

# Principles or Power: Mussolini's Invasion of Ethiopia

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One of the earliest aggressive acts by Benito Mussolini's fascist government in Italy was its invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. Like the North African front of World War II, this Second Italo-Ethiopian War is often overlooked in favor of other pre-1939 conflicts and negotiations. Despite this, it (along with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931) represents one of the earliest expansionist acts by a future Axis power. The conflict was also notable for the failure of the League of Nations; despite rules regarding aggression and collective response, the League was incompetent at best and permissive at worst, in effect allowing the Italian conquest (Sarkees & Wayman 2010).

The exact reason for the Italian invasion is still disputed by different schools of international relations theory. In this paper, I will begin by recounting the history of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War using primary and secondary sources. Then I will review the varying explanations for the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, drawing on conflict-specific works as well as general theory from liberal and neorealist scholars. I will argue that Italy was driven to invade primarily by domestic political concerns, especially building support for the Fascist regime via the glory of conquest and distributed economic gains. Finally, I conclude that the liberal school is most convincing in its explanation of the actions of Mussolini's Italy because it considers the influence of the fascist ideology, explains the brutality of the Italian campaign, and offers a diagnosis and solution for the failure of the League of Nations. Neorealism does offer important insights into the balance of power calculations that led to other powers' (and thus the League of Nations') permissiveness towards the Italian conquest, but is insufficient for a full view.

### History and Analysis

Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia was not the first Italian conflict with the east African state. As the Scramble for Africa heated up, Italy likely felt driven to invade by competition with other European empires as well as the typical mantra of European imperialism, "Glory, God, and Gold". The First Italo-Ethiopian War (1895-1896) ended in disaster for the would-be colonizer; at the Battle of Adowa, Italian troops were ambushed by the army of then-Ethiopian monarch Menelik II, resulting in the loss of more than 3,000 Italian soldiers, the single biggest loss of European lives during the scramble for Africa. The loss was so embarrassing for Italians that the Francesco Crispi government collapsed when the news was received. The pain of Adowa stuck with some Italians, especially as other European states conquered all of Africa except for Ethiopia and American-supported Liberia (Strang 2013a).

Minor border disputes in the Horn of Africa preceded the actual invasion. Italian colonial holdings in Eritrea and Somaliland butted up to the northern edge of Ethiopia and Italian settlers had illegally occupied Ethiopian land at Wal Wal beginning in 1930. The Ethiopian Negus, Haile Selassie, periodically sent men to attempt to clear the land of Italians, as he was concerned that a potential invasion would be aided by the 359 water wells at Wal Wal (Robertson 1977). A skirmish occurred in December 1934, resulting in upwards of 100 casualties for both sides. Diplomatic conflict ensued, and the Ethiopians (despite pressure from Britain and France to appease the Italians) requested arbitration from the League of Nations (Baer 1967).

Despite the fact that Italy's actions in Ethiopia were in clear violation of international rules, Ethiopia's appeal to the League of Nations did not work. Britain and France, concerned about the nascent power of Germany, did not want to alienate Italy by strictly following League rules, and formed the biggest obstacle to arbitration. After some shrewd politicking by the Ethiopian delegation, the League considered Ethiopia's request, but the Italians deflected the issue

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to bilateral arbitration, allowing themselves to simply ignore Ethiopian demands and continue preparations for the war they knew was imminent. Further League action on Ethiopia was subordinated to German treaty violations, which were of much greater concern to France and Britain (Baer 1967). France would even go so far as to offer its approval for an Italian invasion in the Mussolini-Laval Accords of 1935. As Strang (2013a) writes, "no important power outside of Ethiopia saw preservation of Ethiopian sovereignty as a vital interest," and thus the conflict was largely ignored. Weak sanctions, which failed to embargo oil and coal, were applied eventually, but only after the Italians committed acts of brutality (Ristuccia 1997).

Even the direct invasion of Ethiopia did not provoke meaningful League action. Italy invaded Ethiopia from the northeast and southeast in October 1935. Despite the League finding Italy guilty of aggression, no substantial sanctions were pursued due to the sway of France and Germany (Sarkees and Wayman 2010). Mussolini predicted this inaction, saying that "Until there is proof to the contrary, I refuse to believe that the authentic people of Britain will want to spill blood and send Europe to its catastrophe for the sake of a barbarian country unworthy of ranking among civilized nations" (*The New York Times* 1935). By June 1936, Italy had captured the capital of Addis Ababa and proclaimed the king of Italy as the king of Ethiopia. The League of Nations only weakly reacted when the Italian campaign became excessively brutal (punctuated by an infamous 3-day massacre of up to 20,000 Ethiopians in Addis Ababa), imposing the aforementioned weak sanctions on Italy. Ethiopia remained under the control of Italy until 1941, when it was liberated by British and South African troops fighting World War II, and Haile Selassie was restored to the throne (Sarkees & Wayman 2010; *The Economist* 2017). The incompetence of the League and its subsequent disintegration into World War II is considered by many to be demonstrative of the failure of the League of Nations (Strang 2013a).

## Theoretical Explanations – The Liberal Perspective

Liberalism, one of the major traditional schools of international relations thought, is founded on the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. In his essay *Perpetual Peace*, Kant lays out the formula for a peaceful world: the spread of republican values, a pacific union of democratic states, and limited cosmopolitan law (Kant 2016; Doyle 2016). The spread of democracy is necessary for the spread of peace, as laid out in the democratic peace theory, which argues that liberal democracies do not go to war with each. Citizens bear the cost of war and thus wish to avoid it; in turn, they elect leaders who do not go to war. When all states are democratic, there will be no war between them because it is against the interests of citizens (Snyder 2016). Another tenet of liberal IR thought is the innate connection between domestic and international politics. States function on both the domestic and international stage, and agreements made on the international stage must be desirable to a domestic audience. If the United States makes a treaty that cannot be ratified by the Senate, the treaty is useless (Putnam 2016). The success of the liberal world order, characterized by an open and loosely rule-based regime, requires the proper construction of international organizations to make cheating costlier than cooperation (Ikenberry 2016; Keohane 2016). The connection between domestic and international politics and international institution design is of particular importance to the case of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War.

One element of liberal explanations of the war is the desire to unify the Italian public behind the Fascist regime, through both economics and projecting national power. This "Glory, God, and Gold" reasoning linked the Italian conquest to earlier European conquests in Africa (Bosworth 2002). Mussolini may not have even passed glory on that list; De Grand writes that Colonial Minister Lessona found that "To [Mussolini] the political result of proclaiming the empire was enough." The failure at Adowa was close in the memory of Italians as a sign of inferiority, a feeling that could only be overcome with successful conquest in Africa (De Grand 2004). Mussolini also believed that the economics of conquest would unify Italians, seeing that "...industrialists would profit directly, the middle class would have increased opportunities for jobs in the bureaucracy, while agricultural labourers could dream of the chance to have land of their own" and the possibility of diverting attention from economic policy failures (Strang 2013b). Joining its European peers in Africa, the distributed economic gains, and avenging the loss of the First Italo-Ethiopian War would rally the Italian public behind the regime and Fascism. This would legitimate the regime and allow the Fascists to pursue their totalitarian regime with the complicity of the Italian people.

Racism was another rallying point of public opinion. Mussolini's public and private writings indicate concern with the

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death of white civilization. He was intensely concerned with demographic stagnation; Ethiopia represented a chance for Italians to “settle the highlands” and reverse their declining birthrate (Bosworth 2002). He dismissed Africans as backwards peoples, and conquest was a chance for Italian civilization to expand its greatness and use properly the resources that African ‘savages’ had wasted. Italian advisers worried that the intent of Haile Selassie to modernize the Ethiopian state would preclude Italian expansion, thus the invasion could not wait, even arguing that conditions were more favorable for invasion now than in the 1890s (Strang 2013b). This represented a contradiction in Italian thought: the Ethiopians were somehow both dangerously backwards and dangerously modern.

The conquest of Ethiopia also represented an opportunity for a laboratory of fascism. As Mussolini consolidated control and looked outward for territorial gains, he wished to avoid mass domestic dissent. This was especially true of desired social engineering projects, an important aspect of distinctly Fascist totalitarianism (De Grand 2004). As liberalism predicts, the spectre of domestic politics influenced Italy's actions on the world stage. If Italian attempts to dictate society from the top-down and it stirs unrest in Ethiopia, the trouble could be avoided completely in Italy.

Finally, liberal arguments indicate that the League of Nations was constructed so that Mussolini knew that other powers costs of compliance were higher than the cost of cheating the rules. Therefore, the League of Nations must have been a poorly constructed institution. Italy recognized that Britain and France viewed Italy as necessary to constrain nascent German power (Robertson 1977). There was no recourse for these powers, so the British and French decided to cheat the rules, which the Italians recognized and took advantage of (Keohane 2016).

## The Neorealist Perspective

Neorealism emerged as a modification of realism, which was based on the work of Hans Morgenthau. Neorealists argue that anarchy, the lack of a central world government is the source of conflict between states. States are the primary actors in the anarchical world and try to maximize relative power to ensure survival. This system is typically characterized by the security dilemma, which essentially means that “the measures a state takes to increase its own security usually decrease the security of other states” (Mearsheimer 2016a). The security dilemma means that cooperation is difficult (but possible); states are often concerned about cheating or loss of relative power that can hurt its survival and would rather not take the risk of cooperation (Mearsheimer 2016b). Neorealists accept Morgenthau's conception of the balance of power: without equilibrium in the balance of power, one state will gain ascendancy and destroy other states (Morgenthau 2016). The neorealist view of the balance of power and interstate cooperation is relevant to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia.

Neorealists charge that Mussolini was primarily interested in amassing power and ultimately ensuring Italy's survival. After consolidating his power at home, “Mussolini turned his attention to the development of Italian prestige abroad and the assertion...to a place among the great powers of Europe” (Baer 1967). This projection of power would serve as a deterrent, such that other states did not dare to threaten Italian security. Beyond the spectacle of conquest, increasing Italy's territory, wealth, and birthrate were considered to be signs of increased power that could be achieved by conquering Ethiopia. Mussolini envisioned the settling of the Ethiopian countryside by Italian peasants, who would then be able to have more children because “city populations were [to Mussolini] inherently infertile” (Strang 2013b; Bosworth 2002).

Neorealists also recognize that Mussolini correctly perceived the weakness of the international system. Jervis argues that for cooperation to occur, the costs of cooperation must be made lower than the costs of cheating; Mussolini would have recognized that there was no recourse for cheating the collective security agreement (Jervis 2016). He would have also recognized that the British and French were more concerned with the ascendant Germany and its implications for the balance of power; Italy's invasion might actually be welcomed by the British and French as a counterweight to Germany's rearmament, and it certainly wouldn't be opposed (Robertson 1977). This would raise the cost of cooperation further, and Italy knew it had free rein to project its power (De Grand 2004).

## Discussion

Although neorealism offers important insights, liberalism's treatment of domestic politics ultimately makes it more

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applicable to the case of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War. The major flaw with neorealism, in this case, is its homogenization of states; all states are expected to act the same because they possess the same overriding interest in survival. To deny that fascism impacted Italian foreign policy in the pre-WWII era would be a stretch. If Italy had always wanted to take over Ethiopia, it should have done it before Haile Selassie consolidated power and modernized his military, a major concern of Mussolini's advisers (Bosworth 2002). It is also important that liberalism does not reject that the main concern of states is survival, but it does leave room for ideological considerations.

There are sufficient domestic drivers of the invasion of Ethiopia to validate the observations of liberalism. Mussolini needed to create a certain public spirit that would rally around fascism, which a glorious quest of righteous conquest could foster. Without this spirit, the Fascist regime risked perceptions of illegitimacy as its authoritarianism turned into intrusive totalitarianism. To further assist in avoiding this dissent, the Italians could use Ethiopia as a testing ground for racist totalitarian policies. In this way, the Fascist regime could be legitimized and consolidated with little to no domestic costs.

The conduct of the Italians does not square with the arguments of neorealists. The initial invasion of Ethiopia was met with apathy (if not quiet support) from the League of Nations, especially Britain and France. The point at which Italy faced repercussions on the international stage was when the League learned of the brutality of the campaign. If the invasion had solely been about gaining power, the Italians would have refrained from this action. By committing unnecessary acts of brutality, Italians led to a decrease in their own security, as their economic and political power by sanctions and ostracization from Britain and France.

Neorealism offers important insights into the behavior of Britain, France, and the League of Nations. The abandonment of the principles of collective security in the face of a greater threat in Germany supports the neorealist notion that states will always prioritize their own security, and thus international institutions are prone to cheating members. Similarly, balance of power concerns made them act to equalize the balance; maintaining their alliance with Italy was, in their view, necessary to counterbalance German power. They felt that if they did not maintain this balance, they would face annihilation at German hands.

## Conclusion

Foreign policy is innately connected to domestic politics, and the ignorance of that link is the major blind spot of neorealism, especially in the case of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War. While neorealism is good at explaining state actions when faced with prioritization of serious security threats, it does not explain the internal factors that creates security threats. This is the key advantage of liberalism. Liberalism generally maintains the self-help mentality of neorealism and does not take a naïve view of international institutions: an improperly structured institution will not work. Liberalism offers a fuller picture of the Italian motive for invasion, and thus is the superior theoretical explanation for the invasion.

Beyond its relationship to competing theories of international politics, the Second Italo-Ethiopian War is a significant event, showing the failure of the international community as well as demonstrating the hypocrisy and consequences of European perceptions of Africa as an uncivilized continent. As discussed, the buildup to the war saw the failure of the League of Nations' collective security mechanism, contributing to the League's disintegration as World War II began. State interests prevailed over the rules, as members (led by Britain and France) prioritized the threat of a reemergent Germany over the invasion of Ethiopia. Italians partly justified their invasion, both internally and externally, as a civilizing mission and driven by "Glory, God, and Gold". While this mantra clearly communicates the perception of European superiority, under its banner the most uncivilized of acts were committed, including but not limited to the massacre of 20,000 Ethiopians in Addis Ababa. This heinous act proves that racist thought and rhetoric has consequences beyond mental degradation of its target and proves that the Second Italo-Ethiopian War is more than just a blip on the pre-World War II radar.

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# Principles or Power: Mussolini's Invasion of Ethiopia

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