Haile Selassie's Protectorate Appeal to King Edward VIII
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Haile Selassie’s Protectorate Appeal
to King Edward VIII

In the documents printed below is the record of a recently disclosed request for help made by Haile Selassie I during Ethiopia’s most desperate days in the war forced upon it by Italy in 1935-1936. Italy’s long planned, long expected invasion had begun on 3 October 1935 when the troops of General Emilio De Bono struck southward from Eritrea and occupied the ancient Ethiopian cities of Aksum, Aduwa and, then, Makale. After this initial thrust, which was meant to avenge Italy’s bitterly remembered defeat of 1896 and erase the ‘shameful scar’ of Aduwa, the Italian advance stopped, grounded by the need to regroup, to improve transport and communication facilities, and pursuant to Mussolini’s order of late August to “halt on the line conquered and take steps to organize the rear and await events on the international plane”.1

International disapproval was soon forthcoming. Italy was condemned in the League of Nations as having violated its treaty obligations under the Covenant (in addition to breaking other agreements such as the Italian-Ethiopian Treaty of Friendship and Arbitration of 1928, the Tripartite English-French-Italian Treaty of 1906, the Kellogg-Briand Pact, and various conventions against the use of toxic gas in warfare). Debate began in the League in preparation for imposing sanctions upon Italy for its aggression. But, initially, no further action was taken. Despite a period of early anxiety as the British Home Fleet steamed into the Mediterranean in late September, Mussolini soon concluded that Britain and France, the leaders of the League, were not prepared to use military force, at least immediately, to stop Italy’s aggression. Economic and financial sanctions, imposed in November and which were a growing nuisance to Italy, were not in the short run sufficient to check Italy’s action, so long as petroleum was not included among the sanctioned articles and oil was permitted to move in and out of Italian ports. In these circumstances Mussolini prepared to accelerate his military drive in Ethiopia. In mid-November 1935 he replaced De Bono with Italy’s most distinguished soldier, Marshal Pietro Badoglio (thereby...

also getting him conveniently away from Rome where, should domestic repercussions against the Fascist regime develop as a consequence of the Ethiopian conflict, Badoglio was being mentioned as a possible successor to the Duce), and Badoglio went to East Africa with a free hand to improve the Italian military position and to launch a sustained offensive as soon as possible.

In the meantime, however, a number of major uncertainties remained that gravely concerned the Italian government. Ethiopian resistance was expected to increase as the Italians moved deeper into the country. Already in November an Ethiopian counter-attack in the South forced the troops of General Rodolfo Graziani, operating from Italian Somaliland, to withdraw from positions they had taken in the Ogaden. Economic sanctions came into force as Badoglio left Italy, and world opinion was hardening against the aggressor State. In the absence of total military conquest there remained the possibility of a negotiated territorial settlement. During the first months of the war, as indeed in the pre-war period, the leaders of Britain and France bent their efforts to such an end, and a number of feelers, the extent and seriousness of which are still undetermined, were initiated in Rome throughout the course of the war for an agreement to be made directly with the Ethiopian emperor.

British and French efforts to avoid a showdown with Italy by arranging a negotiated settlement were ill-fated. The Hoare-Laval plan of December 1935 proposed to partition Ethiopia, giving to Italy for annexation the peripheral lands of the empire already under Italian occupation while permitting Italy economic and administrative predominance over much of Southern Ethiopia. But with its immediate repudiation by the British government, and the fall of Sir Samuel Hoare, Mussolini could not thereafter count on British generosity toward his imperial ambitions. Anthony Eden, Hoare’s successor as Foreign Secretary, was not inclined to help. As Eden stated to the British Minister in Addis Ababa, Sir Sidney Barton, in his telegram of 24 February 1936, Britain would no longer take a lead, as Hoare had done, in seeking a solution outside the League. In rejecting the Emperor’s suggestions that Britain act as mediator between the two contending parties and that Britain might arrange an armistice while bilateral negotiations were carried on, Eden insisted that conciliation should take place through the agency of the League. As Eden said to the House of Commons on the afternoon of 24 February, “if both sides to this dispute would even now accept the good offices of the League of which they are both members I am sure that there would be no hesitation among their fellow-members in agreeing that the machinery of the Committee of Five is still available.” Further, Eden stated to Barton that as far as the British government was concerned the basis for agreement must be the report of the Committee of Five, issued on 18 September 1935, which while placing Ethiopia under League auspices clearly excluded Italy from the territorial gains the Italians claimed and which by February they had won in battle.

Of the other category of proposals for settlement, those undertaken by members of the Italian government with the aim of coming to a direct agreement with the Emperor, we have only partial information. What efforts were made stemmed mainly from an uncertain military and political situation. With his armed forces and the prestige of his regime committed in East Africa, with the European scene profoundly unsettled by his actions, and before February 1936 when Badoglio’s offensive gave hope of greater military success, perhaps Mussolini would have agreed to a limited settlement if some territorial agreement short of total military conquest could be contrived that would resolve what De Bono

called the "broadly psychological aspect of the question." Perhaps, indeed, Mussolini would have found grounds for negotiation in the Hoare-Laval plan, had it not been preemptorily scuttled by the British government.

The fact is we know very little of the nature and extent of proposals directed to the Emperor emanating from sources within the Italian government. Such plans were afoot. The Under-Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Fulvio Suvich, had given his encouragement in early December to a plan, the agent of which was a Levantine adventurer named Chucri Jacir Bey, which by direct agreement was meant to put most of Ethiopia under Italian control, leaving to Haile Selassie his titles and to his dynasty succession on the throne. There were other emissaries going to and from Rome during early 1936 ostensibly with plans for a settlement. In British documents mention is made of such persons as the English speculator Francis Rickett, the governor of the Bank of Ethiopia, Mrs. Negadras Martin, and Tewfick Doss Pasha, but the Foreign Office showed no interest in these activities. Mussolini, secretive and tentative as ever, appears to have been simply extending some unofficial feelers, and then waiting to see what, if anything, developed. According to Haile Selassie, it was overtures of this kind which, in the face of a renewed Italian military advance, prompted his appeal to the new, young King Edward VIII on 19 February 1936.

But, as Eden's cool reply indicated, in February the British government was simply unwilling to get involved in extra-League negotiations of the kind the Emperor indicated. The bitter public response in England to the Hoare-Laval proposal seemed to preclude any further exercises in the discredited and politically risky old diplomacy. Eden, Hoare's successor, was to the public mind the representative of a high-principled pro-League policy. But, like the Cabinet as a whole, Eden was dismayed by the Italian-Ethiopian conflict. It was clear by February that the League could not stop the war by means of the existing limited sanctions. Any extension of sanctions ran the risk, untenable to the British, of antagonizing the United States or provoking a war in the Mediterranean with Italy, a war that possibly would entail strategically unacceptable losses to the overextended British fleet and would perhaps be a war without effective allies for Britain, so long as France held back its full support. To avoid these complications, rather than to uphold the principle of collective security through the League or to save the independence of Ethiopia, was the main aim of British diplomacy. Therefore Eden eschewed further inquiry about Mussolini's putative offer for peace negotiations to which the Emperor referred. Britain would not facilitate bilateral negotiations. Above all, Britain would not take the responsibility of establishing a protectorate or mandate over Ethiopia. A unilateral British guarantee to secure Ethiopia, already rejected when the issue had been discussed in previous years, was all the more undesirable when foreign troops were in occupation of much of the country. In his telegram to Barton, Eden noted the urgency of the appeal and requested further information on the course of the war. However, the British position was to do nothing more than was being done, which was patently insufficient to save Ethiopia, but also less than would provoke Mussolini to a 'mad dog act' against the British forces in the Mediterranean. Eden insisted the entire matter of bilateral negotiation, if was to be pursued at all, must be kept entirely in the framework of the League, where nothing was likely to be done about it.

2. For this plan see F. Suvich et al., Il Processo Roatta, Rome, 1945, pp. 258-261.
Haile Selassie, once again as throughout the conflict, had asked for more assistance than the British cared to give. The British reply was sent to Addis Ababa on 24 February, but not until 12 March did Colonel Holt, the British military attache, get to the Emperor at Quoram to tell him what it was. This unexplained delay may have been the product of difficulties in arranging transportation at a time of increasing military activity, or it may have been that Haile Selassie foresaw the futility of his request. The Emperor received Eden’s message without comment, but with obvious disappointment, and he spoke at length of the inadequacies of the League of Nations. He was facing a desperate situation. As he had pointed out in his appeal of 19 February, Ethiopia lacked, and was not permitted to receive arms or equipment sufficient to oppose the well-supplied Italian forces. And as the Italian offensive proceeded to success after success Mussolini’s interest in a negotiated settlement naturally decreased. Despite the Emperor’s subsequent appeals to the League no help came to Ethiopia, and on 2 May, left without hope, Haile Selassie fled his homeland. Three days later Marshal Badoglio’s troops entered Addis Ababa and on 9 May 1936 Ethiopia was annexed to Italy. War, not diplomacy, determined Ethiopia’s future.

DOCUMENTS*

Document 1

Sir Sidney Barton (Addis Ababa) to Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs [Anthony Eden] (London), 20 February 1936.

Received: 9. 15 a.m., 21 February 1936.

No. 69.

**Most immediate.

Most secret.

The Emperor sent for the Military Attache at Dessie February 19th and dictated to him through Emperor’s personal servant in English the following confidential message which he brought me by aeroplane today.

The message is addressed to His Britannic Majesty and if His Majesty refers it to his government the Emperor asks that the latter will treat it as strictly confidential and of special importance to the Emperor. The Military Attache was asked to return to Dessie if possible on February 22nd and contrive to indicate

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* The three documents printed here, which were presented to the Cabinet on 24 February 1936, are found in the Public Record Office, London, under Cabinet Conclusion 9 (36) of 24 February 1936 (Cab. 23/83). Appendix. File copies are found in the Foreign Office records, FO 371/20173. Copies of Document 1, Barton’s telegram No. 69 of 20 February 1936 (the Emperor’s message) were sent to the King, the Prime Minister, and to the Service Departments. The time and date of despatch of Document 3, Eden’s reply to Barton on the evening of 24 February, not given in the Cabinet records, is ascertained from the Foreign Office file copy, FO 371/20173, file 84.

on that date to the Emperor by telegraph the minimum delay necessary for an
answer to be received.

The message begins:

When Italy started this war she put out news making it appear that Ethiopia
was starting the war against Italy's colonies. Let alone starting the war
against Italy's colonies we have been forbidden to have enough arms to police
our own country until recent times. It is not necessary to tell this matter in
detail.

But since the aggressiveness of Italy has been decided and England is one of
the countries who has pronounced this judgment against Italy this matter is
also clear.

Sanctions which were put into force against Italy to stop the war have
become insufficient. Even more, because Italy was quite prepared for this
matter, sanctions have become a means to strengthen herself.

When we started our defensive war, though we knew we were not equally
equipped with arms as Italy, nevertheless we wanted to save our honour and
await the judgment of the world. We allowed them to enter our country and
massacre our people knowing that we had unequal arms to match them. This
we did to defend our honour and judgment of the world.

Because England has been the main defender of the case we were hoping
England would have aided us in a way which would not have touched her
honour integrity or armed forces by giving us arms ammunition and loans to
carry on our defensive fight. But though it has been judged against Italy
that she was an aggressor she has not found a way to help the aggressed State
neither to stop the war nor to strengthen us. Not only has Italy violated a
treaty not to use gas against us or other nations but she has been using poison
gas against our people to kill women and children. The world knows how
Italy has bombed Red Cross Hospitals and how she has killed patients in Red
Cross Hospitals and how she has massacred those who have taken shelter under
the Church; of these facts the government of England has been informed.

The reason that we have refused to accept the Hoare-Laval peace proposition
is as the British Government has understood that it was an unjust notification to
the effect that British Government refused to accept it. The reason we refused
it was because we should have had to pay what was an indemnity regardless of
money and blood we have shed.

If England desires to bring peace between us on the basis of international
law she has always championed and if England has this desire we wish before
any more blood is shed and any more harm is done to our country that England
may decide a place where the two countries may meet and negotiate the matter,
in the meantime an armistice being called. This may be conveyed to the
British Government in the name of the Emperor.

The reason we have presented this proposition is that Signor Mussolini has
offered us to negotiate directly with her for peace. If it is necessary to let the
British Government know the proposition he has made we will do so when
reply to this message is received.

But our hopes and our thought is to bring our country into a higher civilisation
and to tie it with benefit both to our country and to England either in the
form of a protectorate or in the form of a mandate without touching our inde
pendence and to work for development of the country which is our own. If this
latter could be possible we would rather choose this than another proposition.

(Message ends.)

My own comments are contained in my telegram No. 70."
Document 2

Sir Sidney Barton (Addis Ababa) to Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs [Anthony Eden] (London), 20 February 1936.

Received: 9:15 a.m., 21 February 1936.

No. 70.

"Most immediate.

Most secret.

My immediately preceding telegram.

This message is evidently the Emperor's own composition and is, I judge, unknown to any of his Ministers or advisers. Normally he conveys such messages to me in French with no one else present, but in this instance, in the absence of a common language and in accordance with Ethiopian practice, he made use of his personal servant who has some knowledge of English, rather than risk the use of an official interpreter. For this reason I have abstained from attempt to improve on the English in order to keep as far as possible the character of the original. The plural use throughout indicates the Emperor's speaking.

In my opinion the background of the case is made up of the following:

1. Emperor's genuine dislike of war as such and attachment to peace.
2. His realisation of the immense injury which a prolonged war must inflict on his country and particularly on the cause of its reform and progress which is second only to its continued independence, in his aims.
3. His realisation that delay in application of further sanctions coupled with refusal of positive League assistance and recent Italian advances on both fronts render a prolonged struggle inevitable.
4. His conviction emphasised repeatedly and consistently to me throughout secret conversations of 1933 and 1934 that only some form of British guarantee for the future could render possible a stabilisation of his relations with Italy.

Whilst I realise that a [grp. undec.] mandate or protectorate is excluded—and, however embarrassing the circumstances may be, England is the only country he trusts—I submit that quite apart from League principles and abstract justice we must as realists accept the fact that only by assuming in some degree responsibility which this trust implies can we hope to promote an early peace. France and Vatican are ruled out as acceptable mediators, and if individual effort is to be utilised we alone remain. If we refuse he will not be willing to accept an [?] unequal settlement which he is convinced will only be the first stage on the road to ultimate absorption of his country by Italy."

Document 3


Despatched: 7:45 p.m., 24 February 1936.

"Secret.

Your telegrams Nos. 69 and 70 (of February 20th: Emperor's plea for intervention).

This message from the Emperor seems to me to constitute a more urgent appeal for assistance than your comments would indicate. For this reason
I shall be glad of a reply as early as possible to my telegram No. 64 (of February 19th).

In the meantime your reply to His Majesty should make the following points plain:

1. H.M. Government cannot contemplate any suggestion for the assumption of a British mandate or protectorate over Abyssinia;

2. Any movement for conciliation between the two parties must come from, or be addressed to, the League. His Majesty may rest assured that H.M. Government will play their full part in promoting any effort which may be made under this condition;

3. In the course of the debate in the House of Commons on February 24th I emphasised that the report of the Committee of Five must in the opinion of H.M. Government remain the foundation of conciliation. It has always been and will remain H.M. Government’s urgent desire to see conciliation on this basis attempted;

4. The Emperor might in these circumstances wish to profit by this public and authoritative declaration of H.M. Government to address to the League an assurance of Abyssinia’s readiness and desire to proceed on this basis and to ask that the Committee of Five should again be convoked.

Should His Majesty decide to adopt this course I should be glad to be informed.

Following for your own information only. I do not for the moment desire to enquire the nature of any proposals which may have reached the Emperor from Italy, more particularly if the channel of these proposals is as I should suspect a very unreliable one.”