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STRATEGICAL STUDY

ITALO-ABYSSINIAN WAR

The strategical conduct of the campaign  
and supply and evacuation operations.

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## FOREWORD

This study was prepared in conjunction with one written by Captain Numa A. Watson, Infantry, covering related topics to those discussed herein. A fuller understanding of the subject discussed will be secured if read in conjunction with Captain Watson's study.

Due to the very recent conclusion of the Italo-Ethiopian war and the lack of a war office or similar organization in Ethiopia, no accurate data are obtainable covering Ethiopian activities. Of necessity therefore, this study was written primarily from the Italian viewpoint. The recent date of these operations is also responsible for a lack of authentic sources. The principal actors concerned have yet to offer any explanation of the parts they played, in the form of an autobiography or similar work.

Accurate detailed maps of Ethiopia are nonexistent. The spelling of geographical names varies with the author. In this study, the spelling used by Major Norman E. Fiske, Cavalry, United States Army, the American military observer with the Italian armies, has been utilized except when this spelling is in conflict with that shown on the National Geographical Society's map of Ethiopia.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Report of the Military Observer with the Italian Army in East Africa, Nos. 1-10 inclusive, by Major Norman E. Fiske, Cavalry, G.B., M.I.D., G.S.C., Washington, D. C.

An excellent account of the entire operation. The officer making this report is known by the author, who reposes considerable confidence in his judgment and ability. By far the best source yet published on this subject.

Italy and Abyssinia, by Lt. Col. H. de Watteville, C.B.E., late R.A.

A series of articles running in the Army Quarterly by Lieutenant Colonel H. de. Watteville, C.B.E., late R.A. The writer, a recognized authority, prepared these articles during the progress of the campaign. His complete sources are not known, but are believed to be very accurate, and possibly secured at the British War Office from the reports of a British observer. His statements are verified by Fiske's reports throughout. The articles are pro-Ethiopian but the strategical discussions are sound.

Italy, England, Abyssinia. by General Henry Rowan-Robinson.

General Rowan-Robinson's book was written to meet the demand for a general discussion of the subject matter when the situation became acute in the summer of 1935. The work is of value chiefly as a review of Italian-Ethiopian relations during the past 50 years and for its broad discussion of the international aspects of the crisis.

The Price of Peace by Simmonds and Emeny.

This is the best and broadest discussion of the international situation in 1935 known to the author. Both writers are fully competent to discuss the subject matter.

Personal Interviews with Major Francis W. Brady, Air Corps, U.S.A.

Major Erady was the American attache for air at our legation at Rome for the four years immediately preceding the outbreak of hostilities. He was a classmate of the author at the Army War College during the conduct of the campaign. He knows, either personally or by reputation, all of the principal Italian actors.

The author has great confidence in his knowledge of the subject due primarily to the startling accuracy with which he forecasted all of the events which subsequently occurred as early as September 1935.

Time, 1935-1936

The only historical value attached to this source is its portrayal of the reaction of public opinion in Great Britain and France when the terms of settlement for the Ethiopian situation became known in October 1935. The publications of these terms also verified the existence of an unofficial understanding as to the ultimate fate of Ethiopia between France, Italy and Great Britain.

Abyssinia by  
Frederick von Popenhuasen

A translation by Corporal F. W. Martin at the Army War College. Popenhuasen gives an excellent discussion of the military geography of Ethiopia.

FOOTNOTE ABBREVIATIONS USED

- MOIA Report of the American Military Observer with the Italian Forces in East Africa.
- IAA Italy and Abyssinia.
- EIA England, Italy, Abyssinia.
- FWB Personal Interviews with Major F. W. Brady, Air Corps, U.S.A.
- POP The Price of Peace.
- Time Articles appearing in this publication during the campaign.
- FVP Frederick von Popenhuasen, Military Geography of Ethiopia.

## ITALO-ABYSSINIAN WAR

Strategical conduct of the campaign and supply and evacuation operations.

1. INTRODUCTION.--Relations between Ethiopia and Italy had been strained for about fifty years. (1) The recent war, which resulted in the annexation of Ethiopia by Italy, was caused by a number of conditions, the chief of which were as follows:

a. Italy's desire for a favorable colony where her surplus population might settle under the rule of the home government. (2)

b. Her dire need for the raw materials such colonies might supply. (See Appendix No. 1)

### 2. ITALIAN AND ETHIOPIAN PREPARATIONS.--

a. Italy's preparations had started years previous. She had sent officers and selected civilians in to Ethiopia to make favorable contacts with local chieftains and maps of the country. (3) General Staff studies indicated that two years' time for active preparations was advisable. Actual preparations started in January, 1935. (4) By October, 1935, she had ready for active operations, three Italian divisions, four native brigades, and a large number of auxiliary troops in Eritrea. Additional troops were in Italian Somaliland, including one Italian division, several light tank units, motorized machine-gun organization, and other auxiliary troops. (5) Air corps units were in Eritrea and Somaliland. (6) To include February 1, 1936, Italy placed 401,208 troops in the field. (7)

b. Ethiopia's preparation consisted mainly in a more or less leisurely mobilization of her manpower, and frantic

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(1) EIA pp 1-39. (2) POP, p 130 et seq. FWB (3) MOIA p 20, FWB  
(4) ibid (5) MOIA p 52. (6) ibid (7) MOIA p 105.

efforts to secure foreign credit and modern arms, to supplement the few already in her hands. No data are available as to the exact number of arms secured, but some deliveries are known to have been made. (8) Estimates as to how many men she placed in the field are of little value.

3. ETHIOPIAN STRATEGY.--The general opinion was that Ethiopian strategy would consist of an irregular warfare, with particular attention to the Italian lines of communication, in an effort to prolong the struggle and exhaust Italian gold, without which Italy could not continue the struggle. At the outset this policy was apparently in the process of being carried out. The national characteristics of the people, however, coupled with Italian inactivity and visions of a second Adowa, led to the offensive actions of December and early January and the resultant concentration of large forces in the immediate front of the Italian mass. This policy was fatal. It gave a sound, strategical objective for Italian efforts, and eventually brought about the Ethiopian defeat. (9)

4. THE ITALIAN STRATEGICAL CONDUCT OF THE CAMPAIGN.--The following factors must be recognized to fully understand the Italian strategical policy:

a. An unofficial, but nevertheless fully understood, agreement had been reached between Italy, France and England, as to the future fate of Ethiopia. It probably contemplated either a division into zones of influence or direct annexation. With this understanding, an extensive campaign on Italy's part was not initially justified. (10)

b. Italian financial conditions could not sustain a prolonged war of great magnitude. A positive decision must be reached in not to exceed 18 months. (11)

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(8) IAA p 255; FWB

(9) IAA pp 257-258; MOIA Part 1

(10) Time 10, Oct 35; FWB

(11) FWB; POP 130 et seq.

c. One of the reasons for this conquest was to divert the attention of the Italian masses from their unsatisfactory living conditions. Initial success must be obtained. In so doing, it would be of material advantage to the political party in power if such successes were secured under Fascist leadership. (12)

d. The near chaos which reigned in Europe demanded that the best Italian troops and equipment be retained on the European mainland. (13)

e. Ethiopia offered no vital strategical objective, save possibly a large concentration of manpower. Addis Ababa, Harrar, and Gondar were important but not vital geographical objectives in a colonial war. It would therefore be a sound policy to encourage any Ethiopian concentrations. (14)

f. An almost total lack of roads in Ethiopia made their construction more or less essential as large bodies penetrated toward the interior. Since the invasion was to be followed by permanent occupation, it was financially sound and expedient to construct these roads in their final form so that they would be immediately available for colonial expansion after a military decision had been reached. A policy therefore which protected Italian territory and permitted the construction of these roads was sound. (15)

g. The ports in Somaliland were so lacking in facilities that a large force could not be based there. Massaua was the only port with sufficient capacity for this. (16)

h. The proximity of the campaign to near by British and French interests, coupled with the Italian understanding with these nations, made it mandatory that she, initially at least, avoid any action which might generate a feeling of

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(12) *ibid* (13) EIA pp 1-39; FWB; IAA p 260.

(14) Author's opinion. (15) MOIA p 238. (16) MOIA pp 44-45.

suspicion or alarm in Great Britain or France. Hence it was not feasible to move initially toward the head waters of the Blue Nile or against any portion of the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railroad.

Considering the foregoing, it is obvious that the selection of the main route of advance and the location of the Italian mass was in reality a "Hobsons choice".

In the author's opinion, consideration of the foregoing factors led the Italians into an initial strategical policy in which diplomatic considerations dominated military operations. In the final stage the situation was reversed. The entire plan is shown graphically in Appendix No. 2.

At the outset, military operations were not pushed with vigor. Italy expected her real victory to be achieved by statecraft and the army was to serve only to divert the attention of the Italian masses and establish a base for future colonization and commercial effort. The strategical concept therefore, was to conduct offensive operations from Eritrea and push into Ethiopia considerable distance. In Somaliland a similar policy was to be followed except that such operations were designed only to protect Italian Somaliland from invasion. In the northern zone, General De Bono, close political friend of the Dictator, was placed in command. (17) He advanced rapidly on Adowa (scene of Italian defeat in 1896) and that place fell with little effort. Troops were pushed to the line Tacazza-Passo-Araro-Macalle, at which points they were halted due to the length of their line of communication over poor roads. Road construction toward the front was pushed to lay the ground work for future operations should these become necessary. (18) In Somaliland

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(17) FWB; MOIA Part 1. (18) MOIA Parts 1, 3 & 4; IAA p 251.

General Graziani, an efficient regular soldier, with few troops, started a successful defense of that territory by the use of offensive tactical thrusts into eastern Ethiopia to capture water holes and secure the routes of approach down the Scebeli and Guiba Rivers. This prevented any considerable force from operating toward Somaliland. Water was the key of the situation here. (19)

Troops and supplies continued to flow into the northern theater with a view to their eventual utilization should the situation so demand. Construction of all sorts was pushed vigorously. (20)

A conference was held in Paris during October 1935 between Italy, France and Great Britain, for the purpose of discussing a settlement of the Ethiopian situation which might be acceptable to the members of the League of Nations which had voted sanctions against Italy at the outset of operations. This conference purposely allowed the news to leak out concerning a previous understanding between the three powers as to the eventual fate of Ethiopia. The trial balloon proved a boomerang. Public opinion in France and Great Britain was outraged and a demand, which the statesmen could not ignore, was made for the continuation of League sanctions. (21) Italy then found it necessary to turn to the battlefield for a favorable decision.

The foregoing event marked the conclusion of the initial strategical policy adopted, and ushered in the concluding phase. Military success was now mandatory. Speed became essential. It was too late to change the location of the Italian mass. Its ultimate objectives, however, could now include any part of Ethiopia and not materially strain

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(19) MOIA Parts 2 and 5. (20) MOIA p 105; IAA p 251.  
(21) Time Oct 10, 1935.

international relations beyond those existing <sup>with</sup> ~~in~~ France and Great Britain. De Bono, the politician, was kicked upstairs. General Badoglio, an able soldier, was hurried to Ethiopia to pull the Dictator's diplomatic chestnuts out of the fire.

Badoglio arrived in Ethiopia early in December, 1935. Realizing the situation, he speeded up road building and supply operations with a view to an early offensive. He was met by the Ethiopian offensive of late December and early January. (22) The Ethiopian strength is unknown and estimates vary between 70,000 and 140,000. The Ethiopian plan was probably in the nature of a wide turning movement against the Italian right, designed to defeat that wing and cut off the main portion of the Italian forces from their bases of supply. (See Appendix No. 3) While marked by some local successes at both Abbi Addi and the Dembequinia Pass, the toll of automatic weapons was too great and after heavy losses the offensive bogged down. The Italian forces were never seriously threatened. (23)

Badoglio's plan for his offensive was so conceived that its success would eventually destroy or capture the bulk of the opposing forces. It consisted of a concentration of the Italian mass of maneuver against the Ethiopian right, with the subsequent employment of this mass of maneuver by a shift toward the Ethiopian center in an effort to successively execute double envelopments of the two right divisions of the Ethiopian forces. A final movement against the Ethiopian left was also a double envelopment. The influence of the "Cannae Theory" is self evident. (24) It is graphically illustrated in Appendix No. 4. The author believes the plan was strategically sound.

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(22) IAA p 202; MOIA Part 1-21-2b. (23) MOIA p 260.  
(24) IAA p 202; MOIA Parts 1-7-8-9.

The tactical execution of this plan was attempted in the Enderta, Second Tembien, and Scire offensives, which occurred on February 10-15, 17-29, and February 29-March 3. (25) None of the actions succeeded in completely surrounding and destroying the forces opposing Badoglio. This was due primarily to the extreme difficulties of the terrain, but well timed, vicious counterattacks aided the defense materially. In all three cases, however, the Ethiopian forces were so roughly handled that well executed pursuit operations by Italian aircraft left the Ethiopian's morale in such a state that these forces began to dissolve. (26)

During the remainder of March, Badoglio pushed his forces slowly southward, constructing roads as he progressed. At one time he had 125,000 combat troops working on roads in addition to some 50,000 Italian civilians and natives. (27) Late in March, the forces had reached the vicinity of the Mecan Pass where he halted and prepared a position to meet another offensive by the Ethiopians led in person by their Emperor, Haile Selassie. The Emperor's attack occurred on March 31. It was conducted with great vigor and some local successes were secured. However, the superiority of the Italian armament took such a heavy toll that by March 3 the attack was stopped and the Emperor's forces began to withdraw. Badoglio immediately launched a pursuit. This pursuit was led by the native Azebu Gallas tribe and continued until the entire force melted away, leaving the way to the capital clear. (28)

Driving his troops as fast as the country would permit, utilizing motor lorries for transportation when feasible, and towing the vehicles by hand when necessary, he pressed

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(25) MOIA Parts 7-8-9; IAA pp 252-255. (26) *ibid*  
(27) IAA p 255; MOIA Part 10. (28) MOIA Part 10.

steadily southward in two columns. Most of his supplies were dropped from the air. His leading elements entered Addis Ababa on May 5. Haile Selassie fled. (29)

In conjunction with the movement on Addis Ababa and prior to the Emperor's defeat, the 2d Italian Corps was moved southwest across very rugged country, devoid of roads, and with the cooperation of a column of tanks and motorized infantry, moving south along the Sudan border, captured Gondar on May 30. (30)

In Somaliland, Graziani launched a successful expedition, on January 2d, which penetrated to Neghelli and from this point operated against the rear of an Ethiopian force which was threatening Somaliland. This operation finally forced the surrender of Ras Desta's forces. Following this operation, Graziani continued to consolidate the positions already won while awaiting the arrival of the Libia division. The services of this native division were desired because the Italian troops could not stand the climate in eastern Ethiopia. Upon its arrival, he launched the Ogoden offensive to cut the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railroad and capture Harrar. This plan is illustrated graphically in Appendix No. 5. It was successfully executed with little difficulty and Harrar fell on May 8. (31)

During the execution of this offensive, Graziani had in mind a rapid advance on Addis Ababa by railroad as soon as he captured Harrar. Unavoidable delays and Badoglio's arrival at Addis Ababa prevented the execution of this portion of his plan, but it was sound and would have spelled the Emperor's doom had the latter been successful in stalemating Badoglio's southward advance. (32)

5. ITALIAN LEADERSHIP.--No discussion of this campaign

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(29) MOIA pp 334-338; IAA p 256. (30) IAA p 255; MOIA pp 279-283.  
(31) MOIA Part 5. (32) MOIA p 225 et seq.

would be complete without reference to the energetic leadership of Badoglio and Graziani. These two men dominated the situation throughout, and conducted their operations on a sound basis. Both lived informally in the field with their men. Badoglio's headquarters consisted of 10 officers in contrast to the usual array of staff and auxiliary officers who clutter up most modern headquarters. Similarly, Graziani attended strictly to the matters confronting him, cutting red tape and routine procedures with common sense decisions that all professional soldiers can well afford to emulate. (33)

6. SUPPLY OPERATIONS.--In general, the Italian supply operations in Ethiopia were conventional insofar as bases, advanced depots, and the flow of supplies to the front, were concerned. The simple fare of the Italian soldier and the still simpler repast of the native troops simplified matters insofar as tonnage figures were concerned. (34) The utilization of motors on a large scale speeded up transportation.

There ~~were~~ three achievements which the author considers of sufficient magnitude to merit discussion.

The first one ~~is~~, the road construction done by the Italians. This construction was accomplished in three echelons. The first operation consisted in merely widening existing trails. This was done by the combat troops as they advanced in order to permit some very light transportation to operate. It was crude but effective. (35) The second step followed closely. It consisted in the utilization of the labor of combat troops and civilian labor companies, operating under army engineers. This operation improved the roads, and portable bridges were installed. The final phase of this construction was the one that is an innovation. It consisted of the

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(33) MOIA Parts 1 to 10. (34) MOIA Parts 3 and 6.  
(35) MOIA p 129, p 142, Part 6.

the construction of thoroughly modern highway<sup>a</sup> never less than 20 feet in width. This was done by civilian contract and the product was the equal of most roads now constructed in America. It is well to consider, however, that the construction of this most excellent highway system had a dual purpose. Primarily designed to supply the forces in the field, its ultimate use was to be for the development of the conquered country in years to come. (36)

The second point worthy of notice is the extensive use made of motor transportation. About 13,000 vehicles were used by the army, and these were assisted by a considerable number operated by civilian firms who made hauling contracts with the army. The types employed varied from a one-ton, four-wheeled drive, all-purpose truck, capable of being used on tracks and with very high wheels to permit underclearance, to a seven-ton Diesel engine truck. The former type was used largely in the advanced zones and proved capable of successful operation over extremely rough country where roads were non-existent. The larger type trucks were employed for heavy hauling in the rear areas. Another innovation was the utilization of American caterpillar tractors drawing 10-ton trailers in a sort of train. These were used in Somaliland, and traversed country where only the brush had been removed. (37)

The principal problem which confronted the Italians in their use of motor transportation was that of trained driver personnel and motor transport officers who were professionally efficient. This untrained personnel was responsible for a large increase in the repair problem. Apparently none of the Italians realized the importance of this unfavorable situation which materially handicapped their efforts. (38) Repairs were

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(36) *ibid* (37) MOIA p 156 et seq, Part 6, p 238 et seq.  
(38) *ibid*

made in three echelons. The first echelon was in the operating organization. The repairs were rudimentary, their value, questionable. The second echelon was termed a mobile repair unit. It operated under canvas. The work done consisted of some replacement of parts, all tire work, and most of the electrical repairs. Some precision machinery was carried by these units. The third echelon was known as major repair shops. These functioned in permanently constructed shops favorably located. The problem of skilled labor, while acute, was solved by bringing civilian mechanics from Italy. These organizations did very excellent work and were operated in an extremely efficient manner. (39)

Another factor which probably caused additional burdens to be thrown on the repair sections, was the policy adopted of sending only used Italian transportation to Ethiopia and leaving the new units purchased with the Italian army in Italy with a probable view of utilizing this modern equipment in Europe. Some of this transportation dated back to the World War. It did not stand up. (40)

American trucks used were of three makes: Fords, Chevrolets and Studebakers. (41) They were  $1\frac{1}{2}$ -ton commercial models with no modifications except the addition of oversized tires. In Somaliland, Graziani's supply was practically based on Fords and caterpillar tractors, the latter being commercial models. (42)

Supply by air is the third point to be noted. This was done with such consistency and to such a large extent that it must be considered as a feasible and efficient means for any future operations. In one case the entire 4th Italian Corps was supplied for days with water, food and ammunition

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(39) *ibid*      (40) *ibid*      (41) MOIA p 157.      (42) MOIA pp 97, 157, 226.

in a most rugged country where motor transportation could not penetrate, and animal transportation was unable to supply the demand. The march on Dessye and Addis Ababa was accomplished solely because it was possible to drop the badly needed gasoline, oil and food supplies at designated points and in sufficient quantities to insure continuation of the advance. Most of the tonnage was dropped by improvised parachutes in 200-pound bundles. (43)

7. EVACUATION.--The evacuation of sick and wounded presented no great problem for two reasons. First, the daily sick rate was from 1.8 to 2.0 per thousand per day. This was a much smaller figure than normally found in Italy proper in time of peace. (44) In the second place the Ethiopian spared no wounded and those wounded who made their way back to aid stations, were generally not seriously injured. This is shown by an average time in Italian hospitals of 15 days. (45)

Sick and wounded were evacuated to roads and airports by hand and animals. Motor ambulances and airplanes carried them to field and ship hospitals. The bulk were cared for in field hospitals which were well equipped and very efficiently operated. No base hospitals were built. Hospital ships, air-cooled, were placed at Massaua and Mogadiscio. They remained at these places until they were filled to capacity and then returned to Italy to discharge their sick for care in hospitals there. Only two convalescent hospitals were built. Both of these were in the high plateau country in the northern theater. (46)

The principal diseases encountered were pulmonary cases, malaria, some sunstrokes, and a little dengue. Venereal diseases were high. No pronounced epidemics occurred, due

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(43) IAA pp 254, 260, 261; MOIA p 244.  
(44) MOIA Part 4, p 190 et seq, Part 6, p 249 et seq.  
(45) ibid  
(46) ibid

primarily to the fact that sanitary conditions were so regulated by the medical personnel that they were, in fact, superior to those encountered in Italy. (47)

8. CONCLUSIONS.--The<sup>main</sup> military lessons to be deducted from the operations in Ethiopia are, in the author's opinion, ~~to be~~ <sup>can</sup> briefly summarized as follows:

a. Leadership is still the dominant factor in war.

b. The airplane, as a weapon for combat purposes and a medium of supply, has proved itself indispensable to a modern army.

c. Motor transportation is superior to animal-drawn in most cases, and while it probably will never completely supplant the latter, it must be recognized as the primary means available.

d. The more civilized the force the greater the supply problem. Operations of a large magnitude cannot succeed with inadequate supply even when facing an inferior enemy, due to the defensive strength of automatic weapons.

e. Road construction increases in importance when motor transportation is used.

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(47) MOIA pp 192, 249.