Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935–1936

Ethiopia resisted colonial domination at a time when most of Africa was under European control. At the battle of Adowa in March 1896, the Italians fielded the largest colonial army the continent had ever seen but were routed by the lion-maned chieftains and warriors under Emperor Menelik, suffering nearly 4,000 fatalities.

That defeat remained a thorn in the side of the Italians for forty years until the so-called Walwal Incident, a skirmish between Ethiopian soldiers and troops from Italian Somaliland, on December 5, 1934, served as a pretext for a full-scale invasion of Ethiopia in October 1935. At that time Italy’s Fascist dictator, Benito Mussolini, sought to expand his provincial holdings by joining Italy’s colonies of Eritrea and Somaliland with Ethiopia, complementing his dominion over Libya in North Africa.

Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie, an adept diplomat, had the full support of European public opinion after the Italian invasion had begun. Unfortunately the penalties that the League of Nations imposed on Italy in November 1935 did not include the all-important oil sanctions that could have ground Mussolini’s armies to a halt. One explanation for this failure is that France and Britain, the League’s two most powerful members, didn’t want to antagonize Italy to the point that it would refuse to counterbalance the territorial ambitions of Hitler’s rapidly rearming regime in Nazi Germany.

Although numerically inferior to Haile Selassie’s armies, the Italian forces were far better equipped and trained. The Italian air force conducted thousands of raids, including conventional bombing and strafing, as well as spraying mustard gas, whereas the meager Ethiopian air force could only provide limited transport and drop leaflets. The Italians were also able to intercept the Ethiopians’ radio transmissions and were thus aware of their plans well in advance. The one hope for the Ethiopians would have been to wage a guerrilla campaign in the mountains, where the Italian tanks and planes would have been far less devastating; such an approach, however, was antithetical to their warrior ethic. After six months of numerous battles and skirmishes, the Ethiopians had lost the war. Emperor Selassie left the country to pursue what would be a vain appeal to the League of Nations; the capital of Addis Ababa was taken over on May 5, 1936. Thus Ethiopia was annexed into the greater Africa Orientale Italiana.

The Remilitarization of the Rhineland, March 8, 1936

According to the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, the Rhineland was to be a neutral zone between Germany and France. It was occupied by Allied troops until 1930, when it became demilitarized after their withdrawal. Taking advantage of the world’s attention to the Italo-Ethiopian war, Hitler decided to reoccupy the Rhineland, which he saw as necessary to defend the Ruhr industrial basin and the military armament factories therein and also as a source of military conscripts. His bold maneuver, which involved close to thirty thousand troops, succeeded thanks to Britain’s unwillingness to go to war over the Rhineland and France’s hesitance to act without British support, even though both their militaries were far superior to Germany’s at that time. The League of Nations met to condemn the German aggression, but in the words of Hitler’s propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, Hitler “couldn’t care less.”