**Italian Occupation (1936-41)**

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**Introduction**

During the second half of the 19th century, a major source of aggression against Ethiopia was Italy. Italy had colonial designs over Ethiopia. Therefore, her colonial ambitions led her to occupy territories in the north, establish the colony of Eritrea and fight the Battle of Adwa against Ethiopia in 1896. However, with the strongest cooperation of Ethiopians across the whole nation, Italy drank the bitter taste of defeat in its first attempt at conquest at the battle of Adwa in 1896, allowing Ethiopia to become the only African nation to remain free of European control. Italian colonial forces however still remained in neighboring Eritrea and Somalia, and it was only a matter of time before the two nations would clash again.

Italy's abiding interest in Ethiopia soon reasserted itself. In one of the most amazing twists in Ethiopian diplomatic history, Italy was fully rehabilitated in Ethiopia, a year after Adwa, being the first country to be diplomatically represented at the court of Emperor Menilek II.

The prospect of war increased dramatically after the fascist dictator, Benito Mussolini, took control of Italy in 1922. He sought Ethiopia for its resources but also to salvage the pride of the only European nation defeated by an African country. Taking Ethiopia would have also completed the Italian domination over the Horn of Africa. A border incident between Ethiopia and Italian Somaliland that December gave Benito Mussolini an excuse to intervene. Rejecting all arbitration offers, in 1935 Mussolini, with much boasting, embarked upon the Ethiopian Campaign and Italian troops entered Addis Ababa while Emperor Haile Selassie was exiled and fled to Palestine and eventually to England in 1936. The same year, Mussolini proclaimed the Italian Empire and created in the Horn the so‑called Africa Orientale Italiana. The war is infamous for the Italians' illegal use of mustard gas. The war resulted in the annexation of Ethiopia, which had resisted Italian occupation in the nineteenth century, into Italian East Africa alongside Eritrea and Italian Somaliland. Politically, the war is best remembered for exposing the inherent weakness of the League of Nations. After five years of strong resistance Italy lost control of Ethiopia and driven out of Addis Ababa by British and Ethiopian troops and Emperor Haile Selassie restored as head of the Ethiopian government.

This paper tries to focus on the historical activities happened during the Italian occupation period including the war led to the occupation and the aftermath effects or outcomes of the war as well as the occupation.

**Background**

Following their defeat at Adwa in 1896, the Italians suspended their expansionist colonial policy in Northeast Africa for a short time. However, they were just waiting the right time to fulfill their interests in any possible way. Italy eventually got its ideological strength in 1922, when Fascists led by Benito Mussolini held power. The Fascists were determined to restore the power and glory of ancient Roman Empire by avenging Italy’s shameful scar at Adwa.

Initially, Mussolini did not disclose his ambition against the sovereignty of Ethiopia rather he was playing diplomatic ‘cards’ till the coming of the ‘right time.’ To achieve their goal of occupation of Ethiopia, Italians followed two policies as it was the case before the Battle of Adwa; ‘subversion’ and ‘rapprochement’. The policy of subversion aimed at affecting the unity of the empire via sowing dissatisfaction in Tigray, Begemedir, Gojjam and Wollo. This responsibility was entrusted to Corrado Zoli, the governor of Eritrea (1928-1930). The Italian legation in Addis Ababa, headed by Guiliano Cora led the policy of ‘rapprochement’, a pseudo reconciliation tactic which was trying to persuade the Ethiopian government to

establish cordial relations between the two countries. For instance, the signing of the 1928

Italo-Ethiopian Treaty of Peace and Friendship was the manifestation of the success of the

Rapprochement policy. Here, beside their legation in Addis Ababa, the Italians had also

consulates in provincial towns such as Dessie, Adwa, Debre Markos and Gondar. These

consulates played a significant role in propagating dissatisfaction and gathering vital military

and political intelligence. In addition to such preparations, the Fascists were also able to get

indirect diplomatic support from Britain and France for their colonial project in Ethiopia.

Here, although it is difficult to pinpoint one particular year when the decision was made by

Mussolini to launch the intended invasion, 1932 appears to have been a crucial year.

Mussolini who made all necessary preparations to launch an invasion against Ethiopia was

only searching for a pretext, and then fortunately he found it inthe Walwal incident. The

Walwal Incident (5 December 1934) was the result of the post-Awa boundary agreement

limitations: lack of demarcation on the ground and lack of effective administrative control in

the frontier regions. However, the Italians refused to give back Walwal and even attacked the

Ethiopian soldiers who were stationed nearby. Thus, this situation gave birth to the so called

Walwal Incident.

Surprisingly, although the number of Ethiopians dead during this border clash was three

times as high as the Italians, it was Italy which demanded totally unreasonable apology and

reparation from Ethiopia. Then, Ethiopia which refused to accept Italy’s demand took the

matter to the League of Nations and a period of diplomatic wrangling followed to resolve the

dispute. However, in the meantime Mussolini, who already got the desired excuse, was

finalizing his preparations to launch a total invasion.

B. The 1935 Invasion and After

After they completed their preparations, the Italians waged their aggression via two major

fronts: the northern and the southern Front. The war was started in the northern Front when

the Italians crossed the Mereb River on 3 October 1935 and launched a three pronged

invasion and controlled Adigrat, Adwa and Mekelle. In January 1936, Ethiopian counter

offensive marched north through three fronts. Ras Emiru Haile-Selassie led the western front, Ras Kasa Hailu (also commander of the entire northern front) and Ras Seyum Mengesha led

the central front and Ras Mulugeta Yigezu (War Minister) led the eastern front.

On 20 January 1936, the Ethiopian army launched a major offensive against the Italians

intending to isolate Mekelle, but failed to realize its objective due to lack of coordination

among the above mentioned commanders. On January 24, the Ethiopian force lost to the

Italians at the first Battle in Temben. This was followed by an attack on the Ethiopian force

which was stationed in what seemed to be an impregnable natural fortress of Amba Aradom,

to the south of Mekelle. The Italians scored yet another decisive victory in which the

commander of the Ethiopian army, Ras Mulugeta Yigezu, lost his life. Besides modern

weapons, the Italian force had superiority in the air. Moreover, the forces of Ras Kasa and

Ras Seyum were outnumbered by the Italian troops.This resulted in another defeat at the

Second Battle of Temben (27-29 February 1936). Ras Kasa and Ras Seyum narrowly

escaped and joined the Emperor at Korem.

On the western front, the Ethiopian army under Ras Emeru put strong resistance against the

advancing force of the Italians. Thanks to Ras Emeru’s better leadership quality, the number

of death of Ethiopian soldiers was less than what it had been in the northern front.

A series of battles between the Ethiopian and Italian forces in the northern Front culminated

in Maychew on 31 March 1936. Although the Ethiopian army (especially members of the

Kebur Zebegna) under the command of the Emperor put strong resistance against the Italians,

they were not able to conclude the battle with victory. Many Ethiopian soldiers lost their

lives from gunpowder and air bombardment during the battle. Then the Italian forces

controlled Dessie and Addis Ababa on 4 April 1936 and 5 May 1936, respectively.

The Ethiopian army in the Southern Front was better equipped and well led.Ras Desta

Damtew (in the south) and Dejazmach Nesibu Zamanuel (in the southeast) were leaders of

the Ethiopian troops in this Front.

The Ethiopian army lost to the Italians at two major battles in the Southern Front: Qorahe

(November 1935) and Genale Dorya (12-14 January 1936). In the ensuing battles, theAskaris

(recruited from Eritrea) deserted the Italians and joined the Ethiopian force which boosted the moral of Ras Desta’s troops. Ras Desta continued to challenge the Italians until he was

captured and executed in early 1937. The number of soldiers the Italians lost during the

fighting in the Southern Front was larger than the North, which slowed their advance to the

center; Badoglio entered Addis Ababa before Graziani even crossed Harar.

On 2 May 1936, the Emperor fled the country and three days later the Italians entered Addis

Ababa. Between Haile Selassie’s departure and the Italian entry, Addis Ababa was beset by

burning of buildings, looting and random shooting. The major targets of the violence were

the rich, foreigners and the imperial palace. Many foreigners saved their lives by taking

refuge in foreign legations.

Here, the entry of the Italian forces into the capital in the middle of such chaos was a relief

for both the foreigners and the natives since the Italians were able to bring peace and order to

the city. At this juncture, some scholars suggested that the Italians deliberately delayed their

entry so that the people of the city would consider them as ‘angels’ of peace, and easily

accept their rule. Anyway, after their control of the capital, Marshal Badoglio immediately

reported the situation to Mussolini. Benito Mussolini announced to the people of Italy and the

world about their control of Ethiopia using the phrase “Ethiopia is Italian!”

The Italians immediately merged Ethiopia with their colonies of Italian Somaliland and

Eritrea. Then, they named the combination of their colonies Italian East Africa (IEA) or

Africa Orientale Italiana (AOI). The newly formed Italian East Africa had six administrative

regional divisions that replaced former international boundaries. These were: Eritrea

(including Tigray) with its capital at Asmara; Amhara (including Begemidr, Gojjam, Wollo

and Northern Shewa) with its capital at Gondar; Oromo and Sidama (including Southern and

Southwestern provinces) with its capital at Jimma; Eastern Ethiopia with its capital at Harar;

Somalia (including Ogaden) with its capital at Mogadishu; Addis Ababa (later changed to

Shewa), the capital of the entire Italian East Africa.

During the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, the following Italians served as governors of

Italian East Africa successively: Marshal Badoglio (till the end of May 1936), Marshal

Graziani (till February 1937), and finally Amadeo Umberto d’Aosta (the Duke of Aosta).

Generally, a top-heavy bureaucracy and corruption characterized the Italian administration of

IEA. For instance, the last governor of IEA, the Duke of Aosta himself characterized 50% of

his officials as inept and 25% as thieves. Marshal Badoglio himself reportedly pocketed

about 1,700,000 Maria Theresa Thalers confiscated from the Bank of Ethiopia, in the

immediate aftermath of the conquest. In the economic respect, the Italians weakened and

destroyed non-Italian foreign firms and replaced them with governmental enterprises that

controlled the industry, trade and agriculture.

The Italians were relatively successful in the sectors of trade and industry as compared to the

agricultural sector. For instance, they planned to settle Italian farmers in selected Ethiopian

areas such as Wegera, Chercher and Jimma. However, their agricultural plan was failed (they

only accomplished 10%) due to their failure to secure the control of the rural areas due to the

patriotic movement.

As indicated above, the Italian administrative control was largely confined to urban areas due

to the strong patriotic resistance.Thus; their legacy was also largely reflected in the towns

than the rural areas, which were actually out of the Italian effective rule. Generally, the

legacy of the Italian rule can be summarized in the following brief points:

 Architecture- the Italians left an indelible mark in towns such as Addis Ababa,

Jimma, Adwa, Gondar, Desse, Harar, Asmara, Mogadishu and others.

 Introduction of urban facilities like clean water and electricity;

 Social legacies (expansion of prostitution, adoption of European habits-including

eating and dressing styles, and adoption of Italian words);

 The consolidation of cash economy;

 Road construction and development of motor transport;

 The sense of division, etc.