

The Abyssinian Crisis (1935)

Sequence and Consequences

A pivotal moment in the League of Nations' decline and the pathway to World War II

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Summary

Background: Why Abyssinia Was Important

Italy's Historical Grievances

In 1896, Italian forces suffered a humiliating defeat at the **Battle of Adowa**, where Abyssinian troops decisively crushed Italy's colonial ambitions. This defeat remained a source of national shame for nearly four decades.

Mussolini's Fascist Ideology

Benito Mussolini dreamed of recreating the glory of the Roman Empire. Conquering Abyssinia would demonstrate Italy's strength, provide resources, and distract Italians from economic hardship at home.

Strategic Advantages

- Abyssinia was one of only two independent African nations
- Bordered Italian territories in Eritrea and Somaliland
- Rich in natural resources and agricultural land
- Militarily weak compared to modern European armies

Causes of the crisis

Imperial Ambitions

Mussolini sought to establish a new Roman Empire across the Mediterranean and Africa, viewing conquest as essential to Fascist ideology.

Economic Pressures

Italy needed raw materials, farmland for settlers, and markets for exports to overcome its limited natural resources and struggling economy.

Domestic Distraction

A military victory would boost Mussolini's popularity and divert attention from Italy's economic problems and rising unemployment.

Causes of the crisis

Invasion of Abyssinia

Opportunism

Abyssinia's weakness invited military exploitation.

Imperial Ambitions

Roman Empire ideology drove expansionist aims.

Domestic Politics

Conquest boosted Mussolini's popularity at home.

Economic Motives

Need for raw materials and land encouraged invasion.

Timeline of Main Events

December 1934

Wal-Wal Incident: Border clash between Italian and Abyssinian forces at a disputed oasis. Italy demands apology and compensation, which Abyssinia refuses.

October 1935

Full-Scale Invasion: Italy launches a massive assault using modern weapons, aircraft, and poison gas against Abyssinian forces armed primarily with rifles.

December 1935

Hoare-Laval Pact Leaked: Secret plan to give Italy two-thirds of Abyssinia is exposed, causing public outrage and both ministers resign in disgrace.

April 1935

Stresa Front Formed: Britain, France, and Italy agree to oppose German rearmament. However, Abyssinia is not discussed, giving Mussolini confidence to proceed.

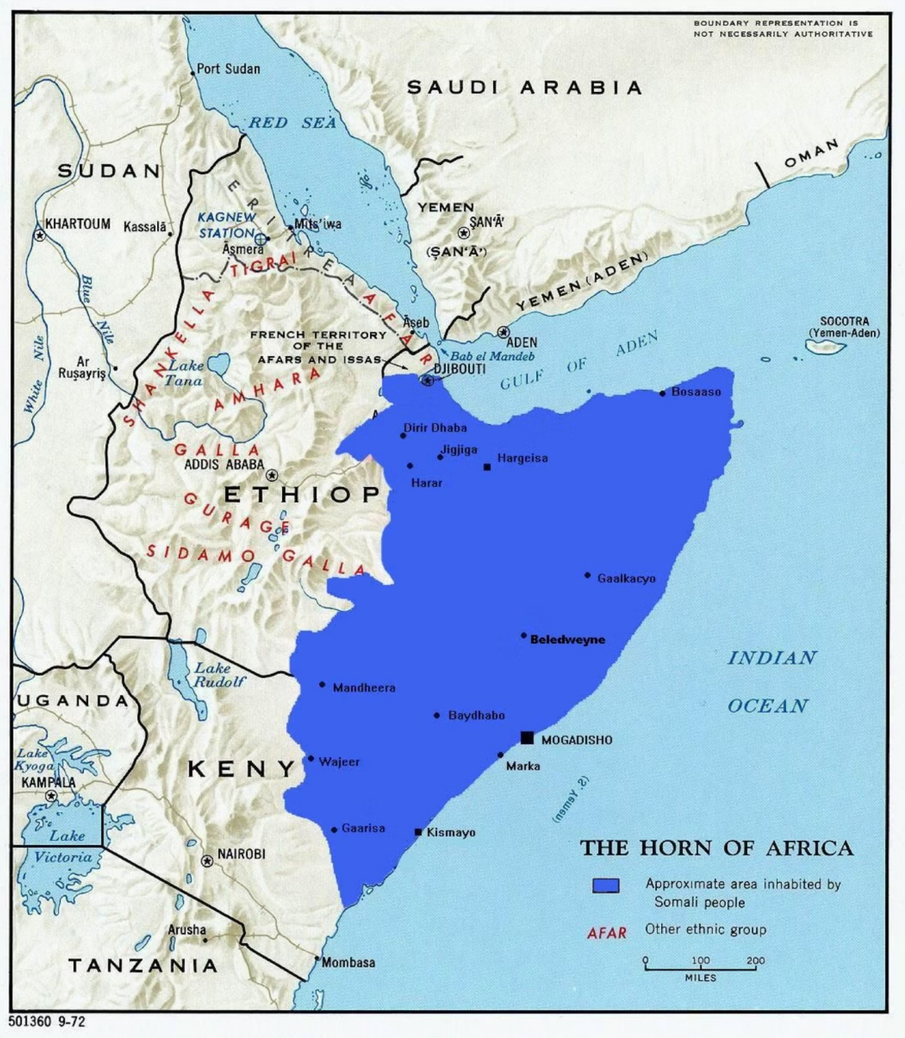
November 1935

League Imposes Sanctions: Members vote for economic sanctions but critically exclude oil and keep the Suez Canal open to Italian ships.

May 1936

Abyssinia Falls: Italy completes its conquest. Emperor Haile Selassie flees and makes a passionate appeal to the League, which takes no further action.

The Wal-Wal Incident



The Spark That Ignited Crisis

In December 1934, a confrontation occurred at the **Wal-Wal oasis**, located in territory disputed between Abyssinia and Italian Somaliland. Both sides claimed the wells.

Italian and Abyssinian forces clashed, resulting in approximately 150 casualties. Mussolini immediately seized upon the incident as justification for military action.

Mussolini's Strategy

He deliberately exaggerated the incident, demanding an apology and 200,000 lire in compensation. When Abyssinia appealed to the League of Nations for arbitration, **Mussolini used the delay to prepare for invasion**.

The League's Inadequate Response

Sanctions Imposed

- Arms embargo on Italy
- Ban on loans to Italy
- Import ban on Italian goods
- Export ban on rubber, metals, and minerals

Critical Weaknesses

Oil not banned — Italy's war machine kept running

- Suez Canal remained open
- USA (non-member) continued trading
- Sanctions took weeks to implement

Why Were Sanctions So Weak?

Fear of Mussolini

Britain and France worried that harsh sanctions would push Italy into an alliance with Nazi Germany, upsetting the European balance of power.

Self-Interest

Britain controlled the Suez Canal and wanted to maintain good relations with Italy. France shared a border and feared Italian retaliation.

Lack of Commitment

Neither Britain nor France was willing to risk war with Italy over Abyssinia, a distant African nation with little strategic value to them.

The Hoare-Laval Pact Scandal

Secret Diplomacy Exposed

In December 1935, British Foreign Secretary **Samuel Hoare** and French Prime Minister **Pierre Laval** secretly agreed to a plan that would give Italy control of approximately two-thirds of Abyssinia, including the most fertile regions.

The Proposal

Italy would gain large territories whilst Abyssinia kept a reduced state

Public Outrage

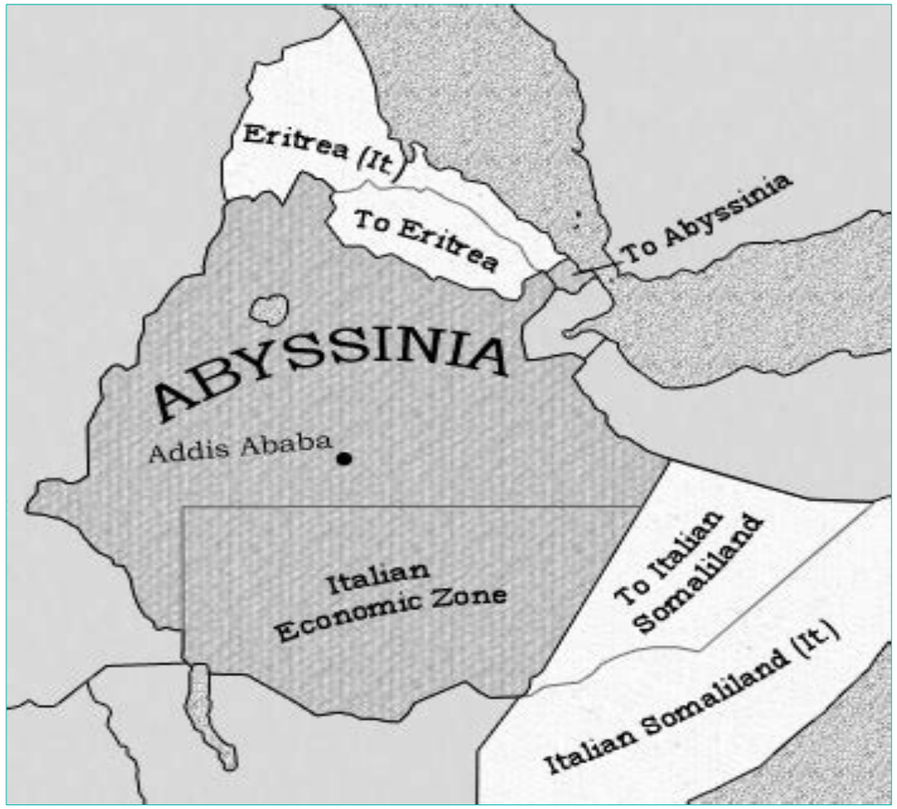
When leaked to French press, British and French public were horrified by the betrayal

Political Collapse

Both Hoare and Laval forced to resign; pact abandoned

League Damaged

Exposed that major powers prioritised their interests over collective security



Consequences for the League of Nations

Credibility Destroyed

The League's failure to stop Italian aggression demonstrated it was powerless against determined aggressors. Member states lost faith in collect security.

Rome-Berlin Axis Formed

Angered by sanctions, Mussolini abandoned cooperation with Britain and France. In October 1936, he formed an alliance with Hitler, creating the Rome-Berlin Axis.

Collective Security Collapsed

The principle that nations would unite to stop aggression proved hollow. The Hoare-Laval Pact showed major powers prioritised self-interest over League principles.

Encouraged Further Aggression

Hitler noted the League's weakness. In March 1936, he remilitarised the Rhineland with confidence. Japan and Germany felt emboldened to pursue expansion.

Evaluation

"How far was the Abyssinian Crisis responsible for the failure of the League of Nations?"

Arguments Supporting High Responsibility

- Exposed the League as unable to enforce its own rules against a major power
- The Hoare-Laval Pact revealed the hypocrisy of Britain and France
- Directly led to the Rome-Berlin Axis, strengthening dictatorships
- Destroyed confidence in collective security
- Encouraged Hitler to test the League in the Rhineland

Evaluation

Alternative Factors to Consider

- The League already had structural weaknesses (no army, unanimous voting)
- USA's absence had undermined the League
- Earlier failures in Manchuria (1931) had damaged credibility
- The Depression reduced nations' willingness to take risks
- Britain and France lacked political will throughout the 1930s

Balanced Conclusion: The Abyssinian Crisis was the most significant single blow to the League's authority. It was the crisis that transformed the League from a struggling organisation into an irrelevant one, marking the true **turning point from which recovery was impossible**.

Summary

Causes

Italian imperial ambitions, Mussolini's Fascist ideology, the 1896 Adowa defeat, economic pressures, and the weakness of Abyssinia

Key Events

Wal-Wal incident → Full invasion (October 1935) → Weak sanctions → Hoare-Laval Pact scandal → Conquest completed (May 1936)

League's Response

Ineffective sanctions excluding oil, Suez Canal kept open, secret diplomacy exposed, failure to take military action

Consequences

League discredited, Italy joined Germany, collective security collapsed, future aggression encouraged, path to World War II cleared

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The Abyssinian Crisis represents the **defining moment** when the League of Nations moved from an imperfect peacekeeping body to an organisation fatally compromised and unable to prevent the drift towards global conflict.