

# League of Nations SC Committee

Research Report



**Forum:** League of Nations Security Council

**Issue:** The Italian annexation of Abyssinia

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**Position:** President

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## **Introduction**

The Italian annexation of Abyssinia is a significant event in history, shedding light on the complexities of imperialism and international conflict. In 1935, Italy, led by Benito Mussolini, launched a military invasion of Abyssinia (now Ethiopia), leading to its annexation. In the early 20th century, Italian Fascism, which was headed by Benito Mussolini, arose in the midst of social unrest, economic instability, and national dissatisfaction that had arisen in the aftermath of World War I. In 1919, Mussolini established the Fascist Party with the objective of reestablishing Italy's former grandeur by promoting nationalism, militarism, and authoritarianism. Mussolini invaded Ethiopia in 1935 with the intention of extending Italy's colonial empire, demonstrating his dominance, and diverting attention from domestic concerns. He viewed the conquest as a means to restore the Roman Empire's prestige. The brutal realities of colonialism and the failure of international institutions such as the League of Nations to prevent aggression are underscored by this conflict, which continues to influence discussions on historical justice and international relations. As a consequence, it remains relevant today and the annexation of Abyssinia highlights the brutal realities of colonial expansion and the limitations of international organizations in enforcing justice.

## **Definition of Key Terms**

### **Annexation**

Annexation refers to the forcible and illegal acquisition of territory by one state at the expense of another. The prohibition of annexation, whether partial or complete, is a crucial principle of customary international law with no exceptions or derogations allowed. Besides the illegality and absolute prohibition of the use of force and annexation under international

law, the consequences of such actions also breach other unconditional international norms, including the right to self-determination and many more.

### **The Corfu Incident/Crisis**

World War I led to the collapse of the Habsburg and Ottoman empires, necessitating the redrawing of European boundaries and sparking nationalism and territorial disputes. A boundary dispute between Italy and Greece over Albania resulted in the 'Corfu Crisis' of 1923 when Italian members of the Albanian Boundary Commission were killed on Greek soil. Italy's demands were unmet, leading to the Italian navy bombarding the Greek island of Corfu. Greece appealed to the League of Nations, but the dispute was settled by the Conference of Ambassadors after Mussolini's threats. Greece agreed to apologize, hold a funeral service, salute the Italian flag, execute the murderers if found, and pay 50 million lire. The crisis revealed the League's weakness and enhanced Mussolini's reputation, paving the way for his expansionist policies.

### **The Manchurian Crisis**

In 1931, the Japanese Empire controlled the South Manchuria Railway. In September, the Japanese alleged that the Chinese had sabotaged the railway. Using this as a pretext, the Japanese army invaded and swiftly took over Manchuria, expelling Chinese defensive forces and renaming the region Manchukuo. This aggressive expansion violated international treaties and led to Japan's withdrawal from the League of Nations when the League condemned the invasion.

## **Major Countries and Organizations Involved**

### **Italy**

Under Benito Mussolini's leadership, Italy sought to expand its colonial empire by annexing Abyssinia (Ethiopia), using advanced weaponry, including chemical weapons, to overcome Abyssinian resistance. Despite widespread international condemnation, Italy succeeded in occupying Abyssinia until World War II.

## **Abyssinia (Ethiopia)**

The Kingdom of Abyssinia, established in the 13th century CE, evolved into the Ethiopian Empire, through a series of military conquests. Led by Emperor Haile Selassie, Abyssinia fiercely resisted the Italian invasion, enduring significant suffering from combat and chemical attacks. Haile Selassie appealed to the League of Nations for assistance, highlighting the injustice and calling for international intervention. This sovereign state historically encompassed the geographical areas of present-day Ethiopia and Eritrea, enduring until the 20th century CE.

## **League of Nations**

Tasked with maintaining peace, the League of Nations condemned Italy's actions and imposed economic sanctions but failed to stop the invasion or provide effective support to Abyssinia. This inability significantly undermined the League's credibility and highlighted its limitations in enforcing international law.

## **United Kingdom**

The United Kingdom condemned Italy's aggression but was hesitant to take strong action due to its own geopolitical interests and concerns about its colonies in Africa and the Mediterranean. Public opinion in the UK was largely supportive of Abyssinia, with widespread calls for a firmer stance against Italy.

## **Germany**

Nazi Germany, under Adolf Hitler, used the situation to strengthen its relationship with Italy, forming the Rome-Berlin Axis. Germany's support for Italy's actions was part of its broader strategy to challenge the existing international order, with the annexation of Abyssinia serving as a testing ground for its aggressive foreign policies.

## **United States**

The United States, not a member of the League of Nations, maintained a policy of neutrality but condemned Italy's invasion. American public opinion was sympathetic to Abyssinia, with

calls for a more active role in opposing Italian aggression, though the conflict highlighted the limitations of U.S. influence due to its isolationist policies at the time.

## France

France condemned the Italian invasion but was reluctant to take decisive action, influenced by its diplomatic relations with Italy and the need to maintain stability in Europe and manage its own colonial interests. This lack of strong action contributed to the overall ineffectiveness of international efforts to support Abyssinia.

## Timeline of Events

Date	Description of Event
January 1895 – October 1896	The First Italo-Ethiopian War concluded with an Italian defeat.
November, 1918	The First World War came to an end.
October, 1922	Benito Mussolini rose to the position of Prime Minister, and his Fascist Party became the ruling party of Italy.
August, 1923	The Corfu Incident revealed Mussolini's intent to showcase Italian political power, despite facing condemnation from the League of Nations.
September 1931 - February 1932	The Manchurian Crisis shocked the world, yet the League of Nations failed to stop the Japanese Empire.
December, 1934	The Abyssinian Crisis began.

## Relevant UN Treaties and Events

1. The Covenant of the League of Nations (1920): Although predating the United Nations, the League of Nations was the precursor to the UN and played a crucial role in the international response to Italy's invasion of Ethiopia. The League condemned the invasion and imposed economic sanctions on Italy, though these measures were

largely ineffective. The failure of the League to prevent or stop the annexation highlighted its weaknesses and contributed to the eventual establishment of the United Nations after World War II.

2. The United Nations Charter (1945): The UN Charter, established after World War II, details the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the prohibition of aggression, principles directly violated by Italy's annexation of Abyssinia. The Charter's emphasis on maintaining international peace and security reflects the lessons learned from the failure of the League of Nations to prevent conflicts like the Italo-Ethiopian War.
3. The Treaty of London (1915): This secret agreement between Italy and the Allied Powers during World War I promised Italy territorial gains, including parts of Africa, in exchange for joining the Allies against the Central Powers. Although Ethiopia was not directly mentioned, this treaty set a precedent for Italian territorial ambitions in Africa, contributing to Mussolini's later drive to expand Italy's colonial empire, which included the invasion of Abyssinia.
4. The Stresa Front (1935): This was an agreement between Italy, France, and Britain, formed in response to Germany's rearmament in violation of the Treaty of Versailles. While its primary focus was on countering German aggression, the Stresa Front indirectly affected the situation in Abyssinia. The agreement aimed to maintain the status quo in Europe, but Mussolini interpreted the lack of specific provisions regarding Africa as tacit approval for his ambitions in Abyssinia, leading to the invasion later that year.
5. The Kellogg-Briand Pact (1928): Also known as the Pact of Paris, this international treaty, signed by numerous countries including Italy, aimed to renounce war as an instrument of national policy and called for the peaceful resolution of conflicts. Italy's invasion of Abyssinia in 1935 was a clear violation of this pact, highlighting the challenges of enforcing such international agreements and the limits of collective security in the pre-World War II era.

## Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

1. League of Nations Sanctions (1935): Following Italy's invasion of Abyssinia in 1935, the League of Nations imposed economic sanctions on Italy in an attempt to pressure Mussolini to halt his aggression. The sanctions included an embargo on arms sales and the prohibition of financial transactions with Italy. However, these sanctions were not universally enforced, and key resources such as oil were excluded, rendering the measures largely ineffective.
2. The Hoare-Laval Pact (1935): This was a secret agreement between Britain and France, proposed by their respective foreign ministers, Samuel Hoare and Pierre Laval. The pact aimed to end the conflict by offering Italy control over large parts of Abyssinia while leaving the remaining portion as a nominally independent state. When the details of the pact were leaked, it was met with public outrage, especially in Britain, as it was seen as a betrayal of Abyssinia and an implicit approval of Italian aggression. The pact was never implemented, and the war continued.
3. Ethiopian Appeals to the League of Nations (1935-1936): Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia made multiple appeals to the League of Nations, seeking assistance and international condemnation of Italy's invasion. His most famous appeal came in June 1936, when he personally addressed the League, highlighting the plight of his country and the failure of collective security. While his speech was powerful and garnered international sympathy, it did not lead to effective action against Italy.
4. Ethiopia's Liberation and Italian Withdrawal (1941): During World War II, British and Commonwealth forces, along with Ethiopian resistance fighters, launched a military campaign to liberate Ethiopia from Italian occupation. The successful campaign led to the defeat of Italian forces in East Africa and the restoration of Haile Selassie to the throne in 1941. This military intervention ultimately resolved the issue by ending Italian control over Ethiopia, but it was not the result of diplomatic efforts or international mediation.

## Possible Solutions

1. Promoting International Accountability for Aggression: Nations should strengthen international laws and mechanisms to hold aggressor states like Italy accountable for acts of invasion and annexation, such as the 1935 invasion of Abyssinia. This includes ensuring that violations of sovereignty are met with enforceable consequences, such as sanctions or legal action against leaders responsible for such aggression.
2. Enhancing Collective Security in Response to Invasions: International organizations, such as the League of Nations at the time, should have established more effective collective security measures to deter and swiftly respond to acts of aggression like Italy's invasion of Abyssinia. This could have included the creation of a rapid response force to intervene and protect the sovereignty of nations under threat.
3. Supporting Post-Conflict Reconstruction in Ethiopia: The international community should have provided robust support for post-conflict reconstruction in Abyssinia following Italy's occupation, including financial aid, rebuilding infrastructure, and helping to reestablish strong governance institutions to ensure long-term stability and the restoration of Ethiopian sovereignty.
4. Strengthening Diplomatic Mediation in the Italo-Ethiopian Conflict: Governments and international bodies should have prioritized diplomatic mediation in the Italo-Ethiopian conflict, with a focus on early intervention to prevent the situation from escalating into full-scale war. This would have included the establishment of permanent mediation panels with the authority to negotiate a peaceful resolution and prevent the annexation.
5. Fostering Regional Cooperation in Africa: African regional organizations and neighboring countries should have been empowered and supported to take a more active role in preventing and resolving the conflict between Italy and Abyssinia. This would involve developing regional security frameworks and promoting dialogue and cooperation to address the dispute peacefully and resist external aggression.



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