

Ethiopia's Role in Recent History

By Rowen Dyer, 6/3/2024.

Ethiopia seems like just one of many countries in Africa, however, its story is much deeper than many others. Ethiopia, whether or not they wanted to, showed the ferocity of fascism and the morale boost of nationalism. Ethiopia's defeat to Fascist Italy also questioned the League of Nations' authority. Ethiopia's victory in the 19th century challenged long-held colonial ideas, but their defeat in the 20th century re-enforced them and encouraged fascist expansionism.

Ethiopia has a long history dating back thousands of years. The start of its more recent importance was the colonization of Africa where it managed to stay independent despite several attempts to colonize it. The Kingdom of Italy's plan to colonize Ethiopia in 1896 was repelled exceptionally well causing bitterness between the two nations. Later the new leader of Italy, Benito Mussolini would use this long-standing shame of defeat to boost his country's nationalism. He attacked Ethiopia and won decisively and quickly, restoring pride in the nation of Italy. The League of Nations, of which Mussolini was a part, was created to prevent conquests like his from happening. The League of Nations failed miserably at its job and was replaced by the United Nations after WWII.

Looking back to the Colonial Era in the 1890s Ethiopia looked like many other nations that colonial powers tried to conquer; however “...the Ethiopian army outperformed the Italian army in terms of defining factors and overcoming terrain and logistic limitations.” (Waktola 74). Ethiopia also had a massive numbers advantage against the Italians. The first war between Ethiopia and Italy had many small skirmishes, but is historically viewed through 3 major battles

with the Italians being consistently repelled by the Ethiopian army. Both sides took heavy casualties, but the attrition of men affected Italy much more due to them being heavily outnumbered from the onset. According to a study published in the *Ethiopian Journal of Environment Studies & Management*, if the Kingdom of Italy did not have a terrain advantage throughout the war their defeat would have been even more brutal. (Waktola 74). Ethiopia did not manage to push the Italians all the way out to sea in the end. This failure allowed the Kingdom of Italy to keep its dreams of conquest alive.

Amba Algae was where the first battle took place in 1895. The Italians had the high ground, but were pushed out by the Ethiopians quickly. Next up the battle of Mekelle in 1896 had many Ethiopian casualties since the Italians were heavily entrenched. After several unsuccessful attempts at a straightforward attack and many casualties, “Empress Taytu called off the ineffective assault on the fort and advised the army to capture the Italian water supply” (Waktola 80-81). The tactic was successful, forcing the Italians to retreat after 43 days. Finally, the battle of Adwa was the last, and biggest battle in the war. As the Ethiopian army moved across the land they picked up more troops, many soldiers brought their families with them. At the battle of Adwa in 1896, the Ethiopian army’s ever-increasing numbers had reached over 100 thousand. These massive numbers had been achieved by picking up many troops from powerful Ethiopian leaders across the country (Crown Council of Ethiopia). The Italians started the battle of Adwa with a surprise attack which did not work and caused the loss of over a fourth of Italy's troops while only killing a tenth of the Ethiopians.

Ethiopia's victory brought great pride to its country however with this pride grew laziness, in the 1900’s some intellectuals “...warned that the penalty for Ethiopia’s failure to modernize would be devastation and enslavement” (Zewde 272). The pleas for modernization

fell on deaf ears. A select few believed that Ethiopia's salvation would come from Fascist Italy and that it was no threat to them. Fascist Italy was indeed a threat to Ethiopian sovereignty and won a war against them with ease in 1935. After Ethiopia's quick defeat against Mussolini, Ethiopian intellectuals had three main choices: support the regime, go into exile, or lead a resistance against their occupiers. For the ones who chose exile, they remained generally safe. Those who stood against the fascists led several unsuccessful movements and organizations like the Black Lions, which Fascist Italy punished via the 1937 Graziani Massacre which "...marked the almost total liquidation of the intellectual component of the resistance" (Zewde 283). There were still a couple of intellectuals left in the resistance, but they were not super important nor successful.

Why Fascist Italy decided to attack Ethiopia in the first place, was to repair its damaged nationalism and pride. Many people in the population after WWI did not believe that Fascist Italy was ready for war, "...Italian opinion by and large opposed an armed conflict" (Sbacchi 126). After success in Ethiopia the civilians "...cooperated with the Fascist Government, supporting the war with nationalistic and patriotic fervor" (Sbacchin 131). Although it is hard to tell for sure due to Mussolini's censorship, it is thought that Mussolini had planned only to take some of Ethiopia, but his people were hungry for colonial holdings. Throughout the whole affair, the League of Nations tried, but miserably failed to negotiate peace.

The League of Nations ended officially after WWII in 1946, however, Ethiopia helped show that the League of Nations would refuse to do anything against warmongering nations, encouraging countries like the USSR and Japan to take their own actions. Britain and some other powers were against the fascist conquest of Ethiopia, but refused to actually do anything, basically showing they were not ready for another major conflict in Europe, "To many

revisionists, especially Hitler, this meant that the League was truly unable to stand in the way of the redrawing of the map of Europe and the destruction of the status quo created at Versailles" (Eloranta 13-14). The way truly was clear for Hitler too. In the mid to late 1930s, Britain did everything to try and keep peace giving Germany many territories such as the Sudetland in Czechoslovakia. These territories only strengthened Hitler's ego. It took Germany attacking Poland a country whose independence was guaranteed by Britain and France, to finally get the Allies moving.

Coming back to Ethiopia, throughout the late 19th and early 20th century Ethiopia unwillingly was an exemplary country in most major world matters from colonialism to the buildup of fascism. Ethiopia also played a major role in the failure of the League of Nations. It is possible if Ethiopian officials had listened to those calling for reforms they might have stood a better chance against Fascist Italy. However, within the short time frame they had to prepare Ethiopia probably still would have been overwhelmed with Mussolini having to win that war or completely lose the trust of their people. Now you know how a country that just looks like another place in Africa affected recent history.

Bibliography

Crown Council of Ethiopia. "An African Victory, the Battle of Adwa." *Crown Council of Ethiopia*, ethiopiancrown.org/the-battle-of-adwa/. Accessed 3 June 2024.

Provided much info on the first Italian-Ethiopian war from a more native perspective. This source was especially useful in understanding who the Ethiopian army picked up more soldiers from. It also explained that the Ethiopians did not

push the Italians out to sea. The creator of this article, the Crown Council is a ruling body in Ethiopia created to advise the Emperor or rule the country directly when there is none. There is reason to lie and put their country in a good light due to being a governing body. Even with this bias they still are the ones who would know the most about how the Emperor rallied troops and fought back against the colonizers.

Crummey, Donald Edward , Marcus, Harold G. and Mehretu, Assefa. "Ethiopia." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 4 Jun. 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Ethiopia>. Accessed 4 June 2024.

Provided some very basic background on Ethiopia's history and was used to double-check dates. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* is not really peer-reviewed however It is written by scholars and checked by editors. I did not use information provided by this source for any major claims in the paper due to this.

Eloranta, Jari. "Why Did the League of Nations Fail?" *Cliometrica*, vol. 5, no. 1, 16 Mar. 2010, pp. 27-52, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11698-010-0049-9>.

A journal published paper on the failure of the League of Nations. It showed that the League of Nations failed due to not having any power or way to enforce its will. It also calls Ethiopia the decisive failure of the League, they could not even stop a war in their backyard and this failure showed the other nations of the world that the League would not be able to stop warmongering nations. The author of this article graduated from the ASU Department of History. They also pull from a large variety of reliable sources from other peer-reviewed journals. One of the paper's biggest points is that the League of Nations failed because it did not offer

meaningful protection to its members like real alliances do. It had no Mutual self-defense clause like NATO does.

Sbacchi, Alberto. "The Italians and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-1936." *Transafrican Journal of History*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1976, pp. 123–38. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24520239>. Accessed 3 June 2024.

The author of this article has spent much of his life researching Italy's involvement in Ethiopia. He is a self-proclaimed expert on the subject and has published several books on the subject. In this article, he shows the massive change in morale that fascist Italy had regarding the war in Ethiopia. This morale boost was able to happen due to the bitterness created in the Italian public from losing the first war. In addition, this article shows just how important the war was for Italy to win. If Italy had lost this war Mussolini might never have been able to regain his public's trust.

UNOG. "The League of Nations." *The United Nations Office at Geneva*, United Nations, www.ungeneva.org/en/about/league-of-nations/overview. Accessed 3 June 2024.

This article gives info on the original purpose of the League and the times it was active. This source is from the United Nations, a predecessor to the League, and has many of the same problems the League did. The source does not mention the League's inability to take action as much as it should. Due to the problems with this source, I only used it as background info for the League's active time period and what the League's goals were.

Waktola, Daniel K. "The Role of Topography and Land Productivity in Military Strategies: An Analysis of the Battle of Adwa." *Ethiopian Journal of Environmental Studies and*

Management, vol. 16, no. 1, 16 Apr. 2023, pp. 74-87,

ejesm.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/ejesm.v16i1.6.pdf. Accessed 3 June 2024.

This journal-published study is one of the most important sources I used. It goes very in-depth into the battles between Ethiopia and the Kingdom of Italy. He put a lot of effort into figuring out the terrain these historic battles took place on. With Italy having so many advantages in the war it makes sense why the Italian public would stay sore about this war for several decades. Daniel K. Waktola is a professor of geography and not only does his work show passion his students do too! On Rate My Professor students widely liked him with a couple even saying that he massively changed their perspectives.

Zewde, Bahru. "The Ethiopian Intelligentsia and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-1941." *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1993, p. 271, <https://doi.org/10.2307/219547>.

This source fills in what happened during the periods before and after the second war. It showed that Ethiopia was resistant to modernization and the failed rebellions to try and break free of Fascist Italy. The author is a major Ethiopian historian. The paper was published in a peer-reviewed Ethiopian journal and pulls from many primary sources such as letters. The paper is all about the so-called intelligentsia or intellectuals of Ethiopia. Ethiopia was trying to modernize and still had a lot of illiteracy making these individuals special in the eyes of the author and to their occupier fascist Italy. Due to this unique position fit to lead the rebellion many were killed during the Graziani Massacre.

