Regional Influences on the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis, 1934-1938

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Regional Influences on the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis, 1934-1938

By

Quentin Colin Holbert

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Abstract

The Italo-Ethiopian Crisis (c. 1934-1938) is both a common case study for the failure of the League of Nations; and as a major event leading up to the Second World War. Much of this existing research focuses on international diplomacy, but far less on people in East Africa. Regional actors, be it colonial officers, soldiers, or civilians, had a major impact on the conduct of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War. The main conflict that led to the outbreak of war, the December 1934 Welwel Incident, was not a conspiracy, but rather a culmination of several decades of tensions that escalated into an international affair. The British colonial officers in East Africa, fearing provocation of Italy, adopted a strict neutrality during the Second Italo-Ethiopian War itself. Non-Governmental Organizations, like the Red Cross and Women’s Suffrage groups, took sides during the war and during Italy’s early colonization of Ethiopia. Religious affiliation largely indicated who Ethiopian civilians supported during the war with Ethiopian Catholics and Muslims supporting the Italians, and Orthodox Ethiopians and Protestant missionaries in opposition.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

On October 3rd, 1935, Italy launched a multi-pronged military offensive against Ethiopia from Italian Somaliland and Italian Eritrea. The total Italian military presence numbered 285,000 in Italian Somaliland and 400,000 in Italian Eritrea spread across the *Regio Esercito* [Royal Army], the *Regia Aeronautica* [Royal Airforce], and the *Regio Corpo Truppe Coloniali* [Royal Corps of Colonial Troops]. Italian Field Marshall Emilio De Bono, who devised and implemented the invasion plan, announced on October 14th, 1935 that “in the name of His Majesty the King of Italy I assume the government of the country [Ethiopia].”¹ William Donovan, later head of the American Office of Strategic Services, characterized the Italian invasion force as “magnificent” and anticipated the war to be “a short one.”² Seven months later, in May 1936, the Italian forces captured Addis Ababa under the leadership of Italian Marshall Pietro Badoglio, but fighting continued for another nine months. Historian Anthony Mockler argued that “the conquest of Ethiopia was complete” only after the defeat of the final Ethiopian guerrilla army on February 17th, 1937.³

This invasion has received much attention from historians studying the roots of the Second World War, and from historians

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² Churchill Archives Centre (CAC), CHAR 2/251/32-33. “Notes on Visit to Abyssinia and Libya by William Donovan, Former United States Attorney General. Commenting That the Italian Army and Air Force in Northern Abyssinia Were ‘Magnificent’, and That the War Would Be a Very Short One. Also That the Italians Had Assembled a Very Powerful Army in Libya, with an Immense Number of Aircraft,” January 1936, 32.

interested in African independence movements. The Second Italo-Ethiopian War is key to both topics’ overarching narratives. Yet many historians and political scientists have simplified the war as Mussolini orchestrating a brutal conquest of one of Africa’s last independent countries. This oversimplification fails to account for peoples’ diverse experiences in East Africa during the 1930s, and the influence that many individuals in smaller-roles had on the war’s outcome.

Peoples experiences, be it as civilians, colonial administrators, or soldiers, directly shaped the Second Italo-Ethiopian War. This was not a conflict where nations’ leaders dictated the course of the conflict. While national leadership was still important, especially in establishing general war policies, neither their authority nor influence were absolute. This war was not simply Italian Fascists versus Ethiopian nationalists; many people had diverse views and experiences, both as participants and observers of the war.

This thesis will examine the different local forces active during the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis (1934-1938). Chapter 2 explores the Welwel Incident and how different regional forces escalated a skirmish into an international crisis. Chapter 3 examines how Great Britain’s appeasement policies in the 1930s affected its East African colonies, with a primary focus on frontier security. Chapter 4 looks into the different Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) active in Ethiopia during the war, including the Red Cross and women’s rights associations. Chapter 5 presents a breakdown of how religion influenced peoples’ decisions during the war and early occupation, namely the relationship between Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, outside Christian missionary groups, and Islam.
Transliteration and Language

Transliteration of East African place names varies heavily between sources. Many early written records of English-Ethiopian relations employ varied spellings, as many of them were attempts to transliterate Amharic or Arabic into Latin-characters. This has occasionally resulted in very different spellings for any given person or place, especially where accent could alter the spelling. Where possible, people and place names will use Ethiopian-English spelling conventions. One example is the Welwel wells, which native-speaking English authors commonly spell as “Wal Wal” while Ethiopian authors usually use “Welwel” when using Latin characters. In cases where Ethiopian authors use multiple ways to write a name, the Amharic conventions will be used in this thesis. The name “Haile Selassie” could be spelled, for example, “Haylä Səllasə” if using Ge’ez language conventions instead of Amharic.

Before examining the historiographical trends in the Second Italo-Ethiopian War, the terms “Ethiopia” and “Abyssinia” must also be addressed. Many historic records of the war use the names interchangeably, which was also common in academic writing until the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution. The presence of two distinct terms for the same empire is significant because, as Richard Moore observed, ”the impression it [the language used] makes in the minds of others and the reactions which it invokes through the association of ideas.” The term Ethiopia originally emerged as a derivative of the Ancient Greek

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term *Aethiopia*, which broadly referenced all of the lands south of the kingdom of Egypt. Ancient Roman scholar Pliny the Elder also references a “Æthiops” as the region’s ruler during the first century BCE. In both cases, the term Ethiopia was a recognition of an autonomous kingdom south of Egypt. Abyssinia, however, is a term that emerged from the Europeanized form of either “Habash,” “Habish,” or “Habsha,” which was an Arabic people that conquered the region before the Common Era. The term Abyssinia has evolved within Ethiopia, as Yosef Ben-Jochannan argued, to become “the equivalent to Ethiopians as ‘Nigger’ is to Africans or African-Americans.” Ethiopia and Abyssinia, while used interchangeably throughout scholarship well into the 1970s, hold very different connotations within Ethiopia. This thesis will, therefore, use Ethiopia and Ethiopians when referring to the Zagwe Dynasty’s Empire and its peoples respectively. Quotations, meanwhile, will retain the authors’ original vernacular. All quotations and references to contemporary institution names will also retain their original phrasing, including any racial epithets and out-dated terminology, throughout this thesis.

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Literature Review

The Second Italo-Ethiopian War took place in what Federico Caprotti characterized as “a backdrop of increasing Italian ambition and mounting international tension.”9 The 1930s were a tumultuous period, with the expansion of Fascist and Communist powers a constant concern for other western powers like Britain and France. A poor global economy, as the Great Depression was still in full force in most of the western world in 1935, exacerbated the expansion of totalitarian regimes. Historian Louise Young, for example, noted that many Japanese citizens viewed Imperial Japan’s conquest of Manchuria in 1931 an essential “lifeline” during the Great Depression.10

Many of the issues that British colonial administrations faced in East Africa were tied to major economic limitations. There are a plethora of studies dealing with Ethiopia’s economy before and during the Second Italo-Ethiopian War.11 There are fewer studies of 1930s economics in other parts of the Horn of Africa or East Africa. Political scientist Edwin Allan Brett published the landmark economic study of East Africa in the early 1970s encompassing Kenya, Tanganyika, and Uganda. Brett focused on the causation of colonial administrations, in

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10 Louise Young, *Japan’s Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 95.

these regions, stunting regional development of an organic capitalist economic system. He did not address the impact of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War on regional economics, which requires further investigation.

The Second Italo-Ethiopian War is a common case study of collective security. One common criticism of League of Nations policy during the war is the exclusion of steel, coal, and oil from the sanctions imposed on Italy after the invasion. Historians and political scientists have debated the impact of these resources’ exclusion on the Italians’ success in East Africa. Some authors cited this war as definitive proof that the League of Nations was ineffective at resolving ongoing international crises. Ruth Henig, a historian of twentieth century international affairs, expanded these arguments and argued that the conquest of Ethiopia caused European powers to discard collective security in favour of “old diplomacy.” This shifted British foreign policy from working through the League of Nations to doubling their efforts to build a coalition in case war erupted with Nazi Germany.

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British endeavours for a strong alliance largely explain their official neutrality during Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia. During the 1930s, Britain “balanced against the most threatening components of Germany, Japan, and Italy’s power that challenged Britain’s vital geo-strategic interests.”16 British officials, for example, were fearful of Germany’s increasingly powerful air force.17 Italy’s strong presence in the Mediterranean and Red seas was also a direct threat to Britain’s naval route to India through the Suez Canal. Britain, however, did not want to directly confront Italy.18 This policy predicated that Italy would remain neutral unless provoked, which was a belief that some British officials held well into 1940. One example of this is that, in an interview dated March 13th, 1940, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain stated that Mussolini “had no intention of leaving the fence on which he at present rested.”19 Before the Second Italo-Ethiopian War’s outbreak, there was some correspondence among British officials on partitioning Ethiopia to gain Italy’s favour,20 although this policy was not pursued beyond initial conceptualization.


17 National Archives, Kew (NA), FO 800/290. “Volume 6: Abyssinia; Air Convention; Air Estimates; Anglo-French Conversations; China; Dominions; France; General Matters; Germany; Japan; Private Manufacture of Arms; Saar; Spain; Steel-Maitland, Sir A.; U.S.A..” (Public Record Office, n.d.), 199–231.


19 NA 1, FO 800/326. “Conversations” (Foreign Office, March 13, 1940).

Historians that specialize in African nationalist movements often examined the impact of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War. Many leaders of African nationalist movements regarded Ethiopia as “the sole remaining pride of Africans and Negros in all parts of the world.” Historian Jonathan Derrick’s book *Africa’s ‘Agitators’: Militant Anti-Colonialism in Africa and the West, 1918-1939* is an excellent study of African nationalist movements during the interwar period. Derrick recognized the “remarkable surge of feeling” the invasion invoked among African communities.

S. K. B. Asante, who specialized in West African History, wrote much of the literature about African intelligentsia’s responses to the Second Italo-Ethiopian War. Asante observed that West African nationalist leaders, including lawyers, journalists, merchants, doctors, and clergymen, summarized the invasion of Ethiopia as “Fascist aggression against a 'black' state.” Organisations including the Prominent Lagos Women Society and the West African Civil Liberties and National Defence League strongly opposed Britain’s appeasement of Italy’s conquest. I. T. A. Wallace-Johnson, a prominent and radical political activist and journalist from Sierra Leone, organized a protest with his Youth League within one day of Italy’s invasion.

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African American communities “were captivated with the Second Italo-Ethiopian War,”25 with many authors discussing these communities’ reactions. Journalist George Schuyler was among the earliest voices in the African American community calling for action. He captured the sentiment of many African Americans with the following passage:

There is not a Negro with other than ice water trickling through his articles who is not anxious to do something to help Ethiopia in her hour of extremity, who is not burning to strike through her a blow at white imperialism and aggression.26

On November 23rd, 1935, Schuyler made a call for African Americans to support Ethiopia’s war effort monetarily to help prevent “a major catastrophe for the darker peoples of the world.”27 Roi Ottley, an African American journalist, argued that Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia was a “tailor-made issue” for the racialists as “at long last, was some sort of tangible - certainly a legitimate issue - around which the black nationalist could rally, and indeed rally a great section of the black population.”28 Many African Americans felt a close connection with Ethiopia and, following these calls for action, many participated in a grassroots campaign to support their Ethiopian brethren. Authors like Ayele Bekerie, Edward O. Erhagbe, and Ehimika A. Ifidon extensively


studied African Americans’ pro-Ethiopian activism. This support is a part of the broader Pan-African movement, which is the idea of solidarity among all Africans, both on the continent and in the diaspora. Kehinde Andrews, professor of Black Studies, argued that Pan-Africanism formally began with the first Pan-African conference in London in 1900. Pan-Africanism exploded in the first half of the twentieth century, with several scholars identifying Ethiopia as a central idea in Pan-African thought. Fikru Gebrekidan’s doctoral dissertation is an excellent study of Ethiopian-Caribbean Pan-African connections from the Second Italo-Ethiopian War to the end of the Ethiopian Civil War in 1991.

Some scholars labelled the captivation with Ethiopia among African American communities since the eighteenth century as ‘Ethiopianism.’ Historian William Scott summarized Ethiopianism as “a biblically based myth of black nationality and destiny…. the concept identifies all people of African descent as Ethiopians and ordains global black redemption from white oppression.”

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Shilliam characterized further this movement as “a hermeneutic that allowed a vision of Pan-African liberation and healing adequate to challenge the global colonial order of slavery and differential racial rule.”34 This movement initially gained momentum with African Americans invoking Ethiopia’s biblical connections, namely to Psalms 68:31 with “the significance of the lines – ‘Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.’”35 Some African American authors, including Frances Harper, invoked this divine imagery as a part of larger African racial pride further solidifying Ethiopia as the quintessential African nation.

Very few authors have discussed one of the exceptions to African and African-American opposition to the Italians: Tigrayan royals. With the ascendancy of the Amhara to power in the mid-nineteenth century, the Tigrayan power base decreased, and the “Tigrayan feudal elites were systematically strangulated into political irrelevance.”36 Menelik II, after becoming Emperor in 1889, shifted power to the Amhara Region and away from Tigray.37 With the Italian invasion in 1935, some parts of the Tigrayan elite aligned with the Italians. Their hope was that they could regain the influence they enjoyed during the previous fragmented-state of Ethiopia. Tigrayan leaders such as Ras Ghetacciù Abaté, Ras Kebbedé Guebret, and Ras Sejum Mangascià received recognition from the Italian Il Duce [The Leader, in reference to

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35 Wilson, “”Are you Man Enough?,”” 266.


Mussolini] on February 6th, 1937 for their collaboration with Italy. Most references to these Tigrayans are footnotes in larger studies of the war and Ethiopian national history, which merits further research on this topic.

Scholars have pointed to Italy’s loss in the First Italo-Ethiopian War (1895-1896) as a motivation for their 1935 military invasion. Italy was among the participants in the Scramble for Africa, which was when European Powers rapidly colonized most of Africa in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Historian Giuseppe Finaldi characterized “empire building” during this period “as a collective and national enterprise” that many Italians considered important. Italy initially settled Eritrea in 1882 and conquered the Red Sea port of Massawa in 1886. Italian colonizers arrived in Somaliland in 1880 and signed protectorate treaties with the Sultanate of Hobyo and the Sultanate of Majeerteen in 1888 and 1889 respectively. Italy and Ethiopian Emperor Menelik II signed the Treaty of Wuchale in 1889, but “the difference in meaning of Article XVII was considerable” between the Italian and Amharic translations. The Italian translation implies that Ethiopia was an Italian protectorate while the Amharic translation lacks this detail. Menelik II’s withdrawal from the treaty, upon discovering the differences between the two versions, was Italy’s casus belli for a military invasion in 1895. Ethiopia’s subsequent victory against the Italians in the Battle of Adowa, sometimes transliterated as Adwa, stalled Italy’s colonial expansion. Historian


Raymond Anthony Jonas noted that “Ethiopia alone had successfully defended its independence” following a European nation’s sustained military campaign in Africa.41

The First Italo-Ethiopian War has had different legacies for Italy and Ethiopia. Many Italians considered this defeat a national shame, which was still present in Italian collective memory in the centenary celebrations of the Battle of Adowa.42 When this defeat was within living memory, many Italians wanted to regain their lost honour. Mussolini evoked this desire in his declaration of war on October 2nd, 1935 when he proclaimed that “Con l’Etiopia abbiamo pazientato quaranta anni! Ora basta! [We have been patient with Ethiopia for forty years. That is enough!]”43 Ethiopia, meanwhile, became internationally respected following its victory at Adowa. Ethiopia also became the “hope to thousands of Africans who were experiencing the full shock of European conquest and were beginning to search for an answer to the myth of African inferiority.”44 While Italy’s prestige decreased, Ethiopia’s increased.

Campaign narratives of Italy’s 1935 invasion are plentiful in both English and Italian. Between 1935 and 1940, multiple authors published books in England describing the campaign. While most English-language publications about the war focused on the lead up, journalist George Martelli was among the first authors to describe the

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full campaign in English in 1938. Some later authors that offered in-depth narratives of the campaign include A. J. Barker, Angelo del Boca, and James Dugan and Laurence Lafore. Italian campaign narratives emerged shortly before their earliest English counterparts. After the conquest of Addis Ababa in May 1936, Italian politicians published retrospectives of the campaign. Three examples are Emilio De Bono, Alessandro Lessona, and Pietro Badoglio, who participated in the campaign and the subsequent colonial administration. These works, while by-products of an imperial fascist state, offer a thorough breakdown of the war itself. They are also valuable because of large gaps in Italian primary sources from Ethiopia. Most written sources from Italians stationed in Ethiopia, including diaries and maps, were destroyed during Britain’s invasion of Ethiopia in 1941, which makes discussing Italy’s war doctrine difficult. These campaign narratives, however, help narrow the gap and are key insights into Italian high command. Domenico Quirico and Giorgio Rochat, meanwhile, offer more recent and comprehensive, and less politicized, studies of the

45 George Martelli, Italy Against the World: The First Complete & Impartial Account of Italy’s Repudiation of the League & Her Conquest of Abyssinia by an English Author Writing with an Intimate Knowledge of the Facts (1937; Reprint, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938).


military campaign from the Italian perspective.49 Ferdinando Pedriali and Roberto Gentili also published more specialized studies on the Regia Aeronautica’s role in the campaign.50

The role of NGOs has been discussed in more specialized studies of the war. The World Bank defines an NGO as any “private organizations that pursue activities to relieve suffering, promote the interests of the poor, protect the environment, provide basic social services or undertake community development.”51 Historian Joseph Fronczak published the most recent, and most comprehensive, study of the “Hands Off Ethiopia” campaign. This campaign was a decentralized international movement advocating for Mussolini to withdraw his military from Ethiopia. Rainer Baudendistel, in his book Between Bombs and Good Intent: The Red Cross and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-1936, outlined how the Red Cross’ services were inconsistent and, often, contradictory. Baudendistel noted that the Red Cross national societies were entirely supportive of the Ethiopian government, exclusively loyal to the Italian government, or apolitical groups concerned with providing neutral service.52 The main limitation of these studies, however, is that many of them have not been contextualized in either regional colonial politics or in larger international movements. Fronczak noted that there is still “a broader


historiographical neglect of transnational social movements.”53 This limitation is despite historians’ larger adoption of international perspectives of world history since the end of the Cold War.54

A small number of historians and political scientists contextualize war in Ethiopian developmental theory. Political scientist Marco Antonsich referred to Ethiopian urbanization as “a cyclical rather than a cumulative phenomenon, because of the constant shift in location of the political and military capitals” well into the nineteenth century.55 Even with the consolation of power into a Shewan empire, western conceptions of modernized infrastructure were not widespread in Ethiopia, even with Selassie’s modernization programs in the early 1930s. Political scientist Mordechai Abir observed that while the Italians did not “themselves establish modern schools.... However, the Italian conquest shook the Ethiopians to the extent that they began to realise the necessity to modernise their country.”56 Indeed many historians have pointed to the often-lopsided technological capabilities of each military as a major factor in Ethiopia’s defeat. Selassie, in conjunction with the Allied powers, saw widespread development of Ethiopia as politically expedient in the postwar period.57


Conclusion

The Second Italo-Ethiopian War is a popular topic among historians. There are excellent histories of this war and its relationship to the Second World War. Historians also thoroughly explored the war’s connection to Pan-African intellectuals and their advocacy for African independence. Current historiography, however, does not adequately explore what people in East Africa did during the war. This war is one that many scholars have focused on from a top-down perspective, with very few authors having considered other experiences.

From soldiers on border patrol to foreign women’s’ rights activists, more people influenced the war than current historiography would imply. This thesis will broaden the scope of current literature about the Second Italo-Ethiopian War and offer another perspective on East African conflict in the 1930s.
CHAPTER 2: THE WELWEL INCIDENT

The Welwel Incident, also transliterated as Walwal in many English sources and Ual-Ual in Italian sources, was an engagement lasting from December 5th to December 7th, 1934 between an Ethiopian force and an Italian colonial garrison. The Welwel Incident is what anthropologist Jan Záhořík called the “breaking point in the mutual Ethiopian-Italian relations as well as in relations between Ethiopia and Europe in general.”58 This was the first engagement between the two empires referred to the League of Nations and it garnered international attention.

The Welwel Incident demonstrates how imperial and colonial policies were inconsistent. Regardless of intentions and plans in an empire’s core, imperial authorities cannot dictate every action in the colonies. The Welwel Incident represented the culmination of over five years of Italian occupation of eastern Ethiopia and Italo-Ethiopian skirmishes for control of the Odagen region. Many commentaries on the Second Italo-Ethiopian War, however, oversimplify the Welwel Incident as a premeditated conspiracy, and entirely ignore the difference between imperial and colonial dimensions. Many authors, while correctly identifying that Italy occupied Welwel since 1929, fail to correlate this occupation with increased levels of violence in eastern Ethiopia. These commentaries often neglect the smaller conflicts that led to the Welwel Incident.

This chapter, therefore, will examine the leadup to the Welwel Incident and its aftermath to assess the escalation of Italo-Ethiopian

58 Jan Záhořík, “Italy, Ethiopia, and the Walwal Incident in 1934,” in Prague Papers on the History of International Relations 2010/2 (Prague: University of Vienna; Charles University of Prague, 2010), 155.
conflicts. Studying Welwel will require studying borders because, with the Italians having occupied the region and constructed a fort, it is important to contextualize how this was able to occur. It is also necessary to consider how Italy was able to exert so much influence across the frontiers of Ethiopia, with military installations and officers over a hundred kilometers inside Ethiopia. Then, following a brief review of the scholarly consensus surrounding the Welwel Incident, there will be a breakdown of the events leading up to and including the clash. This summary is important because, aside from scarce scholarship about the Welwel Incident itself, many authors disagree about the details of the engagement. This summary then makes it possible to evaluate how different countries responded to the engagement. Here, there is marked indifference from Britain’s government toward the dispute between Italy and Ethiopia. The only third party concerned with this conflict was the British Somaliland-Ethiopian Boundary Commission, which was working with the Ethiopian government to resolve complications with the frontier’s poorly-defined borders.

Italian colonial forces in East Africa likely acted independently from their national government. There were multiple minor skirmishes from about 1928 to 1934, which gradually increased tensions between Ethiopia and Italy. This uneasiness culminated in a larger engagement at Welwel. Italian leaders in Rome were subsequently opportunistic and exploited the incident to gain *casus belli* for an invasion of Ethiopia. Arguments that there was a conspiracy behind the Welwel incident both lack considerable evidence and ignore the separation between local colonial conditions and the imperial core. Britain and France stayed largely uninvolved because they were concerned about whether Italy would oppose Nazi Germany’s rapid militarization. However, the
Boundary Commission was interested in the effect the incident would have on their work.

**Borders in the Horn of Africa**

Borders are a complicated, and well-discussed, issue in colonial studies. European powers drew their borders in Africa “arbitrarily” since many of these borders were “not reflective of long-term historical realities.”59 The Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 was the main event that regulated European expansion into Africa, namely, to prevent armed conflict between competing colonial powers. Articles 34 and 35 of the General Act of the Berlin Conference mandated that if a European nation wanted to expand its territory in Africa, there had to be “a notification addressed to the other signatory Powers of the present Act.”60 While the treaty did not overtly outline the partition of Africa, as legal scholar Matthew Craven noted, the language employed “implied that African territory had a status equivalent to terra nullius (either in the strict sense of being ’empty’ or as ’ownerless’) and that European sovereignty could be established at will over territories not yet occupied.”61 Colonial powers opted to work with each other rather than indigenous communities as they partitioned territory. Many local communities, resultantly, were split between different colonies

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including the Boki nation between Cameroon and Nigeria, the “essentially continuous cultural area” of Somalia split across five separate nations, and the Maasai across the Kenyan-Tanzanian borders.

These splits caused multiple complications for communities. Indigenous people in colonial Africa were concerned about their fishing and grazing rights. The formation of colonial borders often split across lands suitable for grazing, and strict enforcement of borders threatened some communities, whose livelihoods had been dependent on livestock for over two thousand years. The Turkana people, an ethnic group native to northwest Kenya, had a skirmish with local Ethiopian irregular soldiers in Toipen in July 1932 over fishing rights.

On the frontier territories between Ethiopia, British Somaliland, and Kenya, there were multiple issues with arms smugglers. Much like in other colonial frontiers, firearm smugglers had largely free license to operate without significant government interference. These smuggling operations were also often connected to local violence. The Ethiopian Section of the Boundary Commission, for example, indicted several men connected to the arms trade for the murder of a “Herr Beits” in late 1934.

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64 NA, CO 967-158. Joseph Byrne, December 8, 1932, 2.


These frontier territories were difficult regions to exercise control over, especially when nomadic communities did not recognize British or Ethiopian rule. Colonial administrations, therefore, regularly observed these indigenous communities’ movements in these frontier territories.\textsuperscript{67} Assistant District Commissioner for North Kavirondo in Kenya, Gerald Reece, in a letter dated June 20\textsuperscript{th}, 1933, observed that

The general position on the Frontier both as far as Turkana and the Northern Frontier Province are concerned is unsatisfactory, as you know, and it seems useless to attempt to get the Abyssinians to exercise any effective control of the nomads on these outlying frontiers. As I write we are hearing that the Turkana are now becoming restless as a result of murders by the Merille [Daasanach people] for which we have not been able to claim compensation.\textsuperscript{68}

The Turkana is an ethnic group who historically resided in the north-western corner of Kenya. Historian John Lamphear, in his seminal work \textit{The Scattering Time: Turkana Responses to Colonial Rule}, observed that the Turkana “derived a strong sense of economic and political integrity from their pre-colonial experiences.”\textsuperscript{69} The Turkana’s desire for independence often meant inconsistent relations with their Ethiopian neighbors. Many Ethiopians “conducted 'private wars' against

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{68} NA, CO 967-158. Gerald Reece to Reece, June 20, 1933, 1–2.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
them [the Turkana] to obtain livestock and other loot” from the 1880s onward,\textsuperscript{70} which the Turkana heavily resisted. When Ethiopia and Britain disputed the ownership of Lake Turkana in the early 1910s, however, then Ethiopian heir Ras Lif Iyasu supported the Turkana’s resistance of British rule.\textsuperscript{71} The Turkana operated outside of both Ethiopian and British rule and maintained active resistance against the British well into the 1930s. This pocket of resistance within the frontier territories between Ethiopia and British-ruled Kenya meant that controlling, much less administrating, this community was extremely difficult.

The borders were further complicated with how Ethiopia previously demarcated its territory. From the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries, Ethiopia was in the Zamana Masafint, or the Era of the Princes. This period, which Kjetil Tronvoll called “one of its [Ethiopia’s] darkest and most troubled,”\textsuperscript{72} was when no central authority ruled all of Ethiopia. Princes formed coalitions and alliances for regional control in different parts of the country. Saheed A. Adejumobi cited the governor of Ye-Maru-Qimis’ victory over Ras Ali of Shoa in 1855 as “the beginning of the end of close to a century-long fratricidal conflict in the Abyssinian core.”\textsuperscript{73} This governor subsequently conquered Tigre and Shoa and became Emperor Tewodros II later the same year. Two subsequent emperors, Yohannes IV (1872–1889) and Menelik II (1889–1913), continued this legacy of consolidating the rest


\textsuperscript{71} Lamphear, \textit{The Scattering Time: Turkana Responses to Colonial Rule}, 140–42.


of Ethiopia under their control. Yohannes IV was most concerned about protecting “the country’s northern marches against Egypt, Italy and disorder in Sudan” during his reign as emperor.\textsuperscript{74} Menelik II, while a Negus, or a monarch with limited power, from 1866 to 1889, focused extensively on southern Ethiopia, expanding the Shoans’ influence with both militaristic and diplomatic approaches. His expansion encompassed several distinct regions including Kaffa, Gibe Oromo, Anywa, Walayta, the Afar, and Borana. Menelik II signed the Treaty of Wuchale with Italy in 1889, which confirmed the Ethiopian-Italian borders and provided financial assistance and military supplies to Menelik II.\textsuperscript{75} While optimistic, Menelik was still wary of Italy’s rapid expansion in the Horn of Africa during the 1880s and 1890s.\textsuperscript{76} 

Aside from direct conquest, these three emperors also negotiated a system of indirect rule. This meant that the regional rulers kept direct authority but were subservient to the emperor. One example was with the Ogaden in eastern Ethiopia. The principal advantage of indirect rule was that it allowed the emperors to focus on more militant opposition within Ethiopia while regional rulers kept other areas stable. The downside, however, was that the actual territorial boundaries between these regional rulers was vague. Between 1897 and 1908, Ethiopia delimited its borders with the adjacent British, French, and Italian colonies. These European powers negotiated their borders as a part of the Scramble for Africa, and Ethiopia and Liberia were the only African states to remain


\textsuperscript{76} Henze, \textit{Layers of Time}, 161–63.
independent during this process. These delimited borders, however, were not always demarcated locally. The Ogaden province had this problem because the terrain was not officially demarcated with British Somaliland until the early 1930s. This meant that the province, while formally recognized as Ethiopian, did not have clear borders with British or Italian Somaliland.

A. T. Curle was a Political Officer and Assistant Commissioner with the British Somaliland-Ethiopian Boundary Commission from approximately 1932 to 1937. While stationed in the city of Burao, which is a city in the Togdheer region of modern-day Somalia, Curle wrote in his diary that “things here are a bit vague as in 1888 we chose a line with the French and made a treaty. Then they chose a line with Abyssinia taking as their point a place off our line with them.”77 This lack of clarity meant that many interactions between local powers concerned border rights. Most interactions between local British and Italian colonial officials and the Ethiopian government officials concerned pastoralists’ cross-border grazing rights.

Britain and Italy’s East African colonies had good diplomatic relations. Britain was supportive of Italian unification in the 1860s, and still retained positive relations after Italy joined the Triple Alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary in 1882. These relations strengthened in 1915 when Britain persuaded Italy to join the Allied Powers in the First World War against its former allies. Britain later rewarded Italy, in part, with the cessation of Jubaland,78 which was a territory then attached to British Kenya. The rise of fascism in Italy during the 1920s

77 Imperial War Museum (IWM), Documents.10911, Box 1, File No. 11. Alexander Tancred Curle, “Private Papers of Lieutenant A. T. Curle” (Diary, October 17, 1933), 3.

did not immediately derail positive interactions either. The British government decided that further relations with Italy “caused no substantial problems so long as Mussolini and his regime seemed to be contributing to the stability of Europe.” Their relations, however, were not perfect. Italy’s acquisition of the Dodecanese Islands in the Aegean Sea and its conquest of Libya during the 1911-1912 Italo-Turkish War “created an Italian presence in the Eastern Mediterranean that had the potential to challenge Britain’s interests.” Italy also felt betrayed because Britain did not give Italy the promised territories from the dissolved Ottoman Empire after the First World War. Overall, however, Italy and Britain maintained positive relations well into the early 1930s despite these grievances.

These positive diplomatic relations trickled into positive colonial relations in East Africa. Local administrators were flexible in their dealings with their neighbors. Curle wrote in his diary on May 21st, 1926 that the Marchess Della Stuffa, who was an Italian colonial officer, allowed him to hunt in Italian Somaliland despite “saying that officially he couldn’t give me leave.” In this situation, the local Marchess Della Stuffa bypassed official imperial policy in favour of a flexible, amicable colonial relations. Gerald Reece, as late as March 1933, was able to travel through Italian Somaliland without impediment. There is no

79 Alfred Willits McKinley, “Anglo-Italian Diplomacy, 1934-1940” (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Delaware, 1982), 64.
82 IWM, Documents.10911, Box 1, File No. 5. Alexander Tancred Curle, “Private Papers of Lieutenant A. T. Curle” (Diary, May 26, 1926), 26.
evidence of hostilities between British and Italian colonies before November 1934.

**The Welwel Incident and Historiography**

Many scholars believe that the Italians, specifically Mussolini, orchestrated the Welwel Incident. Harold Marcus, who was described as “one of North America’s leading historians of modern Ethiopia,” asserted that the Italians doubtlessly attacked first “obviously acting under orders.” Africanist Martin Meredith also argued that the Italians “using aircraft and armoured cars, launched an attack on Abyssinian positions at Walwal” while the Ethiopians were resting.

Anthropologist Jan Záhořík also argued that the Italians “sought to provoke border tensions and incidents and to use the fragile situation for their own purposes.” Záhořík proceeded to explain that the Italians orchestrated the incident as justification for militarization against Ethiopia. Political scientist Ivan Arreguín-Toft argued that Ethiopia, leading into the conflict, acted “precisely so as to avoid any chance of a border ‘incident’ which Italy could inflate into a pretext for invasion.” Arreguín-Toft also argued that Italy was entirely to blame for the fighting, and implies Italy purposefully provoked Ethiopia into a

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87 Záhořík, “Italy, Ethiopia, and the Walwal Incident in 1934,” 147.

border conflict before December 1934. Richard Davis, a historian specializing in British foreign policy, portrayed the Welwel Incident as an insignificant skirmish that Mussolini was entirely responsible for the planning and orchestration of this conflict.⁸⁹ These authors shared the same basic argument: imperial policies dictated local operations, with somebody attempting to provoke a military escalation. Most striking about this argument is how prevalent it is across disciplines: historians, anthropologists, and political scientists with different specializations all argued that the incident was, to some extent, premeditated.

This argument, however, is what David Hackett Fischer would have called a *furtive fallacy*, which is when “history itself is a story of causes mostly insidious and results mostly invidious.”⁹⁰ This fallacy affects historians that assume conspiracy because one or more parties benefit from negative events. In the case of scholarship around Welwel, most authors fall into this category. Authors like Meredith and Davis who asserted that Welwel was an orchestrated conflict did not present evidence for this claim. All these authors reach this conclusion based on Mussolini’s mobilization of forces on Ethiopia’s border in the following months.

The one exception to this trend is Robert Mallett, an expert on Italy during the Second World War. Mallett provided a thorough analysis of Italian mobilization in the Horn of Africa in *Mussolini in Ethiopia, 1919–1935: The Origins of Fascist Italy’s African War*, including the leadup to the Welwel Incident. The one limitation with his, otherwise excellent, study is that he did not offer any insight into the separation of local colonial conditions versus imperial policy. He,

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instead, offers a chronology of events leading into the Second Italo-Ethiopian War. Most of the actual analysis is, instead, focused on the imperial level with Mussolini and his cohorts working around other European powers.

Another common characteristic of English language pieces about the Welwel Incident is authors calling it a border or frontier conflict. Most articles and books call it a “border incident.”\(^{91}\) Even the most common term for the conflict, the Welwel Incident, is derived from people calling it a border, or frontier, incident. It is difficult to explain why people adopted this terminology. One possibility is that some newspapers, within the first month after the Welwel Incident, used variations of the terms “border incident,” “border conflict,” and “frontier incident.”\(^{92}\)

This characterization as a ‘border conflict’ is not entirely accurate. Calling something a border conflict implies that roaming forces near the delineated borders happened upon one another and fought. The incident, however, occurred deep inside Ethiopia’s borders at a central watering site for nomadic communities. This location was not in close proximity to the borders nor was it a previously-disputed territory. While the frontiers and borderlands were ambiguous, calling it a border conflict misrepresents what happened. The Italians also built a fort at Welwel in 1929, completing construction in early 1930. Under the definition of Article 42, Convention IV of the 1907 Hague


Convention, of which Italy was a signatory, a territory “is considered occupied when it is actually placed under the authority of the hostile army. The occupation extends only to the territory where such authority has been established and can be exercised.”\textsuperscript{93} Italy exercised an active military presence at Welwel, and the Italian colonial forces controlled the movement of civilians in this Ethiopian territory. It diminishes the significance of the incident to call it a border conflict when it was, more accurately, a violent clash between Ethiopian soldiers wanting their territory back and the Italian colonial force that refused to surrender the occupied territory.

**Skirmishes and Conflict Before the Welwel Incident**

Italian policy toward Ethiopia sharply shifted “from collaboration to antagonism” in the early 1930s.\textsuperscript{94} Italy and Ethiopia did not have normalized relations following Italy’s defeat in the First Italo-Ethiopian War in 1896. There were, however, some minor examples where Italy and Ethiopia worked with one another. They were still neighbors and could not ignore each other indefinitely, so some relations were necessary. Northern Ethiopia had “modest commercial exchanges” with Italian Eritrea from 1903 to 1935.\textsuperscript{95} The British and Italian governments attempted to pursue development projects in Ethiopia.


from 1926 onward. In early 1928, Italy signed the “Treaty of Amity and Arbitration” with Ethiopia where “Italian financiers enjoy an option of financing any concessions which may be let along the new trade route from Assab to Addis Ababa.”96 There were also negotiations to construct a railroad between Addis Ababa in Ethiopia and Assab in Eritrea, with financing from both the Ethiopian and Italian governments. Ethiopia signed this treaty, however, under the rule of Empress Zewditu. She died two years later and was succeeded by Haile Selassie, born Tafari Makonnen. Selassie was more suspicious of Italian intentions in Ethiopia, especially over the proposed railway construction project that would have connected Italian Eritrea to the Ethiopian capital. Relations between Italy and Ethiopia, around this point, began to stagnate. It was around this time that Italy began exerting its influence near Welwel.

![Figure 1 Confirmed conflicts between Ethiopia and Italy. Created by Quentin Holbert.](image)

Welwel was an oasis in the Ogaden province of Ethiopia. Nomadic pastoralists from British and Italian Somaliland and Ethiopia frequented Welwel, and there were small Ethiopian communities permanently settled near the oasis. Despite the complicated border policies of the Ogaden, foreign governments did not dispute the Ethiopian ownership of Welwel itself before 1930. The Times Atlas of 1920 and British colonial maps up to late 1934 depict Welwel as fifty to sixty miles within Ethiopian territory.97 The Italian minister in Addis Ababa, Giuliano Cora, recognized Welwel as Ethiopian territory in a January 1929 letter to the Ethiopian Foreign Ministry.98 This meant that while unmarked borders affected other communities in the Ogaden, Welwel was certainly accepted among all local powers as belonging to Ethiopia.

Despite this certainty, Italy exerted its influence as early as 1929 with patrols by Italian colonial soldiers across the Ogaden. The Italians further extended their influence in 1930 with the construction of forts at Welwel and Wardair, which was another oasis approximately nine miles southwest of Welwel. One Somali dubat, which was an irregular soldier in the Regio Corpo di Truppe Coloniali, testified that “the officer commanding at Galadi [a small town approximately 110 kilometers southwest of Welwel] had ordered us to challenge any person coming from that side [west], whatever his tribe, and to send him into Italian territory with his live-stock.”99 Anybody that approached the territory and refused “to become Italian nationals” had


all their possessions confiscated and was sent back while those that agreed “received money and clothing.”\textsuperscript{100} Anybody who approached and did not have any valuable property with them were supposed to be returned in the direction that they originally came.

One common misconception about the Welwel Incident is that the Italians remained entirely unchallenged in that area until late 1934. While it is true that the Ethiopian government never officially protested the Italian occupation,\textsuperscript{101} there were multiple skirmishes between the Ethiopians and Italians between 1931 and 1934. Most of these smaller conflicts occurred between Fitaurari Meslekia, head of the Ethiopian troops in Ogaden, and the Italian garrisons across the province. Meslekia also often engaged in direct diplomacy with the Italian Consul in Adowa, including his demand in April 1932 that Europeans were not allowed to leave Adowa and enter the countryside.\textsuperscript{102} Meslekia launched a limited military campaign against Italian garrisons in early 1933, but failed “because of a strong diplomatic stand by Italy and a shrinking of Ethiopian troops because of illness.”\textsuperscript{103}

Ethiopian soldiers also acted independently in some smaller diplomatic crises. One example was when Ethiopian soldiers arrested, and seized all the assets, from nine Italian Somalis in May 1934 near Welwel for unknown reasons.\textsuperscript{104} These soldiers acted, as far as later reports could show, independently of the Ethiopian military’s higher

\textsuperscript{100} \textit{League of Nations Official Journal}, 11:751.

\textsuperscript{101} Potter, \textit{The Wal Wal Arbitration}, 28.

\textsuperscript{102} \textit{Dispute Between Ethiopia and Italy; Request by the Ethiopian Government; Memorandum by the Italian Government on the Situation in Ethiopia}, Volume 7, League of Nations Publications (Geneva: League of Nations, 1935), 23.

\textsuperscript{103} George W. Baer, \textit{The Coming of the Italian-Ethiopian War} (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1967), 47.

\textsuperscript{104} \textit{Dispute Between Ethiopia and Italy}, VII:14.
command. All these conflicts were, largely, local to the Ogaden and did not involve the central imperial governments of either nation.

There were some incidents where Ethiopian forces attacked Italian civilian colonial subjects. In late 1931, there was an Ethiopian attack on Somalis who were part of the Mijurtini community, which was under the jurisdiction of Italian Somaliland, near Bubi. Bubi was a small town about 107 kilometers southwest of Welwel, although there is also a Bubi in the north-west of Ethiopia. The Ethiopian soldiers, under the command of Fitaurari Assaue, raided these Mijurtini at Bubi and "seized 300 camels, 9 taniks [sic] of butter, and 50 akals (straw huts)." The Italians received around 80,000 Lire in compensation from the Ethiopian government in September 1932.

Not every incident between the Italians and Ethiopians was violent. There were multiple incidents that, while not violent, caused tensions between Ethiopia and the Italian colonial administration in the early 1930s. These non-violent conflicts were based around the rights of Italians arrested in Ethiopia. The Franco–Ethiopian Treaty of Amity and Commerce of 1908, colloquially the Klobukowski Treaty, was what legal historian Hailegabriel Feyissa called the "only legal basis’ of European extraterritoriality in Ethiopia until 1936." While only technically applicable to France, other European nations used this treaty as "the basis for consular jurisdiction within Ethiopia in the long run and greater security and privileges for foreigners living in the capital and the empire." Article 7 of this treaty mandated that

105 Dispute Between Ethiopia and Italy, VII:14.


Ethiopian police had the right to arrest foreign citizens and protected persons. The police, however, had to notify the arrested person’s consul and relinquish custody at the soonest opportunity. There were multiple incidents between 1932 and 1934 where Ethiopian police did not comply to these requirements. On June 4th, 1932, the Ethiopian police arrested Italian subject Emanuele Hagginikitas for “unlawfully carrying arms” in an unknown region, but the police lied to the Italian consul about the arrest. In 1933, Mezlekiya arrested nine Italians in the Ogaden without notifying the Italian consul. There were fourteen separate incidents in other parts of Ethiopia with Italian citizens arrested without notification and without formal charges in 1933.

In November 1934 there was an attack against the Italian consulate in Gondar, which was where the Italian Government housed its diplomats since the early 1920s. There was substantive “opposition to foreigners that emanated from religious grounds” among local communities. Local Ethiopian militia, acting independently, attacked the consulate to destroy the local telegraph station because they believed that the radio transmissions were demonic. De Bono recalled that the Ethiopian government’s response to this attack “gave full moral satisfaction to Italy, and

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108 *Dispute Between Ethiopia and Italy*, VII:13.

109 *Dispute Between Ethiopia and Italy*, VII:14


compensation to Italian subjects who had suffered injury.” While none of these incidents garnered international recognition, save for brief news coverage of the attacks at Gondar, they were still sources of contention between Italy and Ethiopia.

The Ogaden was not stable during the early 1930s. Ambiguous borders plus competing desires to control the region caused multiple incidents between Ethiopian and Italian colonial soldiers. The Italian penetration of Ethiopia was deep enough to classify as an occupation under international law. There were no formal orders dictating the occupation, but it was instead an initiative of local Italian colonial officers. Why the local Italian officers acted aggressively in this region is open to interpretation. The Italians believed they owned the area as a part of Italian Somaliland since the Ogaden is, mostly, ethnically Somali. The number of conflicts between Ethiopia and Italy were greatest in the Ogaden, and far fewer were recorded in Tigray or Northern Gondar, which were provinces bordering Italian Eritrea.

Ethiopian forces in the Ogaden, meanwhile, frequently retaliated against the Italian occupation. Other Ethiopian soldiers and irregulars attacked civilians under Italian administration, be it European colonists or indigenous communities, during this timeframe. Both the Ethiopian and Italian forces, while independent from central government control, escalated tensions between Ethiopia and Italy to a point where any incident could erupt into a larger war. This explosion occurred in December 1934 at the Welwel wells.

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The Welwel Incident and its Aftermath

In early November 1934, the Anglo-Ethiopian Boundary Commission departed for Welwel to meet with the Italian garrison. This commission proceeded because they believed instability in the Ogaden could be resolved, at least partially, if the borders were properly demarcated. Leading this commission was Esmond Clifford, Senior British Commissioner for the Anglo-Ethiopian Boundary Commission. On November 22nd, 1934 the council arrived in Welwel with an escort of approximately one thousand Ethiopian soldiers. The Ethiopian soldiers wanted to reclaim the territory from the Italians, seeing it as a violation of their sovereignty, and charged one of the wells. The Italian garrison, which included two Somali Non-Commissioned Officers (NCO) commanding sixty Italian and African soldiers, retreated to the fort and refused Ethiopian demands to surrender the territory. The Somali NCOs, Ali Uelie and Salad Mahmud Hassan, contacted Captain Roberto Cimmaruta of the nearby Uarder garrison for further support. Cimmaruta arrived by the following day and began negotiating with the Boundary Commission on November 24th. These negotiations fell apart when an Italian plane fired on the British and Italian officers early that evening. The observer inside the plane, who was responsible for firing at the delegation, claimed that he thought that Cimmaruta was a prisoner. The pilot, believing that firing on the British would have protected a superior officer, acted on his instincts. Whether this was an excuse for the attack or if the pilot only confessed that they acted recklessly is unclear.

The British left the region to avoid further conflict, leaving the Ethiopian force behind. On December 5th, a gunshot of unknown origin

115 Quirico, Squadrone Bianco, 272–73.
led to direct violence between the Italian and Ethiopian forces. The Italian garrison called in three planes and two tanks to support their line and fighting ended with the Italian garrison repelling the Ethiopian force. The final casualty count was over one hundred Ethiopian dead, over thirty Italian and Somali dead, and an unknown number of wounded on both sides.

Cimmurata was responsible for issuing the demands for reparations, not the Italian nor colonial governments, to Addis Ababa after the Welwel Incident. Selassie responded that it was unreasonable to provide Italy compensation. Selassie’s reasoning was that Italy had violated Ethiopia’s sovereignty in occupying the Ogaden and Ethiopia sustained more than three times the losses in the fighting. Selassie later recalled that the incident “came as a thunderbolt to me. The Italian provocation was obvious, and I did not hesitate to appeal to the League of Nations [for conciliation and arbitration].” The Italian government, after Selassie’s escalation to the League of Nations, claimed that “there was nothing to arbitrate, that Ethiopian troops had delivered an attack without warning or justification upon Italian troops,” rejected Ethiopia’s appeal, and refused to participate in the arbitration process. Italy, during this period, demanded direct negotiations with Ethiopia to discuss reparations for the skirmish.

Mussolini was not involved in the Welwel Incident until after Selassie’s request for arbitration through the League of Nations. Mussolini had to react to a long-brewing colonial conflict. The officer

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who made the demands for reparations acted unilaterally, and Mussolini was initially unaware of these demands. Mussolini’s earliest report to his high command about a prospective invasion plan was on December 20th, 1934. This report, which was entitled “Directions and Plan of Action for the solution of the Italo-Abyssinian question” highlighted that any further actions in Ethiopia required the cooperation of other European powers.119 He also urged his high command to be prepared for the possibility of conflict and ensure that there were 120,000 soldiers ready for combat by fall 1935. Italy mobilized forces on the Ethiopian border from both Italian Somaliland and Italian Eritrea from January 1935 onwards. In early January 1935, De Bono received notification from Mussolini that they would “see how the Wal-Wal affair turns out.”120 The plan was, if they received adequate compensation from Ethiopia, that De Bono would have become the High Commissioner to work with Ethiopia in future diplomacy. Mussolini, however, noted that “we shall follow subsequent events exclusively in accordance with our own standpoint” if compensation was inadequate.121 What Mussolini considered these ‘subsequent events’ was still uncertain, and he “did not plan for the immediate execution of a military solution of the Ethiopia question.”122

Skirmishes continued during these military preparations. On December 28th, 1934, there were reports of an Italian raid on “Gerloguli.”123 This location does not appear on any contemporary

119 De Bono, Anno XIII, 116.
120 De Bono, 57.
121 De Bono, 58.
122 Sbacchi, Ethiopia Under Mussolini: Fascism and the Colonial Experience, 8.
English maps and the only other reference to this location is in a 1903 newspaper article that discussed conflicts on the Ethiopian-Somali frontiers.\textsuperscript{124} It is, therefore, most likely that Gerloguli was a misspelling or mis-transliteration of “Gerlogubi,” which is a small town about 45 kilometers south-west of Welwel. On January 25\textsuperscript{th}, 1935, Ethiopian soldiers at Afdub killed five Italian Somali soldiers.\textsuperscript{125} Afdub refers to two different locations in the Ogaden; one site at approximately 6.81N 45.08E, and another at 9.50N 40.83E. The most likely site is the former, which is approximately 47 kilometers southwest of Welwel. Both these incidents, while not widely published, demonstrate the tense relations between local Italian and Ethiopian forces.

Mussolini’s first confirmation that he was definitely planning to invade Ethiopia was in a letter to De Bono received on March 8\textsuperscript{th}, 1935. Mussolini explicitly stated that they must “take the initiative of operations at the end of October of September.”\textsuperscript{126} Other correspondence, to this date, showed preparations for conflict, but these earlier letters denoted conflict as less likely to be necessary.

After committing to an invasion and while still negotiating with Ethiopia, Mussolini tried to gauge French and British reactions to a prospective conflict with Selassie. Mussolini was in a unique position for negotiations during the mid-1930s. Italy’s alliance with Britain and France during the First World War was a strong basis for future military co-operation. Italy and Nazi Germany, however, were both fascist nations with similar goals of rebuilding themselves as empires. French Foreign Minister Pierre Laval recognized Italy’s unique position and signed the Franco-Italian Agreement on January 7\textsuperscript{th}, 1935, which

\textsuperscript{124} “The Somaliland Campaign,” Ashburton Guardian, September 5, 1903, 1.
\textsuperscript{125} “Italian Crisis in the League,” World Affairs 98, no. 4 (1935): 208.
\textsuperscript{126} De Bono, Anno X\textsuperscript{III}, 118.
France’s parliament ratified on March 26th, 1935. France, in this agreement, authorized Italy to invade and occupy Ethiopia without interference. Laval believed that promising non-intervention in Ethiopia would have earned him good favour with Mussolini. Another clause in the Franco-Italian Agreement was that “no country should modify by a unilateral act its obligations as regards armaments.” Laval interpreted this clause as “a direct Italian promise of Italian support and consultation should Germany denounce the armament clauses of Versailles.”

Britain was also unwilling to oppose Italy in early 1935, which is also something Italian decision makers believed and based their diplomacy around. The Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, Robert Vansittart, was crucial in codifying Britain’s appeasement of Italy. Vansittart recognized that Italy was in a unique geographic position to defend Austria against German aggression and believed it essential to secure Italy’s loyalty in Europe. These concerns resulted in representatives from Britain, France, and Italy meeting in Stresa, Italy on April 14th, 1935 to form a front against Nazi Germany.

One day later, on April 15th, Italy “announced her readiness to proceed to the nomination of arbitrators” in negotiations with

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129 Marcus, A History of Ethiopia, 140.


This announcement was significant because it was the first time Italy acknowledged the League of Nations’ right to arbitrate over the Welwel Incident. From May to late August, Italian and Ethiopian delegates met with the League of Nations Council in Geneva for discussions.

Mussolini’s willingness to work with the League of Nations correlated with his desire to invade Ethiopia. While his intentions were still unknown immediately following the Welwel Incident, he demonstrated increased anxiousness to resolve the situation with Ethiopia, be it through the arbitration and concessions, or through conquest. Mussolini told the Undersecretary to the Minister of the Colonies, Alessandro Lessona, that they had “to resolve, once and for all, the problem of relations with Ethiopia” in early May 1935. Military buildup in Italian Eritrea continued, with De Bono handling the logistics of supplying up to 400,000 soldiers plus attached mechanized units, air support, and supply lines. There was also a buildup of labourers, increasing from 10,000 in February to 50,000 by October, working on building roads and railways from Italian to Ethiopian territory. Italy, during the summer of 1935, was prepared for either incorporating conceded territory into its colonies, or conquest of Ethiopia.

Italy was in an excellent position during the arbitration process. If the League of Nations recognized Mussolini’s grievance, then Italy would gain reparations and territory without further conflict. If the League was neutral or against him, however, he could have cited border instability as a reason for military intervention. If Selassie

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133 Lessona, *Verso L’impero*, 120.

challenged the Italian occupation of the Ogaden, Mussolini would have gained a justification to push back against Ethiopia further. If the League turned against him and sided with Ethiopia, he only had to maintain large forces just outside the disputed area to provoke further border disputes. While the least ideal situation, Mussolini could have escalated these potential disputes into a new cause for war. No matter how the League concluded, Mussolini could have turned the situation to his advantage.

On September 3rd, the League of Nations Council overseeing the arbitration process reached the following conclusion:

This incident was due to an unfortunate chain of circumstances: the first shot might have been as accidental in character as those, so many and so frequent, that preceded it; it is wholly understandable that in the state of nervousness, excitement and suspicion that prevailed among the rival troops, stationed for two weeks in dangerous proximity, this shot should have determined the regrettable results that followed.135

The report then concluded that neither side could be held liable for the escalation of conflict. The commission argued both that Italy took every reasonable measure to avoid conflict and Ethiopia “had no reasonable interest in provoking the engagement.”136 The commission made no comments about the ownership of Welwel or of Italy’s legal standing in the region. This meant that the territory was still in dispute and, with more small-scale conflicts almost guaranteed, it gave Mussolini his casus belli to occupy that region to secure his own colonies’ borders.


The Welwel Incident was not preplanned to provide Italy with an excuse to invade Ethiopia. It was, instead, the result of over five years of conflict between Italy and Ethiopia. Italy expanded into Ethiopia from 1929 onward, with local Italian colonial forces constructing forts over sixty kilometers inside the Ogaden. These initiatives were all locally-determined, with no direct input from government officials in Rome. The Italian colonial forces wrestled for control of eastern Ethiopia, and directly controlled the movement of local peoples. Ethiopian and Italian forces engaged in multiple skirmishes across the Ogaden between 1931 and 1934 before the Welwel Incident. The Ethiopians actively resisted the Italian occupation, and Ethiopian displeasure was a major reason for their sponsorship of the British Somaliland-Ethiopian Boundary Commission; to, peacefully, settle the dispute of who owned the frontier territories of the Ogaden.

When the Ethiopian force of a thousand soldiers arrived unexpectedly at Welwel and charged one of the buildings, especially considering all the previous skirmishes, the local Italian colonial soldiers were tepid. Considering previous tensions between smaller numbers of Italian and Ethiopian soldiers elsewhere in the Ogaden, the presence of a larger Ethiopian force was perceived as an aggressive act. After the Ethiopians and Italians spent two weeks together near contested territory, a fight erupted between the two forces.

The local Italian commander Cimmurata initiated the escalation of this incident into a diplomatic crisis with his demands to Ethiopia for immediate reparations, not the Italian government. When Ethiopia declined and requested arbitration through the League of Nations, the incident exploded into an international affair. Mussolini did not partake in League negotiations until he was certain that France and Britain, the two colonial powers that posed the greatest threat to him, would not
interfere. Once he knew they were not a factor, then he opened negotiations with Ethiopia through the League of Nations while building forces along the Ethiopian border. Mussolini was forced to react to the Welwel Incident and had no role in either planning nor escalating it. Mussolini instead saw the situation as an opportunity to gain the Somali territories of Ethiopia. While Mussolini waited for responses from Britain and France, there were further conflicts in the Ogaden. Multiple skirmishes and small-scale battles erupted in early 1935 between Ethiopian and Italian colonial forces, which were significant because they demonstrated widespread tensions between local forces.

The Welwel Incident was neither a conspiracy for *casus belli* nor was it a uniquely horrific conflict. It was the natural evolution of several years of tension between two local colonial forces feuding for control of the Ogaden, with a gradual escalation from the construction of forts in Welwel in 1929 and the titular conflict in December 1934. In the following months, there was no single agenda; Italian colonial forces continued fighting with the Ethiopians while Mussolini was waiting to see what the League of Nations would concede.

The Welwel Incident was a classic example of how people assumed that what decision makers wanted in an empire’s capital were the same as what isolated people acting thousands of kilometers away desired. What made the Welwel Incident infamous, and so thoroughly connected to the narrative of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War, was people conflating the local conflicts between colonial forces with an imperial army’s conquest of the region. The local colonial soldiers operated independently, not maliciously nor conspiratorially. Why local officers chose to expand into Ethiopia is an open question, but one probable reason is they sincerely believed that the Ogaden province should belong to Italian Somaliland because of the large
Somali presence in the Ogaden. The later post-colonial Somali government also held this belief, which later led to the Ogaden War (1977-1978). While local officers’ motives require further research, namely in Italian colonial archives, it was subsequent reactions from decision makers in Rome and Addis Ababa that set the course for the Second Italo-Ethiopian War.
CHAPTER 3: COLONIAL GOVERNMENTS UNDER BRITISH APPEASEMENT

The British national government’s policy of appeasement towards German, Italian, and Japanese expansion in the early-mid 1930s often created complications for Britain’s colonial counterparts. Appeasement policies forced all levels of a government to avoid provoking Italy further, meaning that colonial administrators and officers had to avoid actions that could be perceived as remotely threatening. Some of the problems these British governments faced included keeping frontier territories near the Ethiopian border secure, protecting British-administered pastoral communities, difficulties in providing humanitarian support in Ethiopia, difficulties handling refugees and deserters, and even offering support to their Italian neighbors. The British colonial governments in Sudan, Kenya, and Somaliland all faced these challenges because of this policy of appeasement.

Cornerstone to British national policy during the early-mid 1930s was to avert conflict unless absolutely necessary. Britain’s Chief of Staffs cautioned that

It is of the utmost importance that this country should not become involved in war within the next few years.... no opportunity should be lost to avert the risk of war, whether in the Far East or in Europe, as long as possible in order to give time for making good the heavy deficiencies in our defence services as a whole.\(^\text{137}\)

Historians have already thoroughly documented the impact of this attitude in British-German relations, and a smaller subsection has examined Italian-British diplomacy in the 1930s. The British national government wanted Italy as an ally against Nazi Germany, which to some politicians meant appeasing some of Italy’s expansionary desires. France, similarly, pursued an ardent anti-German policy in the 1930s and they pursued an alliance with Italy. France also wanted to avoid conflict with Italy “at all costs.”138 This left Britain in an awkward position as, if they opposed Italy’s Mediterranean expansion, then there was a risk that France would break off diplomatic ties with Britain. Historian Robert Mallett argued that “provided that [French Foreign Minister] Pierre Laval remained in power and determined to avoid being drawn into any vigorous action against the Italians, Mussolini could continue to pursue his uncompromising line over the entire Ethiopian matter.”139

The extent of Britain’s response to Mussolini was in flexing its naval might in the Mediterranean and Red Seas. While still wanting to avoid conflict, British officials felt that they had to project their strength to Italy to protect their East African possessions. Britain mobilized a total of 144 warships to the Mediterranean and Red Seas in 1935, which was the largest naval force Britain and its Dominions had mustered since the First World War.140 Such gestures, however, were largely meaningless because Britain already expressed that it did not see conflict as a valid resolution. With British Prime Ministers

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139 Mallett, 199.

140 Morewood, “This Silly African Business:’ The Military Dimension of Britain’s Response to the Abyssinian Crisis,” 81.
Stanley Baldwin (1935-1937) and Neville Chamberlain (1937-1940) having already expressed willingness to work with Italy after they invaded Ethiopia, combined with failed policy initiatives like the Hoare-Laval Pact, Italy had no reason to believe that Britain would intervene. The British navy would not likely have responded to any of Italy’s actions unless the Italians directly attacked the British.

The Italians, by contrast, were unafraid of provoking the British into fighting. Mussolini stated that “out of desperation I would not hesitate, if it were necessary, to make war on [The British].”141 While Mussolini’s military leaders “would have hoped that the order to engage Britain would never be given” because of Britain’s superior navy,142 it is plausible that they would have attacked if deemed necessary. With Britain having already expressed reluctance to fight, however, it let the Italo Comando Supremo [Italian High Command] proceed with more aggressive policies in East Africa without fear of intervention. This Italian aggressiveness and British passivity meant that British colonial security in East Africa was not proactive.

British regional security practices during the 1920s and 1930s, directly influenced how colonial administrators responded to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. Instead of a set of new policies, colonial administrators simply expanded on the previous fifteen years of work, which remained consistent until 1938. British East Africa was not well equipped for conflict in the early twentieth century. The outbreak of the First World War, for example, highlighted the lack of preparedness in Britain’s East African possessions. Britain’s prewar African forces were “little more than 'armed gendarmeries', primarily employed to secure colonial frontiers, uphold internal law and order and to aid

141 Baer, The Coming of the Italian-Ethiopian War, 255.

142 Mallett, Mussolini in Ethiopia, 1919–1935: The Origins of Fascist Italy’s African War, 197.
neighbouring colonies in an emergency.”

Historian George Simpson argued that the British assigned “primary importance to local considerations in the determination of colonial frontier policy” in the 1900s and 1910s. The British colonial administration, for example, relied mostly on junior officers’ judgement in handling Ethiopian raiders’ attacks on “Gabbra, Boran, and Samburu settlements” in the Northwestern section of the Northern Frontier District of Kenya in April 1913. The Ethiopian slave trade was also highly prevalent in the frontier territory between Ethiopia and Sudan, with 40,000 members of the Dizi community uprooted from southwestern Ethiopia in 1912 alone. The British, therefore, monitored large population movements near its colonial borders. Almost immediately on the declaration of war in August 1914, rumours spread across Kenya that Nairobi was at immediate threat of a German invasion. There were continued security concerns in the 1920s. Hubert Moyse Bartlett, then officer in the Royal Corps of Signals and instructor at the Nautical College at Pangbourne, reflected that “tribal unrest was rife in many parts of the East African territories” during the 1910s and 1920s.

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Disarmament following the First World War exacerbated concerns about this unrest among Indigenous communities. Many colonial administrators resented African colonial forces like the Kings African Rifles and did not want these forces to be well-equipped in case they revolted against the colonial governments.\textsuperscript{149} The total strength of the defence forces in British East Africa dropped from 5740 to 2386 full-time soldiers from 1920 to 1933.\textsuperscript{150} These soldiers had no significant overhauls in weaponry during this period, often retaining the same firearms used during the East Africa Campaign (1914-1918). Concerns about these forces’ weakness, however, increased during the 1930s with the rise of totalitarian regimes in Europe. Guy Campbell, former commander of the Kenya Regiment, observed that “the rise of Nazism under Hitler troubled many of the settlers who realized the weakness of Kenya’s defences.”\textsuperscript{151} A well-equipped Italian or German invasion force, which would likely have had hundreds of thousands of soldiers engaged in combined warfare, could easily eliminate a couple of thousand poorly-equipped soldiers scattered across all of British East Africa. As the Italian army advanced into Ethiopia, it became apparent to many British soldiers and politicians that they could not ignore the tepid security situation. Rapid rearmament, however, could have raised Italy’s suspicion of a prospective surprise attack.

The British colonial governments in Kenya, Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, and British Somaliland paid close attention to the fighting


\textsuperscript{150} Malcolm Page, \textit{A History of the King’s African Rifles and East African Forces} (London: Leo Cooper, 1998), 50.

between Ethiopian and Italian forces. This scrutiny of the conflict is unsurprising because there was a large risk that the war would spill over into neighboring colonies. Italy’s highly-aggressive strategy against Ethiopia further exacerbated these concerns. Italy’s commanders believed that “the war with the Ethiopians would need to be ruthless, brutal and above all extremely quick.”\textsuperscript{152} One example is that on June 5\textsuperscript{th}, 1936 Mussolini ordered that “all rebels made prisoner are to be shot” rather than risk a prolonged conflict,\textsuperscript{153} and Badoglio was supposed to eliminate any remaining rebels with poison gas.\textsuperscript{154} On February 21\textsuperscript{st}, 1937, Mussolini ordered the execution of all men eighteen and older in Goggetti,\textsuperscript{155} which is a village about ninety kilometers south of Addis Ababa, in retaliation to the failed assassination attempt on Graziani by two Eritreans in Addis Ababa on February 17\textsuperscript{th}, 1937. There were also British concerns that Italy’s widespread use of poison gas. Steve Baldwin, the British Prime Minister from June 1935 to May 1937, argued that if a European nation “employs them [chemical weapons] in Africa, what guarantees have we that they may not be used in Europe?”\textsuperscript{156} There was also a risk that these gases could have spread into British-controlled territory. The British, therefore, carefully monitored Italy’s progress through Ethiopia,

\textsuperscript{152} Mallett, \textit{Mussolini in Ethiopia, 1919–1935: The Origins of Fascist Italy’s African War}, 160.

\textsuperscript{153} MacGregor Knox, \textit{Mussolini Unleashed, 1939-1941: Politics and Strategy in Fascist Italy’s Last War} (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 3.

\textsuperscript{154} Knox, 4.


with a special focus on frontier territories on the British-Ethiopian borders.

There were hundreds of reports sent between the British Foreign and Colonial offices from November 1935 to March 1936. One of the issues that the British tracked was the Regia Aeronautica’s bombing runs. The Regia Aeronautica followed similar aggressive doctrines as Italy’s land forces. Any groups without clear Italian insignia were considered fair targets, which included neutral pastoral communities. This fear of Italy’s indiscriminate air power extended to British-controlled towns and centers. One example of this was Britain’s concern about Moyale, which is a market town on the Kenyan-Ethiopian border. Originally a Greek-immigrant’s house dubbed Fort Harrington, British Major C. W. Gwynn identified the area as “well placed as a healthy administrative post and as a possible commercial centre” for its potential to revitalize “the important, though at present little used, trade route from Kismayu, vid the Wajjeira oasis, to Boran and central Abyssinia.” The British built infrastructure around this settlement and shared administrative control of Moyale with Ethiopia. After October 1935, however, Moyale was under risk of Italian attack because of the presence of Ethiopian administrators. The commanding officer of the Northern Brigade of the King’s African Rifles, J. A. Campbell, wrote to Bryne in February 1936 that “unless due care is exercised an Italian bombing attack might include British MOYALE [sic] by mistake, thus creating a most unfortunate international incident.”

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157 Many of these letters are available in NA, FCO 141-6347. “Kenya: Intelligence Reports on War Between Italy and Ethiopia.”


Since Italy’s official attitude was that it was Britons’ fault if they happened to be too close to an Ethiopian encampment during a bombing run, Campbell’s concern was justified.

There is some evidence suggesting that the Italians actively communicated with British-administered communities. On March 13th, 1936 the Officer-in-Charge of the Northern District of Kenya, V. G. Glenday, noted that the Italians had renewed a prewar policy of “attracting our tribesmen across the frontier” as potential allies against remaining Ethiopian forces. While there were still attacks against neutral communities after this shift, the frequency dramatically dropped.

British colonial officers were also highly concerned about causing an incident with Italy along several of their frontiers neighboring Ethiopia. Maurice Stanley Lush was among the British officers stationed in Anglo-Egyptian Sudan responsible for frontier security. In a later interview, he claimed that there were no interactions with any Italian officers that he was aware of during the 1930s. Lush instead described that the British administrators had to be very careful not to provoke the Italians “until Italy came into the [Second World] war, there was no question – in fact we had to be very careful not to do anything until Italy came into the war against us.” It is very likely that the British could not employ many patrols to combat slavers in the frontier because they wanted to avoid confrontation with Italy.

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163 Lush, "Lush, Maurice Stanley (Oral History)," pt. 3.
There was probably a fear of repeating the Welwel Incident in other frontier territories. These more cautious policies continued until 1937-1938 when the British-Italian colonial governments agreed to meet more regularly to handle issues in the borderlands. Until this increased communication, which was after Ethiopia’s larger defeat in 1937, it was supremely difficult for British colonies to send patrols through their territories.

This concern with security had a direct, detrimental impact on indigenous African communities. Indigenous populations living near the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and Ethiopian borders were highly vulnerable during the Second Italo-Ethiopian War because the regional British officers worried about provoking the Italians. While Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and Ethiopia outlined their borders in 1907, populations within the frontier territories were often beyond the jurisdiction of either government. The Funj populations, for example, were vulnerable to slavers well into the 1930s. British authorities in Anglo-Egyptian Sudan “have annually spent large sums in controlling the frontiers” and repelling Ethiopian slavers. These British anti-slaver units, however, could have sent mixed signals to nearby Italian units and a repeat of the Welwel Incident could have occurred. These British colonial forces, therefore, reduced operations in the frontier territories with Ethiopia.

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164 NA, FO 401-73. “Further Correspondence Respecting Abyssinia” (Foreign Office, 1939), 23.


Indigenous communities near the Ethiopian borders were also vulnerable to Italian attacks. In early January 1936, Italian aircraft bombed an unnamed indigenous community that was under the protection of Britain.167 This attack, which occurred near the Bulale Wells in the British Somaliland-Ethiopian frontier territory, was likely accidental because there was an Ethiopian force stationed near the indigenous community and it is possible that the pilots, depending on their altitude, mistook their targets. While British administrators raised concerns with their Italian neighbors, the British did not expand their forces to protect these neutral communities. It is likely that, for similar reasons as reducing forces in frontier territories, they did not want to escalate to a violent confrontation with Italian aircraft.

Another danger for the British administrators was the influx of Italian deserters in early 1936. 415 Eritreans, all deserters from the Regio Corpo Truppe Coloniali, entered Kenya in 1936. Historian David Wilkin observed that to oppose armed and trained men who had obviously mutinied successfully from the Italian army would have been dangerous since the numbers of Kenyan police and KAR soldiers who patrolled the NFD [Northern Frontier District] in that area were probably fewer than these 415 soldiers.168

There were also predictions that an additional two thousand soldiers were expected to desert in the following weeks. The KAR disarmed these deserters and sent them to a military camp near the Isiolo Provincial Headquarters, which was in the town of Isiolo approximately

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285 kilometres north of Nairobi. Around two hundred more Eritreans deserted and fled into Kenya by November 1937.

While not a physical threat, Ethiopian refugees were perceived among Britons as an existential crisis. The British public closely followed the cases of refugees in 1930s Europe and Africa “as not discrete incidents, but all tied to fascist violence.”\textsuperscript{169} It was, therefore, not within the British government’s interest to ignore the potential crisis that Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia posed. The British colonial administrations, however, wanted to transfer the refugees out of their colonies as soon as possible because they “were expensive, they caused administrative difficulties, and hosting them engendered tensions with the new Italian rulers to the north.”\textsuperscript{170} The concerns over tensions with Italy were, especially, serious considering Britain’s overall desire to appease Italian interests.

Approximately eight thousand Ethiopians fled to Kenya from October 1935 to November 1937.\textsuperscript{171} Most of these Ethiopians were relocated to work camps near the Kenyan-Ethiopian border while colonial administrators struggled to find more permanent accommodations. When Italy launched an anti-Ethiopian intelligentsia campaign in 1937, creating what historian Msmaku Asrat called “the


\textsuperscript{170} Shadle, 2.

missing generation’ in Ethiopia’s intellectual and political history,”¹⁷² most potential refugees were killed before they had a chance to flee. Some people, who believed the Italians would target them, fled to the American Legation in Addis Ababa.¹⁷³ After a brief stay, these people fled into the countryside where their fates are currently unknown.

These challenges did not prompt any substantive changes in British regional security policies before the Second World War. Archibald Wavell, Commander-in-Chief Middle East, was frustrated with London’s lack of commitment to keeping East Africa safe from an Italian invasion in 1939-1940.¹⁷⁴ Angus Gillan, the Civil Secretary in Sudan, characterized Sudan’s security as “typically British improvisation” rather than a well-organized set of protocol.¹⁷⁵ It would not be until Italy’s conquest of British Somaliland in the summer of 1940, and Britain’s shift to a wartime government in East Africa, that there would be any major changes.

The Italian officers were also concerned about potential incidents with British forces, which further highlight the limitations British administrators faced. Adolfo Graziani, then Governor and Commander-in-Chief of Italian Somaliland, sent a request on January 29th, 1936 to Byrne that British soldiers on the Italo-British borders should stop communicating with their Italian counterparts. Graziani cited that there were three incidents where “officials and officers of the Kenya


¹⁷⁵ Stewart, 18.
Colony have very kindly come to our lines to offer cigarettes and
magazines or to congratulate with us on our successes.” 176 Graziani,
however, requested that Byrne order that similar gestures of kindness
“not happen again in the future as they might be the cause of serious
incidents.” 177

This letter clearly demonstrates the disconnect between colonial
administrators and colonial soldiers. Graziani likely believed that this
was a serious, or at least pervasive, issue if he contacted Byrne about
it. There were examples of gift-giving along the Italian-British borders
during the Second Italo-Ethiopian War, although it is unclear how
widespread this practice was. It is also likely, if there were three
official incidents recorded, that there were others that were not. This
letter also demonstrates British soldiers’ sense of comradery with their
Italian counterparts. Why they felt this way is somewhat unclear, but it
is likely that they felt a connection to their fellow European colonials.
Some British soldiers gave the Italians gifts celebrating the conquest
of Ethiopia, which was the last independent indigenous nation in Africa.
Yet, upon the receipt of this complaint from Graziani’s office, it is likely
that Byrne had to enforce a no-contact policy to avoid provoking the
Italians.

There is also evidence that some of the British administrators
felt positively about their Italian counterparts. Hugh Stonehewer-Bird,
the British Consul-General to Addis Ababa from 1937 to 1940, which
was a period of substantial trade between British and Italian East

176 NA, FCO 141-6347. Adolfo Graziani to Joseph Aloysius Byrne, January 29, 1936.
177 Graziani to Byrne.
Africa, prepared the annual reports of Italian East Africa for the British Foreign Office. In his report for 1938, he referred to Ethiopia as a “vast parasite” not liable to turn any profits for several years despite Italy’s immense investment in the country’s infrastructure.

Stonehewer-Bird also lamented the lack of Italian colonists migrating to Ethiopia in 1937 and 1938. Stonehewer-Bird, however, still had to be cautious not to provoke any diplomatic incidents with Italy despite being a proponent of its imperialism.

This support of Italy’s imperialism further extended to some British civilians. English novelist Evelyn Waugh argued that the Italian invasion was a positive influence for indigenous Africans. He believed that

The neighbouring territories would have been saved much expense and anxiety through the establishment of an orderly rule on their frontiers; the subject peoples would have gained by changing to progressive and comparatively humane masters; the Abyssinians themselves would have preserved the traditional forms of their independence and participated in the profits resulting from the development of their resources.

Waugh’s writings, while controversial in England for supporting Fascist Italy’s conquest of Ethiopia, represent a real sentiment that some Europeans held toward Ethiopia: that it would be better as a colonized state. British socialist and Marxist Historian Cyril Lionel Robert James noted that several newspapers like The Observer regularly presented a

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pro-fascist slant on Ethiopian-Italian relations during the 1930s. Letter-to-the-editor sections of British newspapers offered a wide range of opinions on the conflict between Ethiopia and Italy. One anonymous writer to The Evening Telegraph, for example, argued during the early stages of the diplomatic crisis that Italy had as much right to Ethiopia as Britain did to Egypt and, therefore, Britain should not intervene. On October 14th, 1935 a C. Duvivier argued that international responses to Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia were no different than people’s opposition to the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) and therefore Italy had the right to “restore order and civilisation in this anarchic country [Ethiopia].” These civilians, while not directly involved in colonial administration, further reflect the diverse perspectives that Britons held toward their Italian counterparts.

While the war was still ongoing, the British national government did not want to risk any incidents with Ethiopia or Italy. The Chamberlain government tried to use appeasement to both avoid conflict with Nazi Germany, and to gain favour with Italy as a potential ally. This meant limiting frontier operations and monitoring cross-border conflicts. Once the Italians gained control over most of the country in 1937, the British colonial government dropped most of its reservations about its neighbors, with most discussions over the following two years related to economic concerns. The main result of these prior reservations were fragmentary security policies heavily based on 1920s colonial doctrines. There were, furthermore,

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184 C. Duvivier, “Italy and World Opinion: To the Editor of the Devon & Exeter Gazette,” Devon & Exeter Gazette, October 18, 1935, 11.
inconsistent attitudes toward the combatant nations in all levels of government and among civilians. These inconsistent attitudes likely complicated efforts to form cohesive security and diplomatic policies at the regional level.
CHAPTER 4: PARTISANSHIP AND NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

NGOs were active in the Horn of Africa during the 1930s as a direct response to the humanitarian crisis that the Italian invasion caused. NGOs are a clear example of how colonial administrators viewed the war differently than civilians and soldiers. Administrators often saw NGOs as an impediment to maintaining stability in the region whereas soldiers and civilians, generally, supported NGOs endeavours in East Africa.

It is important to consider what an NGO was when viewing responses to them during the colonial period. While political scientists like Eric Werker and Faisal Z. Ahmed noted that scholarly definitions of NGOs are vague, there are two common characteristics that apply to many NGOs: the ability to operate across borders, and independence from government bodies. Historian Cherri Wemlinger asserted that “nation-state boundaries, whether geographic or political, are no longer useful in defining international relations,” because people and organizations, often operate across national boundaries. While some NGOs focus on one province or country, they are able to operate in multiple countries simultaneously. Closely related to this potential transnationality is their independence from government bodies. Political scientists Martin Barber and Cameron Bowie observed that

'Independence' for NGOs working in humanitarian emergencies is intended to allow them to operate in all areas of a country

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where people are suffering, irrespective of which group or faction is running a particular area. The 'independence' of a development NGO is based on the need to distance itself from the political standpoints adopted by the government of the country in which it is registered.187

This independence, theoretically, is essential for an NGO to operate during major conflicts. If an aid organization is financially beholden to an invading nation, for example, then there is an incentive to not help victims from the defending nation. For organizations like the Red Cross “neutrality is inherently tied to” their missions.188

NGOs worked around different governments during the Second Italo-Ethiopian War. In some cases, colonial administrations and their central imperial powers interfered with NGOs based on political aims. In one case, the Italian Red Cross, the NGO worked in tandem with the Italian government to further support their nation’s greater ambitions. NGOs tied to resistance and social movements, including Ethiopian suffragettes and insurgents, violently opposed the Italian occupation of Ethiopia. British suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst established The New Times and Ethiopia News in opposition to the Italian invasion.

The most prominent NGO during the Second Italo-Ethiopian War was the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (Subsequently called the Red Cross). The Red Cross originated following a battle between Franco-Sardinian and Austrian forces at Solferino, Italy in 1859. Civilian onlookers, including Swiss businessman Henry Dunant, noticed that many wounded soldiers lacked medical aid and provided this aid themselves. Dunant formally


established the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 1863 as a centralized, private body based in Geneva, Switzerland that offers humanitarian aid across the world. Different countries later established national Red Cross societies, which provide direct aid to their respective nations with the support of their governments. A third branch of the Red Cross, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), formed in 1919 to better organize national Red Cross societies for international relief programs.

Selassie launched the Ethiopian Red Cross Society on August 6th, 1935 in reaction to the Welwel Incident and the increased tensions with Italy. In Selassie’s autobiography, which he initially wrote in 1936-1937, he outlined that he originally proposed the foundation of a Red Cross Society in Addis Ababa in July 1935 “with the object of safeguarding the lives of Our soldiers as far as possible.”189 Selassie believed the forthcoming war was “unwinnable,”190 and he wanted to mitigate the loss of Ethiopian life as much as possible. Selassie likely saw the long-term benefits, as the New York Times reported Selassie as emphasizing “the necessity of a Red Cross…. not only in war but also in peace.”191 Selassie, however, was interested in the positive impact a national Red Cross could have if Italy invaded Ethiopia. Ethiopia wanted its medical services to catch up to Italy, who were much better equipped to handle massive casualties.

The Ethiopian Red Cross faced multiple challenges during the Second Italo-Ethiopian War. The ICRC formally recognized the


190 Marcus, A History of Ethiopia, 142.

Ethiopian Red Cross Society as the 48th official member of the IFRC on September 25th, 1935, which was less than two weeks before the Italian invasion. The ICRC did not have time to provide training and support to the Ethiopian branch before the outbreak of conflict. The ICRC sent two European doctors, Marcel Junod and Sydney Brown, to both offer expertise to the Ethiopian Red Cross and to provide broader support to frontline casualties. While Brown had worked with the ICRC for seven years by 1935, Junod’s first exposure was when he received an urgent invitation to work in Ethiopia on October 15th, 1935.

To the ICRC, Ethiopia was substantially behind their Italian counterparts and there was little optimism about the Ethiopian Red Cross’s functionality in a crisis. From 1896 to 1948, Ethiopia relied upon western-managed hospitals for healthcare within major cities like Addis Ababa, Harrar, and Dessie. The rest of the country, however, still depended on Hakim, which were local experts in herbal remedies and cures. A Hakim usually learned from another expert in the same region and carefully guarded their knowledge. Brown explained to Junod that “if my information is correct there is only one Abyssinian medical man [Workneh Eshete] in the whole of the country.”

Many of the doctors and expert medical staff, therefore, came from European nations with British and Scandinavian national Red Cross societies offering the most direct support. Then ICRC president Paul Logoz stated that “Dr [Marcel] Junod told us that the Ethiopian Red Cross was only a façade. Perhaps it would have been better not to

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have tried to create such a façade and not to have admitted to the League of Nations a ‘State’ whose ‘civilisation’ was questionable.”

Trained doctors for frontline work came almost entirely from European nations, with many having no prior experience with work in East Africa. The Ethiopian Red Cross was simply unequipped to handle the forthcoming conflict.

The British Red Cross played an active role during the war. The British Red Cross, from the early 1930s onward, sought to have at least one branch available in every British protectorate and colony. They provided, alongside their Scandinavian counterparts, a plethora of supplies and medical professionals. There was some popular support for their work during the Second Italo-Ethiopian War in England. Cosmo Gordon Lang, then Archbishop of Canterbury, offered blessings to both Red Cross doctors and the Red Cross flag before departure to Ethiopia. Some protestant church programs had their pastors make requests of their congregations to donate to the British Red Cross.

There was a general sense of duty among many Britons to help Ethiopia where possible, be it through donated funds, medical supplies, or offers of service to the British Red Cross.

The British colonial government, however, exercised caution when the British Red Cross requested specific support. G. A. Burgoyne was a First World War veteran who later joined the British Red Cross.


When his Red Cross unit requested support from the colonial government in Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, their request was refused because “the policy of the British government aims at the concentration of British subjects and the reduction of travelling to a minimum.” Burgoyne later entered Ethiopia without any support from the British colonial government.

The Italian military in Ethiopia made multiple attacks against Red-Cross hospitals during the war. On December 6th, 1935 the Italian Regia Aeronautica dropped incendiary bombs on the town of Dessie, with many of said bombs hitting both Selassie’s palace and the hospital. On December 30th, 1935 Italian aircraft bombed Swedish ambulances at Melka Dida, which was a camp in the Dolo Addo district of Eastern Ethiopia. There was also an attack against the Egyptian Red Cross Society, that was active near Degehabur in the Ogaden region, in early January 1936. Junod claimed that from February 1936 onward all of the Red Cross units were constantly fleeing from Italian bombing runs and frequently under attack. One of these attacks included an Italian air raid on the Harar hospital in late March 1936, which was the largest Red Cross-operated facility in Ethiopia. Contemporary records become scarcer due to the rapidity

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201 United Nations Archives (UNA), C.207.M.129.1936.VII. “Dispute Between Ethiopia and Italy: Communication From the Swiss Government” (League of Nations, May 7, 1936), 1.


203 Junod, Warrior Without Weapons, 51.

204 “The Bombing of Harar by Italian ‘Planes,” The Western Daily Press and Bristol Mirror, April 1, 1936, 8.
of these assaults, with greater gaps in primary sources. Burgoyne, for example, stopped writing in his diary in late January, and he died in an Italian bombing raid a month later.\textsuperscript{205} Brown sent a letter to Geneva in February 1936 stating that

\begin{quote}
 it is now very clear that this little colonial affair has become a war of extermination and that if we do not manage to have the Red Cross emblem respected by a country calling itself civilized we will never be able to do so later if we are ever faced by a war in Europe.\textsuperscript{206}
\end{quote}

The frequency of these attacks supports Brown’s claim. As attacks continued into March and April, the common Italian response was that the camps were close to Ethiopian forces. Following a bombing run on British Red Cross members in March 1936, the Italian embassy reported that their pilots bombed the camp because, according to the Italians, the British ambulance was close to Ethiopian anti-aircraft guns.\textsuperscript{207} These attacks were almost certainly Italian military policy, and not accidental bombings. Smaller and more infrequent incidents could have been blamed on individual pilots and bomber squadrons. Similarly, poorly marked encampments with armed guards could be mistaken for military outposts. These possibilities, however, do not address how many attacks occurred across the entire Ethiopian front nor their intensity. These attacks were probably official Regia Areonautica policy whereby pilots likely received specific orders to target any large groups that were not Italian, or any groups even suspected of helping Ethiopia to any capacity. The Italian military

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{205} “British Major Killed in Italian Bomb Raid,” \textit{Daily Mail}, March 6, 1936, 1.
\textsuperscript{206} Smyser, \textit{The Humanitarian Conscience: Caring for Others in the Age of Terror}, 50.
\textsuperscript{207} “Italian Charges Against British Red Cross,” \textit{Citizen}, April 17, 1936, 7.
\end{quote}
rejected the ICRC’s pledge to neutrality and treated them as an enemy combatant during the Second Italo-Ethiopian War.

The Italian Red Cross refused all assistance from other Red Cross societies. While the ICRC only recognizes one Red Cross society per nation to maintain cohesion, it is typical for societies to cooperate during an international crisis. It is also common for civilians from other countries to provide support; Italian Americans, for example, donated almost exclusively to the Italian Red Cross. The official explanation that the Italian government gave was that the Italian Red Cross did not require any foreign support to care for Italian casualties. The Italian government viewed Italian emigrants, meanwhile, as extensions of the nation and obligated to support their imperial endeavours. There is some truth to this claim of lacking need, as mortality rates from illness in East Africa during the war were reportedly lower than equivalent Italian units stationed in Italy. This highly disproportionate efficacy of Italian medical treatment, even compared to other European Red Cross units in Africa, implies that the Italian Red Cross acted more as a medical unit for the Italian military instead of a third party. It is highly likely that the Italian Red Cross prioritized Italian casualties and, through rejecting offers for international aid except from Italian emigrants, wanted to do so without scrutiny from other Red Cross societies.


The Italian Red Cross’ administration had a clear partisan bias toward the fascist government. Filippo Cremonesi, president of the Italian National Red Cross, often opposed the actions of the ICRC and tried to align the national organization with the Italian fascist government. Cremonesi spent his tenure moulding the Italian Red Cross “to the service of the Fascist Fatherland and to the orders of the Duce.” Since the Italian government saw Ethiopia and other East African colonies as “one region of a Magna Italia,” international NGOs did not have much influence in Italian-controlled territory.

One example of Cremonesi’s influence was with the usage of poison gas during the Second Italo-Ethiopian War, which was a major component of Italy’s war effort. Historian Richard Overy stated that there were 103 confirmed attacks using mustard and phosphorous bombs in Ethiopia from December 22nd, 1935 to March 29th, 1936. Italy’s total budget for its chemical gases for the Second Italo-Ethiopian War were one hundred million lire, which included funding for gas masks, flamethrowers, and storage of volatile materials. There were at least five cases of Italian aircraft having used lethal poison gas against Ethiopian soldiers: over the Takkaze Valley in Northeastern Ethiopia on December 22nd, 1935, the Battle of the Shire from February 29th 1936 to March 2nd 1936, the Battle of Maychew on March


31st 1936, and a series of attacks on Ethiopian towns in April 1936. Selassie described how he “has been accosted by old friends whom he could not recognize because of burns” from poison gas. Conservative estimates place the total amount of gas used against the Ethiopians around five hundred thousand tonnes. Unnamed Soviet analysts estimated that approximately thirty percent of the 50,000 casualties resulted from chemical weapons. Chemical warfare was, based on these figures, instrumental in the Italian war effort and not an incidental inclusion into pre-existing strategies.

These weapons were highly effective partially because the Red Cross failed to provide direct support to affected communities. Red Cross missions need to justify requests for specialized supplies, which meant that for gas masks to be sent to Ethiopia there had to be evidence of chemical warfare being present. Cremonesi, not wanting to be implicated in any war crimes, refused to discuss Italy’s use of poison gas in Ethiopia during any official meetings with the ICRC. This culminated in the ICRC refusing Ethiopian requests for gas masks because, without an approved investigation, the Ethiopian government


could not irrefutably demonstrate “for what purposes the masks were to be used.” This is an example of direct intervention in the Red Cross’ operations from somebody who had specific political goals. The Red Cross, on the ground level, were unable to provide direct support to affected communities after attacks. Junod, in the aftermath of one bombing, described how “the monotonous chant rose towards the refuge of the Emperor…. Who was to help them in their suffering? There were no doctors available and our ambulances had been destroyed.” The constant attacks on Red Cross societies made assisting those communities almost impossible, especially as Ethiopia was already ill-equipped to combat chemical warfare. The Red Cross, because of partisan actors, were unable to perform their duties adequately in Ethiopia.

The ICRC’s involvement in Ethiopia ended with the Italian conquest of Addis Ababa. Junod was among the last Red Cross members still alive in Addis Ababa after the Italian conquest, and Badoglio reportedly told Junod that “the International Red Cross would have done better not to interfere.” Junod subsequently left Ethiopia and, in July 1936, went to Spain as an observer in the ongoing civil war. Other Red-Cross affiliated personnel evacuated Ethiopia as able, including three missionaries attached to the Ethiopian Red Cross, during the spring of 1936. The Red Cross’ involvement in the Second Italo-Ethiopian War was, effectively, over.


222 Junod, 83.

Different Red Cross societies had different roles during the Second Italo-Ethiopian War. The ICRC, while providing supplies and expertise to Ethiopia, largely limited itself in its absolute pledge to neutrality. The Ethiopian Red Cross, formed specifically as a response to Italian aggression in 1935, was too poorly equipped for the forthcoming war. Other national societies like the British Red Cross and American Red Cross provided support more directly, although their respective governments limited their actions to varied extents. The Italian Red Cross was weaponized for the Italian war machine and was largely responsible for the ICRC’s complicit attitude toward Italy’s use of chemical warfare.

The Red Cross societies were not the only NGOs active in Ethiopia during the Second Italo-Ethiopian War. Many women’s organizations and activists, both international and Ethiopian, opposed Italy’s invasion and were active in their opposition. The most robust research on women’s involvement in the Second Italo-Ethiopian War in English is Wemlinger’s work, including her doctoral thesis *Making Their Voices Heard: Expressions of World Opinion to the League of Nations During the Italo-Ethiopian Dispute (1934-1938)*. Wemlinger estimated that, before the Italian invasion in October 1935, “over sixty exclusively women’s national and international organizations contacted the League of Nations” concerning the Italo-Ethiopian crisis.224 Princess Tsehai Haile Selassie, the third daughter of Haile Selassie, became an important symbol for women’s groups during the Second Italo-Ethiopian War. Following Tsehai Selassie’s radio speech urging all women to help Ethiopia on September 8th, 1935, the League of Nations received a plethora of letters requesting a peaceful resolution to the

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ongoing Italo-Ethiopian Crisis. Many of the women that wrote to the League cited Tsehai as their main inspiration.\textsuperscript{225}

Ethiopian women and women’s organizations actively participated in the war, usually on behalf of Ethiopia. Scholarship on these groups remains scarce, with most of the existing research being unpublished B.A. and M.A. theses from Addis Ababa University.\textsuperscript{226} Ethiopian women traditionally appeared on battlefields as supports for the fighting men. Historian Tsehai Berhane-Salassie noted that, while women fighting were rare, they frequently “appeared as fighters with guns or other weapons, in response to mobilisation decrees of the government” and during times of national emergency.\textsuperscript{227} The Second Italo-Ethiopian War was one of these occasions, where many women directly participated in the resistance movements. The Ethiopian Women’s Volunteer Service Association, for example, resisted the Italian invasion. The women involved had varied roles, from supplying patriot fighters with medical supplies to conducting intelligence operations, from 1936 to 1941. Many women also became Shifta, which was a broad term for any bandits, outlaws, and rebels in East Africa.\textsuperscript{228} These Shifta consistently opposed Italian rule, often disrupting supply lines and attacking isolated patrols and outposts, well into 1940 and 1941.

\textsuperscript{225} Wemlinger, 204–9.


One of the most prominent western women advocating for Ethiopia was Sylvia Pankhurst. Pankhurst found Ethiopia’s “long history of independence” appealing to “her anti-colonialist sentiments.”\(^{229}\) She initially wrote to newspapers like *The New York Times* warning readers that Italy was likely going to invade Ethiopia. In 1936 she founded *The New Times and Ethiopia News* newspaper in response to Italy’s invasion, using this paper to argue against Italy’s fascist expansionism. Pankhurst’s activism on Ethiopia’s behalf was “much appreciated by black activists in Africa, the West Indies, Britain and America.”\(^{230}\) Her work was also likely considered important in undermining Italian rule, with many Ethiopian nationalists sharing translated copies of her publication with one another. It is difficult to quantify the effect of Pankhurst’s activism had on the Second Italo-Ethiopian War, but Ethiopian resistance fighters saw her as important.

One of Pankhurst’s colleagues, *Hakim* Warqenah Eshate, was also deeply involved in the war. Eshate, sometimes known by his baptized name of Charles Martin, was a “Ethiopian statesman, diplomat and occasional businessman” with a personal relationship to Selassie.\(^{231}\) Eshate vocally opposed, and in large part brought to light, Britain’s neutrality following Italy’s invasion. He regularly contributed to *The New Times and Ethiopia News* and launched “an ambitious appeal to raise 2 million pounds sterling” for relief efforts across


Ethiopia. Similar to Pankhurst, he was pivotal in raising general awareness of the Italo-Ethiopian conflict, and the plight of Ethiopians under their new imperial rulers.

One small set of NGOs in Ethiopia during the war were veterinary hospitals and ambulances. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) was concerned about the welfare of horses and mules, which were used extensively for transporting soldiers and supplies. Italy’s use of poison gases, furthermore, exacerbated concerns of animal welfare and suffering during the war. These NGOs and activists, however, have almost no presence in current academic literature on the Second Italo-Ethiopian War and merit further investigation.

The Second Italo-Ethiopian War cannot be understood, in full, when examining only national or colonial governments. NGOs were important in the Second Italo-Ethiopian War. As entities, theoretically, outside of direct government control, they worked within Ethiopia according to their different goals. The war, however, shaped which side different organizations supported. The Ethiopian Red Cross, being poorly equipped and having only formed a few months before the outbreak of war, received immense support from the ICRC and other national Red Cross societies. The Italian Red Cross acted as an arm of the Italian military, and supplied support almost exclusively to Italian soldiers and civilians. Administration within the Italian Red Cross blocked the ICRC from performing their full duties within Ethiopia, including blocking investigations over Italy’s use of chemical warfare. Women’s groups, both inside and outside of Ethiopia, provided direct support to Ethiopia. Many women within Ethiopia aided in the war and

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later resistance movements in both logistics support and direct combat roles. Individuals like Sylvia Pankhurst and Warqenah Eshate, organized awareness and fundraising campaigns for Ethiopia.
CHAPTER 5: RELIGIOUS INFLUENCES ON THE SECOND ITALO-ETHIOPIAN WAR

Religious organizations were caught in a quagmire during the war. These organizations, typically, hold influence across national boundaries and spread their beliefs wherever they take hold. While some religious institutions become state-mandated, they are still separate entities from governments. That said, governments attempted to weaponize religion to garner support for their regimes during the war. Religion, generally, motivated many people more than national loyalties, with many factions siding with, or opposing, the Ethiopian government because of a common faith. There are a few exceptions where religion did not override political motives, but generally religion determined alliances within Ethiopia in the 1930s.

Ethiopia was a pluralist society in the 1930s. American missionary Samuel Marinus Zwemer estimated, in 1936, that about three and a half million are monophysite Jacobite Christians connected with the Coptic patriarchate of Alexandria. There are some Catholics and Protestants, fifty thousand Jews, perhaps a million animistic pagans, and the rest of the population is Moslem, i.e., about three million, or thirty-seven per cent of the total.²³⁴

The two major forces in Ethiopia during the 1930s were Ethiopian Orthodoxy and Islam, which was mostly Sunni and almost no Shia.

The Ethiopian government tried to rally national support, partially, around their longstanding religious institutions, namely the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC). Many resistance

fighters during Italy’s occupation unified around Ethiopian Orthodoxy. Ethiopia as a bastion of true Christianity was a powerful image among many Ethiopians. Italy used Catholicism to legitimize their conquest of, from their perspective, a backwards African nation. The small Catholic communities in Ethiopian celebrated the Italian invasion and the expansion of Catholic Churches in the late 1930s. The Muslim minority worked with Italy in exchange for more political power, which the Italians gave them.

**Religion in Ethiopia Before the Second Italo-Ethiopian War**

From the fourth to early twentieth centuries, a large part of Ethiopia’s population practiced Christianity largely through the EOTC, which was among the only Sub-Saharan African Christian organizations before the colonial period. While precise records are scarce, scholars generally agree that Ezana of Axum (320 – 360 CE) of the Kingdom of Aksum, which comprised modern-day Eritrea and the Tigray Region of Northern Ethiopia, codified Christianity as the state religion early in the fourth century.

The EOTC’s interpretation of Christianity remained largely Alexandrian, which was where several apostles to Ethiopia originated. The term *Tewahedo*, or unity, is the central doctrine of this branch of Christianity whereby there is a “union of the divine and human natures in Christ, whom they [Orthodox Ethiopians] view as one person with

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one nature, which is uniquely divine and human.\textsuperscript{236} Ethiopia specifically sent ambassadors to Alexandria “to ordain them [EOTC] a bishop, and some presbyters” well into the mid-seventh century.\textsuperscript{237}

There were some splits between Ethiopian and Eastern Orthodoxy, however, starting with the Muslim conquest of Egypt in the mid-seventh century. Islam rapidly spread across North and East Africa from the seventh to twelfth centuries, with many Ethiopians having “came to see themselves as an island of Christianity in a hostile sea of Islam and of paganism.”\textsuperscript{238} This meant that the EOTC began to develop separately from other branches of Eastern Orthodoxy. One example is the appropriation of Queen Sheba into Ethiopia’s founding mythology. Queen Sheba, who originally appeared in Hebrew tradition as a caravanner that brought gifts to King Solomon, is seen as the origin of Ethiopia’s monarchy. References to Queen Sheba as the ancestor of Ethiopia’s royal family emerged as early as the eleventh century.\textsuperscript{239} Emperor Fasilides moved the imperial capital to Gondar in 1636, which established a precedent for the EOTC being prevalent in the capital. This shift to Gondar also meant the ascension of the Amhara ethnic group, which were overwhelming Ethiopian Orthodox,

\textsuperscript{236} Donald Crummey, “Church and Nation: The Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahedo Church (From the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century),” in \textit{Eastern Christianity}, ed. Michael Angold, Volume 5, Cambridge History of Christianity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 459.

\textsuperscript{237} Michael Geddes, \textit{The Church History of Ethiopia: Wherein, Among Other Things, the Two Great Splendid Roman Missions Into That Empire Are Placed in Their True Light; to Which Are Added, an Epitome of the Dominican History of That Church, and an Account of the Practices and Conviction of Maria of the Annunciation, the Famous Nun of Lisbon} (London: Rose and Crown, 1696), 17.

\textsuperscript{238} Crummey, “Church and Nation: The Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahedo Church (From the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century),” 459.

as the rulers of Ethiopia. The EOTC has, since this period, maintained hegemony across most of Ethiopia.

From the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, many Christian evangelists travelled to, or studied, Ethiopia with different perspectives of the country’s religiosity. The last neighboring pre-colonial Christian State adjacent to Ethiopia was the Kingdom of Nubia (modern-day southern Egypt and central-Sudan), which ultimately converted to Islam.” That there was a Christian nation thriving in a sea of Islamic states seemed amazing to some Europeans. Martin Luther, Christian monk and reformer, commended Ethiopian Deacons as highly educated compared to their Arab counterparts in the 1530s. Portuguese explorer Francisco Alzarez, during his expeditions during the sixteenth century, found Christian Ethiopians worthy of respect. Jesuit missionaries despised the EOTC’s orthodoxy, and attempted to forcefully convert the Ethiopians during the mid-seventeenth century. In his expedition to Ethiopia in the early 1840s, British engineer William Cornwallis Harris advocated for a more ‘intimate’ connection between Ethiopia’s Christian population and the global


Christian community. All of these Europeans saw Ethiopia as a devoutly-Christian state.

At no point did any of these Christian travellers and missionaries make any significant progress in converting Ethiopians to their respective denominations. The Catholic church, for example, repeatedly failed to introduce Catholicism to Ethiopia. The greatest of these failures was in 1633, when Emperor Fasilidas ordered the expulsion and execution of all Jesuit missionaries. When Bishop Giustino de Jacobis received an assignment to Ethiopia in 1829, Monsignor Vincent Spaccapietra commented that “it is God who will have him for this terrible Abyssinian mission.” Jacobis was, nonetheless, successful in establishing Catholic communities from 1839 to 1847, which is the basis for many modern Ethiopian Catholic communities. These communities, however remained small until after Italy’s invasion in 1935.

The other major religion in East Africa was Sunni Islam. Among Ethiopian leaders dating to the twelfth century, Islam held “secondary” and “inferior” status to Christianity. Islam initially emerged in the Kingdom of Aksum sometime between 613 and 615 CE, with Islamic historian Ibn Ishāq citing Ethiopia as a safe haven for those fleeing persecution elsewhere. While no particular regional or ethnic groups are overwhelmingly Muslim over Christian, there is a higher

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concentration of practising Muslims in the Eastern half of the country with a small concentration in western Ethiopia. These eastern Muslims originally migrated to modern-day Somalia around 622 CE. Somali oral tradition depicts a peaceful adoption of Islam and subsequent propagation across the rest of the Horn of Africa. This Somali migration into Ethiopia, most likely, occurred starting in the twelfth century among Cushitic-speaking pastoral communities. Some of these communities, including the Beja, had a minor impact on spreading Islam to North Ethiopia.

Other ethnic groups adopted Islam over the following centuries, but not necessarily at equal rates. Oromo communities adopted Islam at different rates, as many traditional Oromo communities despised their early Islamic counterparts. When the Oromo became predominantly Muslim is unclear, as conversion rates differed by region, but many communities began to shift in the late-eighteenth century and became dominant by the late nineteenth century. Islam, however, never became the majority religion in Ethiopia. British diplomat Gerald Herbert Portal called Islam a great wave that, for centuries, has “beaten against the mountain barriers of Abyssinia, but never has it succeeded in breaking into the country.”

Portal’s description of Islam being a wave alludes to the centuries of conflict between Christian Ethiopia and its Muslim


252 Østebø, Volume 12, 63–64.

253 Gerald Herbert Portal, My Mission to Abyssinia (London: Edward Arnold, 1892), iv.
neighbors. The Sultanate of Ifat (c. 1285 – 1415 CE) controlled a part of the Ogaden, and waged wars against their Christian neighbors in the 1320s. King Yeshaq of Ethiopia declared Muslims “enemies of the lord” and invaded the sultanates of southern Ethiopia in 1415.\textsuperscript{254} King Dawit I of Ethiopia led an army to Sennar, which is a town on the Blue Nile in modern-day Sudan, in the early fifteenth century to force nearby Muslim raiders from attacking isolated Christian communities.\textsuperscript{255} Conflict between Christian Ethiopia and the Adal Sultanate, succeeded the Ifat Sultanate, persisted during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. General Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi of the Adal Sultanate conquered much of Ethiopia in the 1530s, including the entire Ogaden, by 1539. Many historians and political scientists consider this war the origin of modern Ethiopian-Somali territorial disputes.\textsuperscript{256}

This war also highlights how the EOTC and Catholicism was not compatible beyond temporary alliances. Dawit II, shortly before his death in September 1540, appealed to Portugal for assistance. Portugal sent four hundred soldiers to Ethiopia, which participated in the final three years of the war and helped defeat al-Ghazi’s army in 1543. While a Portuguese diaspora did appear in Ethiopia, having lasted from the 1540s to the 1620s and 1630s, there is little evidence suggesting that the Catholics and Orthodox Ethiopians co-operated


\textsuperscript{255} Getatchew Haile, \textit{The Ethiopian Orthodox Church’s Tradition on the Holy Cross} (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2018), 9–11.

beyond opposing Islamic invaders. Emperor Asnaf Sagad I (c. 1540 – 1559), having won some battles against his Muslim neighbors without support in the 1550s, saw no need for further alliances.

These prior conflicts were a factor in Amharics’ forced conversion of Ethiopian Muslims. Yohannes IV was determined to Christianize the Muslims in “the eastern escarpment and coastlands” from 1878 to his death in 1889, but the extent of Yohannes IV’ persecution is unclear. Yohannes IV was reported to have made an ultimatum to Muslim communities in Gondar: convert to Christianity or be expelled.

Yohannes IV made a similar ultimatum to the Galla, which were the pastoral communities that lived in Ethiopia’s southern highlands. It was during a battle against the Mahdists, who were members of Muhammad Ahmad bin Abdullah’s religious and political movement in Sudan, that Yohannes IV was killed. For many Muslims in the Gondar region of Ethiopia their primary goal was “not so much to spread the Islamic faith as to survive with it” during the nineteenth and the early-twentieth centuries. It is, therefore, unsurprising that many Muslim communities resented the EOTC. The communities that practised Islam during this period of persecution were, predominantly, previously-pagan communities. Historian J. Spencer Trimingham argued that the popularity of Islam among Ethiopia’s pagan communities “was helped by the fact that it was religion hostile to the Amharic race who lorded

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258 Caulk, 28.

Islam was used as a unifier for those already facing oppression.

Menelik II, from 1889 to his death in 1913, continued his predecessors’ anti-Islamic policies but made some pro-Muslim gestures. He “developed a sophisticated diplomatic system that allowed for him to open up toward non-Christians” while he “occupied the Somali Ogaden.” The Ethiopian government was a mosaic of Muslim and Christian representatives, and large parts of his military were Islamic. Political representation, however, does not reflect many citizens’ experiences. Menelik’s colonization of the Ogaden was a key part of building Ethiopia’s economic and military power from the 1890s onward. A combination of tributes from local communities “along with revenue from the control of the slave trade (an estimate 25,000 slaves per year in the 1880s) and valuable ivory, coffee and civet exports financed Menelik’s consolidation of power.” Menelik II masked his continuity of pro-Christian and anti-Islamic policies with some examples of political representation.

Islamic-Christian divides directly dictated Ethiopia’s neutrality during the First World War. As a powerful independent state, Ethiopia had the potential to affect the outcome of the war in Africa. The Ottoman Empire and Imperial Germany both tried to gain Ethiopia as an ally against Britain, namely, to cripple Britain’s access to the Suez

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Canal. Losing the Suez Canal meant cutting off soldiers and supplies in East Africa and, more importantly, India. Liij [Child] Iyasu was the heir to Ethiopia following Menelik II’s death and was more amicable to Ethiopia’s Muslim population than his predecessors. Some authors have speculated that Iyasu converted to Islam and wanted to unify Ethiopia under Islamic law.264 Rumours spread that Iyasu was turning against the EOTC and, while these rumours remain contested, it is clear that he sought alliances with the Muslim minorities in Ethiopia, the Ottoman Empire, and Muhammad Abd Allah al-Hassan, then leader of the Somali Dervish movement for independence. The EOTC subsequently excommunicated Iyasu, which made him ineligible to become emperor. Britain, Italy, and France further levied pressure against Iyasu and his Islamic allies until their eventual military defeat in 1921. Religious lines, above everything else, were critical in Ethiopia’s conduct during the First World War. Iyasu, straying from the conventional EOTC power base in favour of Islamic allies, garnered mistrust from the EOTC and other Amharic elites. This directly led to his overthrow, and the eventual installment of Selassie as the official ruler of Ethiopia.

There is a precedent for European powers aligning with Muslim communities, or in some cases recruiting them into their colonial armies, to gain control of African colonies. Lord Frederick Lugard, the first British High Commissioner for Northern Nigeria, tried to rule indirectly through the Islamic Emirs. The Portuguese, in Guinea and Mozambique, tried to enlist Muslims in their colonial forces to better


There are a few themes that recur in the centuries of religious conflict in Ethiopia. The EOTC has, largely, been the core of political power while Islam was a persistent threat. Other religious groups, including Catholics, largely held a peripheral role within Ethiopia and had little impact on the nation’s politics. There were a few examples of external powers, including Portugal, trying to gain favour with the Ethiopian government through supporting the Orthodox Church against Islamic enemies. Neutral Muslim communities within Ethiopia had, historically, faced oppression during times that the EOTC held more influence in said communities’ provinces. These divisions and conflicts all set the foundation for how religion influenced the Second Italo-Ethiopian War.

**Religion During the War**

The EOTC was a pivotal part of the anti-fascist resistance from 1936 onward. The famous line from Psalms 68:31 “Ethiopia shall stretch out her hands unto God” was deeply-engrained among many Ethiopians,\footnote{Aregawi, “Revisiting Resistance in Italian-Occupied Ethiopia,” 98.} and they saw the violation of Ethiopia as sacrilegious. Indeed, many Ethiopians, when later asked why they fought the Italians, replied \textit{“ba mateb, ba haimonot”} [i.e. for the cross worn around one’s neck, for the Christian religion].\footnote{Charles McClellan, “Observations on the Ethiopian Nation, Its Nationalism, and the Italo-Ethiopian War,” \textit{Northeast African Studies} 3, no. 1 (1996): 76.} The sense of
nationalism, in the protection of Ethiopia, was for many people far weaker than their loyalty to their faith. Religious unity was later a factor in the Ethiopian Civil War (1974-1991) where religious groups resisted Ethiopia’s socialist authoritarian regime.\textsuperscript{268} One anonymous Ethiopian, following the shutdown of several churches in the early 1980s, lamented that “religion was here a long time before Marxism.”\textsuperscript{269}

Although not all EOTC groups explicitly supported insurgent warfare, the Italians did directly attack EOTC monasteries. Following the failed assassination attempt on Graziani on February 19\textsuperscript{th}, 1937, the Italians suspected the involvement of monks in the Debre Libanos monastery, which is approximately one hundred kilometers north of Addis Ababa. In May 1937, before any official investigations completed, Italian colonists massacred 426 monks and 23 laymen at this monastery.\textsuperscript{270} The monastery did house the two would-be assassins, Abraha Deboch and Mogus Asgedom, briefly before their flight to Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. Whether the failed assassins had prior connections to any of the monks or simply invoked their religious right to sanctuary is unclear. Regardless, the Italian colonists still saw the monks as traitors to the Italian empire.

One exception to the EOTC’s support of an independent Ethiopia was with the Tigrayan royal family. Tigray, at the time of the war, was overwhelmingly Christian with a small Muslim minority. The Tigrayan


royal family vied for power in the mid-nineteenth century, and opposed Menelik II’s, and his successors’, Shewan-based rule. Tigrayan Ethiopians were the largest case of an overwhelming Ethiopian Orthodox community opposing Haile Selassie during the Second Italo-Ethiopian War. Their opposition to Selassie, unlike some other groups, was political and not religious.

The Catholic Church faced multiple challenges during the Second Italo-Ethiopian War. Many internationally-based Catholic leaders were split on whether to remain loyal to Italy or not. The Vatican was technically bound “to remain extraneous to all temporal disputes.” Catholic doctrine from Pope Leo XIII (1878–1903) to Pius XI “focused on the element of peace in just war theory.” The Catholic Church, theoretically, saw itself as outside of Fascist Italy’s expansionary wars. Mussolini, however, saw the Vatican as a key part of his vision for a greater Italy. Many Catholic leaders within Italy also saw the war in Ethiopia as a civilizing mission and a chance to spread their influence in the Horn of Africa.

Among those against Mussolini was Pope Pius XI, who believed in the Church’s abstinence from international affairs. Pius XI, however, felt that Mussolini had greater influence over the rest of the Church. Pius XI, therefore, decided that it was in his best interests to align with

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Mussolini for the short term to protect the Church’s long-term security. The Fascist Italian government ultimately received “the support of the Vatican...and concluded a concordat which safeguarded the rights of the Catholic Church in Italy.” It is difficult to assess how much real power Pius XI had but, through his endorsement of Mussolini, he had given legitimacy to claims of Fascist Italy’s divine right for conquest. Some observers found this allegiance treasonous to the faith, but these individuals held little political power in Italy. The Catholic Church was, during this war, a tool of the Fascist government to offer greater legitimacy to the invasion. Pius XI’s endorsement of Italy gave a clear signal to otherwise politically-disengaged soldiers that a civilizing mission in Ethiopia aligned with their Catholicism.

Catholics within Ethiopia, while numerically insignificant, generally supported the Italian invasion. On October 13th, 1935, the Catholic procession in Adowa prayed for the success of the Italian invaders. In June 1936 the Vatican announced the establishment of a Catholic hierarchy in Ethiopia, which was as a part of its integration into the Italian Empire. The Italian colonial government, in co-operation with the Catholic Church, expelled all non-Catholic missionary groups between 1936 and 1937.

The Italians did initially not believe that these foreign missionaries were a threat. Protestant missionary groups were not very large compared to their Catholic counterparts. Eight out of the


278 “Simple Memorial,” Courier and Advertiser, October 14, 1935, 7.

279 “Pope and Ethiopia,” The Nottingham Evening Post, June 1, 1936, 8.

280 Larebo, “Empire Building and Its Limitations,” 84.
ten protestant missionary groups only had around 150 members in Ethiopia each.\textsuperscript{281} The size of the other two groups, a series of Swedish parishes and the Church Mission to Jews, is unclear but estimated to hover anywhere from 3,000 to 10,000 members each. Italy’s main opposition to these groups was, initially, that the protestant schools and churches did not teach students to be loyal to Italy.\textsuperscript{282} Author Joseph James Cooksey argued that if Ethiopia lost its sovereignty then it would be impossible for evangelicals to continue their work in that country.\textsuperscript{283} As many denominations were associated with their respective governments, including the Church of England and Sweden’s Low Church Lutherans, quelling the missionaries was an indirect way of blocking said governments.

One example of the war’s impact on Protestant missionaries is with the Sudan Interior Mission’s (SIM) work. SIM was a fundamentalist Protestant group originally formed in 1893 in opposition to the rising popularity of liberal Christian organizations.\textsuperscript{284} SIM, after multiple failures, established its first missionary outpost in Patigi of the Kwara state in Nigeria in 1902. The mission spread across West Africa and, in the 1920s, expanded to East Africa. While SIM offered medical support to Ethiopians along the Sudan-Ethiopian border in 1918-1919 due to the ongoing influenza epidemic, SIM’s first building in Ethiopia was a hospital in late 1925, which offered religious

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\textsuperscript{282} Lass-Westphal, 93.
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services alongside medical support. This organizations’ influence expanded until the Italian invasion in 1935. While some missionaries departed, most remained active in Ethiopia during the early stages of the war. Ethiopians, mostly Catholic or Muslim, revolted against Selassie in Spring 1936, which was when Ethiopia lost its last major battle with the Italians. These rebels subsequently pushed many S.I.M. missionaries out of Ethiopia because they saw SIM. as an unwanted foreign influence.\textsuperscript{285} The Catholic Church, however, believed that the remnants of this fundamentalist Protestant group exerted too much political control and would potentially challenge Italian rule in Ethiopia.\textsuperscript{286} The Italian colonial government, under pressure from the Catholic Church, forced the remaining SIM members active in Ethiopia to relocate to Sudan in 1937.\textsuperscript{287} The Italians, while initially tolerating these groups, moved to expel them once it became clear that they would not conform to Italian Fascist doctrine nor co-operate with the Catholic groups.

Protestants in other countries, meanwhile, sharply opposed Italy’s expansion. Daniel Bartlett, secretary of the Bible Churchman’s Missionary Society, argued that this war demonstrated “the essential difference between Italian Christianity and Bible Christianity” whereby Italian Christianity was “founded on tradition” rather than the Bible.\textsuperscript{288} Bartlett, representing the only group in Ethiopia with British


\textsuperscript{286} Eshete, “The Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) in Ethiopia (1928-1970),” 45.


\textsuperscript{288} “Missionary Work in Ethiopia,” \textit{The Western Daily Press and Bristol Mirror}, October 9, 1935, 8.
missionaries at the time, clearly saw the Catholic invaders as antithetical to his view of true Christianity.

In October 1935 “all missionaries, both British and American, were advised by their respective Governments to leave the country.”\(^\text{289}\) Every missionary from the Bible Churchman’s Missionary Society, an evangelical Anglican society, stayed in Ethiopia after the declaration of war.\(^\text{290}\) Correspondence remained steady between the society’s missionaries and their home base in England well into 1936, with communication only slowing as Italy forcefully expelled all missionaries in 1937. Following this expulsion, the British government was reluctant to let these missionaries work too close to the Ethiopian border. The Anglo-Egyptian Sudan administration, for example, forbade SIM from operating along the Sudan-Ethiopian border in the mid-1930s because of the risk of violence. They were also not allowed to send evangelists to the Koma community, who resided near the border, in case the war spilled into Sudan.\(^\text{291}\) It is likely that the British colonial governments were also apprehensive of provoking a conflict with Italy, which supporting missionary groups that rivalled the Italian Catholics could have caused. This is a case where a religious organization faced opposition from two separate governments but for two different reasons: one that did not trust them, and one that wanted to avoid potential conflicts.


Scholars have previously noted the long-lasting cultural impact of evangelism and its significance in imperial identities.\textsuperscript{292} Ethiopia, a country and region that has had a Christian influence for sixteen centuries, became a battleground for European denominations. Catholicism and Protestantism, in their battle for Ethiopia, represented how different imperial powers wanted to exert their influence in the last uncolonized African state. With Italian Catholics pushing out other European Christian groups, Orthodox Ethiopia would have become saturated with Italian religious, and thus imperial, ideals.

There is evidence of Islamic groups aligning with the Italians before the end of sustained hostilities in 1937. \textit{Jihad} movements in late 1935 directly aided the Italian military, mobilizing around twelve thousand soldiers to fight Selassie’s forces in the Somali-dominant Ogaden province.\textsuperscript{293} This Islamic force diluted Ethiopia’s military across a wider front, which made them more vulnerable to Italian offensives. Muslim Oromo groups launched attacks against Ethiopian weapon shipments in early 1936.\textsuperscript{294}

While these divisions existed before 1935, Italy exploited these splits to better control Ethiopia. The Italian colonial government offered Islamic communities more political power in an Italian-


controlled Ethiopia if they helped support the Fascist regime. Furthermore, the Italians appealed to some Muslim communities’ anti-Semitic attitudes toward Ethiopia’s Jewish minority. Divide-and-conquer had been a part of Italian colonial policy since the 1890s, although Badoglio amplified these efforts after November 1935. He recognized that long-standing religious identities fostered stronger loyalty than recently-formed nationalism. Mussolini promised on March 18th, 1937 that he was dedicated “to prove to you how it [Italy] is interested in improving your [African Muslims] destiny.” There is some evidence proving that Mussolini kept this promise in Ethiopia. From 1936 onward, the Italian colonial government built fifty new mosques and provided direct funding for Islamic education across Ethiopia. Wahhabism, which was a branch of conservative Islam that emerged in the Arabian Peninsula during the eighteenth century, gained some support from the Italian colonial government as the Italians supported Wahhabis’ pilgrimage to Mecca.

This support of Muslims, however, only extended to conservative, Orthodox factions. Muslims in Ethiopia were largely “divided between a pro-Ethiopian wing led by reformists such as Rashid Rida, and Islamicist militants such as the author Yusuf Ahmad, who perceived


Ethiopia to be a historic enemy of Islam deserving destruction.”  

While the colonial government endorsed Orthodox Islam, reformist-minded Islamic groups received little support. This distinction likely occurred because the Italians probably believed that the Orthodox wing was less likely to sew discord whereas the reformists were already accustomed to creating civil unrest. Italy’s alliance with East African Orthodox Muslims lasted until September 1940, whereby Italy’s invasion of Egypt prompted Islamic leaders to declare *Jihad* against Italy.  

Religion was integral to much of the factionalism during the Second Italo-Ethiopian War. Many people did not automatically align with Ethiopia out of nationalism, but instead interpreted the war through religious doctrine. Different interpretations of the conflict exacerbated fractures within religious groups, and often intersected with secular political ambitions. The EOTC was a center for Ethiopian resistance because of many Ethiopians’ views of their country as a holy land. Both Islamic and Catholic groups, meanwhile, unified around the Italians because both groups expected to gain more power within Ethiopia. The Italians privileged Catholic programs over other Christian denominations, going so far as to expel all non-Catholic missionary groups like SIM. The Italians also appealed to downtrodden Muslims, who desired more political power in a Christian-dominated state. These different alliances were all important during the war and Italy’s attempted colonization of Ethiopia.

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301 Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, 137.

302 “Arab Call To A Holy War,” *The Times*, September 26, 1940, 3.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

The Second Italo-Ethiopian War, while sometimes simplified as a colonial conflict leading up to the Second World War, was a multifaceted and complex affair. While national policies, like Britain’s appeasement or Italy’s imperial ambitions, were important in the conduct of the war, these policies offer an incomplete picture of the conflict. While figures like Mussolini or Badoglio were important, they alone did not shape the war’s outcome nor the experiences of those involved.

The outbreak of war was not a simple order from Italian Il Duce Benito Mussolini. Complex relationships between colonial officers in East Africa, conjoint with a convoluted border situation, prompted a skirmish in December 1934. This skirmish was an accident, where soldiers that distrusted one another stayed in close proximity for two weeks before an anonymous soldier fired a single shot, which erupted into a battle between Ethiopian and Italian forces. With Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie calling for reparations from Italy, it makes sense that the Italians’ would respond that they were not guilty for the fighting. Mussolini, caught in a diplomatic crisis regardless, opted to try and gain what he could from Ethiopia diplomatically. It was this escalation to the League of Nations that set the course for war.

The outbreak of war caused a dilemma for British colonial administrators. Politicians in London wanted to appease Italy because they thought that Mussolini could be a useful ally against German Fuhrer Adolf Hitler’s rapid rearmament and expansion in Europe. This appeasement, however, handcuffed British colonial administrators in East Africa. Anything that potentially could have provoked Italy was off-limits. Regular security duties, like protecting British borders and
British-administered pastoral communities, became complicated affairs. Even actions supporting Italy, like British soldiers giving gifts to their Italian neighbors, were condemned for their risk of provoking incidents.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) were active during the Second Italo-Ethiopian War. As groups typically outside of national governments’ control, NGOs have a unique perspective on international conflicts. The Italian Red Cross operated outside of the larger ICRC to benefit the Italian military while other Red Cross Societies, seeing Ethiopia’s plight, rushed to its aid exclusively. Within Ethiopia, groups like the Ethiopian Women’s Volunteer Service Association further participated in insurgency warfare against the Italian occupiers. The role these participants played varied, from noncombative supply units to guerrilla fighters.

Religion greatly influenced the course of the war, which many historians have overlooked. The Catholic Church, aligned with the Italian Fascists, spread its influence across Ethiopia. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church was a critical part of Ethiopian resistance to the Italians, while hitherto marginalized Muslim and Catholic minorities aided their new colonial rulers. Italy, meanwhile, expelled all non-Catholic missionary groups to further solidify control in Ethiopia. Religion has remained important to many Ethiopians, with religious identity becoming a major unifying force against the Marxist Mengistu regime in the 1980s and Christian-Islamic conflict a security concern in the 2010s.

This thesis could form the foundation for future research. One limitation in this thesis, largely due financial and time constraints, is the number of archives used. Future, larger-scale projects should incorporate African archives. Three possible East African archives include the National Library and Archives of Ethiopia, the Kenyan
National Archives, and the National Records Office of Sudan. The National Library and Archives of Ethiopia contain extensive records about the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis, including Italian-language documents from their occupation of Addis Ababa from 1936 to 1941. The Kenyan National Archives and the National Records Office of Sudan have files about their respective colonial administrations not available in the UK National Archives, Kew.

There is also the possibility for greater work on ethnic groups’ experiences during this war. Very few authors have discussed different ethnic groups experiences during the crisis. Communities like the Mijurtini are barely referenced, much less extensively studied, among historians. One option is to examine colonial correspondence to see if certain groups emerge, and to see how they reacted to the invasion. Scholars with fluency in regional languages could also, potentially, conduct oral histories of communities’ memories of 1930s Ethiopia.

The Second Italo-Ethiopian War was not a simple invasion where one army annihilated the other. Many groups scattered across East Africa contributed and participated in the war, with varied roles and opinions. Reducing the conflict to the common images of tanks and planes versus an army of spears is reductive in explaining the diverse factions vying for control, or in some cases survival, in 1930s Ethiopia.
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