

ABYSSINIAN CRISIS 1935-36

Background: Benito Mussolini, the leader of the Fascist Party, became the Prime Minister of Italy in 1922 (after the "March on Rome"). In 1928 he had done away with all other political parties. He was now "*Il Duce*", the dictator over an Italy that had become a single-party state. After the Wall Street Crash and the following depression most countries focused on their own development. Collective Security was harder to achieve so an alternative for the different countries security was necessary.

Adolf Hitler became Germany's new Chancellor in January 1933. Two months later Benito Mussolini contacted Great Britain and France and suggested some kind of co-operation together with Germany to guarantee peace in Europe.

FOUR POWER PACT (June 1933)

This was a pact between Italy, France, Great Britain and Germany. It suggested:

1. The contacting partners should co-operate for ten years to preserve peace in Europe
2. It acknowledged the principle of "reasonable revision" of the previous Peace Treaties

So why did the different countries accept this pact? (according to Morris):

- **Great Britain** saw Italy as the key to peace in Europe. This was in their opinion a traditional balance of power that would guarantee peace.
- **France** shared some of Britain's motives but many people did not see much value in this pact.
- **Germany** (Hitler and NSDAP) needed peace so they could focus on the domestic problems.
- **Italy** - the opinion of Italy's motive varies. Some historians claim that Mussolini's wish for peace was genuine and he came with the proposal of a pact due to the resurgence of Germany. Other historians claim that he acted purely in Italian self-interest. He wanted to separate France from her allies in Eastern Europe which was an area of Italian interest. With Great Britain as one partner in this pact it might also be possible to further separate France from Britain.

No matter what - the pact failed. Why?

- In October 1933 Germany left the World Disarmament Conference in Geneva and the League of Nations. Tension in Europe grew.
- The Four Power Pact was never ratified by the governments in the countries that signed the pact.
- Eastern Europe felt excluded. Some countries therefore tried to influence the Four Powers by making their own alliances with one of the partners: Poland and Germany signed a non-aggression pact in January 1934. The USSR started discussions about a mutual assistance pact with France...

CRISIS - AUSTRIA AND THE MURDER OF DOLLFUSS

In February 1934 Austria faced a short skirmish between socialist and conservative-fascist forces. This **February Uprising** led to a few thousand casualties (several hundred people were killed). The Social Democrats were blamed together with some of the Trade Unions. Engelbert Dollfuss, the Austrian Chancellor since May 1932 (also leader of the Christian Social Party) had already banned the Austrian Nazi Party and the Communist Party in June 1933. Now he completely outlawed the Social Democratic Party and had some leading members of the Socialist "*Schutzbund*" (a paramilitary protection army for the socialists) executed.

Dollfuss had already in 1933 established an authoritarian state much like Mussolini's Italy. The political doctrine of Dollfuss is often referred to as "*Austrofascism*". Even though the Social Democratic Party and the Trade Unions had lost power after this take-over they were big enough to challenge the Austrian government in February 1934. As mentioned - the socialists failed and Dollfuss continued to rule. The political tension grew and in July 1934 Dollfuss was murdered during an attempt by Austria's National Socialist Party to topple the regime and proclaim a Nazi government. The assassination of Dollfuss was accompanied by Nazi uprisings in many regions in Austria, resulting in further deaths.

Mussolini was now very concerned about Hitler and Germany's reaction. Would Germany attempt an invasion of Austria to support the coup? Instead of waiting for an answer Mussolini assembled an army corps of four divisions on the Austrian border and threatened Hitler with a war with Italy in the event of a German invasion. Mussolini now realized that an alliance against German aggression was necessary...

WAL-WAL INCIDENT (November 1934)

In 1930, Italy built a fort at Wal-Wal, an oasis in the Ogaden. The fort was in clear violation of the Italo–Abyssinian Treaty of Friendship (signed in 1928). The Italians built the fort as part of a gradual encroachment into what was clearly Ethiopian territory.

On November 22, 1934, a strong force of 1000 Ethiopian militia with three fitaurari (military - political Ethiopian commanders) materialized near Ual Ual and requested the Dubats garrison (about 60 men) to withdraw. The Somali NCO leading the garrison refused to withdraw and notified the fact to the captain Cimmaruta, commander of the garrison of Uarder (20 km from Ual Ual. The day after, while surveying the border between British Somaliland and Ethiopia, an Anglo–Ethiopian boundary commission arrived at Wal-Wal. The commission was confronted by an Italian force already at Wal-Wal. The British members of the boundary commission protested but withdrew to avoid an international incident. The Ethiopian members of the boundary commission stayed at Wal-Wal. Between December 5 and December 7, for reasons which have never been clearly determined, there was a skirmish between the garrison of Somalis who were in Italian service and a force of armed Ethiopians. According to the Italians, the Ethiopians attacked the Somalis with a strong fire of rifles and machine guns. According to the Ethiopians, the Italians attacked them. The Ethiopians claimed the Italians were supported by two tanks and three aircraft. In the end, approximately 107 Ethiopians and 50 Italians and Somalis were killed. Neither side did anything to avoid confrontation; The Ethiopians repeatedly menaced the Italian garrison with the threat of an armed attack, and the Italians sent two planes over the Ethiopian camp with some machine-gun fire (*Wikipedia*).

ROME AGREEMENTS (January 1935)

Mussolini once again contacted France. The pro-Italian foreign Minister Pierre Laval came to Rome and after having discussions with Mussolini signed a Franco-Italian agreement - also referred to as the Rome Agreements. This agreement defined disputed parts of French Somaliland (now Djibouti) as part of Eritrea, redefined the official status of Italians in French-held Tunisia, and essentially gave the Italians a free hand in dealing with the Abyssinia Crisis with Ethiopia. In exchange for this, France hoped for Italian support against German aggression.

One of the results of the Franco-Italian agreement was that Mussolini began to send large numbers of troops to Eritrea and Italian Somaliland. These were the Italian colonies that bordered Ethiopia to the northeast and southeast respectively. There was little international protest to this build-up.

OFFICIAL GERMAN RE-ARMAMENT (March 1935)

In 1933, Hitler ordered his army generals to prepare to treble the size of the army to 300,000 men. He ordered the Air Ministry to plan to build 1,000 war planes. Military buildings such as barracks were built. He withdrew from the Geneva Disarmament Conference when the French refused to accept his plan that the French should disarm to the level of the Germans or that the Germans should re-arm to the level of the French. For two years, the German military expanded in secret. By March 1935, Hitler felt strong enough to go public on Nazi Germany's military expansion - which broke the terms of the Versailles Treaty. Europe learned that the Nazis had 2,500 war planes in its Luftwaffe and an army of 300,000 men in its Wehrmacht. Hitler felt confident enough to publicly announce that there would be compulsory military conscription in Nazi Germany and that the army would be increased to 550,000 men.

STRESA FRONT (April 1935)

This meeting and agreement was a reaction to the German re-armament. In Stresa Great Britain, France and Italy agreed to take "co-ordinated action against any country unilaterally violating existing treaties" and thereby endanger peace in Europe.

Why did Mussolini and Italy want to form this front?

- Mussolini was concerned about Germany's increasing power and he was suspicious of Hitler's foreign ambitions (especially since he had his own plans for Austria as well as the Balkans)
- Mussolini wanted support for action in Abyssinia

Why did Great Britain and France want to form this front?

- Both of the countries wanted a common front against further German breaches of the Versailles Treaty
- They were concerned that Italy should not get closer to Germany

BRITISH ATTEMPT TO APPEASE ITALY (June 1935)

In June 1935 the British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden tried to make some agreements between Great Britain, Italy and Abyssinia. He proposed a deal where Italy would have received the Ogaden region from Abyssinia and the Britain would compensate them with a piece of British Somaliland which would allow Abyssinia access to the sea. It was a failed mission though, as Mussolini was bent on conquest. Following that, Britain declared an arms embargo on both Italy and Ethiopia on July 25. Many believe that this was a direct result of Italy's decree that supplying Ethiopia would be perceived as an act of unfriendliness. Britain also cleared its warships from the Mediterranean, further allowing Italy unhindered access.

ANGLO-GERMAN NAVAL AGREEMENT (June 1935):

This was a bilateral agreement between Great Britain and Germany. The A.G.N.A fixed a ratio where the total tonnage of the Kriegsmarine was to be 35% of the total tonnage of the Royal Navy on a permanent basis. It was registered in League of Nations Treaty Series on July 12, 1935. The A.G.N.A was an ambitious attempt on the part of both London and Berlin to reach better relations, but which ultimately floundered because of conflicting expectations between the two states. For the Germans, the A.G.N.A. was intended to mark the beginning of an Anglo-German alliance against France and the Soviet Union, whereas for the British, the A.G.N.A. was to be the beginning of a series of arms limitation agreements that were made to limit German expansionism. The A.G.N.A was highly controversial both at the time and since because the 35:100 tonnage ratio agreed to allow Germany the right to build a Navy beyond the limits set by the Treaty of Versailles, and the British had made the agreement without consulting her Stresa allies France or Italy first. The agreement was renounced by Adolf Hitler on April 28, 1939...

ITALY AND THE ABYSSINIAN CRISIS:

- During the "scramble for Africa" Italy had marked the region of Somalia, Eritrea and Abyssinia as an Italian sphere of influence. In 1896 the Italian army suffered a humiliating defeat against the Abyssinian Army (Battle of Adowa). This battle was a classic example of underestimating your enemy. 15000-20000 Italians thought they could defeat 75000-100000 Abyssinians. This did not work. In the 1930's Mussolini wanted to compensate this old defeat.
- The political doctrine of Italy, fascism, demanded action. Mussolini had for several years promised Italian expansion - now was the time to live up to these promises.
- Political tension due to the Depression. Italy did not have a lot of raw material. The Wall Street Crash affected her import of necessary goods. A successful war against Abyssinia could improve Italy's economic situation and it would also take some pressure of the government.
- Great Britain and France still had their colonies and they did not show any signs of reducing them. The "Mandate System" had instead increased their empires. Italy had been one of the victorious nations in WWI but she had not received enough compensation for her efforts according to most

Italian politicians ("we won the war but lost the peace"). Abyssinia was a bit of a compensation for the previous poor results.

- Mussolini was sure he had reached an agreement with France (Rome Agreements) and that he had some British understanding (through the Stresa Front).

CHRONOLOGY AFTER THE WAL-WAL INCIDENT

Between the Wal-Wal incident (November 1934) and the start of the Italian invasion (October 1935) the Abyssinian Emperor Haile Selassie appealed for help to the League of Nations four times! He wanted the League to send neutral observers to arbitrate in the conflict between Italy and Abyssinia.

- **February 23**, Mussolini began to send large numbers of troops to Eritrea and Italian Somaliland. There was little international protest to this build-up.
- **March 8**, Ethiopia again requested arbitration and noted Italian military build-up.
- Between May 20 and 21, the League of Nations held a special session to discuss the crisis in Abyssinia.
- **June 19**, Abyssinia requested neutral observers.
- **June 25**, the British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden tried to make some agreements between Great Britain, Italy and Abyssinia. He proposed a deal where Italy would have received the Ogaden region from Abyssinia and the Britain would compensate them with a piece of British Somaliland which would allow Abyssinia access to the sea. It was a failed mission though, as Mussolini was bent on conquest.
- **June 25**, Italian and Abyssinian officials met in the Hague to discuss arbitration and these discussions fell apart by July 9.
- **July 25**, Britain declared an arms embargo on both Italy and Abyssinia. Many believe that this was a direct result of Italy's decree that supplying Abyssinia would be perceived as an act of unfriendliness. Britain also cleared its warships from the Mediterranean, further allowing Italy unhindered access.
- **August 3**, the League limited arbitration talks to matters except for the sovereignty of Wal-Wal.
- **August 12**, Abyssinia pleaded for arms embargo to be lifted. It was obvious that they suffered much more from the arms embargo than Italy. This further stressed Abyssinia's inferior position.
- **August 16**, France and Britain offered Italy large concessions in Abyssinia to avert war and Italy rejected these offers.
- **August 22**, Britain reaffirmed its embargo on armaments.
- **September 4**, the League exonerated both Italy and Abyssinia of the Wal-Wal incident since both nations believed Wal-Wal was within its territorial borders.
- **September 10**, Pierre Laval, Anthony Eden, and Sir Samuel Hoare agreed on limitations to Italian sanctions.
- **September 25**, Abyssinia again asked for neutral observers.
- **September 28**, Abyssinia began to mobilize its large but poorly-equipped army.
- **October 2**, Italian troops, tanks and air planes invaded Abyssinia without a declaration of war. In response, Ethiopia declared war on Italy and the two nations were at war.

ITALO-ABYSSINIAN WAR 1935-36

- **October 7**, the League of Nations declared Italy the aggressor and started the slow process of imposing sanctions. However, these sanctions did not extend to several vital materials, such as oil and were not carried out by all members of the League. Specifically, the United Kingdom and France did not take any serious action against Italy (such as blocking Italian access to the Suez Canal). Even actions such as the Italian use of some chemical weapons, massacres of civilians and attacking international ambulances did little to change the League's passive approach to the situation.

- **December**, Samuel Hoare of Britain and Pierre Laval of France proposed the secret **Hoare-Laval Plan** which would end the war but allow Italy to control large areas of Abyssinia. Mussolini agreed to the plan, but it caused an outcry in Britain and France when the plan was leaked to the media. Hoare and Laval were accused of betraying the Abyssinians, and both resigned. The plan was dropped, but the perception spread that Britain and France were not serious about the principles of the League. The "*double game*" of applying sanctions and negotiating at the same time behind the back of the League of Nations by its two strongest members seriously discredited both the League of Nations and the Stresa Front!
- The Abyssinian capital of Addis Ababa fell on **May 5, 1936**. Mussolini declared that the King of Italy, Victor Emanuel III was the new Emperor of Abyssinia. Abyssinia was merged with the other Italian colonies to become Italian East Africa (Africa Orientale Italiana, or AOI). Abyssinia never officially surrendered and the ex-Emperor Haile Selassie went into exile. Italian control of AOI was never total (because of guerrilla, later used by the British in WWII), but in 1940 was complete in 3/4 of Abyssinia.

REACTION FROM LEAGUE OF NATIONS:

- **October 1935**. Both the League Council and the Assembly condemned Italy's invasion of Abyssinia. 50 out of 54 nations voted in favor for economic sanctions. The 50 Assembly members also set up a Committee of 18 members to consider how to apply sanctions.
- **November 18th**. The League Committee on sanctions recommended the following sanctions: Any sale of arms, rubber and certain metals to Italy was banned; any loan to Italy was banned; most Italian imports were banned.

So why did the sanctions not work?

- The sanctions took too long to be implemented (about 6 weeks - the war started the 2nd of October and the suggestion of sanctions was not presented until November 18th).
- The sanctions excluded some of the most valuable materials Italy and Mussolini needed like oil, steel and coal.
- Great Britain kept the Suez Canal open so Italy had no problems sending supply ships to the war.
- Countries who were not members of the League of Nations continued to trade with Italy; for example USA (observed a few of the sanctions but not all), Germany and Japan (both these countries fully ignored the sanctions).
- It took some time before the sanctions had an impact on the Italian economy (early spring 1936 - then the war was nearly over).
- Neither Britain nor France wanted to apply sufficient pressure on Mussolini and Italy since it might lead to broken diplomatic relations with Italy; Mussolini taking up closer relations with Germany (who ignored the sanctions and continued to trade with Italy) and maybe even war (which neither France nor Great Britain had any preparation for).
- Great Britain was concerned about her naval bases in the Mediterranean: Malta and Gibraltar. After the expansion of Japan Britain might need their naval resources in the Pacific.
- France would benefit from good relations with Italy. Her Mediterranean coast would be protected; France would not need to build up forces to fight in the Alps; and France could keep closer contacts with the allies in the Little Entente (through an Italian corridor).
- In early 1936 a report came from the Commission about a ban on oil sales to Italy. This ban could have significant effect within a few months but only if the US agreed to participate. The chances of that were remote according to the League so the oil embargo on Italy was never imposed.
- The League of Nations ended their sanctions on Italy in July 1936.

RESULTS OF THE ABYSSINIAN CRISIS:

- First of all - Italy took Abyssinia and Haile Selassie was forced into exile.
- This was the second time within a few years that the League of Nations failed to solve a major conflict. This shattered any hopes of the League or Collective Security as protection against aggression.
- The Stresa Front between Italy, Great Britain and France ended. Their relation now became tense.
- Hitler used the Abyssinian Crisis to advance into the Rhineland. On March 7, 1936, nineteen German infantry battalions (about 22000 men) and a handful of planes entered the Rhineland. They reached the river Rhine by 11:00 a.m. and then three battalions crossed to the west bank of the Rhine. This was an aggressive action and a clear breach of the Versailles Treaty. Most of the World attention was on the last major battles in Abyssinia so Hitler did not receive any real resistance. He now knew that his aggressive policy worked and could be applied again if the opportunity came.
- In July 1936 the Spanish Civil War broke out. Italy and Germany supported the Spanish Nationalists. France supported the Republican government and Great Britain wanted a policy of no-intervention. This caused further split between the previous allies: Great Britain, France and Italy. As a consequence Mussolini now approached Hitler and in October 1936 Italy and Germany signed the Rome-Berlin Axis; a friendship and trade agreement.
- Italy left the League of Nations in 1937

