of the *Second Italo-Ethiopian War*.

With the refusal of member nations to commit resources and military support toward the First and Second Italo-Ethiopian War, came the strain in the credibility of the League’s ability to function and a strain in support from other member nations toward any action suggested by the League itself.

³ Wikimedia, A Map of Member Nations and the Years That They Have Joined the League of Nations., Wikimedia (Wikimedia, April 28, 2016), https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_League_of_Nations_WWI.png

⁴ Abyssinia was admitted to the League as a Member State in 1923. When the country joined the United

Nations 1945, it joined at Ethiopia. Tuji Jidda, ‘Abyssinia to Ethiopia: from obfuscation to confusion’, *OPride*, 2 November 2009, <https://www.opride.com/2009/11/02/abyssinia-to-ethiopia-from-obfuscation-to-confusion/>



A member of the League of Nations until the end of the League itself, Ethiopia sets itself as one of the many examples in the long list of the League's failures through the onset of further Italian conflict and aggression in the region.

The League and Italy

One of the 42 founding members, Italy was admitted to the League of Nations during its creation in January of 1920. As one of the unaligned founding members, Italy was given unique treatment at the hands of the Allied powers in an attempt to diminish the growing German sphere of influence across Europe.

Unfortunately for Ethiopia, in attempts to appease Italy, no direct action was taken by the League itself to counter Italian expansionist efforts throughout East Africa other than the suggestion for economic sanctions to be levied against the Italians.

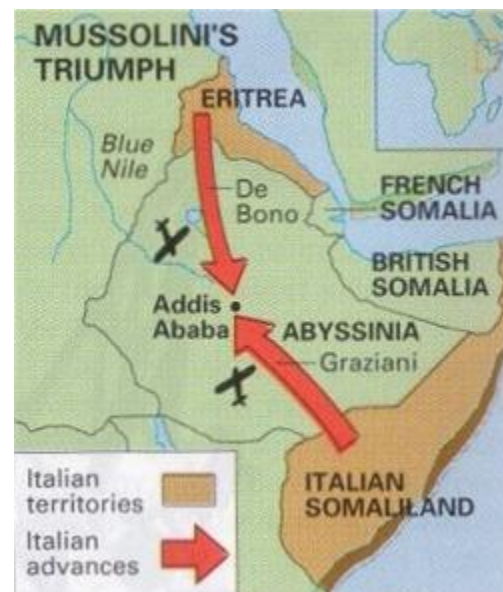
It is this hesitance by the "Big Three" and other member nations in the League that allowed Italy to continue its expansionist efforts unchecked, and allowed Mussolini to roam free in East Africa until the Second World War.

The Walwal Incident

After the *Treaty of Wuchale* ended the *First Italo-Ethiopian War* and ordered Italian recognition of the independence of Ethiopia, unresolved tensions still remained between Italy and Ethiopia and small conflicts soon became common. Fueled in part through the nationalistic and fascist appeal of Mussolini and his speeches, and another in Italy's thirst for god, gold, and glory in East Africa, Italian interest in reconquering Ethiopia soon grew to a maximum.

Initiated with the purposeful construction of Italian fortifications on Ethiopian territory, the

Walwal incident also commonly known as the Abyssinia Crisis, signaled the resumption of Italian-Ethiopian hostilities, and the beginning of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War. Purposefully ignoring Ethiopian sovereignty and territorial boundaries in the town of Walwal, Italian Consulates traveled deep into Ethiopian territory to establish a consul, but instead constructed massive fortifications used to project Italian power deep into the countryside.



Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia⁵

Upon learning of the fortifications at Walwal and despite official requests for immediate withdrawal by both the British and Ethiopian Governments, the Italian garrison at Walwal held firm until conflict erupted between the Italians and Ethiopians resulting in casualties on both sides.

A resumption in hostilities between the Italians and the Ethiopians threatens the stability of both East Africa. Should Mussolini be allowed to continue with this conquest of East Africa? Is this setting a dangerous precedent that can be exploited in years to come?

⁵ Allsop, "Abyssinia Crisis 1935-6: | History Revision for GCSE, IGCSE, IB and AS/A2 History: Mr Allsop History," History revision for GCSE

IGCSE IB and ASA2 History Mr Allsop History Abyssinia Crisis 19356 Comments (ALLSOP, June 2019),



Role of the League of Nations

In the case of the ongoing aggression of Italy against Ethiopia, the League of Nations remains the preeminent international body. There is no other organization with the resources to attempt to resolve this conflict either through peaceful negotiation or a security commitment by the Member Nations. The League has been involved with the conflict between the two nations since the start of the WalWal incident in 1934 where it suggested the placement of economic sanctions on Italy.

The commitment of the League of Nations to the preservation of peace and negotiation to prevent or stop outright warfare has been a guiding principle in prior conflicts. That principle is no less vital in the Italo-Ethiopian Conflict.

In terms of what the League has available in its power to follow through with the ideals agreed upon in the creation of the League of Nations, are utilizing the League frameworks themselves. Particularly, the commitment of powerful states to the League's processes in diplomacy may be helpful in the cooling of the conflict.

The ultimate decision for acting though would lie on the floor of the League's Council, unless it is brought before the assembly for discussion among members. On the floor of the chamber, resolutions would be undertaken to determine what actions should be pursued to resolve or otherwise condemn the crises. These resolutions can be varied and will be returned to later.

Landmark Resolutions

The League of Nations has had successes preventing, containing or stopping inter-state warfare. These crises witnessed the League successfully negotiating, resolving, and

otherwise assisting in the maintenance of regional peace.

There have been two specific incidents which demonstrated what the League of Nations can do when conditions are right: the *Incident at Petrich* and resolution of the *Chaco War*. These also incidents not only established a precedent for countering Italian aggression in East Africa, but provide a baseline for evaluating the successes and failures of the League of Nations as a whole.

Initially, the Incident at Petrich involved a conflict between Bulgaria and Greece in 1925 regarding the slaying of Greek soldiers by their Bulgarian counterparts.⁶ The crisis was especially frightening because this was the same region where crisis provoked the First World War.

The League of Nations sought and received acceptance by both sides to mediate the dispute. The key issue was compensation for the slain soldiers following the Greek seizure of Petrich, a Bulgarian Town.⁷ The League was able to resolve this dispute, debating toward mutually agreed framework in the League Council.

Among its most powerful responses was the threat to blockade Greek ports, a form of what today would be considered sanctions on arms imports and trade.⁸ Importantly, the Greek government gave in to the Council's demands within the dispute. Acceptance of the Council's resolution ended and facilitated a final negotiated solution.

Next, the outbreak of the Chaco War, which started in 1932 and continued until 1935, brought Latin American concerns regarding the spiraling issues of territorial disputes before the League of Nations. The Chaco War between Paraguay and Bolivia was fought over control of

⁶ Barros, James. "The Greek-Bulgarian Incident of 1925: The League of Nations and the Great Powers." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 108, no. 4 (1964): 354

⁷ *Ibid.* 126

⁸ *Ibid.* 127



a large, contested province, Chaco, rich in petroleum.⁹

To achieve lasting peace, member nations in the League agreed to utilize Article 15 of the League Charter as it provides the powers and instrumentation to mediate conflict and bring about cases to the International Court of Justice in the Hague.¹⁰

Though the process of mediation within the League of Nations failed to stop the fighting, Member nations of the Commission of Neutrals, were eventually able to fulfill the League's goals and bring an end to the fighting.

Country/Block Positions

Allied Powers (France & England): The two of the three major allied powers out of First World War are actively attempting to take a step back in committing to one side over the other. As Italy could be a key ally for curbing German aggression and influence throughout Europe and abroad, France and England are supportive of the Ethiopians plight but are refusing to take sides in order to build a coalition against the Germans.

Nazi Germany: Although courting Italy at the time of the turn of the century, Nazi Germany's take on the Italo-Ethiopian conflict differs from that of a traditional ally. Offering indirect material support and arms to Ethiopia, Nazi Germany's position is attempting to bring Italy back into the fold of European politics. As Mussolini's ambitions for Italy differ from the wishes of Hitler and his vision of Europe, Nazi Germany is sure to convince Italy of their fallacies in this conflict.

Ethiopia: As a result of a direct violation of their sovereignty, Ethiopia is set on fighting this struggle against Italy until the very end. Whether that is seeking direct action through other

Member nations of the League itself or committing more to the fight against Italy Ethiopia is not going to go down without a fight.

Other Member nations: Situated with no direct claim to the Italo-Ethiopian conflict other than through politics, the unaligned Member nations of the League are left to decide to either pick sides, or to work diligently toward a diplomatic solution appeasable to both parties. Whichever decision may arise from such a compromise must be suitable for both parties or this conflict may engulf the world into another decade of fighting.

Proposals for action

The processes surrounding the League of Nations ability to address aggression in the international system are varied and rely on gaining consensus within either the League Council or the League Assembly to support resolutions. Major possibilities for action include:

- **Recognize warfare as an immutable part of the international system** and declare the League of Nations will not address ongoing conflicts, only assisting in the prevention and resolution of warfare about being asked by both belligerent parties for assistance. This would support Italian actions and create a precedent for further colonial conquest.
- **Call for a peace negotiation and partition of territory** to appease Italian ambition and prevent further bloodshed. If the League cannot mobilize even commitment to reverse the fighting, maybe it can stabilize the situation. This would leave the Ethiopians aggravated and undermined by their would be

⁹ Woolsey, Lester H. "The Settlement of the Chaco Dispute." American Journal of International Law 33, no. 1 (1939): 126

¹⁰ Ibid 127



saviors, but some Member Nations may view this as the best course of action.

- **Commit to Articles 11 and form a coalition of willing partners** to support Ethiopian resistance against Italy either through material or military aid. Aid could include military assistance, arms transfers and training, or a commitment of forces to support the Ethiopian armies. By sticking to the principles of the League Charter, the Member nations would strengthen the principle of collective security, raise barriers to further war in Africa.
- **Create a new committee** to study issues surrounding the treatment of civilians in war-torn East Asia. A second Lytton Commission-type investigation would not delight the Ethiopians, but it would postpone demands for action and might allow enough time to diplomatically resolve this dispute.
- **Establish aid programs** to assist civilians who may be displaced by conflict. Rather than act to stop the war, which might require sending their own armed forces, Member nations could mitigate the effects of war on the civilian victims.
- **Commit to a trade blockade** of all belligerents in the conflict in order to starve both sides of their ability to continue war.
- **Commit to a trade blockade of Italy** alone as the major aggressor. This will anger Italy and appease Ethiopia, but it may bring about enough time to diplomatically end this dispute.



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