



G. Bruce Strang. *Collision of Empires: Italy's Invasion of Ethiopia and Its' International Impact.* Farnham: Ashgate, 2013. 398 S. ISBN 978-1-4094-3010-0.

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G. B. Strang (Hrsg.): Collision of Empires

On May 1936, after a campaign that lasted only eight months, Italy entered Addis Ababa and officially annexed Ethiopia. The war was a real international crisis, previous alliances were shattered and new ones forged; the League of Nations received a blow from which it would never fully recover. This edited book contains 13 chapters written by 11 contributors that analyse the international impact of the Italo-Ethiopian war.

In Europe, the crisis destabilized the traditional system of alliances and tested the determination of Britain and France to stand the rise of Nazi Germany. German expansionism was much feared and in order to check this incumbent menace, France, Great Britain, the United States and their allies were ready to compromise. Despite the brutality of the war, the infamous use of poison gas and widespread atrocities, democratic powers accepted Mussolini's expansionist plans and finally conceded to Italy the coveted prey. But the idea that non-European interests could be traded for peace in Europe proved wrong. In the end, the worst-case scenario materialized: Italy, Germany and Japan cemented their ties. The Anglo-French-Italian front formed at Stresa collapsed and a new Rome-Berlin axis took its place. The probability of war increased. As Martin Thomas points out in his chapter on France and the Ethiopian crisis, Italy's realignment with Germany was probably unavoidable; what it is certain is that the Ethiopian War accelerated this process.

The League of Nations was the other victim of the conflict. Established in the aftermath of the Paris Peace

Conference, the League of Nations supported the idea of collective security through the promotion of arbitration. But the European powers paid only lip service to the principles stated by the League of Nations's Charter and eventually Ethiopia's independence was sacrificed on the altar of European interests. As Gaynor Johnson writes in his chapter on the League's diplomatic response to the invasion: "[t]he crisis represented the last straw, the final demonstration of how poorly equipped the League was to respond to any serious challenge to its authority" (p. 53). Not only was the League too slow to respond to the pace of events, but eventually when a position was decided, the sanctions proved utterly ineffective. On 18. November, economic and financial sanctions against Italy were approved by the League of Nations but commodities like petroleum, coal, iron and steel were not included in the list of the sanctioned products.

The Ethiopian crisis of 1935-36 has been perceived as a seminal moment on the road to the outbreak of war in 1939, therefore generations of scholars have written about it. Also Africanists have paid attention to the crisis and already in the 1960s and 1970s a considerable amount of studies was consecrated to the international response to Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia. Alberto Sbacchi worked on the relations between Italy, France and Great Britain during the Ethiopian crisis; George W. Baer focused on the limited effects of the sanctions imposed by the League of Nations, while Antoinette Iadarola wrote about the admission of Ethiopia into the League of Nations. Alberto Sbacchi, *Legacy of Bitterness. Ethiopia and Fascist Italy, 1935-1941*, Lawrenceville NJ

1997; George W. Baer, *Test Case. Italy, Ethiopia, and the League of Nations*, Stanford 1976; Antoinette Iadarola, *Ethiopia's Admission Into the League of Nations. An Assessment of Motives*, in: *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 8/4 (1975), pp. 601-22.

To this rich literature the book edited by Strang provides a considerable contribution at two levels. The first concerns the cases considered. In the past, scholarly attention was mainly limited to the reaction of the great powers: France, Britain and the United States. Now to these cases are added the analysis of Canada, the British Dominions, the Soviet Union, the Vatican and the neutral states of Europe. Strang's edited volume not only deals with the perspective of single states, chapters on Philip Noel-Baker and the League of Nations, Mussolini and Social Darwinism, and Britain's military response to the Ethiopian crisis all offer new insights to our understanding of the crisis.

The second level of novelty is represented by the sources. The documents consulted come from two dozen archives. Some have already been explored, others represent an absolute novelty and various chapters make an extensive use of materials so far retained. Again the volume makes a significant contribution, representing by far the most updated and valuable publication currently available on the diplomatic dimensions of the Italo-Ethiopian crisis of 1935-36.

The edited book is less effective in considering the African and colonial dimensions of the Ethiopian crisis. The two chapters by J. Calvitt Clarke III on Japan and the Soviet Union are the only ones that deal with the reaction of non-Western countries to the invasion. Engaging and well-written and -documented, the two chapters offer a view of the crisis as seen from a non-Western point of view. The chapter by Ian C. Spear on Ethiopia is mainly based on secondary sources and is one of the shortest of the entire collection. The treatment of Ethiopian diplomacy could probably have been better served. Since medieval times the country was in constant touch with Europe. Throughout the 19th and 20th century Ethiopia enjoyed vibrant diplomatic relations not only with Western powers, but also with the Ottoman Empire, Japan and Russia. The skill and sagacity

of Ethiopian diplomacy was epitomized by the country's admission to the League of Nations in 1923 and when the crisis approached, Ethiopians were more willing than the other powers to use the Covenant of the League as the principal weapon in their defence.

In order to appreciate the value of Strang's edited book the reader has to be aware that the 'international impact' of the title refers almost exclusively to the diplomatic dimension of the Italo-Ethiopian crisis of 1935-36. A better subtitle would certainly have informed the reader that this edited book has a pronounced political and diplomatic overtone. Other aspects of the crisis's impact are overlooked; popular reactions to the Italian Fascist invasion, for example, are barely treated. If the governments expressed a timid condemnation, the general public reaction was much more assertive and public sentiment clearly sided with Ethiopia. Even in Germany - as Geoffrey T. Waddington writes in his contribution - popular sentiment until the turn of 1935-36 was staunchly anti-Italian. The same occurred in Japan where newspaper editorials expressed sympathy for Ethiopia and in the Soviet Union, where many books were published in support of the Ethiopians. The Italian aggression met an almost negative international reaction and Italy had to fight hard to avoid complete isolation.

Another dimension of the crisis that is treated only marginally is the African American and Pan-African protest. In the eyes of Black activists Ethiopia was not a country like others, it was the symbol of black power and pride, the only country with Liberia that was able to escape European colonialism. Between 1935 and 1936 black Americans mounted a campaign that, since the 1970s, has attracted increasing attention. Other scholars have focused on the West Indian reactions to the war and on the reaction of the Pan-African movement in Britain. The international impact of Italy's invasion of Ethiopia was felt also in the Arab world. Mussolini spared no resources for his propaganda campaign in the Middle East, but again the results were mixed, and many countries remained suspicious of the real aims behind Mussolini's pro-Islam declarations. These fundamental dimensions of the international impact of Italy's invasion of Ethiopia still await more adequate treatment.

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