

# **The Italo-Ethiopian War: Fascist Rhetoric, Imperialist Diplomacy**

by  
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## I. Consistency

Much has been said of the violent nature of Benito Mussolini's Fascist rule in Italy from his dramatic March on Rome in 1925 to his inglorious demise in 1945. However, recently, comparatively little has been said of the effects of Fascist doctrine on Italian foreign policymaking. Mussolini's regime, despite its disciplined veneer, was corrupt and inefficient, politically repressive, and culturally insidious. Historian R. J. B Bosworth is correct in saying that "it holds a prominent place in the black book of human misdeeds in the twentieth century."<sup>1</sup> However, despite the Fascists' fervent use of the term "totalitarian," Italy remained in fact anything but. Fascism did not universally affect Italians, with many in the state retaining their regional, pre-modern views despite Mussolini's best efforts. It is clear that many Italians were not totally enchanted by the Fascist program.<sup>2</sup> But more interesting is *il Duce* himself: Mussolini. Mussolini, who had evolved from a socialist revolutionary to a nationalist ideologue, was not himself entirely consistent. Reading Emil Ludwig's *Talks with Mussolini* reveals the twofold nature of *il Duce* as he attempts to make coherent his revolutionary attitude and his striving for pragmatic solutions during the middle years of his rule, a tension that persists when examining Mussolini's foreign policy.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R. J. B Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy*, p 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, pp 336-338.

<sup>3</sup> Emil Ludwig, *Talks with Mussolini*, pp 142-147.

The lauded transition from a liberal foreign policy to a vigorous Fascist version features prominently in Fascist propaganda. Italy's attempts to overturn the Versailles order,<sup>4</sup> her foray into Ethiopia, Mussolini's commitment to the Spanish Civil War, and her eventual joining of the Axis Powers in general European conflict were vital to the buildup of World War Two. But was Fascist doctrine always at the helm of Mussolini's foreign policy? Venerable historian of Italian history, Denis Mack Smith certainly thought so. Smith characterized the foreign policy of Benito Mussolini as one predominantly "in search of strife."<sup>5</sup> Smith takes seriously Fascism's claim that it would create "new men," ones "who are always ready to sacrifice their lives" for the service of the state. This "Italian of Mussolini" would be nothing like the decadent, liberal, slothful Italians who had come before.<sup>6</sup> According to Smith, Mussolini's emphasis on "enlightened discipline" and Fascism's "warrior soul" seamlessly evolved into a novel approach to Italian foreign policy.<sup>7</sup> It was his rash decision to bombard Corfu in 1923 that defined Mussolini's approach to foreign policy, whereas his willingness to negotiate with the other powers to bring about peace in Europe was merely a facade until his reputation at home became more established.<sup>8</sup> Prefacing his chapter on Mussolini's foreign politics, Smith writes that:

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<sup>4</sup> The politics and treaties derived from the Versailles Conference following WWI. Heavily influenced by Wilsonian self-determination, the moralizing framework of the League of Nations, and the "Covenant" to keep peace, but also profoundly affected by traditional European realists' attempts to ensure that the Allied victors maintained their present advantages. For nations who were directly targeted (such as Germany) or who felt left out of the spoils of victory (Italy), the Versailles order appeared distinctly unfair and untenable. For more information, see Norman Graebner, Edward Bennet, *The Versailles Treaty and its Legacy*.

<sup>5</sup> Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini: A Biography*, p 170.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, pp 150-151.

<sup>7</sup> Benito Mussolini, *My Autobiography*, pp 234, 276.

<sup>8</sup> Denis Mack Smith, *Modern Italy*, p 383.

It was entirely in character that Mussolini should continue to act in foreign politics with the same lack of consideration for the rights of others as he did at home. Italians had to be not just respected abroad but feared, and he meant to win for them a ‘power without limit’ so that Italy would have an acknowledged primacy over other nations: such was the destiny that had been carved out for them ‘by the infallible hand of God’.<sup>9</sup>

Smith’s argument is that Fascist foreign policy constituted a perceptible shift in foreign policymaking from previous Italian regimes. Though Smith qualifies this, acknowledging that Mussolini himself deliberately sought to confuse opponents by varying his tone drastically between “tension and detente,” he nevertheless portrays Mussolini as a man whose aggressive speeches at home were reflected in his decisions made on the international scale.<sup>10</sup>

However, this is too strong a claim. Mussolini’s pragmatic advancement of his career through the twilight of the liberal regime reveals that Mussolini was anything but orthodox. When compared to the ideological predictability of the liberal regime before him, Mussolini’s foreign policy is at best inconsistent—especially in the realm of imperial conquest. Whereas the liberal regime’s rhetoric emphasizing the pursuit of national unification had been consistent with its actions and goals on the international stage, Mussolini’s handling of the second Italo-Ethiopian War was often anything but Fascist. As domestically Mussolini extolled the Blackshirts’ indomitable courage and indefatigable action, his representatives abroad used artfully conciliatory methods to buy time for Fascist conquest without resorting to war.

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<sup>9</sup> *Mussolini: A Biography*, p 151.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p 158.

A re-orientation of Mussolini's vaunted "Fascist War" is in order. This paper is dedicated to discerning the nature of Mussolini's foreign policy, specifically its application during the most successful of Fascism's foreign endeavors—the Second Italo-Ethiopian War. By perceiving the issues facing the liberal regime and its attempts to overcome those problems, and by examining the domestic framing of this war and comparing it to the Byzantine negotiations that surrounded it, I hope to provide an answer to the question begged by Denis Mack Smith's summary of Mussolini's foreign policy. Shortly after Italian troops occupied Addis Ababa on May 5 of 1936, Mussolini declared that thanks to the Blackshirts' intrepid discipline, and "That after seven months of fierce hostilities, I pronounce this great word, but it is strictly necessary for me to add it is our peace, Roman peace, which is expressed in this simple, irrevocable, definite phrase: Ethiopia is Italian!"<sup>11</sup> But who had really won the war, and how had it been won? Had it been the Blackshirts on the field of battle, or realistic diplomats in the halls of the League?

## **II. The Liberal Regime's Struggle**

The lack of national consciousness was a serious issue for the Italian state, made even more poignant by the lack of adequate representation of the lower classes of society. As Italian statesman Sidney Sonnino said in 1881, "The vast majority of the population, more than ninety per cent, feels entirely cut off from our institutions. People see themselves subjected to the State and forced to serve it with their blood and their money, but they do not feel that they are a vital and organic part of it, and take no interest at all in

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<sup>11</sup> Benito Mussolini, Speech on the End of the War in Ethiopia, May 5, 1936.

its existence or its affairs.”<sup>12</sup> Parliament, the chief organ of the new government, was viewed disparagingly even before its creation as an “instrument for the furtherance of selfish sectional interests by the propertied classes, thus inimical to the ‘people’ and the ‘nation’.” The highly personal tales of individual heroism and sacrifice touted during the *Risorgimento* seemed to discredit the value of a Parliamentary regime, and many worried Parliament would merely reflect the divided nature of Italian political life--rather than actually ameliorating the effects of regional differences. The differences between the Christlike depiction of arch-reformer Giuseppe Garibaldi and the discordant nature of Parliament were not lost on much of the population. As historian Christopher Duggan puts it: “Nowhere was it suggested that freedom was to be won either by or for parliament. Nor was there much room in the patriotic mythology...for assemblies or collective decision-making...” Scandals, an unwillingness to open the vote to a wider base, and the continuation of personal, regional conflicts and alliances within Parliament further weakened respect for the government’s prestige. What mattered to many elected deputies was not furthering the education and unification of Italy, but rather securing advantages for their own region or household. An age-old problem facing representative governments, to be sure, but one whose intensity threatened to tear the government apart from the inside out. Throughout Italy, earnest believers in the project of the *Risorgimento* looked forlornly on the results of their faith, and began to seek recompense.

Patriots and many in Parliament first turned to their King to bolster faith in the new government. King Victor Emmanuel II had been crucial in uniting the nation in the first place, and his presence in the eternal city of Rome would, it was hoped, become a

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<sup>12</sup> Christopher Duggan, *The Force of Destiny*, p 298.

rallying point for all Italians. Unfortunately, the devout Catholic did not take to his new palace in Rome, the Quirinal Palace—which had until recently been the Pope’s. With the King absent, the government lost a strategic battle to the Pope, who still remained “caged” in the Vatican. When Italians looked to their capital, they saw a city torn between papal and parliamentary influence—yet another sign that the regeneration promised by the *Risorgimento* had yet to be completed.

To add to the government’s woes, the Catholic Church stood tenaciously in the way of the formation of a unified Italian consciousness. The state had undertaken to appease the Pope’s wrath in 1871 by passing the “Law of Guarantees,”<sup>13</sup> which formally acknowledged the authority of the Pope as a sovereign power. This law did not appease the Pope, Pius IX, who quickly denounced this state of affairs and called for a return of the papal states. Pius IX, who became pontiff during the tumultuous 1846 revolutions, maintained an understandably anti-democratic policy in the face of the church’s rapidly diminishing temporal authority. The first Vatican Council, convoked in 1868 just before the completion of Italian unification, denounced *all* forms of liberalism—communism, capitalism, republicanism, secularism, and so forth. Furthermore, the church insisted on its independence and fervently anathematized the new regime as a bastion of sin and modernity—two things the Pontiff stood staunchly against. Devout Catholics were thus left with further divided loyalties.<sup>14</sup> Not only were their ties to the land and local politics just as pertinent as ever, but their faith now also stood in question. Every time a Catholic

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<sup>13</sup> *La Legge Delle Guarentigie* was passed by Italian Parliament in 1871, and guaranteed the sovereignty of the Pope separate from the state—such as mandating that insults directed at the Pope be treated as a royal offense, establishing a yearly pension for the Vatican, and renouncing the state’s right to appoint clergy. From the text of The Law of Guarantees, accessed at <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07048a.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> *The Force of Destiny*, pp 298-301.



went to the polls, regardless of who he voted for, he disobeyed a formal provision of the church against all political activity—essentially creating an un-appeasable minority within the state. The battle for primacy between the state and the Holy See would continue unabated until Mussolini’s signing of the Lateran Pacts mended the rift between Italy’s church and state.

With the death of King Emmanuel II and the ascension of his less-impressive son, King Umberto I, the continuing schism between the Pope and the state, and the waning moral authority of Parliament as fractious politics continued to carry the day—nationalists sought a new way to foster national harmony. For the *Risorgimento* veteran and recently elected Prime Minister Francesco Crispi, the creation of a national consciousness lay in glory abroad. Under Crispi, the “bath of blood” model of unification through warfare would be tested for the first time since the *Risorgimento*’s completion. Ignoring the reality that conflict had not brought unity to Italy in the first place, Crispi hoped to fully Italianize the Italian people by giving them a goal to strive toward and a future to hope in.

### ***The Imperial “Solution”***

Francesco Crispi was a veteran of the *Risorgimento*. A critic himself of Parliamentary inaction, he was himself swept up into Parliamentary machinations following the resignation of fellow reformer Agostino Depretis in 1887. Depretis had made promises of government and economic reform, most of which had not been kept. However, he did succeed in pushing through the chaotic legislature a bill increasing the franchise from half a million voters to around two million.<sup>15</sup> Despite this success, when

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<sup>15</sup> *Modern Italy*, p 123. Christopher Seton-Watson, *Italy from Liberalism to Fascism*, p 129.

Crispi took power, the government was in shambles. Unlike many Italian intellectuals, Crispi saw the nation of Italy as a *fact* rather than as a product of national will,<sup>16</sup> and his assertive “foreign policy of prestige” and attempts to create Italian hegemony in the Mediterranean were designed to realize this reality.

Crispi was thoroughly dedicated to the idea of the Italian state. Defending his claim to chancellorship, he said: “From the Alps to the sea there are only Italians. And to be honest, is there anyone who could claim to be more of a unitarist than me? To my mind, my whole life is proof of it, from Palermo to Turin. I am here to work for the country, to give it my time, all my remaining energy. I hope that I will be able to do something good. I belong entirely to Italy, believe me. I feel as if I am back in 1860.”<sup>17</sup> He was a vigorous administrator, whose first term saw several reforming measures passed through Parliament—including his work on the previously mentioned suffrage extension bill with Depretis in 1882, as well as laws clarifying the power of the police, a prison reform bill, and an entirely new penal code in unified penal legislation throughout Italy. Despite this, regionalism and political extremism remained a serious threat to the Italian state.<sup>18</sup>

Crispi’s first term saw a radical shift in Italian foreign policy. He, like Mussolini after him, took over as head of the foreign office when he came to power. His model was simple: unlike his predecessors who had cared little for Italian designs in the Mediterranean, he would emulate Bismarck and display Italy’s might on an international scale. “The destiny assigned to Italy within the projected European order” was the

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<sup>16</sup> Adrian Lyttleton, *The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy, 1919-1929*, p 15.

<sup>17</sup> *The Force of Destiny*, p 327.

<sup>18</sup> *Italy from Liberalism to Fascism*, p 131. Albrecht Carrie, *Italy from Napoleon to Mussolini*, pp 48-49.

replacement of Austria-Hungary and France as the dominant Mediterranean power. To this end Crispi strove incessantly, which delighted Italian nationalists.<sup>19</sup> Putting aside his unrealistic irredentist notions for the Tirol, he immediately made efforts to strengthen Italy's ties to the Triple Alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary, and made little effort to conceal his bellicose desires.<sup>20</sup> Crispi took a dangerously provocative stance toward France, further convincing the French government that the Triple Alliance was a threat to European stability by its very nature. Despite his revolutionary background, or perhaps because of it, Crispi believed that only through war could unification truly come about. Aside from instituting a trade war with France (which seriously injured Italian trade),<sup>21</sup> his efforts to destabilize European peace and provoke a war on the Triple Alliance's terms seem at times almost comical. In 1889, after he claimed that the French navy was aggressively posturing against Italy, British reinforcements arrived prepared to keep the peace to find that Crispi had relied on bogus sources. When in July of the same year Crispi frantically called upon Bismarck for aid on the premise that a French relief force to the beleaguered Vatican was on the way, Bismarck merely nodded politely and remained inactive.<sup>22</sup> So far, challenging European power structure had only served to cement Italy's position as the weakest of the central European Great Powers.

But the nationalism Crispi stood for soon found a new avenue for its fury—in the same direction Mussolini would later direct Italian wrath: Ethiopia. Italian forces already had a presence in the area to “stabilize” the region, but were embarrassingly defeated at

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<sup>19</sup> *The Force of Destiny*, p 332.

<sup>20</sup> *Modern Italy*, p 132, *Italy from Liberalism to Fascism*, p 133.

<sup>21</sup> *The Seizure of Power*, p 134.

<sup>22</sup> *Mussolini: A Biography*, p 133, *Italy from Liberalism to Fascism*, p 135.

Dogali in 1867. This soon became a rallying cry for nationalists, who lionized the fallen soldiers and called for retribution.<sup>23</sup> Though initially opposed to Italian intervention, Crispi soon seized upon this defeat as a way to finally deliver tangible success to the Italian people, saying:

Like the human body, nations need air that they can breathe in order to survive. Without it they would grow weaker and eventually perish. And as far as we are concerned, we have understood this, and have secured the air for Italy's lungs... Today Italy is on the march and is asserting itself...Africa, mysterious and awesome, opens up to us, trusting and friendly... Ethiopia, now almost entirely pacified, reaches out its hand to us in the person of a sovereign desirous of civilization...<sup>24</sup>

Under threat of Italian invasion, Menelik agreed to sign the Treaty of Ucciali on May 2 of 1889, which the Italians thought established an effective protectorate over the region. Despite Crispi's boasts that Ethiopia was effectively subject to Italian civilization, problems soon arose in the region. Menelik, perturbed by further Italian incursions, claimed that the version of the treaty in Ethiopian merely granted the king the *option* of submitting to Italian jurisdiction—it did not mandate his cooperation.<sup>25</sup> In response to this, and to Ethiopian appeals to the French and Russians for protection, Crispi fully embraced an imperial stance for Italy in the region. *Civus Romanus*, Italian civilization, was once again on the march. Though he would be ousted from power before he could make good on his expansionist rhetoric, Crispi would return to see his imperial plans through.

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<sup>23</sup> *The Force of Destiny*, p 324.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in *The Force of Destiny*, p 357.

<sup>25</sup> *Italy from Liberalism to Fascism*, pp 139-140.

Crispi's fall from power came as a result of a financial crash in 1889 and the disastrous trade war with France—which dropped Italian export to France from 41% to only 16%.<sup>26</sup> However, following yet another banking scandal involving the Banca Romana and several prominent deputies (including, surprisingly, Crispi himself,) Crispi was ushered in to restore order to the nation. In the years since his first term, socialism had become popular within the Italian peasantry and working class—exploding following the Second International in 1889 and the following Italian financial slump, and helped along by concerted efforts to organize workers and make socialist press available to the Italian peasantry.<sup>27</sup> The zenith of this socialist rise was a full scale revolt in Sicily in response to economic despair on the island. This revolt, instigated by socialist bands called the *fasci*—prototypes for the later fascist model of armed revolutionaries—was an attempt at organized revolution, and was made even more serious by Crispi's firm belief that this violence constituted an insidious French attempt to cut off Sicily from the Italian mainland and provide a landfall for French forces.<sup>28</sup> Crispi responded by declaring martial law and cracking down harshly on the peasantry and the instigators of the uprising, even going so far as to formally dissolve the socialist party.<sup>29</sup>

But Crispi was not satisfied with the return to normalcy—Italians remained too regionalist, Parliament wallowed in scandals, the rise of socialism had further divided Italian politics, and Italian interests remained a joke abroad. To combat this, Crispi turned once more to the same place Mussolini would turn almost half a century later: Ethiopia. However, Crispi was not to succeed. Ignoring Parliamentary concerns and disregarding

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<sup>26</sup> *Modern Italy*, pp 148-149, *Italy from Liberalism to Fascism*, p 141.

<sup>27</sup> *Italy from Liberalism to Fascism*, pp 157-160, *Modern Italy*, pp 157-158.

<sup>28</sup> *Italy from Liberalism to Fascism*, pp 165-167.

<sup>29</sup> *Modern Italy*, p 161.

Italy's isolated position in Europe, Crispi sent an under-strength force to Ethiopia under the command of General Baratieri. After a few initial successes, the army was caught up in a slow war with King Menelik that did not suit Crispi's need for a dramatic victory to stir nationalist pride at home. Baratieri pushed forward without proper reconnaissance and with his troops dangerously over-extended, and was totally defeated near Adowa by a superior Ethiopian force numbering almost 100,000.<sup>30</sup>

This defeat was crushing for Crispi, who was driven from office with his legacy of assertive nationalism temporarily discredited. However, his fall from power following Adowa did not spell the end to Italian nationalists' calls for glory abroad. Not only had Crispi failed to bring prestige to Italy through foreign affairs, he had failed to deal adequately with the rapid rise of socialist organizations appearing throughout the nation. The Catholic church had not been idle either—mobilizing its own local movements throughout its dioceses to return Italy to the faith of its forefathers. This battle between the utopian “new faith” of socialist intellectuals like Filippo Turati and conservative Catholic values radiating from the Vatican was to divide Italian middle and lower-classes' loyalties until Mussolini came to power more than thirty years later and either crushed or coerced a majority of the formal resistance to the state's authority. Despite Crispi's political demise and their temporary fall from grace, Italian nationalists would not be silenced and would continue to seek unification in glory abroad.

### ***Unity through Strife***

But why was it that so many in Italy, particularly nationalists but also certain socialists, so earnestly desired violent confrontation? Why was Crispi not content to

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<sup>30</sup> *Italy from Liberalism to Fascism*, pp 179-180, *The Force of Destiny*, pp 346-347.

develop Italian industry, and instead chose to provoke crises in Europe and eventually invade Ethiopia? The answer lies in Italian intellectuals' understanding of what Italy needed in order to become a fully unified nation. Italy's profound division has already been detailed, and Italian intellectuals were well aware of the challenges facing Italy on her road to modernity. According to these intellectuals, the *Risorgimento* had not been completed, at least not in a moral sense. Many regions in Italy remained without a modern sense of national consciousness, and Italy had few victories to its name. Having already tried and been largely unsuccessful in forming a unifying symbol in the form of Parliament or the Monarchy, Italian intellectuals turned to war itself as a method for completing the moral transformation of Italy from region to nation. Romanticizing conflict as the way to fully complete the revolution begun by the *Risorgimento*, an Italian intellectual wrote in 1909 that: "War is the greatest possible manifestation of life that humans can offer. Indeed, war can, and should, be *worshipped*: the worship of heroes, the cult of traditions. No nation can aspire to greatness that does not venerate the past and exalt its own power."<sup>31</sup> The symbol of the fatherland, and loyalty to it would be immensely bolstered if Italy was able to secure glory for itself abroad.

Not only was conflict viewed as being restorative, but intellectuals anticipated nationalizing benefits of the military itself. As a friend of Garibaldi, Giuseppe Guerzoni, explained in 1879:

The ambition of the army is this: to take a man from society and leave its imprint on him for his entire life. To turn a ruffian into a gentleman...an anarchist into a citizen, etc...living continually with men who all dress identically, and all answer to the same superior...who gradually instils in him a sense of discipline, a respect

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<sup>31</sup> "La nostra azione," *Il Tricolore*, June 16, 1909. Quoted in *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, p 15.

for hierarchy and a feeling for true equality...enjoying the constant comradeship of people speaking different dialects from every region of Italy...seeing just one flag, the revered symbol of the fatherland and the king...everything works to engender a universe of new and better feelings and affections and so create a different man. And in this way the by now proverbial saying is becoming a strict reality: having made Italy, the *army is making Italians*.<sup>32</sup>

The army not only offered an employment that was universally available across Italy, but also provided an environment in which nothing less than patriotic fervor was constantly extolled. As Guerzioni says, bonding with comrades through adversity and saluting the same flag every day, all while being paid better wages than the average peasant earned, should naturally produce the love of country that Italian intellectuals felt was missing in regionalist Italy—or so at least, it was hoped. Furthermore, the willingness to sacrifice and the upholding of one's duty appealed to the intelligentsia's nostalgia for Imperial Rome; a state in which, it was assumed, every man willingly served in the legions out of love for country and honor. Indeed, many Italian peasants agreed with this framework; the experience of being in the army was considered an honorable—if trying—career.<sup>33</sup>

If the intellectuals were correct in asserting that the military was the best way to generate national consciousness, and that war was a truly regenerating force for a country, then Italy was in serious need of action. As Emilio Gentile writes of Italy: “Its national tradition lacked major wars or great victories; in compensation, it had a revolutionary myth and could not conceive of revolution without a purifying violence.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Quoted in *The Force of Destiny*, pp 283-284.

<sup>33</sup> As one peasant says: “You had to do what you could to avoid being chosen, but if you couldn't, you had stories to tell, because it was a man's stuff!” Quoted in *The Force of Destiny*, p 286.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, p 15.



Crispi was the first Italian Prime Minister to take seriously the claim that violence, preferably in the form of glory won abroad, would unify the fractured Italian people. As he wrote in 1896,

'War,' said the marshal, 'has been instituted by God, and is a principle of order in the world. In it, and through it, the noblest human virtues are enhanced; courage, selflessness, devotion to duty, love of sacrifice. Without war, the world would slide into putrefaction and drown in materialism.' And look, indeed, at how many cubits the Italian people has grown by since the war in Africa began... Oh, what good blood, good blood that does not lie, is Latin blood!... When the moment of truth, the supreme test, arrives... we find ourselves... a serious and mature people, a truly superior people.... With pride, we can now claim that not only Italy, but also Italians, have been made!<sup>35</sup>

Crispi's "foreign policy of prestige" and his imperial designs in Africa were both conceptualized utilizing this framework of conflict. Italy would never become more than a geographical expression, as arch-conservative Metternich once called it, if she did not mobilize her discordant masses and secure victory abroad. Though Crispi would not be able to realize this vision as his efforts failed, another "supreme test" lay around the corner for Italy. The Great War would be the most dangerous challenge faced by the fledgling nation, and calls for regeneration through violence would only heighten the negative effects of this bloody war upon Italian society. For both socialist agitators and nationalist intellectuals, this war was not just about territorial acquisition. It was about securing the future of Italy as a "protagonist of modern civilization," and completing the

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<sup>35</sup> Francesco Crispi, quoted in *The Force of Destiny*, p 347.

unfinished *Risorgimento*.<sup>36</sup> Neither the invasion of Libya, nor the coming “War to End All Wars” would accomplish this.

### ***A Great and Terrible War***

It is clear that Crispi’s imperialism of the 1880s and 90s further divided the already weak Italian government. Italian colonialism brought shame to the liberal regime and effected the nadir of Italian prestige at Adowa in 1896. However, though the liberal regime was discredited and nationalism for the moment discarded, it did not entirely disappear. Even the artful liberal prime minister Giovanni Giolitti was not immune to its effects. Driven by a desire to appease nationalist wounded pride following Adowa and thereby bring nationalists into his developing political coalition, Giolitti abandoned his previous distaste for Crispi’s “megalomania” and agreed to invade Libya in 1911.<sup>37</sup> This revivification of imperialist hopes instilled new life into nationalist poets like Gabriele D’Annunzio and Giovanni Pascoli—who became the heralds of the next generation of increasingly radical Italian literature and poetry. It was nationalists like D’Annunzio who helped popularize the themes of naval expansion and Adriatic conquest that would come to define Italian nationalistic sentiment following WWI.

Italy continued to face extreme internal and ideological divisions when Gavrilo Princip’s assassination of Archduke Ferdinand set in motion events that would plunge the world into the Great War. Socialists, nationalists, democrats, Catholics—all vied for power within a parliamentary regime that seemed incapable of effectively compromising. Men like Turati on the left and D’Annunzio on the right clamored for revolution: a call

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<sup>36</sup> Luca Somigli and Simona Storchi, “Introduction: The Great War and the Modernist Imagination in Italy,” p 19.

<sup>37</sup> *The Seizure of Power*, p 21, *The Force of Destiny*, p 381.

that resonated with many disenchanting peasants throughout Italy. As one Italian historian writes of these prolific ideologues: “Many youths...tired of Giollitian good sense, flat, grey, every day, accommodating...and dissatisfied with a banal existence bureaucratically regulated by a meagre stipend, in which nothing ever happened, attributed political substance to this literary barbarism...”<sup>38</sup> Nationalists sought a “revolution” abroad through disciplinary vigor, and socialists sought a literal revolution at home to undo the decadent and impotent bourgeoisie. Both sought unity through strife. A “revolution” would indeed come to pass, though it would establish neither a revived liberal state nor a proletariat dictatorship. Instead, the war’s failure to resolve Italy’s burning social divisions led to the rise of Mussolini’s fascism from the militant nationalism that had been fermenting for over thirty years.

The Great War must be summarized shortly, as even a brief explanation of Italy’s conflict would require another paper. However, the war’s effects on Italy may be nicely summarized by examining two particular battles—the disgrace at Caporetto, and the hard-fought victory at Vittorio Veneto. Several powerful factions sat in opposition to Italy’s entrance into the Great War. The majority of Italians agreed with the government’s decision to remain neutral even in the face of Italy’s erstwhile ties to the Triple Alliance and despite the Vatican’s instinctual urge to bolster Austria-Hungary’s historical position as the guardian of Catholicism in Central Europe.<sup>39</sup> But neutrality carried neither the honor, nor the potential rewards that war brought with it—and many intellectuals and deputies raged against this “policy of cowardice.” Even within the socialist party contentions arose between the radical wing who sought to use the prospect of war to

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<sup>38</sup> *The Seizure of Power*, p 17.

<sup>39</sup> *Italy from Liberalism to Fascism*, p 417. *Modern Italy*, p 255, *The Force of Destiny*, p 388.

enact a proper revolution, the moderates who remained intransigent in their commitment to non-aggression, and an emerging hybrid of nationalism and socialism—a third position best showcased in Benito Mussolini’s transition from socialist activist to jingoistic spokesman.

Mussolini began his shift from socialist organizer to radical nationalist shortly before the war began. Regarding the dramatic failure of the socialist “Red Week” of violent strikes, Renzo De Felice writes: “Only Mussolini understood that a new era was beginning and that socialism must not continue to be out of step with the times.” For Mussolini, the key to Italian power was not a unified socialist workers’ front, but rather a nationalist response. Blaming first Austria, and then Germany for its “aggression against Belgium, [by which] Germany was laying bare its purpose, its aims, and its soul,” Mussolini began to fall away from the socialist party line of neutrality. Following an article published in *Avanti!* in which he lambasted a policy of neutrality as “backward and immobilizing,” and in which he called for Italy to become “the protagonists” of history, Mussolini resigned from his position as editor of *Avanti!* to form his own nationalist paper *Il Popolo d’Italia* shortly afterward. Though still ostensibly socialist, Mussolini was advocating for the creation of *Fasci d’azione rivoluzionaria* as early as 1914.

Mussolini’s growing enthusiasm and D’Annunzio’s jingoistic poetry helped build support for intervention within Italy. If Italy remained neutral, she could expect little help from either side once the war was over. She would be despised as a traitor by the Central Powers, or shut out of Mediterranean dominance by the Entente. Both Mussolini and D’Annunzio threatened revolution at home if Italy’s honor was not vindicated.

D'Annunzio declared that "It is no longer time for talk but for action. If it is a crime to incite citizens to violence, then I shall boast of this crime..."<sup>40</sup> Thanks to this mounting pressure on the King and to a few well-placed lofty promises—such as the Treaty of London, drafted in secret by pro-war Sidney Sonnino, which promised Italy the Tyrol, Trieste, Istria, and northern Dalmatia, among other things, the pro-war faction eventually settled the issue and entered the war as part of the Entente. On May 24, 1915, Italy declared war on Austria-Hungary. "Three cheers for the War, for the irresistible and great act of this glowing young Italy," Mussolini boldly proclaimed. The greatest test of Italian nationhood had begun in earnest.

And yet Italian life at home remained divisive. The anti-war socialist party attempted to reconcile their beliefs with the need for national solidarity through the policy of "neither support nor sabotage". This formula became an increasingly difficult balancing act as the party split itself apart following the October 1917 revolution in Russia. This new, radical wing called for subversion of the state in order to emulate their Russian counterparts.<sup>41</sup> As time wore on, it became increasingly difficult for the socialist party to explain their lack of enthusiasm to support Italy's titanic struggle. This suspicion came to a head near the end of 1917 when, shortly after a violent socialist uprising in Turin set the nation on edge, the northern army was smashed at Caporetto.<sup>42</sup> In his account of the war, *Diario di Gurerra*,<sup>43</sup> Mussolini stresses the demoralizing effect that the disastrous defeat at Caporetto had upon him and his fellow soldiers. As he writes:

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<sup>40</sup> *Italy from Liberalism to Fascism*, pp 417, 477.

<sup>41</sup> *The Seizure of Power*, p 26, *Modern Italy*, p 274.

<sup>42</sup> *Mussolini's Italy*, pp 84-85, *The Force of Destiny*, pp 391-393.

<sup>43</sup> This book is a useful source, although historically suspect as it was published after the war in an attempt to turn *il Duce* into a veritable war hero.

I do not choose to make posthumous recriminations. The weakness of internal politics in 1917, the feeble parliamentary situation, the hateful socialist propaganda, were certainly preparing the ground for events that could prove ruinous. And the blow came in October, 1917; it took the name of Caporetto. Never in my life as an Italian and as a politician have I experienced a sorrow equal to that which I suffered after news of the defeat of Caporetto.<sup>44</sup>

Mussolini, and nationalists like him, blamed the socialists, along with their questionable loyalty, for the weak state Italy found herself in in 1917—despite his attempt to not “posthumously recriminate.” Yet despite their rancor, the disorganization, fatigue, and frank apathy of the defeated soldiers streaming southward astonished nationalists. Many soldiers simply did not care to fight; “We understood nothing. We only tried not to die.”<sup>45</sup> Instead of blaming the defeat on Italy’s deficient supply train and the forceful but incompetent leadership of General Cadorna, many Italians placed the blame squarely upon non-interventionists and socialists. As historian Adrian Lyttleton writes, “An Italian stab-in-the-back legend was born.”<sup>46</sup> Despite this dramatic setback, brave Italian soldiers bolstered by better leadership, fresh recruits, and Allied aid managed to stem the Austro-German advancing tide. Defeat had rallied the nation militarily—and had shattered her politically.

Even hard-fought victory would not regenerate the nation’s spirit. Believers in *Risorgimento* national transformation or in socialist utopia could not be satisfied even as Italy’s future began to brighten. By the end of 1917, Italy’s bureaucratic machine finally had a grasp on her economic position, and politicians—free from the imposing shadow of the anti-Parliamentarian General Cadorna—began to assert themselves and demand the

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<sup>44</sup> Benito Mussolini, *My Autobiography*, pp 49-50.

<sup>45</sup> *The Force of Destiny*, p 395.

<sup>46</sup> *The Seizure of Power*, p 28.

military produce results. With this renewed vigor and with the gradual collapse of Austrian resistance came the final push at Monte Grappa in 1918. Taking the strategically vital town of Vittorio Veneto, Italy finally forced Austria to the bargaining table to sign an armistice, which they did on November 4.<sup>47</sup> But this was not the end of political strife. The entire nation was ebullient with victory, but nationalists felt the war was *theirs*. It had not been the treacherous socialists nor the apathetic liberal state; no, these *imboscatti*<sup>48</sup> had not saved Italy—it had been national vigor that had seen the war through and would see Italy rewarded for her sacrifice of 600,000 souls.

### ***A War Lost in Victory***

Caporetto may have been devastating, yet Italy's true defeat would not arrive on the tip of an Austrian bayonet but signed by diplomats' pens at Versailles. The most important event of the war for the purposes of understanding the rise of the *squadrists* are the Allies' failure at Versailles to deliver on the terms of the Treaty of London. With Allied triumph in 1918 and the convention of the Paris Peace Conference, Italy's star seemed to have finally reached its zenith. However, President Wilson's insistence upon applying his 14-Point doctrine of national sovereignty to post-war Europe, the Italian leadership's failure to adapt to Parisian diplomacy, and the Allied view that Italian arms had contributed very little to achieving victory destroyed Italy's chances of receiving the territories promised to her under the Treaty of London.

For the Italians, this was madness. The "Mutilated Victory," as the war was nicknamed by D'Annunzio, replaced a victorious national spirit with the mindset of a

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<sup>47</sup> *The Force of Destiny*, pp 400-404, *Italy from Liberalism to Fascism*, pp 486-490, *Modern Italy*, p 275.

<sup>48</sup> "Shirker," *Mussolini's Italy*, pp 86-87.

defeated nation. Even before the end of the war, it was clear that the Allies were not willing to adhere to the terms of the Treaty of London, both because of their commitment to Wilsonian self-determination and (perhaps more tangibly) a desire to avoid creating a new, Italian threat in the Mediterranean. Italy was forced to bargain at the Paris Conference for spoils as if it were a lesser, defeated nation. But despite Prime Minister Orlando's warning of civil wars in Italy should the demands not be met, at Paris Italy only secured the Tyrol and reparations from Germany—far less than it had been promised. This was *unacceptable* to the Italian public, who considered this a betrayal by their Allies and a tragic waste of Italian lives for next to nothing. By now, the war was no longer merely about territorial acquisition. For both socialists and nationalists, the very fate of the nation hung in the balance. So many lives had been spent, and yet neither side saw the regeneration or progress it had hoped for. The socialists had been discredited and were unable to provoke a general revolution, and the nationalists were faced with an inglorious victory and a nation that seemed ever more divided than in 1913. For both sides, this outcome was deplorable.

Likewise, Mussolini—whose commentary had become increasingly imperialist—voiced his opinion that Wilson was an “anti-Latin” and a “muddled professor,” that Italians must consider themselves superior in every way, and that the greatest war fought by Italians since the collapse of the Roman Empire could not end with the loss of Fiume.<sup>49</sup> In fact, Italian imperialism was no longer a tool of the bourgeoisie to keep workers under their thumb, but “The eternal and immutable law of life. At the bottom of

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<sup>49</sup> This port city made famous by D'Annunzio had become a symbol of the “Mutilated Victory.” Promised to Italy, it was instead turned into a jointly-governed independent city administered by the Allies.



it is but the need, the desire, and the will for expansion which every living, healthy individual or people has in itself.”

The war’s aftermath, namely the disastrous Treaty of Versailles in 1918 and the ferocious popular outcry against it within Italy that made possible Mussolini’s administration, represents an attempt by socialists, nationalists, and liberals to come to terms with the failure of the war to provide the salvation, or at least tangible profit, that they so desperately yearned for. The war failed to produce a decisive outcome that favored any party, as Mussolini’s exploitation of the socialist democratic victory in 1919 would soon prove.<sup>50</sup> But this had not been the first attempt to forge Italian consciousness through war. Crispi’s aggressive realism and Italian colonialism— “developed out of the need to compensate for failure rather than celebrate success” had both been efforts to solve the same problem.<sup>51</sup> Even the less-bellicose and more conciliatory leaders of the liberal regime, such as Giovanni Giolitti, were profoundly influenced by the sense that “war recovered and continued the Mazzinian revolution.”<sup>52</sup> The ultimate test of this theory was the Great War, and the popular backlash and intellectual rebellion that resulted from Italy’s failure to receive its due rewards at Versailles demonstrates that this vision had dangerously heightened Italian expectations of the war. Though the liberal regime did indeed employ realistic politics and tit-for-tat negotiations (particularly in securing Italian intervention) every major foray into international affairs was nevertheless unquestionably influenced by, and in accord with the intelligentsia’s notion of regeneration through violence. Unlike the Fascist regime to come, the liberal regime’s

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<sup>50</sup> Alexander De Grand, *Italian Fascism*, p 22.

<sup>51</sup> *The Seizure of Power*, p 21.

<sup>52</sup> *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, p 17.

rhetoric matched its actions—and it had reaped the price of its actions. With the dramatic failure of this vision, a humiliated Italy did not return to a more temperate political climate, but instead turned to a movement which offered an even greater sense of “belonging.” It was a movement whose leader promised to honor the horrific sacrifices Italy had endured and propel her into a brighter future—Mussolini’s Fascism.

### **III. The Ethiopian War**

Perhaps the most useful instance of Fascist notions of foreign policy translated into action is the Italo-Ethiopian (also known as the Abyssinian) War that began in 1935. This conflict in essence had two fronts: one that pillaged the fields and villages of Ethiopia, and one that raged behind desks and through correspondence in the League of Nations. Furthermore, two different and often opposing rhetorical frameworks described this campaign. The first is espoused by Mussolini himself, when he declared the advent of war in Ethiopia, proclaiming:

Blackshirts of the Revolution!... A solemn hour is about to sound in the history of the Fatherland. At this moment twenty million men occupy the public squares of all Italy. Never in the history of mankind has there been seen a more gigantic demonstration. Twenty million men, but one heart, one will, one decision... For many months the wheels of destiny have been moving toward their goal under the impulse of our calm determination... It is not only an army that strives toward its objectives, but a whole people of forty-four million souls against whom an attempt is being made to consummate the blackest of injustices; that of depriving us of some small place in the sun... For thirteen years we have been patient while the circle tightened around us at the hands of those who wish to suffocate us. With Ethiopia we have been patient for forty years! It is time to say enough!<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Benito Mussolini, *Declaration of Mobilization*, October 2, 1935.

This is the language of an Italy resurgent. Confident in her armed forces, assured of her people's discipline, and united by a fraternal love of Fatherland; this Italy strove to blot out the stains of the Mutilated Victory and Adowa and replace them with a Fascist (or perhaps even Roman) era of victory. This speech, heralded from the Palazzo Venezia, represents the Fascist interpretation of the conflict. This was a war Italy needed, not only to provide colonial territory to handle her 40 million inhabitants and thus stabilize the economy, but also to prove Italy's worth as a nation. Without aggressive and total victory, the very framework for Fascist dominance falls apart. As Professor Alfredo Rocco wrote of Fascism in 1925, "Only because it is action, and as such actualizes itself in a vast organization and in a huge movement, has it the conditions for determining the historical course of contemporary Italy." Without a war of this kind, Fascism had no claim to Italian's loyalty.

But propagandist rhetoric rarely reaches the halls of diplomacy. In such circumstances, more nuanced legal arguments than appeals to "national destiny" are in order. The battle to persuade the world that Italy deserved to dominate Ethiopia was fought with different weapons in the Council of the League than on the home front. Baron Aloisi, speaking to the Council in October of 1935 in response to Ethiopian requests for League arbitration, says:

Ever since 1928, Ethiopia, taking advantage of her position as a Member of the League of Nations and sheltering behind the Treaty of Friendship concluded with Italy in that year, has developed her policy of aiming against the Italian possessions. Acts of provocation, hostile demonstrations, raids, acts of brigandage, and violence against the peaceful people on our frontiers have steadily increased.... Italy on the contrary has always desired to show forbearance but after her bitter experiences, frequently accompanied by bloodshed, she was

forced to admit that Ethiopia was beyond all question her enemy an enemy whose bad faith had never been controverted, and that no policy of confidence, no demonstration or treaty of friendship had succeeded in changing her. Any possibility of peaceful conditions and co-operation between Italy and Ethiopia having unfortunately vanished, Italy can no longer adopt a passive and forgiving attitude towards an *uncivilized State incapable of controlling itself or its own people*, who, powerfully armed, are at present threatening the Italian frontiers.<sup>54</sup>

Italy here is presented as an offended nation, one acting indirectly on behalf of all civilized European states. As Baron Aloisi presents the issue, Ethiopia is not only a threat to the security of Italian assets but also to the very nature of the League. Ethiopia has failed to show itself capable of raising itself to the standard of a European state, and has not controlled her aggression toward Italy—specifically, as Aloisi mentions, during times when Italy has been preoccupied elsewhere, such as during the Great War.<sup>55</sup> Thus, Italy cannot abide by the League's arbitration of the issue, because Ethiopia is not a fellow civilized state. Italy would be demeaning itself if it awarded the Ethiopian government such respect in the face of affronts like the Wal-Wal incident, and the argument implies that other European nations should similarly disdain Ethiopian appeals to legal parity.

According to Mussolini, this war was to be the deciding “bath of blood.” This would make up for Adowa, this would wipe the Mutilated Victory of 1918 from the pages of history, and this would renew the Italian spirit of imperial domination and demonstrate to the world Italy's Fascist vigor. But according to Italian diplomats, this war was one chiefly concerned with preserving Italian prestige and with preserving peace in Europe by maintaining stability in Africa. Italy cannot stand by and allow her

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<sup>54</sup> Italics added. "First Meeting (Private, Then Public)," *League of Nations Official Journal* 16, no. 11 (November 1935): 1132-1139.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, p 1136.

international standing as a Great Power to be tarnished, and thus Italy must handle the Ethiopian issue herself. Fellow Great Powers may watch as Italy ensures European stability, but interference will be considered not as impartial judgement but as an affront to Italian honor.

Mussolini's twofold approach to this war, his bellicosity at home, and his deliberations abroad highlight the inconsistency between Fascist doctrine and Fascist foreign policy. This was not a truly Fascist war, but rather a war delicately balanced by Mussolini to ensure total loyalty at home with minimum risk abroad. Great Power Politics, not Fascist vigor, defined Fascist foreign policy.

### ***A Working Definition of Great Power Politics***

But what do we mean when we say "Great Power Politics"? To summarize briefly how this paper will define the term: the European state system before the introduction of the Versailles order viewed the realm of international relations as a zero-sum game. There was only a certain amount of "power" that a state could realistically wield; thus, in order to increase one state's power, another state must concede some of its influence. And where imbalance existed on the international plane, there existed a risk of war. This is why the search for an "equilibrium" within Europe was so pressing for leaders such as Bismarck. Yes, some interests of the state were "vital"—such as German unification, in Bismarck's case—but most interests were "adjustable" and could be bargained with in order to obtain peace.<sup>56</sup> Political realism dominated this international order. European realists saw the world as a system of states, with each state being a rational and self-interested actor. This realism took on different forms depending on the state;

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<sup>56</sup> F. R. Bridge, Roger Bullen, *The Great Powers and the European States System: 1815-1914*, p 112.

Morganthau's observation that states are led by human beings who are possessed with a "limitless lust for power" is perhaps too strong.<sup>57</sup> However, even if states were not always helmed by leaders who sought any opportunity to advance their state's power relative to others, it was nevertheless possible for the vital interests of a state to be in conflict with another. Even in states like France where the outlook post-German unification took on a distinctly defensive tone, conflicts between states over vital interests could still occur. Furthermore, because states were fundamentally self-interested actors, those who *did* seek to advance their station through any practical means were not acting unreasonably. Nevertheless, conflict was naturally to be avoided if at all possible; and because realists tend to not view states as inherently "immoral," bargaining, alliance forging, and posturing were all equally valid measures to rely upon in order to stave off war. Unlike Woodrow Wilson's framework for European politics, which frequently relied on idealistic language to describe international politics and castigated "secret diplomacy and entangling alliances,"<sup>58</sup> and unlike the League which regarded breaches of the Covenant as morally deplorable, European realists relied on pragmatic policies in order to achieve the equilibrium required to preserve peace, or simply to advance their own state's ends.

An excellent example of this is the scramble to reconfigure alliances following Bismarck's successful unification of Germany. Categorized as a "shock absorber" in Europe, the German Confederation had long played a vital role in the European balance of power. It had proven itself strong enough to put up resistance in the case of an invasion from a hostile power, as exemplified during the Napoleonic Wars, but did not have the

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<sup>57</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p 19.

<sup>58</sup> Margaret MacMillan, *Paris 1919*, pp 11-14.

cohesion to threaten its neighbors in return.<sup>59</sup> The rise of Prussian authority within the Confederacy following Napoleon's invasion and the rewards bestowed upon it at the Congress of Vienna would, under Bismarck, begin to change Germany's role in Europe. Through a series of dramatic military and diplomatic triumphs, Bismarck succeeded in uniting Germany and establishing it as a power distinct from Austria-Hungary that would dominate the European Great Power system by 1870. Quickly surrounding itself with allies in the form of the "Triple Alliance" with Austria-Hungary and Italy, Germany posed a serious threat to European equilibrium.<sup>60</sup> Thus, when in 1875 Bismarck hinted that Germany might launch another war against the weakened France, the hitherto estranged Britain and Russia set aside their differences and warned Germany that doing so would mean war.<sup>61</sup> Even the recent war in Crimea would not stop British and Russian leaders from joining forces to ensure that the game of international relations stayed relatively manageable.

Italian foreign politics under the liberal regime were defined by this political realism as well. Crispi, as well as the crafty Giolitti, both understood Europe as a system of Great Powers, of which Italy was definitively the weakest. Even Italy's signing of the Triple Alliance and Giolitti's industrial reform measures did not change the fact that Italy remained divided at home and without great influence abroad.<sup>62</sup> Crispi's foreign policy of prestige, his close alliance with Bismarck and later failed invasion of Ethiopia, and Giolitti's annexation of Libya all represented attempts to both bolster Italy's potency abroad via traditional European diplomatic means, and thus heal her internal division. In

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<sup>59</sup> *The Great Powers and the European States System: 1815-1914*, pp 113-114.

<sup>60</sup> Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers*, pp 187, 190-191.

<sup>61</sup> *The Great Powers: 1815-1914*, p 119.

<sup>62</sup> *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, pp 204-205.

order to secure Italian honor abroad, and thereby Italian unity, Crispi was more than willing to create war scares or invade Africa. Giolitti, likewise, was unable to bear the thought of France conquering Libya as it had annexed Tunisia, and he was willing to authorize his own colonial war—a course he had strongly criticized Crispi for pursuing only a few years earlier.<sup>63</sup> For realists such as these, consistency was only profitable when it brought tangible benefits.

The alternative to this view of international politics would be something akin to Hitler's plans for Eastern Europe. Hitler's version of international politics was, if anything, idealistic. Rather than pursuing purely pragmatic advances for his nation within a system of established states, Hitler viewed his foreign policy as dominated by a few overarching goals. The notion of *Lebensraum*, the domination of Aryan culture, the elimination of the "Jewish menace," and the eventual destruction of communism in Europe influenced his thinking far more than careful calculations of European equilibrium. Hitler earnestly believed that he was setting out to make a "new European order," one dominated by the Third Reich. The Third Reich would expand into the "new California" of the East (particularly Ukraine), providing Germans with land to rule over the racially inferior cultures.<sup>64</sup> Failure to destroy the communist menace, failure to finish the "war of annihilation" against the Jews, *any* failure to install the new European order was unacceptable. This is not to say that Hitler could not approach foreign affairs craftily, but that the goal was always Third Reich through total war, if necessary. The "protectors of a dying epoch" would be overtaken, and Nazi Germany would take their place.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> *Force of Destiny*, pp 381-386,

<sup>64</sup> Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century*, pp 143-144, 148-151.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, pp 164-165, 143.



Such a vision was not the case even for the most romantic and fervent of Italian Nationalists. Even proponents of the revolutionary *Risorgimento* only sought “to make Italy once again into one body, one nation”—not total Italian domination in Europe.<sup>66</sup> Great Power politics was indeed about maximizing one’s power, but power within a *system*. German ascendancy could be tolerated and striven for, but German *hegemony* was unthinkable. Realists like Bismarck and Crispi would be perplexed by Hitler’s insistence on long-term total war in Europe. Most leaders of Europe from the Congress of Vienna forward were anything but idealistic in the realm of foreign policy. Attempting to replace the established order was not prudent, taking pragmatic steps to advance one’s honor, productivity, and security within the system was preferred.

#### **IV. The War at Home**

When on May 5 of 1936, Mussolini declared that “This day is a great date for the Blackshirt revolution.... A milestone in our march has been reached,” this concluded a concerted pro-war propaganda wave within Italy itself that had been largely successful in transforming the Italian people from apathetic observers to active proponents of the Fascist war in Ethiopia. The war for Italian support was just as important to Mussolini as his expedition in Ethiopia—for without Italian popular support, the Fascist regime would be in jeopardy. To understand how starkly un-Fascist the Mussolini’s diplomacy on the international stage truly was, one must first understand the “religious” quality of the Fascist regime—and building from this, how the conflict was portrayed to Italians.

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<sup>66</sup> Massimo d’Azeglio, quoted in *Force of Destiny*, p 217.

## *A State Religion*

Fascism is not only a party: it is a regime. It is not only a regime: it is a faith. It is not only a faith, it is a religion, which is conquering the working masses of the Italian people...And nobody will deflect us from the path that we must resolutely follow. Are you ready to follow it?<sup>67</sup>

Historian Emilio Gentile argued convincingly for the “sacralization” of politics under the Fascist regime. In an effort to fulfill the nationalists’ quest for national consciousness, the Fascist “religion” began to rebrand the Great War, using the old regime’s rituals, symbols, and memorials to promote Italy’s vigorous and courageous drive into a glorious future. The “religion of the trenches” accomplished this by effectively monopolizing patriotism through their use of powerful rhetoric and violent action. No longer was it enough to passively support the Fatherland; to be a fascist, one had to profess his absolute willingness to sacrifice for the cause of Fascism and for the health of the Fatherland—which were now inseparable entities within the Fascist regime. The Fatherland was to be the supreme good for all Italians, and it was through Fascist dedication and faith that one served the Fatherland.<sup>68</sup> As *L’Illustrazione Italiana* noted in 1922, “Words like ‘Italy, Victory, Glory, Appreciation, Gratitude’ take the place of ‘Sacrifice, Holocaust, the Fallen, War’ without adjectives attached. Today there is less of the cemetery and more of the Pantheon.”<sup>69</sup> The shame of the Mutilated Victory and the liberal regime’s inability to serve the Italian state or unite the Italian people would never again be allowed to happen—or so it was promised.

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<sup>67</sup> Benito Mussolini, quoted in *The Force of Destiny*, p 476.

<sup>68</sup> Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, pp 18-28.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, p 30. *The Force of Destiny*, pp 475-483.

This religion was one of heightened nationalism; one which forwent the liberal regime's weak efforts to unite the Italian people behind the King or Parliament and instead sought to mold a new Italy, under one man, from the ashes of the old—to truly complete the *Risorgimento*. In particular, Italy's failure to create for itself an empire worthy of respect was unacceptable to Fascist doctrine. Mussolini, himself a veteran of the Great War, strongly emphasized his commitment to honoring the sacrifices of Italian soldiers and to make good on their successes. Speaking to maimed veterans in 1923, he said:

...Patriotism is not formed by mere words, it is formed by deeds, by example, by showing oneself worthy before one's own conscience of the quality of being Italian.

The Government intends to exalt all the forces of the country, all the moral values arising from our victory; it means daily and disinterestedly to defend all those who by their deeds and their blood have contributed to this glorious victory.<sup>70</sup>

Fascism promised to right the disappointments of the past. Italy's weakly administered and unfruitful holdings in North Africa would simply not do. Under Mussolini's guidance, Italy initiated a campaign to stabilize the regions of Somalia and Libya, often using brutal tactics to force the rebellious natives into surrender.<sup>71</sup> But despite the fact that Libyan resistance was effectively destroyed by the end of 1931, Crispi's failure remained. The defeat at Adowa and the humiliating withdrawal from the region remained fresh on the Fascist mind.

The Fascist case for invading Ethiopia shared many justifications with the liberal regime; however, its ideological reasoning was quite different. As with Crispi,

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<sup>70</sup> Benito Mussolini, Speech in Arosio, March 30, 1923.

<sup>71</sup> R. J. B. Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy*, pp 379-382. *The Force of Destiny*, pp 495-498.

international prestige was at stake. Italy could not continue to call itself a “great power” as long as it was without profitable colonies and as long as it remained defeated by an African nation. The Fascist press would make a great deal out of Italy’s birthrate, and her need for overseas resources and living space; as the nationalists had done in 1889. And, like the nationalists before it, Fascism lauded the “civilizing mission” of Roman culture—portraying this conflict as a means by which the benefits of Italian culture could reach the backwards interior of Africa.<sup>72</sup> However, there were several key differences. Unlike the nationalists, this campaign was not portrayed as a means by which the Italian fatherland could be created; Fascists believed they had succeeded in creating a united Italy and national consciousness. The tone of Fascist imperialism was not “developed out of the need to compensate for failure rather than celebrate success”—instead, this was to be a war to demonstrate the vigor and courage of the Italian people, as molded by Fascist doctrine.<sup>73</sup> Instead of desperately searching for a method of unifying the nation, the Fascists sought to test their own unifying doctrine—and to prove the healthiness of the state.

In *The Doctrine of Fascism*, written in 1932, Mussolini explores the topic of imperialism. Beginning by reaffirming Fascism’s will to exercise power as the Roman Empire had, Mussolini then discusses the nature of imperial power itself. “Fascism sees in the imperialistic spirit—i.e. in the tendency of nations to expand—as a manifestation

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<sup>72</sup> “More than once in its history, Rome became a mediator and balancer of antithetical universal ideas between East and West. The first time was after the Samnite War, the second was when St. Paul called himself Roman, the third was the Renaissance. Today is the fourth time. Today Rome has its own idea and a complex of conceptions of a universalistic character, in which the social and human labour of the last century flows and is composed.” Benito Mussolini, “The Universal Mission of Rome,” published in *Gerarchia*, October 1932.

<sup>73</sup> *The Seizure of Power*, 21

of their vitality.” Power in every sense—military, mercantile, territorial, moral—is the standard by which a nation is to be judged. Fascism regards any form of retreat from colonial endeavors, or any extreme focus on domestic affairs as weakness and as a sign of decay. “The Fascist doctrine is that best suited to the tendencies and feelings of a people which, like the Italian, after lying fallow during centuries of foreign servitude, are now reasserting itself in the world.”<sup>74</sup> It was not Italian failure to compete that necessitated colonialism, but rather the immense *success* she experienced under Fascism that demanded her attention shift abroad.

Furthermore, imperial conquest “implies discipline, the coordination of efforts, a deep sense of duty and a spirit of self-sacrifice,” all qualities which should be present in Italians of a Fascist model.<sup>75</sup> Any conquest, though specifically Ethiopia, would hold the Fascist state accountable to its own standards. If Italy could not conquer Ethiopia, if she could not prove her health through natural expansion—then Fascism had failed. This was a different sort of war; one fought to prove the existence of Italian consciousness (along a Fascist model) rather than one fought to create it.

For Mussolini, the stakes were high. Fascism had indeed monopolized patriotic sentiment through its extremely effective use of the Mutilated Victory. Offering to Italy a government “of the spirit of the trenches,” Fascism promised a regime which would remake Italians into vigorous, disciplined, and courageous modern men (and women). No more would the state stand for failure; instead, Fascism portrayed itself as standing for a future in which all Italians were united, healthy, and victorious. Although his war was to be a “rerun” of Crispi’s campaign in many ways, the Ethiopian war of 1935 would be for

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<sup>74</sup> Benito Mussolini, *The Doctrine of Fascism*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*

Fascists a new type of war. The Blackshirts set out to prove the Fatherland's right to life, rather than to create a sense of Fatherland. The methods and rhetoric employed by Mussolini and his propaganda machine to convince the Italians of the necessity of war would be entirely in line with the Fascist "system of thought." Thus, the War at Home would be a *truly* Fascist war, one quite far removed ideologically from its liberal predecessor.

### ***Mussolini's War***

Mussolini, once the radical socialist revolutionary and advocate for workers' solidarity, had by now thoroughly transformed himself into the spokesman for Italian-first nationalism. Speaking at the second quinquennial of the regime on March 18, 1934, Mussolini sought to define this nationalism—outlining the accomplishments of the Fascist regime thus far and promising Italians a prosperous future. Lauding Fascist transformation of the state into a mechanism which aided all Italians, Mussolini declared that: "The bottom line is this: within a few decades all rural Italians must have a large and healthy home, where the peasant generations can live and last for centuries, as the secure and unchangeable basis of our race." This claim, taken by itself, is nothing surprising for a regime to guarantee its people—however, how Mussolini framed the challenges facing the Fascist state is crucial.

Standing between Italy and this prosperous future were two things: Italy's geography itself and the post-Treaty of Versailles order. Mussolini began framing Italy's dilemma by reminding his listeners of his tireless efforts to reform the League of Nations. Peace could only be accomplished if the European states agreed to a general

disarmament, however, such a thing was pure folly. Disarmament, particularly of Germany, was impossible.

If the armed States do not disarm, then they are violating the fifth part of the Treaty of Versailles and therefore cannot logically oppose the practical application of those equal rights which were recognized for Germany in December 1932. There are no alternatives. Pretending to keep a people like the Germans disarmed forever is a pure illusion, perhaps already shattered by the facts. Unless the aim is to prevent the eventual subsequent rearmament of Germany by force. But that game has only one result: war.<sup>76</sup>

With disarmament so unlikely, Italy had to abandon her own efforts to demobilize. "For financial reasons, the Fascist government has severely cut the military budget for the last two years and for the upcoming year. But we will not go any further."<sup>77</sup> The time for disarmament had passed, Italy needed to ensure its future and its right to live by becoming strong and having faith in her armed forces. In light of the emerging European situation, the Fascist state required a modern, powerful army in order to prevail.

But Italy could not become strong merely by pouring resources into her military—she had to first find a place for her burgeoning population to go and the resources to fund her armed forces. Italy was a small nation, surrounded by the sea and cut off from Europe by the Alps. She had very little area to expand in order to allow for her rapidly increasing demographic. This was a problem; for a large population denotes a strong state. Addressing this, Mussolini quoted Machiavelli, saying: "Those who would have their city become a great empire, must endeavor by every means to fill it with

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<sup>76</sup> Benito Mussolini, March 18, 1934.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid

inhabitants; for without a numerous population no city can ever succeed in growing powerful."

But where was Italy to expand and what more of her natural bounty could be exploited? Luckily, Mussolini said, the Italian peninsula provided a natural route for expansion—the same tread by the Romans centuries ago: the Mediterranean. For Italy, who was by nature a maritime power, salvation lay across the sea in Africa. As the Romans had brought civilization to North Africa, so would the Fascist state. But Mussolini assured his listeners, this did not necessarily mean war, nor conflict with the other Great Powers.

It is not a question of territorial conquests—and this should be heard by everyone, both near and far—but a natural expansion that should lead to collaboration between Italy and the peoples of Africa, between Italy and the nations of the Near East and the Middle East.... We do not intend to claim either monopolies nor privileges, but we do ask and desire that those countries who have already arrived, those who are satisfied and conservative, do not try to block on every side the spiritual, political and economic expansion of Fascist Italy!<sup>78</sup>

The Fascist regime simply could not provide for its rapidly growing population, or hope to sustain a powerful defensive army necessitated by the unfolding events in Europe without room to grow in the Mediterranean. Though early on, this meant only “spiritual, political, and economic expansion,” that would soon change.

Despite its similarities, Mussolini’s rhetoric was *not* the language of Nationalist imperialism. According to Fascist rhetoric, Italy was no longer “the great martyr among the nations,” but a youthful, optimistic state whose future lay in natural expansion. No

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<sup>78</sup> Benito Mussolini, March 18, 1934.



longer would the army be required to prove “Italy” existed—rather, the army was a tool to defend the self-sufficient state.<sup>79</sup> Italian intellectual Giustino Fortunato wrote in 1912 of the Libyan conquest that: “I have come to the firm conclusion that only when Italy has secured a virile victory of its people over an enemy—no matter who...only then will it be able to say that it has avenged a millennium and a half of shameful history and be able to *face the future with confidence.*”<sup>80</sup> Nationalist expansion under Crispi and Giolitti had failed to give Italy this confidence; Fascism had emerged from the Great War as a faith that promised Italy a bright, united future. It was confidence that differentiated Mussolini’s Italy from Giolitti’s of 1912—Fascism now fought to prove Italy’s worth, Nationalists had fought to find it.

The onset of sanctions only served to bolster Fascist propaganda, at least within Italy. The League could not agree to impose sanctions on military material, and as such only imposed sanctions on Italian exports in general (excluding oil and coal.) Mussolini did not fail to capitalize upon this: the sanctions aptly demonstrated the fickle nature of the decadent, liberal regimes and would only serve to bolster Fascist resolve. In a speech directed to “the women of Italy” on December 2, 1935, Mussolini praised Italian women’s dedication to serving the home front both during the Great War and during the present crisis. Mussolini censured the Allied Powers for their abandonment of Italy, but remained hopeful of the future.

Now those same people whom we helped are conspiring against Italy. But what is the crime that Italy supposedly has perpetrated? None, unless it is a crime to bring civilization to backwards lands, to build roads and schools, to spread hygiene and modern progress. It is not the economic aspect of the sanctions that bothers us so

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<sup>79</sup> *The Force of Destiny*, p 381.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, p 384.

much. The economic sanctions, in a certain sense, will be useful for the Italian people. Today we have finally realized that we have many more raw materials than we previously thought.<sup>81</sup>

Unlike Crispi's attempted invasion in 1896, Fascism's Ethiopian war did not face the same threat of political dissolution should the war fail to be expeditious. Sanctions, ironically, played a large role in this, providing Italians with a sense that "they were all in this together." By contrast, Crispi wrote of Italian consciousness in his memoirs that "[It was] the result of mere aggregation of seven states, and not of a revolution.... The people remained as they were prior to the constitution of the new kingdom...without any hope of nationalizing those characteristics that act to keep the peoples of the peninsula divided."<sup>82</sup> Had sanctions hit Italy in 1896, Crispi's regime would have likely collapsed under the sheer weight of disunity. Within the Fascist state—thanks to Mussolini's totalitarian control over the press and his liberal use of the police to enforce pro-war opinions—this was not as great an issue. In that sense, Fascism capitalized upon adversity in a way the liberal regime had not. Both called for regeneration through warfare, but the Fascist state acquitted itself better to the portrayal of adversity as a *positive* hurdle, rather than as a destructive factor. The liberal regime had hoped for a quick and easy war, and had been repudiated when it did not accomplish its aims. Mussolini promised a quick and easy war, and properly adjusted his rhetoric to meet the challenges brought about by a prolonged campaign and diplomatic pressure from the rest of Europe.

Finally, Mussolini thoroughly emphasized the active and bellicose nature of the new Italy. According to the Decalogue of the Fascist Soldier, to be earnestly Fascist

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<sup>81</sup> Benito Mussolini, "To the Women of Italy," Speech in Rome, December 2, 1935.

<sup>82</sup> *The Force of Destiny*, p 345.

meant to “never believe in perpetual peace.” This article, written in 1928, encapsulates the spirit of the Blackshirt into writing—and it is a warlike spirit indeed. Discipline, the importance of one’s weapon, the honor of serving one’s country even while doing menial tasks, intense reliance upon the government, and an eternal willingness to die for the cause are all mandated for the Fascist warrior.<sup>83</sup> Mussolini’s speeches adhere to this worldview. Speaking in October of 1935, Mussolini boldly proclaimed to the adoring peasants surrounding him that “for us Fascists to die is not to die, when we die for Italy.” Extolling the fierce and noble nature of the Italian peasant, Mussolini remarked that “An enormous majority of these soldiers [in Ethiopia] come from the countryside: both volunteers and regulars. For the deep truth is this: never before as today has the whole Italian people realized the justice of this cause of ours.” The highest duty of the Italian peasant was to, “When the moment arrives, provide millions of soldiers to defend the legitimate interests of the Nation.” Rather than “rummaging among old papers” in the hopes of finding a long-lost relative who was a noble, Italians should take pride in their willingness to sacrifice for the state and for their fellow Blackshirts.<sup>84</sup> The willingness to go to war at a moment’s notice was not a vice, but a virtue.

Thus, the Ethiopian struggle that emerged from Mussolini’s writings and speeches is entirely consistent with Fascist ideology. Proclaiming the vigor of the new state, Mussolini called for the expansion and influence that a flourishing state deserves while maintaining an obsession for bellicose action and disciplined sacrifice. Unlike his liberal predecessors, Mussolini spent little time worrying about Italian consciousness, and used such hurdles as the imposition of sanctions to bolster the unifying effect of Fascism. This

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<sup>83</sup> Decalogue of the Fascist Soldier, 1928.

<sup>84</sup> Benito Mussolini, Speech in Rome, October 26, 1935.

conflict, as presented by Mussolini, was a war waged with total confidence in the outcome, with absolute faith in the spirit of the Blackshirts.

### *Hearts and Minds*

But was the average Italian swayed by Mussolini's talk of "[Going] up against anyone, of any color, trying to cross the road"?<sup>85</sup> If the Fascist message of healthy conquest was to have any meaning at all, it needed to be grounded in Italian popular sentiment. Many soldiers who were shipped off to fight in Ethiopia were indeed influenced by the sense that Italy was on the cusp of greatness. According to the diary of Liberto Micheloni, the sendoff from Italian shores was indescribably moving. The flags, the band playing, the cheering—all contributed to the sense that Italy was truly alive. The enthusiasm of his fellow soldiers mirrored his experience. "Like Micheloni, most of these soldiers would remember their embarkations in almost exclusively euphoric terms and as an unvarnished triumph of fascist purpose and dynamism,"<sup>86</sup> but, this memory was not ubiquitous. Many soldiers' diaries do acknowledge the Fascist vision that war entails adventure, glory, and "truly living" and yet remain hesitant to commit completely. For conscripts particularly, war was a sacrifice as well as an adventure. The pain of leaving one's home tempered sharply the sense of enthusiasm to fight—as with any war.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Benito Mussolini, Speech in Eboli, June 6, 1935. Mussolini here is speaking to his legionaries, decrying Europe and the liberal government's attempts to prevent Italy from rightfully conquering Ethiopia. "Crossing the road," presumably refers to any who deviate from or cast doubt on Italy's stated aims in Africa.

<sup>86</sup> Ian Shank, "From Home to Port: Italian Soldiers' Perspectives on the Opening Stage of the Ethiopian Campaign", p 114.

<sup>87</sup> Ian Shank argues convincingly that going to war offered Fascist soldiers a chance to transition from indoctrination to skepticism, or from apathy to faith—depending on the soldier. Despite this initial dissension, however, Shank concludes that the overall effect upon the Italian soldier was uniting. *Ibid*, pp 118-119, 134.

Despite this, victory in the field and acclamation at home did provide Fascist legionaries with the sense that Italy deserved the fruits of her success. As Guglielmo Morlotti wrote:

Empire! Italy must provide space, sustenance, and work for 44 million Italians. The space is insufficient, Italy must expand herself, it is necessary. A necessity of life. At Versailles they cheated us, allowing us the crumbs after having seen the allies gobble up the remains of a great banquet..., And the Italy of those times, demoralized, disorganized and tired, protested feebly (or shamefully?). But soon she awoke, she transformed herself.<sup>88</sup>

Sentiments at home were similar. Few openly spoke out against the war, but the words of those who did belie a pessimism influenced by Italy's past. Some boldly maintained that "the head of government is neither a super-man nor a semi-deity," while others worried about the poor quality of Ethiopian territory—saying that "In those sorts of places, white men can't survive." Ferdinando Belli, a shopkeep from Cremona, was not impressed by the regime's initial breakthroughs. Bringing up Italian failure in the region, he was quoted as saying: "In any case, in its previous wars, Italy only managed to seize a few stones and some sand and that's what it will get with this one, too." Still others worried that Italy had not yet been brought into the modern world, as was championed by the Fascist state, saying: "[Mussolini] would have been better off first to think about civilizing the Italians."<sup>89</sup> Thankfully for Mussolini, the totalitarian nature of his regime lent itself to the suppression of such dangerous opinions. Every individual previously quoted was arrested and tried by the Italian police. Belli was categorized as "habitually ready to launch into criticisms and negative appreciations of government measures," and was sentenced to three years in jail for his crimes. However, Italian

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, p 124.

<sup>89</sup> *Mussolini's Italy*, pp 385-387.

Fascism did not hold an iron grip over its people as did the Nazi regime. Most of these aforementioned rebels were amnestied long before their sentences were served—likely thanks to the rapid victory in Ethiopia which rendered their criticism null, and the general lack of enthusiasm for jailing “apolitical” criminals.<sup>90</sup>

But as the Fascist propaganda machine spun its tale of League treachery, and as news came trickling in of Italian successes on the field, the mood began to change. In *What Italy Owes to Mussolini*, written in 1937, Missiroli wrote that “It is difficult to calculate the financial contribution given by Italians abroad through the collection of gold and other means,” and commends the thousands of men who showed up to volunteer for the war and their praiseworthy efforts in the war, as well as the immense solidarity expressed at home in the face of European sanctions.<sup>91</sup> Even anti-Fascists were swept up in Mussolini’s “holy” cause to civilize Ethiopia, with the hitherto-unenthusiastic Queen Elena presenting her royal wedding ring to be sold to pay for the war effort.<sup>92</sup> As Italian troops neared the Ethiopian capital, Italians became ebullient. Upon hearing of the triumph, the King wept openly and presented Mussolini with the highest military honor available. All across Italy, crowds gathered to celebrate Italy’s hard-fought victory in Africa and to proclaim the *Duce* as Italy’s modern Caesar.<sup>93</sup> Having overcome Italian pessimism, Fascism passed its first real test with flying colors.

In short, the Ethiopian war at home was effectively portrayed as a truly Fascist war. This war would, however temporarily, prove both Mussolini’s and Fascism’s accomplishments to the Italian people, and finally unite them behind the reality of Fascist

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<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, p 386.

<sup>91</sup> *What Italy Owes to Mussolini*, pp 197-199, 258-259.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, p 259. *Mussolini*, p 308.

<sup>93</sup> *The Force of Destiny*, pp 506-507.

success. Rather than compensating for the failure of the revolution, as the liberal regime had, the Fascist war *celebrated* the accomplishments and vigor of the new, “permanent revolution.”<sup>94</sup> The war was portrayed not as a way to make Italians, but as a way to prove the worth of the new “Fascist man.” Furthermore, Mussolini’s bellicose rhetoric was entirely in harmony with Fascism’s system of thought. Action, courage, and sacrifice were the defining factors of the war, at least at home. Unlike Mussolini’s actions on the diplomatic state—in which he sought conciliatory measures and utilized delaying tactics to postpone or forego conflict—Mussolini in Italy championed Italian warfare. No enemy—not the Ethiopians, nor the European League—could defeat the Italian legions. Backing down was never an option. As it had been in 1919, it was Italy against the world—only this time, Fascism provided Italians with a framework that emphasized unity, discipline, and optimism instead of the defeatist, desperate nationalism that had characterized previous Italian colonial wars.

## V. The War in Europe and Africa

As early as March of 1934 Mussolini had his eyes set on Africa. As outlined in the speech given on March 18 at the second Quinquennial of the Regime, Mussolini tied Italy’s future to developing *Mare Nostrum*,<sup>95</sup> saying: “The aim we have in mind is the development and valorization of the still-countless resources of these two continents—and especially Africa—and of bringing these areas more closely into the orbit of world

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<sup>94</sup> “We need to speak of permanent revolution because the phrase exerts a mystical influence upon the masses. It is stimulating too, for persons of higher intellect.... We imply that the times are exceptional, and we give the man in the street a feeling that he is participating in an extraordinary movement.” A fine example of Mussolini’s ability to understand the importance of myths to popular movements. From Emil Ludwig’s, *Talks with Mussolini*, p 103.

<sup>95</sup> Latin: “Our Sea”

*civilization*.....Her location in the Mediterranean, which is resuming its historic role of uniting the East and the West, confers this right to Italy and binds upon it this duty.”<sup>96</sup>

Despite Mussolini’s firm assurance that Italy’s “duty” to civilize the Ethiopians was to be a purely “natural” campaign involving no territorial annexation, Mussolini’s gradual buildup of troops in the region as early as 1929 invalidates this claim. And with Hitler’s ascension to power in 1933 diverting European attention elsewhere, Mussolini calculated that the time was ripe for Italian expansion in earnest.<sup>97</sup> But Mussolini was well aware of the restrictions placed on belligerency by Italy’s place in the League of Nations and was unwilling to launch a campaign if the result would be Italian exclusion from European affairs. The solution he settled on is characteristic of European great power posturing: target the powers who upheld the Covenant—Britain and France. If Mussolini could secure a pledge from even one of these nations that his African expedition would be met with little resistance, then he could move forward. The Stresa agreements and France’s tendency toward rapprochement during the early months of 1935 encouraged Mussolini that his colonialism would go unchallenged, and thus laid the groundwork for the Italian invasion of Ethiopia following a bloody clash between Italian and Ethiopian troops over the disputed territory of Wal-Wal in December of 1934.<sup>98</sup> This

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<sup>96</sup> Benito Mussolini, March 18, 1934. Italics added.

<sup>97</sup> Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini’s Roman Empire*, p 60. Franklin D. Laurens, *France and the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis 1935-1936*, p 16.

<sup>98</sup> The Wal-Wal incident, Mussolini’s initial *casus belli*, took place on 5-7 of December, 1934. Italian and Ethiopian troops clashed along a disputed border town, containing several hundred valuable wells. The incident was paraded in Italy as proof of Ethiopian treachery, and used as impetus to transfer more Italian forces to the region. The matter was brought before the League, and eventually resolved inconclusively—which did not prevent Italian propaganda from labelling it as Ethiopian aggression. "Decision of the Italo-Ethiopian Commission of Conciliation and Arbitration" League of Nations Official Journal 16, no. 11 (November 1935): 1351-1355. Del Boca, *The Ethiopian War*, pp 19-21. F. P Walters, *History of the League of Nations*, pp 21-22.



incident catalyzed Italian aggression in the region and began a long diplomatic process within Europe that would end in the defeat of collective security.

Shortly after the Wal-Wal incident, the Ethiopian government issued a formal request to the League for arbitration. Unfortunately for Haile Selassie, the League had only recently finished deliberating over the crucial Saar issue and failed to act on the proposal until much later in the year. Meanwhile, Baron Aloisi called for the arbitration to be postponed—saying that "The Royal Government...considers that the discussion of the Abyssinian request would not facilitate in any way the continuance of the direct negotiations with a view to an understanding."<sup>99</sup> While Aloisi stalled for time, Mussolini began vital negotiations with France and Britain regarding Africa. In particular, Italian and French affairs in Africa had, until recently, been at odds—thanks in large part to the French acquisition of Tunisia (which contained a substantial minority of Italians). Furthermore, Italy had not forgotten how she had been treated by the Allied Powers at Versailles, and felt that both Britain and France had treated her unfairly in disregarding her territorial claims as stipulated under the Treaty of London<sup>100</sup>—a sentiment that Fascism did not fail to capitalize upon. Mussolini, the man who “restored the temple of a profaned Italy,”<sup>101</sup> would not let Italy be embarrassed again on the international stage. Thankfully for Mussolini and his foreign affairs office, France and Britain were eager to come to an agreement which pleased Italy. Marshal Petain espoused the feeling of many in the French government when he said that “...the closest collaboration between France

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<sup>99</sup> "Eighth Meeting (Private, Then Public)," League of Nations Official Journal 16, no. 2 (February 1935): 161-180

<sup>100</sup> Even before the advent of Fascism, Liberal politicians had decried Italy's meager gains in Africa. A. J. Barker, *The Civilizing Mission*, pp 29-30.

<sup>101</sup> Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, p 41.

and Italy is not only the sacred heritage of our two million dead comrades, but more than ever a necessity for the future of Europe, of the Latin peoples and the culture they produced.”<sup>102</sup> In light of German recrudescence within Europe, Italian friendship was all the more valuable. Historian Franklin Laurens places great emphasis on the importance of French foreign minister Pierre Laval’s private discussion with Mussolini in January of 1935, implying that this meeting encouraged Mussolini by giving him a “free hand” in Ethiopia. This view gains some credence when viewed in light of a statement made by Laval at the end of 1935, in which he says:

I admit it...I consented to giving Italy...the right, to the exclusion of France, of asking for concessions in all Ethiopia, except for our established rights. In exchange, Italy granted to France the same opportunity in a zone...which appeared to me to be an adequate supply traffic for the railroad from Jubuti to Addis Ababa... Thus, rich prospects for the future would be opened for Italy. But I was correct in thinking that she would use this liberty in a peaceful way and only in a peaceful way.<sup>103</sup>

Mussolini earnestly believed that cooperation with Britain was possible. As early as 1925, the British Foreign Secretary Sir Austen Chamberlain had been impressed by Mussolini and officially “found themselves in perfect agreement on the policy to be pursued to assure the continued good relations between Italy and Great Britain.”<sup>104</sup> This “perfect agreement” amounted to British support for continuing Italian dominance in the region, at the expense of Ethiopian sovereignty. Mussolini’s hopes that Britain would not dare challenge her over Ethiopia were further strengthened at the Stresa Conference in

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<sup>102</sup> Quoted in von Schuschinigg, *Austrian Requiem*, p 153.

<sup>103</sup> Pierre Laval, quoted in Laurens *France and the Italo-Ethiopian Conflict*, p 25.

<sup>104</sup> Glen St John Barclay, *Rise and Fall of the New Roman Empire*, p 149. *Civilizing Mission*, p 32. Mussolini’s relationship with Sir Austen Chamberlain had greatly helped to establish friendly relations with England—who had recognized Italian authority over the region in 1925, shortly after the Locarno Pact.

April of 1935—a conference that sought to secure peace in Europe against the German menace, and in doing so, appeared to offer Mussolini a dominant position in Africa.

Mussolini firmly believed that a prompt victory would not upset the League enough to enact any real measures against him—and that French and British attention lay across the Rhine. To secure his initiative, he once more called Pierre Laval and Ramsey McDonald<sup>105</sup> to a conference at Stresa to discuss German rearmament. Positioning himself as the champion of an anti-Nazi alliance, Mussolini sought to create a friendly alliance between the old “Locarno Powers.” This was, on the surface, an attempt to revive the efficacy of collective security. As reported by the Royal Institute of International Affairs after the signing,<sup>106</sup> the Great Powers agreed to:

- (1) A common line of conduct by the three Governments on the subject of the French protest to the League against German repudiation of the Treaty.
- (2) Agreement that the Eastern Pact negotiations must go on.
- (3) Confirmation of the declaration of Austrian independence and convening of a further conference to negotiate a Central European pact.
- (4) Further active study of the question of a Western Air Pact.
- (5) " Regretful" recognition that Germany's rearmament has shaken the hopes which inspired the efforts for disarmament, and pledges to continue working for international agreement on arms limitation.
- (6) Agreement to take up with other States the question of allowing rearmament to Austria, Bulgaria and Hungary.

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<sup>105</sup> French Prime Minister and British Prime Minister, respectively.

<sup>106</sup> H. L. "The Stresa Conference." *Bulletin of International News* 11, no. 21 (1935): 3-6. Accessed October 3, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25639396>.

(7) Reaffirmation by Great Britain and Italy of their obligations as guarantors under the Locarno Treaty.

(8) " Complete agreement "in opposing by all practical means any unilateral repudiation of treaties which might endanger the peace of Europe, and decision to act in close and mutual cooperation for this purpose."

It is notable that despite this list of agreements, no solution to the growing tension in Ethiopia was agreed upon. The inclusion, at least according to the Institute of International Affairs and Mussolini himself of the phrase "of Europe"<sup>107</sup> was a crucial concession to Italian aims. In order to secure Mussolini's cooperation against potential German aggression, Macdonald and Laval at least tacitly agreed to look the other way to Italian designs in Africa. However, Britain could not afford to blatantly ignore the Covenant she had sworn to uphold. According to the "Peace Ballot," a poll held by a branch of the League of Nations Union in Britain, up to ninety percent of respondents supported Britain remaining in the League of Nations—and more importantly, an overwhelming majority supported the upholding of Britain's commitment to disarmament and peace in Europe. Ninety percent of voters supported the collective security protocols for economic sanctions against aggressor nations, and crucially, seventy percent supported *military action* against aggressive nations.<sup>108</sup> Prime Minister Baldwin and British representative to the League Anthony Eden did not fail to grasp the results of this poll.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> *Stresa Conference*, in Oxford Reference. *Mussolini*, p 301.

<sup>108</sup> The Peace Ballot of 1934-35, Churchill College Cambridge, accessed at <https://www.chu.cam.ac.uk/archives/education/churchill-era/exercises/appeasement/peace-ballot-1934-35/>

<sup>109</sup> Anthony Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, pp 264-266.

The result of the Stresa Conference and negotiations with France and Britain left Mussolini confident in his ability to take Ethiopia with little more than a formal protest from the League. Throughout these negotiations, Mussolini relied heavily upon traditional European diplomacy—on deals and compromises made between Great Powers to preserve their prestige. France, faced with a resurgent Germany, could not afford to alienate Italy—a fact which would continue to shape French policy regarding Italy following the outbreak of the war in October. Britain was torn between their obligations to the League and its popular support for collective security and their desire to avoid an armed conflict with Italy in the Mediterranean. Mussolini capitalized on both of these weaknesses to procure an unofficial go-ahead for his expedition into Africa. In doing so, he mirrored the liberal regime's methods of diplomacy. Although Fascist destiny now guided his quest, Italy approached the foreign powers to bargain as it had in 1914—and received similar assurances of its belligerent plans. By now Mussolini's extensive preparations were complete, and Italian aggression was imminent. On October 2, 1935, Italian troops violated the Ethiopian border and Mussolini addressed his people in Rome, saying that "Forty million Italians are marching in unison with the army, all united because there is an attempt to commit against them the blackest of all injustices, to rob them of a place in the sun. With Ethiopia we have been patient for forty years. *Now enough!*"<sup>110</sup> Mussolini, the modern Caesar of a fleeting empire, had finally cast his die.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup>Ivone Kirkpatrick, *A Study in Power*, p 319. Italics added.

<sup>111</sup>Fascist propagandists did not fail to capitalize upon this allusion. "If you listen carefully...you may still hear the terrible tread of the Roman legions...Caesar has come to life again in the Duce; he rides at the head of numberless cohorts, treading down all cowardice and all impurities to re-establish the culture and new might of Rome. Step into the ranks of his army..." Quoted in *The Force of Destiny*, p 499. From T. Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight. Political Socialization in Fascist Italy 1922-1943*, p 21.

## *English Hesitancy*

It was recognized early on by the members of the League that the Abyssinian Crisis was to be the greatest challenge faced by the organization. If they failed here, collective security in Europe was forfeit. Under this immense pressure, it is crucial to understand the various reasons why the dominant powers of the League, Britain and France, were unwilling to put forward a strong policy in the face of Mussolini's aggressive diplomacy. Of the two responses, British policy is perhaps the more complicated—dominated as it was by a confusing mixture of imperial realism with the sense that upholding the League was morally required.

The Peace Ballot of 1934 profoundly affected British policy making in the months leading up to the War.<sup>112</sup> Prime Minister Baldwin was facing a national election in 1935, and his gradual shift from pacifism to rearmament reflects an attempt to come to terms with his electorate. He received mixed signals from different camps. The Peace Ballot overwhelmingly supported general disarmament in Europe and a continuation of peace by international agreement. However, the public response to Hoare's speech to the League on September 11 was extraordinarily affirmative. In this speech, Hoare reaffirmed the British people's support for collective security in Europe "for no selfish motives," and that Britain was "deeply and genuinely moved by a great ideal." The British people, according to Hoare, were shocked by the destruction of peace brought about by Italian aggression, and, as a practical people, were convinced that "Collective security, founded on international agreement, is the most effective safeguard of peace."<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> A. J. Barker, *The Civilizing Mission*, p 111-113.

<sup>113</sup> League of Nations Official Journal, Special Supplement 138 (1935): 40-48

But the League was not a “super state,” rather, “The League is what its Member States make it. If it succeeds, it is because its Members have, in combination with each other, the will and the power to apply the principles of the Covenant.” To this end, Britain would dedicate herself. However, she would not do so alone. “If the burden is to be borne, it must be borne collectively. If risks for peace are to be run, they must be run by all. The security of the many cannot be ensured solely by the efforts of a few, however powerful they may be.”<sup>114</sup>

The response to this speech was ebullient, and overwhelmingly so. Hoare himself was surprised at the “universal acclamation.”<sup>115</sup> As one commentator put it, “[the speech was] welcomed unanimously in this country and did more to win respect and confidence for British policy than anything that has been said or done for a long time.”<sup>116</sup>

Despite the positive response, this speech did not represent a newly unified or forceful British approach to the Abyssinian Crisis. Instead, it aptly demonstrates the British dilemma. British moral support for the League was unequivocal: “The ideas enshrined in the Covenant...have appealed...with growing force to the strain of idealism which has its place in our national character, and they have become a part of.” But the British remained a “practical people,”<sup>117</sup> who supported the League because it remained the best avenue for ensuring peace. The British were highly conscious of the tenuous position of their holdings in Africa *vis a vis* the Italians, and were well aware of their own military unpreparedness for combat with a mobilizing Italian state.<sup>118</sup> For realists within

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<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*, p 44.

<sup>115</sup> George Baer, *Test Case: Italy, Ethiopia, and the League of Nations*, p 47.

<sup>116</sup> Wickham Steed, quoted in Baer, p 47.

<sup>117</sup> League of Nations Official Journal, Special Supplement (1920-1946)

<sup>118</sup> British Cabinet Meeting, December 2, 1935, p 335.

the cabinet, and for many in the London press, “Some of the claims of Italy...are reasonable in essence, if not at the moment in degree.”<sup>119</sup> Furthermore, like the French, Britain was acutely aware of the threat posed by German resurgence. Though the Anglo-German Naval Agreement—a realist response to German might—would do great harm to Anglo-French relations, this realistic approach further demonstrates the English tendency toward realist policy over idealistic. They, like France, did not wish to alienate Mussolini entirely from the European peace consensus.

Baldwin would win reelection in 1935 on a National Ballot, promising to approach the Abyssinian crisis with renewed unity at home and by reaffirming Britain’s obligation to strive for peace within the League framework.<sup>120</sup> The vacillation of British policy—the continuation of rhetorical posturing juxtaposed with an unwillingness to commit to collective action—provided Mussolini valuable time to mobilize along the Ethiopian border. As Mussolini aptly noted, “There will be no complications in Europe before the English elections.”<sup>121</sup> But British elections were over, and had been decided in favor of League participation. Although Hoare would continue to seek an agreement with Italy, Britain’s back had been stiffened. It would be the English, with the tentative assurance of French help, who would push for stronger sanctions against Italy. The idealism and faith of the British people would only get them so far, however. In the end, the failure of the French to fully commit to mutual defense in the event of Italian aggression, the caution of the British cabinet regarding Britain’s position in the Mediterranean and in the Far East, and the disastrous response to the Hoare-Laval Pact

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<sup>119</sup> Letter by Sir Hesketh Bell, *London Times*, July 29, 1935.

<sup>120</sup> National Party Manifesto, quoted in *Test Case*, p 51.

<sup>121</sup> Mussolini’s Letter to De Bono, October 20, 1935, quoted in *Test Case*.



would stall an effective response from the League and give Mussolini the time he needed to secure Ethiopia for Italy. Mussolini would respond to British hesitation with skillful counter maneuvering, using both diplomatic measures to postpone deliberation of the crisis and military posturing to secure British inaction. When, in September, Hoare transferred a letter of personal friendship to Mussolini, Mussolini responded by moving more troops to the Libyan frontier.<sup>122</sup> But despite the key role Britain played in formulating the League's response to Italian aggression, it was France that Mussolini shrewdly discerned would be the lynchpin of European resistance. His intuition would prove entirely correct.

### ***French Realism***

World War One had devastated France. The treaties of Versailles, which introduced severe regulations of German military might as well as extremely harsh reparations to be paid to France, were a result of a French determination to ensure that the Great War never happened to them again. Pessimistic realism led the French to all but lose faith in the League while it was still inchoate, with Clemenceau famously remarking that "I like the League, but I do not believe in it."<sup>123</sup> France preferred to deal with Germany directly, rather than through a League of Nations which was guided by the rule of law rather than by a sense of urgency. Pierre Laval continued this tradition of pessimistic realism, veiled though his actions may have been by the language of League moralizing.

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<sup>122</sup> *Civilizing Mission*, p 130.

<sup>123</sup> Margaret MacMillan, *Paris 1919*, p 86-87.

Mussolini had great faith in his ability to negotiate with and manipulate Laval.<sup>124</sup> Mussolini, who was himself an advocate for treaty reform, nevertheless understood the primacy that French diplomacy placed on ensuring the Versailles order remained in effect—having played a vital role in underwriting the Brenner frontier’s security against German aggression at Locarno.<sup>125</sup> German repudiation of the Versailles Treaty in 1932 and Hitler’s withdrawal from the League of Nations in 1934 only heightened French fear that Europe would soon be plunged into another devastating conflict. Anxiety colored French diplomats’ reception to the storm clouds gathering in Africa. Rather than dealing with the problem through collective security, Laval preferred to deal with Mussolini directly—as exemplified by the nebulous “midnight agreement” of January 1935, away from which Mussolini came convinced that he had been given a free hand in Ethiopia, saying that “With these agreements, which can as a whole be considered satisfactory, a page of the post-war relations between Italy and France has been closed, and the premises of an effective collaboration between the two countries have been created, as expressly indicated in the general declaration.”<sup>126</sup> Rapprochement between the two Latin nations was surprising, especially when one considers the virulent Italian protests to French treatment of Italian nationals in Tunisia, and the hatred of Fascism present in a wide swath of the French left.<sup>127</sup> However, Laval was not interested chiefly in appeasing the French press, but rather with ensuring that France had a solid ally in Italy against

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<sup>124</sup> *A Study in Power*, p 290.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid*, p 242-243, *Force of Destiny*, p 438-439.

<sup>126</sup> Benito Mussolini, Speech in the Chamber, May 25, 1935.

<sup>127</sup> *Civilizing Mission*, p 82. *Test Case*, p 53-55.

Germany.<sup>128</sup> Only days after meeting with Mussolini in the Palazzo Venetia, Laval stalled a motion by the Abyssinian delegation to bring the situation to the League's attention under Article 15 following extensive telegram communication regarding the Wal-Wal incident in December of 1934.<sup>129</sup> Such delays in League deliberation would undermine Laval's later vehement insistence that "the representatives of France have consistently sought to increase the moral of this supreme international institution...resolved [as they were] to make it stronger, to give it the means to act."<sup>130</sup>

The Stresa Front was a further attempt to secure cooperation among the old "Locarno Powers." An understanding of the Stresa agreement is crucial to understanding French (and to a less overt extent, British) policy going forward, as this was a definite agreement of the realistic goals that each side sought to preserve. The recognition that German rearmament was indeed happening at a rapid pace, the reaffirmation of the security of Austrian borders, the promise of air power coordination, and the rededication of the Locarno powers to "opposing by all practical means any unilateral repudiation of treaties which might endanger the peace of Europe, and decision to act in close and mutual cooperation for this purpose"<sup>131</sup> was an affirmation of European solidarity that soothed French fears tremendously. Even the characteristically cynical French press lauded the agreement as an important barrier between German expansion and European stability, and an admirable display of Italian goodwill.<sup>132</sup> This agreement would continue

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<sup>128</sup> Speaking on those who opposed dealing with Italy on moral grounds, Laval said: "Those damned *ideologues*...the rights of man? Certainly. But the rights of Frenchmen first!" Quoted in *Civilizing Mission*, p 84.

<sup>129</sup> League of Nations Official Journal 16, no. 2 (February 1935): 193-438, *Civilizing Mission*, p 84-85.

<sup>130</sup> League of Nations Official Journal, Special Supplement 138 (1935): 65-68

<sup>131</sup> H. L. *Bulletin of International News*, "The Stresa Conference," 3-6.

<sup>132</sup> *France and the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis*, pp 60-61.

to color Laval's correspondence with Italy going forward. Mussolini had proven that he could be reasoned with, as long as his demands were at least nominally accepted. Agreement of some sort, however unpleasant it might be for smaller states such as Ethiopia, could be achieved. But acquiescence from both the British and French delegations to Mussolini's insertion of the phrase "peace in Europe" rather than "peace in general" only bolstered Mussolini's belief that his colonial adventure would be tolerated as long as he continued to uphold the Austrian border against predatory German incursions.

It is clear that French diplomatic strategy, particularly under Laval, emphasized the continuation of the Versailles order even at the expense of collective security. However, one aspect of French policy remains unsatisfactorily explained. Why would France choose rapprochement with Italy rather than pursuing an alliance with the significantly more powerful Britain? Relations between France and Britain, though at times strained, had been tempered by the Great War—whereas relations with the often anti-Catholic, and now Fascist Italy had been strained since the *Risorgimento*. The greatest breach between Britain and France occurred in June of 1935 with the signing of the Anglo-German naval agreement in London. This treaty, which allowed Germany to build up its naval strength to 35% of the British Fleet, as well as substantially increasing its numbers of submarines, flew directly in the face of both the Versailles limitations on German armaments and the recently signed Stresa agreements. Neither Italy nor France had been consulted before signing.<sup>133</sup> The response to what was perceived as Britain's flagrant prioritizing of naval superiority over diplomatic relations was immediate, with both Italian and French

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<sup>133</sup> Walter Cozine, *The Anglo-German Naval Treaty of 1935: A Study of the Nexus of British Naval and Foreign Policy*, p 32. *France and the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis*, pp 67-68.

diplomats expressing their disgust at Britain's attempt to appease Germany without regard for mainland Europe. As *L'Echo de Paris* put it:

It is proper that some truths be told about England. She cannot continue, in the name of the League Covenant and respect of treaties, her siege of European chancelleries to foment condemnation of Italian policy in Abyssinia. She cannot declare her treaties inviolable when her colonial appetite is concerned and violate them in an off-handed way when her maritime preeminence is at stake.<sup>134</sup>

Once again, French anxiety was rekindled. Britain had proven herself willing to negotiate with Hitler's Germany on matters which directly concerned British sovereignty, but unwilling to realistically examine matters in Africa. If the Stresa front, the lynchpin of "real" collective security, was not respected, why would the League be any different? Did the Great Powers have any chance of actually stopping Italy from realizing her seemingly reasonable demands for dominance in Ethiopia? Furthermore, British idealization of League principles threatened to drive Mussolini, who had hitherto proven himself open to negotiations in good faith,<sup>135</sup> into the German orbit. This could not be allowed. In light of the Anglo-German naval treaty, France's hesitation to give their guarantee to support Britain in the event of a war over Ethiopia appears much more reasonable.

Thus, the two powers opposing Mussolini stood united without any real conviction. Neither would act strongly against Italian aggression without the other, and both had serious motivations for viewing the Abyssinian delegation's desperate pleas with measured apathy. Britain was torn between an idealized faith in the League as the

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<sup>134</sup> *L'Echo de Paris*, June 18, 1935, quoted in *France and the Italo-European Crisis*.

<sup>135</sup> As Seton-Watson says of Mussolini's foreign policy up to 1934, "Speaking broadly, it may be said that for seven or eight years after Corfu Mussolini's attitude was one of reserve and cautious realism...He supported every action which could genuinely be described as collective." *Britain and the Dictators*, pp 170-171.

most effective and morally upstanding method for securing peace on the international scale and her colonial and naval interests abroad—even as Hoare affirmed Britain’s unending support for collective security, he recognized Britain’s inherent “realistic tendencies.” Laval, and many within the France’s government, were driven by profound unease to rhetorically support collective security only insofar as it ensured German submission. When serious issues arose elsewhere, Laval sought tangible, one-on-one agreements rather than nebulous League denunciations. Austrian sovereignty, the Franco-German border, and the North Sea’s balance of naval power concerned Laval far more than Italy’s colonial escapades abroad—even when those claims bordered colonies that had traditionally caused friction between the two states. Mussolini, for his part, aptly navigated this confusing mess of double policies. Focusing first on appeasing French fears, Mussolini secured unspoken French assent to his imperialist intentions. He followed this with his assurances of European stability at Stresa, which reaffirmed French willingness to negotiate and placed Britain in the tough spot of having to choose between maintaining the Stresa Front or upholding her obligations to collective security. Having thus rendered French opposition impotent at best, irritating at worst, Mussolini turned to deal with the surprisingly stiff resistance Britain offered to Italian aggression. Mussolini’s methods demonstrated old-European style power politics, and his upcoming diplomacy—though belligerent in tone—would continue this trend; as he sought to ensure British inaction and utilize French goodwill to postpone League deliberation, thus protecting Italy from sanctions (or a full-scale European war) that would hamstring her military machine.

### *The Italian Approach*

The dominant approach taken by Mussolini to the Great Powers is also the one least in accord with Fascist principles. This was namely the policy of delaying or stymieing adjudication of the Abyssinian Crisis in order to buy time for Italy to build up forces along the frontier. Mussolini delegated to Baron Aloisi, the Italian representative to the League, the difficult task of presenting the Italian case for Ethiopian domination before the Council. Immediately following the Wal-Wal incident and the subsequent Ethiopian appeal to the League under Article 5 of the Italo-Ethiopian Treaty of 1928,<sup>136</sup> the Italian embassy replied that no arbitration was necessary. It was a settled matter; Ethiopia had fired first and would be dealt with accordingly—there was no need for tortuous League deliberation.<sup>137</sup> Though this motion would fail and Italy's case would have to be formally presented to the League, this delay was not to be the last. Thanks in large part to the Laval and Hoare's willingness to accommodate Italian wishes so as not to alienate Mussolini, Italian calls for postponement of League action throughout 1935 often met with considerable success. For example, when the League met to discuss the affair soon after the Stresa Conference on April 15<sup>th</sup>, Aloisi asserted that Italy would agree to further negotiations under Article 5 and would nominate two members to be placed on the Arbitration Commission as soon as possible. In light of this, Hoare and Laval "declared that, this being so, there was nothing for the Council to discuss, but that the question should be placed on the agenda of the next regular session, which was due to

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<sup>136</sup> Article 5 states that "Both Governments undertake to submit to a procedure of conciliation and arbitration in disputes which may arise between them and which it may not have been possible to settle by ordinary diplomatic methods, without having recourse to armed force. Notes shall be exchanged by common agreement between the two Governments regarding the manner of appointing arbitrators.

<sup>137</sup> F.P. Walters, *A History of the League of Nations*, p 632.

open some five weeks later.”<sup>138</sup> Despite Mussolini’s assertion that the treaty of 1928 was a “dead letter” to which the Ethiopians perniciously clung,<sup>139</sup> Britain and France remained willing to assent to Aloisi’s requests for good-faith negotiations. The first proposal put forward in the hopes of providing a peaceful settlement was advanced by Anthony Eden on his visit to Rome in June. This generous plan would cede large sections of Ethiopia to the Italians, and in exchange Ethiopia would receive parts of British Somaliland and the port of Zeila—allowing her access to the sea.<sup>140</sup> Few found this option attractive. Mussolini found the territorial acquisitions to be anemic and the French were no more supportive. This “Zeila Plan,” proposed a mere four days after the signing of the Anglo-German Naval Treaty, was further evidence that Britain was perfectly willing to practice “cooperation in a singular manner” by refusing to discuss realistic policy with the French.<sup>141</sup>

While Aloisi attempted to disrupt League procedure, Mussolini did his best to pander to British realists. An excellent example of this is an interview with Mussolini, conducted by Jules Sauerwein on October 7, 1935—in which Mussolini says that:

This disagreement that England has with us truly makes no sense, and a conflict between our two nations is really inconceivable. Neither from close nor from afar, neither directly nor indirectly do we seek to harm British interests.<sup>142</sup>

Mussolini’s tone in the interview is conciliatory, yet cautionary. He assured Britain that his colonial affairs will in no way affect the prosperity or security of British imperial territories, and reminded the reader that he considered the League to be a crucial

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<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*, p 633.

<sup>139</sup> Benito Mussolini, Speech to the Chamber, May 25, 1935.

<sup>140</sup> *History of the League of Nations*, pp 636-637. *Britain and the Dictators*, p 357.

<sup>141</sup> *France and the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis*, p 86. Quoting *Le Temps*, July 3, 6, 1935.

<sup>142</sup> Benito Mussolini, Interview with Jules Sauerwein, October 7, 1935. Published in *Il Popolo d’Italia*, October 8, 1935.



instrument of European security and that any dispute would certainly be solvable within the League guidelines. However, Mussolini also warned that Britain's heavy naval presence in the region laid a serious burden on Mediterranean affairs, and that the League's mechanisms were not infallible. Questioning the wisdom of relying entirely on the League, Mussolini says: "It would be strange if this institution, whose entire purpose is to avoid war, would have the effect of amplifying a war. It would even be paradoxical if a clearly circumscribed colonial war turned into a war between ten or twelve powers."<sup>143</sup>

Mussolini suggested that England would do well to realize that it was no longer dealing with a weak Italy, but with an Italy that sought its rightful place as leader of the Mediterranean. However, despite this hurdle, he assured Jules that Italy *in no way* sought a breach of relations with Great Britain. By publishing his conciliatory methods toward the League as he also remained in direct contact with League diplomats in both Britain and France, Mussolini sought to make Italy's position as a loyal member of the Locarno powers absolutely clear to the wider European community—further tempering serious action against Italy.

The discord caused by France and Britain's differing priorities and by Italy's seemingly assuaging methods suited Mussolini and Aloisi nicely. Preparations across the Ethiopian border proceeded smoothly throughout 1935, and by October General De Bono would have at his command well over 200,000 Italian troops. Despite this continual buildup of Italian military might on the border, Britain and France continued to desperately propose peaceful settlements which would satiate Italy's stated grievances

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<sup>143</sup> *Ibid*

with Ethiopia—namely, the continuation of slavery within Ethiopia and Haile Selassie’s (or at least, his chiefs’) continuing hostility toward Italian holdings in the region. In August, negotiations were once again opened in the hopes of ascertaining Italy’s true aims and providing her with an adequate settlement without totally violating the Covenant and Ethiopian sovereignty. Haile Selassie was presented with a demeaning path to peace. According to this plan, Ethiopia would assent to a total reorganization of its national life, to be headed up by foreign advisors appointed by the Great Powers and the League.<sup>144</sup>

According to Anthony Eden,

The work of reorganization was to have extended to the most wanted fields of national life, such as economic, financial, commercial and constructional development; foreign settlement; modernization of administrative services; anti-slavery measures, frontier and other police services. The free activity of foreigners in the economic sphere would have been respected. On the other hand, the collective character of the assistance would not have prevented particular account being taken of the special interests of Italy without prejudice to the recognized rights of France and the United Kingdom. Finally, we did not examine, but we did not in any way exclude, the possibility of territorial adjustments to which Italy and Ethiopia might agree.<sup>145</sup>

Selassie agreed to the proposition. This was, as Walters says, “the maximum concessions which the Emperor was ready to make for the sake of peace,” and represented an extreme leap of faith for the Ethiopian Emperor.<sup>146</sup> By placing his nation

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<sup>144</sup> *Test Case*, p 18. *History of the League of Nations*, pp 640-641. *British and Foreign State Papers*, Volume 139, pp 278-280.

<sup>145</sup> "First Meeting (Private, Then Public)," *League of Nations Official Journal* 16, no. 11 (November 1935): 1132-1139

<sup>146</sup> *History of the League of Nations*, p 640.

in such a vulnerable position, Selassie could do little else but rely upon League goodwill to protect his nation from further Italian annexation. But Mussolini yet again refused to accede; even this proposition fell far short of his goal of total domination in Ethiopia.<sup>147</sup>

By preventing Aloisi from explicitly stating Italy's demands for the region, yet encouraging him to engage in diplomatic measures with the League, Mussolini skillfully played upon the uncertainty of Britain and France's alliance and exploited both nation's willingness to seek rapprochement with Italy to prevent an unstable Europe. Aloisi never put forth *exactly* what would satisfy Mussolini, instead calling for deferred arbitration and repeatedly denouncing the legitimacy of the Ethiopian state as a member of the Covenant. His argument, summarized in the British Foreign Papers, was that "A case like that of Ethiopia cannot be settled by the means provided by the Covenant, because the Covenant does not contemplate the case of countries which, though unworthy and incapable of participation in the League of Nations, continue to claim the rights and to demand the observance of the obligations that such participation involves."<sup>148</sup> Though this argument was unconvincing within the League and seen as morally deplorable to many in France and, in particular Britain—by denouncing the League's *mechanisms* for dealing with the crisis rather than addressing the issue itself, Aloisi was able to keep the British and French guessing. Unable to decide what exactly it was that Mussolini wanted but unwilling to give up on Ethiopian sovereignty, both Great Powers put forth increasingly unrealistic settlements that served only to undermine the League's credibility and postpone final judgement.

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<sup>147</sup> Anthony Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, p 281.

<sup>148</sup> *British and Foreign State Papers*, Volume 139, pp 282-285.

But a “Fascist” strategy this was not. As understood by both Mussolini himself and the eminent contemporary scholar of fascism, Alfredo Rocco, Fascism was virile and aggressive in nature. Rocco, in an essay in which he attempts to define the political doctrine of fascism, writes that: “It is true that Fascism is, above all, action and sentiment and that such it must continue to be. Were it otherwise, it could not keep up that immense driving force, that renovating power which it now possesses and would merely be the solitary meditation of a chosen few....Only because it is action, and as such actualizes itself in a vast organization and in a huge movement, has it the conditions for determining the historical course of contemporary Italy.”<sup>149</sup> According to Rocco, liberalism and communism share common ideological foundations; namely, the belief that society is “merely a sum total of individuals, a plurality which breaks up into its single components. Therefore, the ends of a society, so considered, are nothing more than the ends of the individuals which compose it and for whose sake it exists.” This view, which Rocco dubs “atomistic,” is repudiated by Fascism—which views the state in a more Aristotelean manner as an *organic* being arising from human nature. However, this is not a social Darwinist, evolving state, but rather an assertion that human history is composed of an ever-changing series of social groups whose “highest good” supersedes, and is often at odds with, both the individuals that comprise it and past generations. This means that “social groups, as fractions of the species receive thereby a life and scope which transcend the scope and life of the individuals identifying themselves with the history and finalities of the uninterrupted series of generations.”<sup>150</sup> In short, the individual lives for society—not the society for the individual. The right to make war, earnest war, and the

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<sup>149</sup> Alfredo Rocco, *The Political Doctrine of Fascism*.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid*

right to pursue the transcendent goals of the nation rests with the head of state alone. Liberal mechanisms like the League only served to hinder the Fascist idea of the state, and thus should be met with Fascist strength.

But this is not how Mussolini and Aloisi played the diplomatic game in the buildup to the invasion. Mussolini chose a more prudent, cautious route—one that both laid bare the Great Powers' own distrust of the League and bought him time to move his legions to the Abyssinian front. Perhaps an explanation for this lies in Rocco's definition of Fascism, where he explains that Fascism does not often question the methods of the state, but rather pursues the *ends* of the state with a true passion.<sup>151</sup> He writes: "As a matter of fact, Fascism never raises the question of methods, using in its political praxis now liberal ways, now democratic means and at times even socialistic devices." Following this doctrine, Fascism would have been well within its own nature to utilize liberal means to achieve its expansionist ends.

Though Mussolini did read this letter and congratulate Rocco on his thorough and perceptive description of the inchoate movement,<sup>152</sup> it is unlikely that Fascist dogma influenced Mussolini's decision making on the international scale. Rather, Mussolini's actions align more closely with those of Francesco Crispi's generation of statesmen—striving to achieve tangible advantages for their states by any means necessary. Political realism dominated European statecraft through the early twentieth century, and though

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<sup>151</sup> And what is the *telos* of the fascist state? Rocco writes that "Fascist society has historical and immanent ends of preservation, expansion, improvement, quite distinct from those of the individuals which at a given moment compose it; so distinct in fact that they may even be in opposition." Rocco goes to great lengths to connect fascist doctrine with Italy's cultural contributions to European culture, but does little to describe its tangible goals—other than those mentioned above, which could presumably also be goals of a liberal or communist state.

<sup>152</sup> Benito Mussolini, Letter to Alfredo Rocco, August 31, 1925.

the League—Wilson’s progressive brainchild—represented a concerted effort to replace this framework with a moral counterpart, it is evident from the actions of France and Italy, among others, that realism had not been entirely abandoned. It was the tradition of statesmen to bargain for time in order to ensure their country was victorious—and this is exactly what Mussolini did in the beginning months of the Abyssinian crisis.

### ***Oil Sanctions and Mussolini’s Aggression***

Laval remained torn as to how to deal with Italy. In conversation with Eden in August, he was gloomy; consigned to the reality that there was little to be done for Ethiopia. He asked Eden to “understand the extreme difficulty of his position. He had made a treaty with Italy; its collapse would leave him without allies in Europe, for he could not rely on Russia.”<sup>153</sup> This statement is telling of the strain placed on Britain and France’s relationship. Laval’s chief concern remained Germany, rather than Africa. Furthermore, for him to assert that he was “without allies” in Europe shows the disdain with which France viewed British promises following the Anglo-German Naval Treaty. When Eden reminded Laval that Britain would stand with France while Locarno treaty remained in effect, Laval brushed him off—noting that Mussolini had sent telegrams expressing his commitment to friendship with France and his determination to keep troops stationed on the Brenner frontier.<sup>154</sup> Mussolini’s strategy of rapprochement had paid dividends, and would continue to do so. But with Italian invasion and the onset of sanctions, Mussolini’s tone would change from conciliatory to bellicose. His response to the League’s first real attempt at collective security would result in the Hoare-Laval

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<sup>153</sup> Anthony Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, p 282.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid*, p 282.

plan—another product of British hesitancy and French insecurity. This disastrous plan would delay League action yet again and give Italian troops the time they needed to finalize the conquest of Ethiopia.

On October 2, 1935, De Bono was given the go-ahead to invade Ethiopia. Haile Selassie appealed once again to the world, declaring his nation's willingness to resist aggression and repeating that his nation's conscience was unsullied.<sup>155</sup> The Great Powers, aware of the deteriorating situation and unable to gain any ground with Mussolini, responded swiftly. The same day that Italian troops engaged Ethiopian forces, the British Cabinet resolved that His Majesty's Government should "advocate at Geneva the imposition of the maximum of economic sanctions on which the agreement could be secured." However, it was also acknowledged that "the amount of sanctions would depend on the attitude of other nations...and on the result of international investigation."<sup>156</sup> The cabinet's position was clear—Britain would impose sanctions at once, but the cabinet was not willing to commit fully to a solitary stance against Italian aggression. Laval, despite his hesitancy, was of the same mind—requesting and receiving from his cabinet a "blank check" with which to advocate for French interests at Geneva. For now, French interests lay in upholding the League's responsibility to condemn blatant aggression at least to the extent of applying economic sanctions.<sup>157</sup> Following the report of a committee on the matter to the Council,<sup>158</sup> the League decided that Italy had in

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<sup>155</sup> Angelo Del Boca, *The Ethiopian War: 1935-41*, pp 28-29.

<sup>156</sup> British Cabinet meeting, October 4, 1935, p 43. *Facing the Dictators*, p 304.

<sup>157</sup> *France and the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis*, pp 165-166.

<sup>158</sup> The report stated that "The adoption by a state of measures of security on its own territory, and within the limits of its international agreements, does not authorize another state to consider itself free from its own obligations under the Covenant," and that "The Committee has come to the conclusion that the

fact violated Article 15 of the Covenant and that Article 16 should be imposed at once.<sup>159</sup> In accordance to this decision, on October 5 the 52 nations decided to apply economic sanctions to Italy—with a further “Committee of the Thirteen” being set up to enforce the policy.<sup>160</sup> But despite this timely response to the Ethiopian issue, military sanctions were not applied and resources crucial to the Italian war effort (oil and coal) were not restricted. Italian peasants might feel the effect of these sanctions, but the army’s effectiveness had not been severely hampered.

Now exhibiting more of what could be considered “Fascist vigor,” Mussolini threw the full weight of the Fascist propaganda machine, as well as the voices of his diplomats stationed throughout Europe, to warn that support for strengthened sanctions would be regarded as “an unfriendly act” by the Italian government—declaring that “The Italian people listen to words but judge by deeds.”<sup>161</sup> These defiant overtures perturbed both the British and French. The British cabinet, heavily influenced by a “warning” from General Garibaldi, were particularly unsettled by Mussolini’s threat to Mediterranean stability. General Garibaldi, grandson of the heroic Giuseppe Garibaldi, spoke privately with Sir Vansittart<sup>162</sup> and warned him that increased sanctions could drive Mussolini to a “desperation, (not madness but a calculated desperation) and lead to an enlargement of

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Italian Government has resorted to war in disregard of its obligations under Article 12 of the League of Nations.” *Facing the Dictators*, p 310.

<sup>159</sup> In short, Article 15 required League members to submit their complaints to the League Council before engaging in aggressive actions. If this is not respected, Article 16 declared that the aggressor nation is *ipso facto* at fault with the rest of the League, and immediate action should be taken to cut off all trade or financial relations. Articles 15 and 15 from *The Covenant of the League of Nations, 1924*.

<sup>160</sup> *A History of the League of Nations*, pp 654-655. Luigi Villari, *Italian Foreign Policy Under Mussolini*, p 146. *The League of Nations and the Italo-Ethiopian Conflict*, pp 53-54.

<sup>161</sup> Benito Mussolini, Speech in the Chamber, December 7, 1935. *Facing the Dictators*, p 329. *France and the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis*, pp 255-256.

<sup>162</sup> Senior diplomat Sir Robert Vansittart was the Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, and highly influential within the British foreign ministry.



the area of hostilities.”<sup>163</sup> Garibaldi assured Vansittart that Signor Grandi had spoken frequently with Mussolini, and that Mussolini was prepared to cease hostilities and negotiate—but that Italy would tolerate no extension of sanctions, nor would she relinquish her conquered territory.<sup>164</sup>

This amounted to a serious threat to the British, as any threat to British naval superiority was unacceptable. The Cabinet hotly debated this threat, with some referring to Mussolini’s defiant stance as a “mad dog” act, tantamount to suicide.<sup>165</sup> However, others pointed out that Italy was already fully geared up for war and the British fleet in the Mediterranean was not. In the event of war, the navy would be placed in the perilous position of having to defend themselves in a land-locked sea from a superior Italian air force, as well as maintaining defense over the entire British Empire (most notably Singapore, from potential Japanese aggression). The British Navy would inevitably carry the day, but with heavy losses—which would dramatically weaken League resolve once it was seen that the largest navy in the world had sustained serious losses in an open conflict.<sup>166</sup> Furthermore, if Mussolini were defeated and forced to step down from government, the regime that would replace him would likely be communist—which would dramatically alter the nature of European affairs.<sup>167</sup>

Despite these difficulties, other members pointed out that the majority of European nations supported, at least in word, the application of stricter sanctions. Hoare had pledged personal support in front of the entire European community to collective

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<sup>163</sup> The National Archives: CAB-24-257, p 295.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid*, p 296. CAB-24-257, p 296

<sup>165</sup> British Cabinet Meeting, December 2, 1935, p 335.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid*, pp 342-343.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid*, p 345.

security, as such the British could not afford to back down from Italy's reprehensible actions and face alienating the League and the British people. Oil sanctions had been agreed upon *in principle* by the Committee of Eighteen on November 15—all that remained was to secure definite French support for the operation.<sup>168</sup> Laval had made his position clear in a speech given to the League that France considered conciliatory policies the most desirable for European stability. Likely recognizing that France was the linchpin of League perseverance, Mussolini began threatening French positions in North Africa by moving troops to the French border, by warning of Italian departure from the League, and by hinting that French Riviera might be attacked.<sup>169</sup> These threats did not fall on deaf ears. Laval, already willing to appease Italian aggression, personally requested and secured a postponement of League deliberations regarding oil sanctions from December 6<sup>th</sup> until December 12<sup>th</sup>. It was at this committee that further sanctions were expected to be applied by the major nations, but Laval's personal request could not be ignored.<sup>170</sup> Laval, for his part, "had concluded that oil sanctions must not be applied by the League since they would undoubtedly result in a general European War."<sup>171</sup> For Hoare and Laval, Mussolini's overtures suggesting that he would be amenable to further negotiations were the safer option for both their nations.

## VI. The Culmination of Italian Diplomacy

The Hoare-Laval plan was a peculiar instance of personal diplomacy between France and Britain in a crisis that had hitherto been discussed most often within the

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<sup>168</sup> British Cabinet Meeting December 2, p 336.

<sup>169</sup> *History of the League of Nations*, p 667.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid*, p 668. *Facing the Dictators*, p 330.

<sup>171</sup> Ambassador Strauss, quoted in *France and the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis*, p 258.

League. Hoare had been suffering bouts of “blackouts,” likely from stress and overwork. In order to alleviate this, he decided and received permission to take a skiing holiday in Switzerland where he could recover his strength. There was to be no serious negotiation; Hoare himself assured Eden “Don’t worry, I shall not commit you to anything.”<sup>172</sup> However, Laval saw this as an opportunity to bring the English in line with France’s realistic policy of appeasement by dealing directly with his English counterpart. There would be no need for League posturing between the two men and their secretaries. On December 7<sup>th</sup>, Hoare arrived in Paris for what was intended to be a brief stop on his way to Switzerland. His detour would end up taking the better part of two days—an exceedingly short time in which to produce a comprehensive plan for responding to the crisis.

When the two met at Quai d’Orsay, Laval made his grievances plain. First, it should be taken as fact that any extension of sanctions would be met by Mussolini with a military response. Second, France had never been enamored with the British method of dealing with Italy—power politics should take precedence over moral concerns. Conciliation, not castigation, would have saved Europe from this predicament she found herself in. Laval, firmly convinced of this, expressed his desire to return to a more realistic policy of appeasement in order to avoid a war in Europe. For his part, Hoare seemed to appreciate this more direct approach to negotiations—thanking Laval for his frankness. According to Hoare, the British regarded a “mad dog” act by Mussolini to be unlikely, but not impossible. Britain *must* be assured of France’s commitment to support Britain in the event of a hostile response from Italy.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> *Facing the Dictators*, pp 332-335.

<sup>173</sup> Record of a Meeting held at the Quai d’Orsay on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1935, CAB-24-257, pp 319-320.

Laval was willing to pledge France's support to Britain, but reminded Hoare that a significant portion of French public opinion regarded Britain's staunch position not as a commitment to the League, but as a manifestation of British anti-fascism. The *L'Echo de Paris*, for example, mirrored the British cabinet's own fear that Mussolini's defeat would bring about a communist revolution in Italy—which would cause enough chaos to destabilize the Brenner frontier and allow Germany to *Anschluss* Austria without resistance.<sup>174</sup> Laval, citing the Veteran's League of Italy and France, insisted that “the return of Italian troops to their country without glory or territorial acquisitions meant revolution,” and that “rather than this, Italy would fight.”<sup>175</sup> Hoare agreed, and in light of this concord the two decided that further negotiations must be pursued to the utmost.

On how this was to be accomplished, the two differed. Laval asserted that the British demands were too harsh, and that Italy could not be stripped of her territorial acquisitions or have her claims to the region ignored. Britain must resolve, like France, to be more considerate of Italian demands. Hoare was imperative that Britain could not be seen as rewarding aggression—otherwise the framework of collective security would fall apart. As such, the proposals must be forwarded for approval to the League, any question of total mandate of Ethiopian territory must be excluded, and the cession of Ethiopian territory (specifically Adowa) must be mitigated by allowing Ethiopia unrestricted access to the sea. To this end, Laval agreed, and the two set about drafting the joint proposal

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<sup>174</sup> *L'Echo de Paris*, November 1935, cited in *France and the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis*, pp 267-268.

<sup>175</sup> This organization, like many “voluntary” associations affiliated with the Fascist regime, was undoubtedly heavily influenced by Fascist propaganda and war-aims. On the same day Hoare and Laval met, Mussolini called attention to their tenacity and loyalty, and applauded the supporters of Italy's cause throughout the world in his speech denouncing the application of sanctions. Benito Mussolini, Speech in the Chamber, December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1935. “Record of a Meeting held at the Quai d'Orsay on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1935,” CAB-24-257, p 319.

they both hoped would satisfy Mussolini's aims in the region and sweep this issue under the rug and allow the League to return to the status quo.<sup>176</sup>

Despite the insistence that the proposal be forwarded to the League, the negotiation between Hoare and Laval neatly circumvented the tedious collective accountability facilitated by the League Council. France and Britain finalized their attempts to direct European response to Italy on their own terms, and in doing so, played right into Mussolini's hands. The plan called for an exchange of territories, with Ethiopia ceding some 60,000 square miles to Italy in exchange for a 3,000 square mile outlet to the sea. Indeed, if Mussolini was not comfortable granting Ethiopia Italian territory, Britain and France would guarantee Ethiopia access to the sea by ceding portions of French or British Somaliland. In effect, Mussolini would sacrifice absolutely nothing from agreeing to the plan. Italy would also gain exclusive economic and expansionist rights over the whole southern half of the country—effectively making Ethiopia into an Italian protectorate.<sup>177</sup> This plan was to be forwarded first to the British cabinet and then to Mussolini, without consulting Haile Selassie—who would be notified of the plan and Britain and France's support of it at the same time as the rest of the League. Laval and Hoare hoped this would be the end of the matter, and Laval went so far as to say that if Ethiopia rejected the proposal, "he would not feel justified in continuing to support the application of sanctions."<sup>178</sup>

In Italy, the plan was received with surprise. Mussolini, forceful though he had been in demanding further negotiations, was not prepared to deal with the situation now

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<sup>176</sup> CAB-24-257, pp 320-321.

<sup>177</sup> James C. Robertson, "The Hoare Laval Plan," pp 440-441. *History of the League of Nations*, p 669. *Facing the Dictators*, pp 337-339.

<sup>178</sup> *France and the Italo-Ethiopian Conflict*, p 279.

facing him. Despite his unwillingness to concede to Ethiopia a port—which constituted a threat to Italian holdings in the region—the plan in front of him was extremely generous. The need to provide a Fascist victory and appear in harmony with Fascist doctrine had, no doubt, influenced Mussolini's dealings with the League so far. However thus far, Fascist bellicosity had not prevented Mussolini from engaging with the other great powers on realistic terms. But if any point challenged this realism, the Hoare-Laval plan was that moment. Laval's personal warning that the British were at their limit and that further conciliation would be impossible, combined with the limited success of the newly appointed Marshal Badoglio against an Ethiopian counter-offensive, made Mussolini nervous.<sup>179</sup> He could accept the plan, and gain victory without alienating the other powers more than necessary—but to do so would be against everything Fascism had been building toward. As noted by the Veterans Association, Italian troops could not return home without glory or the results for the regime would be disastrous. With this in mind and despite his doubts, Mussolini resolved to accept nothing short of total victory. At a speech made on December 18<sup>th</sup> at Pontina, Mussolini boldly declared that:

“We have also committed ourselves to a tough battle against this front. And we will carry it out to the end. A People of forty-four million—not only of inhabitants, but of souls—will not allow themselves to be strangled with impunity, much less mystified.... It is a trial in which we are all committed, from the first to the last, but it is a trial which tests the virility of the Italian people. It is a trial, dear comrades, from which we will come out victorious. It will take some time; but when one is committed to a struggle, comrades, it is not so much time that matters, but *victory*.”<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> *The Ethiopian War*, pp 70-73. *Test Case*, p 138.

<sup>180</sup> Benito Mussolini, Speech in Pontina, December 18<sup>th</sup>, 1935.

Fascist Italy would give no response to the plan. The speech at Pontina again rings with the chords of Fascist vigor and courage, as well as the unceasing call for absolute victory. Indeed, Mussolini's diplomatic record of the Ethiopian War appears truly Fascist following his failure to accept the Hoare-Laval Plan. However, it should be noted that none of what Mussolini said at Pontina was communicated to the British or French. Mussolini did not respond by asserting that Italy could not be stopped and would carry on until Haile Selassie was deposed, instead, he opted for silence. This had the effect of demoralizing the League diplomats without finally closing negotiations. The Hoare-Laval Plan may indeed have been the farthest Britain and France were willing to go to appease Italy, but without a definite "no" from Mussolini, negotiations continued apace.

But before the proposal could be deliberated in the British cabinet or presented to the League, the plan in its entirety was leaked by the Paris press. The response was immediate public outcry, with many in the British cabinet threatening to resign if the plan was forwarded. Sir Vansittart voiced his concerns to Sir Eden when he asked: "Why have our countries been asked to put on sanctions, to suffer loss of trade and other inconvenience, if the only result is that Italy should be offered by France and Great Britain more, probably, than she would ever have achieved by herself alone, even if sanctions had not been put on?"<sup>181</sup> In Ethiopia, news of the plan was met with indignation and shock. The Ethiopian representative to the League, Wolde Mariam, eloquently expressed what many in the League Council and Ethiopia thought of the situation: "[In light of Italy's aggression,] is it consistent with the Covenant that the Covenant-breaking State should be begged, by the League of Nations, to be good enough to accept a large

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<sup>181</sup> *Facing the Dictators*, p 345.

part of its victim's territory together with the effective control of the rest under the cloak of the League ?”<sup>182</sup>

But despite the immediate backlash and Mussolini’s anxious response, the plan unquestionably worked in Italy’s favor. When the Council had met to discuss the extension of sanctions on December 12<sup>th</sup>, they were informed by Hoare and Laval that further tangible negotiations had been submitted to both governments, and that as such, no further sanctions could be applied until both countries returned their responses. Thus, despite the fact that the plan was immediately decried in the League and both Ethiopia and Italy’s responses were hostile, the League’s hands were tied.<sup>183</sup> Oil sanctions were put off again, and Europe’s faith in Britain and France to handle the matter in accordance with the framework of collective security was severely damaged. To be sure, the agreement reached in Paris was not consistent with the League’s principles—but it was very much consistent with realistic international politics. Great Powers, dealing directly with each other and deciding what policies ought to be enacted by the powers they influence is nothing new—take, for example, France’s attempts to form a “little entente” of allied states in the Balkans in order to secure itself against Germany. Through a mixture of delaying tactics and threats of force, Mussolini had succeeded in tarnishing the League’s reputation and securing the time that General Badoglio needed to finalize Italian conquest.

Despite Eden’s assurance that “The Paris proposals...were not advanced as proposals to be insisted upon in any event. They were advanced in order to ascertain what

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<sup>182</sup> "Ninth Meeting (Public)," League of Nations Official Journal 17, no. 1 (January 1936): 8-12

<sup>183</sup> *History of the League of Nations*, p 671. *Civilizing Mission*, p 224.



the views of the two parties and the League might be upon them and His Majesty's Government recommended them only for this purpose,"<sup>184</sup> the Hoare-Laval plan had greatly disheartened the League's hopes for achieving a peaceful and respectable solution to the Abyssinian Crisis. Hoare resigned on December 18<sup>th</sup>, and Laval—despite winning a vote of confidence on January 16<sup>th</sup>—resigned from his office as foreign minister on January 21, 1935. With this changing of the guard came no significant changes in British or French diplomatic relations with Italy. The Council meeting scheduled for December 6<sup>th</sup> had been the high-water mark of sanctionist opinion, but was rendered impotent by the Hoare-Laval plan and Mussolini's unfavorable response. Contrary to fascist doctrine, Mussolini's most effective diplomatic weapon had *not* been his veiled threats of a European war—influential though these had been on the British in particular—but rather his willingness to seek rapprochement with France and his continuing insistence that further negotiation would be met with peace in the region, if only Italian demands were properly met. Mussolini would continue to hold out, calling for further negotiations and warning of further conflict if oil sanctions were extended, but he had weathered the worst of the storm. What followed this episode was Italian victory in Ethiopia and a rapid increase in the threat posed by Germany to European stability, both of which paralyzed the League's response to Ethiopia's pleas.

### ***The End of the Matter and What Went Wrong***

For Mussolini, much now rested upon his army's performance in Ethiopia. Though oil sanctions had been diverted, Eden had not ceased his championing of further sanctions. He had turned down the most conciliatory proposal that either Britain or

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<sup>184</sup> *Facing the Dictators*, p 348.

France was willing to consider, and as such, all now rested on swift victory. As undersecretary of the colonies, Alessandro Lessona told De Bono, “Either Italy wins the war in a few months, or all is lost.”<sup>185</sup> That had been in November, and now January of 1936 had dawned with no Italian breakthrough. General Badoglio, determined to smash the Ethiopian resistance but with his boldness tempered by observing firsthand the Ethiopian’s tenacity, now initiated the decisive push of the war at Amba Aradam. Despite the valiant efforts of the Ethiopians against all odds, Italian troops pushed through their defenses and scaled the mountain—seizing a vital mountain pass and leaving roughly six thousand Ethiopians dead on the field. Following this, Badoglio engaged the remainder of the Emperor’s armies at the Second Battle of Tambien and succeeded in routing them.<sup>186</sup> Events now moved swiftly as the Ethiopian army began to fall apart from desertion and hopelessness. But as the news reached Europe of the defeat of the northern Ethiopian forces, it became increasingly clear that Mussolini would have his empire whether or not sanctions were applied.

To add to the League’s woes, Adolf Hitler dramatically increased the level of tension in Europe when, on March 7<sup>th</sup>, Germany remilitarized the Rhineland.<sup>187</sup> Citing the recently signed Franco-Soviet treaty, which was overtly aimed at containing German dominance, Germany insisted that the terms of the Locarno Pact were no longer in effect and that thus she had the right to reclaim the Rhineland. This act had the effect of entirely removing any chance that France would press for the application of more sanctions.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> *Test Case*, p 173.

<sup>186</sup> *Civilizing Mission*, pp 251-254. *The Ethiopian War*, pp 124-128, 139-142.

<sup>187</sup> *History of the League of Nations*, p 678

<sup>188</sup> *France and the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis*, pp 343-345.

Pierre Flandin, Laval's replacement who was himself a realist, took seriously Mussolini's threats to leave the League of Nations should further sanctions be applied.<sup>189</sup> As such, extending sanctions became even less appealing. France's attention was now captured by the evolving situation across the Rhine—Africa was of little import.<sup>190</sup> And France was not alone—Hitler's maneuver only decreased Britain's willingness to provoke Italy through the application of sanctions. Britain had been following German rearmament for some time now, and a report from the Foreign Office as early as November declared that:

There is no time to lose in the preparation and completion of our own defensive arrangements. [This rearmament is an] essential accompaniment and, so far as possible, preliminary of any agreement to discuss with the German Government the changes which, in Herr Hitler's own words, are almost certainly necessary to prevent 'an explosion in the future'.<sup>191</sup>

According to this report, the British regarded the German nation as "Living in a state of war," in which "Everything is subordinated to the needs of the defense forces."<sup>192</sup> Thus despite continued negotiation within the League regarding extended sanctions, even Anthony Eden, champion of the Covenant, shifted to matters closer at hand. By the time the Council convened again to discuss sanctions once more on April 20, little hope remained. League discussion almost entirely focused on the need to reinforce the Locarno powers in the face of the developing situation on the Rhine.<sup>193</sup> In his memoirs, Eden admits that:

An open Anglo-French rift upon this issue must have an unwelcome reaction upon the general European situation and the attitude of the two dictators.

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<sup>189</sup> *Ibid*, p 306. *Facing the Dictators*, p 367, pp 380-381.

<sup>190</sup> *France and the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis*, pp 338-340.

<sup>191</sup> CAB 24-257, p 236.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid*, p 237.

<sup>193</sup> "Third Meeting (Public)," *League of Nations Official Journal* 17, no. 4 (April 1936): 318-324

Moreover, there is no financial or economic sanction which could be serious, the effect of which would be immediate, and it is probable that the fate of Italy's Abyssinian campaign will depend upon the power of the Emperor to keep his weakened armies in being during the next few weeks.<sup>194</sup>

When Badoglio entered the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa on May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1936, he received little fanfare from the local population. Despite the Emperor's vow to continue the war by taking his case to Geneva in person, and though determined Ethiopian military resistance would continue, internationally the war was over. Mussolini's gamble had paid dividends. Only hours after news reached Rome, he triumphantly declared to an exuberant crowd that "It is our peace—a Roman peace—which is expressed in these terms, the final and definite terms, 'Ethiopia is Italian.' The people of the Lion of Judah have shown clearly that they wish to live under the tutelage of the Italian people."<sup>195</sup> By contrast, the League's gamble that setbacks in the field would prevent Mussolini from taking Ethiopia without the need for military sanctions had failed miserably.

In light of the increasing tensions in Europe, France turned hopefully to Mussolini's declaration to reconstruct the Stresa Front. At the Council meeting on April 20<sup>th</sup>, Baron Aloisi reiterated Mussolini's promise to uphold European stability, albeit in language that did not satisfy her detractors in the League. He began by first stating Italy's immense goodwill toward the League, as demonstrated by Italy's refusal to abandon the League even after "the denial of justice" she suffered at the League's hands. Furthermore, Aloisi pointed out that at no point had Mussolini refused to negotiate—even though

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<sup>194</sup> *Facing the Dictators*, p 427.

<sup>195</sup> Benito Mussolini, Speech in Rome, May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1936.

negotiations had been hitherto unfruitful. In light of Italy's willingness to adhere to League principles, the *true* League principles which demanded the abolition of slavery and a civilizational parity to European culture, it was not Italy who had stymied the League's progress—rather, Ethiopia's refusal to commit to direct negotiation with Italy had caused the crisis. After all: "Is there really anything which is contrary to the Covenant, or which is opposed to constant international practice, in the desire that the conversations should proceed direct between the two delegations on neutral territory?"<sup>196</sup> With her armies victorious in the field, how could Italy agree to a suspension of conflict with an uncivilized nation which had shown itself unwilling to negotiate on "good faith" with Italy before, more than willing to "abuse" her position within the League, and whose aggression had (according to Aloisi) started the war? But now came the decisive claim: "Italian co-operation in the work of European pacification, which will have to follow the settlement of the Italo-Ethiopian dispute—a dispute that should have been kept within its strictly colonial limits—will also be retarded by the failure of conciliation."<sup>197</sup> In short, Aloisi made clear that the Great Powers could not seek peace in Europe without Italian goodwill.

Despite the Council's clear distaste at having to listen to the claims of a nation victorious in an unjust war, no one spoke out against these claims. The League's attempt to prevent Italy from finalizing her aggressive war had been defeated. Though the Council did censor Italy for her use of poison gas against the Ethiopians on multiple

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<sup>196</sup> "Ninth Meeting (Private, Then Public)," League of Nations Official Journal 17, no. 4 (April 1936): 358-376

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid*, p 377.

occasions, and though the sanctions were not immediately lifted—the future looked bright for Mussolini’s developing Mediterranean empire.<sup>198</sup>

### ***A Victory for Realistic, not Fascist, Diplomacy***

As the world’s attention was drawn away from the dying embers of the tragedy in Africa toward the ominous flames kindling across the Rhine, Mussolini was in triumph. He had taken the capital of Ethiopia, finally removing the stain of Adowa and accomplishing what Crispi could not. And, he had done so despite fervent protestation from the entire body of the League.

Mussolini’s victory over Hoare’s promises and Laval’s assurances did not stem from Fascist doctrine, but rather from Mussolini’s realistic approach international politics, using a framework that resulted in actions which mirrored traditional European methods of diplomacy. According to Mussolini himself, fascism was above all, a “system of thought.” One which, according to him, influences its members daily in a seemingly religious way—elevating them beyond the “flabby and materialistic positivism of the nineteenth century.”<sup>199</sup> Bound up intrinsically in this “system of thought” were the particularly Fascist emphasis on vigor, youth, discipline, patriotism, honor, and unity. Fascism “presented itself as the heir and successor of national radicalism, as a protagonist of the struggle for intervention, as the spokesman for war veterans, defender of the Italian victory in the war, and the avant-garde of the new Italy born of the trenches.”<sup>200</sup> Fascism demanded action, Fascism demanded unapologetic nationalism, and Fascism demanded a disciplined willingness to use force to achieve the state’s ends.

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<sup>198</sup> *Ibid*, pp 368-372. *History of the League of Nations*, pp 680-681.

<sup>199</sup> Benito Mussolini, *The Doctrine of Fascism*.

<sup>200</sup> Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, p 21.

As viewed as such a vigorous system of thought, the League and its machinations should have been completely unacceptable to a Fascist government. The Fascist diplomatic tone touted domestically is described in a quote from Mussolini himself:

Fascism does not, generally speaking, believe in the possibility or utility of perpetual peace. It therefore discards pacifism as a cloak for cowardly supine renunciation in contradistinction to self-sacrifice. War alone keys up all human energies to their maximum tension and sets the seal of nobility on those peoples who have the courage to face it. All other tests are substitutes which never place a man face to face with himself before the alternative of life or death. Therefore, all doctrines which postulate peace at all costs are incompatible with Fascism. Equally foreign to the spirit of Fascism, even if accepted as useful in meeting special political situations—are all internationalistic or League superstructures which, as history shows, crumble to the ground whenever the heart of nations is deeply stirred by sentimental, idealistic or practical considerations.<sup>201</sup>

And yet, Mussolini had taken care to deal with the great powers largely through the League, and without committing to “conquest in full”<sup>202</sup>—instead agreeing to negotiate within the framework of the Covenant. Instead of declaring a war to avenge the legacy of Adowa and purge Italian military history of its mistakes, Mussolini instructed Aloisi to present a carefully prepared case against Ethiopia’s League membership. Though this was ineffective at swaying the minds of many, the rhetoric was enough to demand some sort of conciliation for Italy. Britain and France could not deny Italy’s request—as it was reasonably made and as both nations depended on Italy to uphold their picture of peace in Europe. Skillfully exploiting both of these openings, Mussolini danced between conciliatory and bellicose rhetoric—now assuring Britain that only a *little* more

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<sup>201</sup> Benito Mussolini, *The Doctrine of Fascism*.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid*

time was needed to properly meet Italy's just demands, and then warning France unequivocally that Italy would withdraw from the League if military sanctions were enacted—all the while remaining studiously intransigent of his goals in the region. No conciliation, no matter how desperate or generous they might be, would move him. And after all, why should they? Mussolini knew that both Britain and France regarded Italy as a vital partner after Stresa and a member of the old “Locarno Powers,” who they could not afford to do without.

Mussolini's stubborn refusal to accept anything less than total dominion in Ethiopia might resemble a Fascist goal—but his methods for obtaining this prize were anything but Fascist. His continuing reliance on delaying action, conciliatory telegrams, and League rhetoric—mixed only when absolutely necessary with threats of violence much more resemble the politics of Bismarck than the mythologized doctrine of the Blackshirts. Fascist doctrine might loudly proclaim that *meglio vivere un giorno da leone che cento anni da pecora*,<sup>203</sup> but Mussolini was not so foolish as to overlook the benefits of a more conciliatory approach to foreign policy—when it suited him.

## VI. Conclusion

Whatever words are employed by historians to describe the Italian liberal regime, “consistent” is perhaps not often mentioned. The fledgling regime struggled desperately to live up to its revolutionary and idealistic vision of unification, seeking first unity through symbols and institutions; then failing to do so, through regenerative violence. One can understand the fervor with which intellectuals like Francesco De Sanctis and

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<sup>203</sup> “Better to live one day as a lion than a hundred years as a sheep” was the rather wordy slogan coined by Mussolini in 1932. *Mussolini*, p 294, *Mussolini and Hitler*, p 62.



Giuseppe Mazzini sought to form a “national religion” in order to finalize *Risorgimento*. The modern definition of “nation” extended to more than just allegiance to a crown, it was a sense of belonging, duty and citizenship; one that could not be easily fostered in Italy, a region which had not been totally united under one kingdom since the Roman Empire, with no unified dialect, and consisting of a population of pre-modern peasants whose allegiance had for centuries been first to their landlord. For these utopian, romantic intellectuals, Italy *could not be* unless a genuine national consciousness was forged. In their desperation, they turned to the military—which had indeed made citizens of revolutionary France under Napoleon, and which promised to transform both poor country boys and upper-class gentlemen into Italian patriots. But more than that, Italy needed to prove itself. Without victory, real victory—the nation had nothing other than shared pain to memorialize. Seeking to remediate this, liberals like Francesco Crispi, Giovanni Giolitti, and Sidney Sonnino utilized every method at their disposal to earn for Italy the respect and honor she deserved. Behind the nationalist posturing and realist assessment of power displayed by each of these men lay an earnest desire to finalize the *Risorgimento*, and that desire was consistently discernable in their rhetoric and actions.

Listening to the powerful language Mussolini employed so often at home, one would expect that Denis Mack Smith’s assessment that Fascist foreign policy was “in search of strife” would be correct. After all, Fascism was *action*, it was *unreserved conquest*—and this was exactly what Mussolini told the adoring crowds gathered around his balcony at the *Palazzo Venezia*. Indeed, domestic Fascist rhetoric was novel. According to Fascist doctrine, Italy was no longer in doubt. Italy was Fascist, and Fascism was united. Any dissidence was “anti-Fascism,” and thus not really Italian. For

Fascism, imperialism was not an attempt to compensate for failure. Though Mussolini's efforts to modernize the country by 1932 may not have been truly "revolutionary," they were nonetheless surprisingly effective—as is the case of the draining of the Pontine Marshes. Imperialism was natural expansion for a healthy state, particularly one so dedicated to the "Lictor's Rods" of unity, strength, and discipline.<sup>204</sup> According to Mussolini, "As long as a man lives, he is an imperialist. When he is dead, for him imperialism is over."<sup>205</sup> The Italo-Ethiopian War at home was effectively portrayed as a Fascist war, one which would demonstrate Italian success to the entire world—but perhaps more importantly, to Italians.

However, the diplomatic strategy employed by Mussolini to handle the League of Nations was anything but "Fascist." Rather than expressing Italy's right to expand as a healthy nation and challenging the world to stop her, Baron Aloisi instead denounced Ethiopia's claim to be "civilized," and consistently played for time. Rather than stating Italy's aims up front—as one would expect a true Blackshirt to do—Aloisi was forbidden from declaring what exactly Mussolini wanted. This left the nations in the League in a predicament, made worse by the fact that Mussolini aptly played upon the fears of the two greatest of the Great Powers, Britain and France. With France, Mussolini was extremely conciliatory; promising Laval that Italy stood with France against her arch-enemy Germany. With Britain, Mussolini was more forceful, but not overtly so. Instead of declaring Britain an enemy of Fascism, Mussolini instead repeatedly expressed his desire to work within the League Covenant and merely hinted through unofficial methods that further British interference would jeopardize British interests in the Mediterranean.

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<sup>204</sup> *The Doctrine of Fascism*

<sup>205</sup> *Talks with Mussolini*, p 57.

These strategies paid spectacular dividends, at least in the short term. Neither Britain nor France desired to alienate Italy and as such were content to appease Italy rather than confronting her directly. Their increasingly unrealistic plans to partition Ethiopia and the growing mistrust between them caused by a difference in approaches to foreign policy only served to strengthen Mussolini's intransigence. Though the League had acted swiftly to enact sanctions against Italy and displayed remarkable unity of purpose in doing so, hopes for effective application of collective security were squashed by the culmination of French and British realistic policymaking—the Hoare-Laval Pact. With the Covenant framework largely disgraced, and with Hitler threatening the Rhineland, Mussolini was left largely free to brutally annihilate Ethiopian resistance; thus ending the first and last of Fascism's colonial conquests.

Mussolini was indeed Fascist, but he was not an idiot. Realizing that Fascist doctrine would only hinder negotiations with the Great Powers, Mussolini instead relied upon tactics reminiscent of the realism of Bismarck or Crispi. But unlike Crispi, Mussolini's war at home was not the same as his war in Africa. Fascist foreign policy largely diverged from its (rather malnourished) intellectual roots. If indeed "Fascism trains its guns on the whole block of democratic ideologies, and rejects both their premises and their practical applications and implements"<sup>206</sup> in their entirety, then the diplomatic and military fronts of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War appear not as "Fascist," but merely manifestations of a hubristic, lukewarm, and late-term European imperialism.

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<sup>206</sup> *The Doctrine of Fascism*

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