

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Negotiating Empire: The Secret Talks Between Italy and Ethiopia in Italian Archive Documents (1935–1940)

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Abstract

This article examines the secret negotiations, hitherto neglected, between Fascist Italy and the Ethiopian Empire before, during and after the Italo-Ethiopian War (1935–1940). Based on recently discovered Italian archival sources and Italian and British diplomatic documents, it reveals how Emperor Haile Selassie and other members of the Ethiopian court were involved in negotiations during and after the conflict. The study therefore contributes to a deeper understanding of the war between Italy and Ethiopia, interpreting it in the light of European events but also of secret negotiations.

Résumé

Cet article examine les négociations secrètes, jusqu'ici négligées, entre l'Italie fasciste et l'Empire éthiopien avant, pendant et après la guerre italo-éthiopienne (1935–1940). S'appuyant sur des sources d'archives italiennes récemment découvertes et sur des documents diplomatiques italiens et britanniques, il révèle comment l'empereur Haïlé Sélassié et d'autres membres de la cour éthiopienne ont participé aux négociations pendant et après le conflit. L'étude contribue ainsi à une meilleure compréhension de la guerre entre l'Italie et l'Éthiopie, en l'interprétant à l'aune des événements européens, mais aussi de négociations secrètes.

Keywords: Italo-Ethiopian War; Italian colonialism; League of Nations; Fascist Italy; Haile Selassie

Introduction

The war in Ethiopia is one of the most thoroughly researched topics in Italian historiography, as demonstrated by the extensive literature devoted to the

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subject. Nevertheless, the secret negotiations between the two belligerent parties during the conflict have thus far received only marginal attention, being addressed mainly in incidental ways by existing studies. Secret negotiations during the war are only briefly mentioned by Del Boca, Zewde, and Sbacchi, none of whom, however, explore the issue in depth.¹ On the other hand, Sbacchi is the only one who delves into the negotiations after the end of the conflict between Italy and Ethiopia.²

The analysis of Italian diplomatic documents and archival material held at the Central State Archive (ACS) and the Diplomatic Historical Archive (ASD), allows us to partially fill this gap and is the main theme of this article. Through this methodological approach, it has been possible to reconstruct three distinct negotiation processes. The first, which unfolded between 1935 and 1937, involved Enrico Cerulli – Director General for Political Affairs at the Ministry of the Colonies – on the Italian side, and Dr. Adrien Zervos – a physician, Greek Consul General in Ethiopia, and personal advisor to Emperor Haile Selassie – on the Ethiopian side. These negotiations also involved both Benito Mussolini and the Negus directly. Following the conclusion of the Ethiopian conflict, a second attempt at negotiation was made by the Ethiopian Emperor, intermittently, during the period of 1937–1938, with the support of members of the English and Vatican clergy, who engaged with various representatives of the Italian government. Finally, a third negotiation initiative emerged between 1938 and 1940, with Asfa Wossen, the eldest son of Emperor Haile Selassie, as the primary Ethiopian interlocutor.

This article aims to investigate and contextualize historically the negotiations conducted by Zervos and Cerulli, concentrating mostly on the Italian decision-making process and placing the negotiations within the broader framework of European tensions. Finally, it will explore the negotiations that took place after 1937 and, although inconclusive, continued until 1940.

From a methodological point of view, a multi-archival research proved essential for several reasons. Firstly, it allowed us to examine different perspectives on the issue, going beyond those of the governments involved to include the various Italian ministries concerned. Secondly, the practical difficulties of archival research in Italy made such an approach necessary: the archives of the Italian Ministry for Africa, for example, are divided between the ASD and the ACS, with a significant portion of the documents missing. Consequently, the existence of additional, as yet unknown, documents cannot be excluded – a possibility inferred from the fragmentary nature of some of the available sources, even though the existing materials already offer a valuable and informative picture. Furthermore, although Italian archival sources are indispensable for understanding the decision-making processes of the fascist regime, they inherently reflect its ideological vision and strategic priorities. The lack of direct Ethiopian voices, due both to the absence of first-hand accounts and the

¹ Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855–1991* (James Currey, 2001), 166; Angelo Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa Orientale, La conquista dell'impero* (Mondadori, 2014), 245; Alberto Sbacchi, "Italian Mandate or Protectorate over Ethiopia in 1935–1936," *Rivista di studi politici internazionali* 42 (1975): 559–582.

² Alberto Sbacchi, "Secret Talks for the Submission of Haile Selassie and Prince Asfaw Wassen, 1936–1939," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 7, no. 4 (1974): 668–680.

limited availability of Ethiopian documentation, requires a critical and cautious interpretation of the sources and highlights the need for further research. This article therefore aims to provide a preliminary overview of the subject, analyzing the role of negotiations in the Italian-Ethiopian war.

Prewar period and Italo-British relations

According to most historians of the Ethiopian War, including Del Boca, Mori, and Labanca, Mussolini decided to invade Ethiopia in the early 1930s, as evidenced by military plans drawn up by the Ministry of Colonies.³ However, there is no consensus on how to interpret fascist foreign policy at that time.⁴ Scholars such as De Felice, Quartararo and Sbacchi believe that, although preparations had begun, Mussolini was not aiming for total annexation, but rather control of the peripheral areas or a protectorate.⁵ Other historians, including Labanca, Rochat, and Dominioni, see the memorandum of 30 December 1934 – just days after the Walwal incident – as proof of the intention to proceed with a complete military conquest.⁶ However, it must be noted that even some scholars who do not align with De Felice and Quartararo nevertheless emphasize a certain ambiguity in Fascist foreign policy during that time. Mockler, for instance, notes that war plans against Ethiopia had already been prepared in 1906, 1915, and 1926, but that such detailed plans did not necessarily indicate an actual intention to resort to a full-scale invasion.⁷

Many scholars agree on the importance of placing the Italian decision in the context of European diplomatic dynamics.⁸ With the rise of Nazi Germany, France and Great Britain wanted to prevent Italy from moving closer to Berlin and initially tolerated the Italian colonial initiatives.⁹ However, France's recognition of Italy's "free hand" in Ethiopia did not include the use of force, and relations with Britain remained tense.¹⁰ In this sense, a key document is the memorandum of Deputy Foreign Minister Suvich (January 1935), which proposed

³ On the Italian-Ethiopian war, see Nicola Labanca, *La Guerra d'Etiopia (1935–1941)* (Il Mulino, 2015); Renato Mori, *Mussolini e la conquista dell'Etiopia* (Mondadori, 1978); Giorgio Rochat, *Le guerre italiane 1935–1943* (Einaudi, 2008); Zewde, *History*; Anthony Mockler, *Haile Selassie's War: The Italian-Ethiopian Campaign, 1935–6* (Random House, 1984); George Baer, *The Coming of the Italo-Ethiopian War* (Harvard University Press, 1967); G. Bruce Strang (ed.), *Collision of Empires: Italy's Invasion of Ethiopia and Its International Impact* (Routledge, 2013); Thomas Coffey, *Lion by the Tail: The Story of the Italian-Ethiopian War* (Hamilton, 1974); Christian Carnevale, *La frattura insanabile. La Guerra d'Etiopia come crisi globale (1934–1936)* (Mimesis, 2025).

⁴ Rosaria Quartararo, *Roma tra Londra e Berlino* (Jouvence Editore, 2002); 90; Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce* (Einaudi, 2019), 605.

⁵ Quartararo, *Roma*, 90; De Felice, *Mussolini*, 644, 706–707; Sbacchi, "Italian Mandate."

⁶ On the Walwal incident, see Mockler, *Selassie's War*, 38–43; Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome (ACS), Fondo Badoglio, 4/127, Mussolini, Memorandum for Badoglio, 30 December 1934.

⁷ Anthony Mockler, *Il Mito dell'Impero* (Rizzoli, 1977), 61. Also see Mori, *Mussolini*.

⁸ Quartararo, *Roma*, 88; Labanca, *Guerra d'Etiopia*, 184–185; see also Eugenio Di Rienzo, *Il "Gioco degli Imperi". La guerra d'Etiopia e le origini del secondo conflitto mondiale* (Società Editrice Dante Alighieri, 2018).

⁹ See Quartararo, *Roma*; Mori, *Mussolini*; De Felice, *Mussolini*; Labanca, *Guerra d'Etiopia*, 184.

¹⁰ Quartararo, *Roma*, 96.

two strategies: a protectorate with British economic guarantees or a “limited” territorial partition with London – which, however, is not further detailed by the diplomat.¹¹ In fact, Rome was acutely aware of the threat Britain would perceive from an Italian conquest of Ethiopia and Mussolini had always considered an understanding with London essential to his expansionist aims in Africa.¹²

Germany’s remilitarization of the Rhineland in April 1935 temporarily distracted European attention from the Ethiopian question, and the issue was not discussed at the Stresa Conference.¹³ This was interpreted in Rome as tacit approval of Italy’s African initiative.¹⁴ Mussolini, increasingly distrustful of British policy, rejected Eden’s proposals based on territorial exchanges with Ethiopia.¹⁵ The hardening of the Italian position was also linked to the perception that London was increasingly against Italian expansion in Africa.¹⁶

According to some members of the Italian government such as Lessona or Aloisi, at the time, only a mandate or protectorate over Ethiopia could have prevented war, as already discussed both through official diplomatic channels and in back-channel contacts with Ethiopian representatives.¹⁷ From June to August 1935, Italy drew up several protectorate plans, including one with Haile Selassie as regent and Italian advisers, inspired by the models of Tunisia, Morocco, and Iraq.¹⁸ Previously, it had also discussed them with Negus Haile Selassie through the embassy and intermediaries such as Dr. Borra. However, the Emperor refused.¹⁹ International diplomacy also explored this option. The Greek Diplomat Politis – described by Mori and Quartararo as an influential figure at the Ethiopian court – informed French Foreign Ministry Secretary-General Léger that the Negus might accept the cession of Adwa and Ogaden; Mussolini discussed this with British and French representatives.²⁰ Grandi, the Italian Ambassador to Great Britain, also discussed the matter with Vansittart, despite doubts about acceptance by the smaller states of the League.²¹ Meanwhile, Enrico Cerulli’s secret mission was launched, seeking a direct agreement with the Negus through his adviser Zervos.²² At the same time, as early as March 1935, the military secret services were exploring the possibility of a direct agreement between Mussolini and the Ethiopian Emperor.²³ Despite

¹¹ De Felice, *Mussolini*, 645.

¹² Baer, *Italo-Ethiopian War*, 110; Quartararo, *Roma*, 113.

¹³ Mori, *Mussolini*, 20.

¹⁴ Mori, *Mussolini*, 20; Quartararo, *Roma*, 123; Sbacchi, “Italian Mandate,” 563.

¹⁵ Mori, *Mussolini*, 36.

¹⁶ Mori, *Mussolini*, 36.

¹⁷ De Felice, *Mussolini*, 672; Paolo Aloisi, *Journal* (Plon, 1957), 295; Alessandro Lessona, *Verso l’Impero*, (Sansoni, 1939), 157.

¹⁸ Alberto Sbacchi, *Il colonialismo italiano* (Mursia, 2009), 10.

¹⁹ Del Boca, *Gli italiani*, 245.

²⁰ Quartararo, *Roma*, 135–139; Mori, *Mussolini*, 49.

²¹ Sbacchi, “Italian Mandate,” 564; Angelo Del Boca, *Il Negus. Vita e morte dell’ultimo re dei re* (Laterza, 2007), 88; Quartararo, *Roma*, 135–139; Mori, *Mussolini*, 49; Coffey, *Lion*, 94; Enzo Collotti, *Fascismo e politica di potenza. Politica estera 1922–1939* (La nuova Italia, 2000), 256.

²² ACS, Ministero dell’Africa Italiana (MAI), Gabinetto (G), 15, Nicolaos to Hortense, 22 August 1935.

²³ Quartararo, *Roma*, 202.

military preparations, Mussolini sought to avoid a direct confrontation with the United Kingdom, partly because of the King's opposition and his awareness of the military risks.²⁴ In July, he instructed Grandi to seek a "definitive and legal" solution with Great Britain, referring to the Tripartite Treaty, which provided for the partition of Ethiopia in spheres of influence.²⁵ French diplomacy, led by Minister for Foreign Affairs Laval, tried to mediate to avoid conflict, while the British government still harbored hopes for an agreement.²⁶ On 31 August, Italy was informed that Ethiopia would ask the League of Nations for a joint mandate with Italy, France, and the United Kingdom for the modernization of the country.²⁷ On 11 September, Hoare and Laval agreed on the imposition of economic but not military sanctions.²⁸ Then, on 18 September, the League proposed an international protectorate, which Italy rejected as insufficient in terms of territorial and economic concessions.²⁹ According to the Italian diplomat Guariglia, this plan would in fact have reduced Italy's presence in Ethiopian administration, thereby nullifying the ongoing troop deployments – which, in his view, served both as instruments of conquest and as tools of diplomatic pressure.³⁰

On 28 September, the "Duce" leaked to the press his willingness to negotiate with London, aware of the political and diplomatic risks of war.³¹ Even after hostilities began, Mussolini thus maintained a dual strategy: on the one hand, rapid military action; on the other, openness to a back-channel solution. It was known that Haile Selassie was willing to make concessions in order to retain power in the center of the country.³² However, these overtures were not enough to avoid armed conflict.

From the outbreak of hostilities to the proclamation of the Italian Empire

The beginning of Italian military operations in Ethiopia had no immediate impact on the ongoing diplomatic negotiations, either in Europe or in Ethiopia. As previously noted, Rome was fully aware of the potentially adverse consequences

²⁴ Mori, *Mussolini*, 55.

²⁵ ACS, MAI, G, 12. *Considerazioni sul Tripartito nei riguardi anglo-italiani*; on the "Tripartite treaty", see Edward C. Keefer, "Great Britain, France, and the Ethiopian Tripartite Treaty of 1906," *Albion* 13, no. 4, (1981), 364–380 and Luciano Monzali, *Il colonialismo nella politica estera italiana 1878–1949* (Società Editrice Dante Alighieri, 2017).

²⁶ Baer, *Italo-Ethiopian War*, 423.

²⁷ ACS, MAI, G, 12, Lessona to De Bono, telegram, 31 August 1935.

²⁸ Lorenzo Villari, *Storia diplomatica del conflitto italo-etiope* (Zanichelli, 1943), 144.

²⁹ Villari, *Storia diplomatica*, 136.

³⁰ Raffaele Guariglia, *Ricordi, 1922–1946* (Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1949), 269.

³¹ De Felice, *Mussolini*, 686. According to Aloisi, two days before the conflict, Mussolini said that if Italy had obtained "the great vassal regions" of Ethiopia, the conflict would have been avoided; see Aloisi, *Journal*, 310.

³² Sbacchi, *Il colonialismo italiano*, 6. On the sanctions imposed by the League of Nations, see Gaynor Johnson, "Philip Noel-Baker, the League of Nations and the Abyssinian Crisis, 1935–1936," in Strang, *Collision of Empires*, 53–71.

that a prolonged conflict could have on the country and on its relations with Great Britain. Moreover, only four days after the beginning of hostilities, General De Bono sent Mussolini a telegram in which he warned of the possibility that the Italian army might soon find itself in “serious difficulty” and in “critical condition,” urging caution in media communications and advising against any triumphalist rhetoric in the press.³³

In order to avoid further escalation with Great Britain, the Italian government therefore made a proposal, on 3 October – the very day military operations began – to Minister Hoare, suggesting a “general demobilization to clear the atmosphere.” Then, Mussolini delivered a public speech on 5 October, in which he reaffirmed Italy’s intention to maintain strong relations with the nations committed to preserving peace in Europe. Nonetheless, alongside these conciliatory signals, the Fascist government continued to pursue a dual strategy. While formally seeking dialogue with the United Kingdom, it simultaneously intensified anti-British propaganda in the Middle East, relying on a coordinated network of agents directed by Enrico Cerulli.³⁴ One of these agents who, as seen before, was sent to Ethiopia to meet Zervos, reported, the day after the invasion, that Haile Selassie had expressed willingness to initiate preliminary talks.³⁵ In the days that followed, further communications confirmed the Emperor’s interest in clarifying the timing and modalities of such negotiations. Mussolini, promptly informed by Cerulli, authorized the agent’s return to Italy in the event that the Negus presented “serious” proposals.³⁶ Subsequent documentation records the agent’s return from Africa in early November and a second journey at the end of the month, during which he carried a “confidential file.”³⁷

A memorandum written by Cerulli during this period and addressed to Mussolini suggested the continuation, through the intermediary, of a “cautious” line of action in order to maintain an open channel for direct negotiation with the Ethiopian Emperor.³⁸ Simultaneously, Italy submitted requests to the French government – as part of a potential mediation with London – including annexation of already conquered territories, controlled disarmament of Ethiopia, cession of Assab to the Negus, and the attribution to Italy of a mandate over the non-Amharic parts of the country, within the framework of the League of Nations.³⁹ As Mori observes, they aimed to preserve, at least formally, the continuity of the Ethiopian state.⁴⁰ However, the British government responded unfavorably to these overtures, partly due to the approaching general elections.⁴¹ The British establishment was divided between a more uncompromising line (represented by Eden) and a conciliatory approach (embodied by Hoare and

³³ Gianfranco Bianchi, *Rivelazioni sul conflitto italo-etiope* (CEIS, 1967), 184.

³⁴ Quartararo, *Roma*, 166.

³⁵ ACS, MAI, G, 15, *Telegram from Addis Abeba to Phosalex Pirée*, 4 October 1935.

³⁶ ACS, MAI, G, 15, Gino Balduzzi to Phosalex Pirée, 14 October 1935.

³⁷ ACS, MAI, G, 15, *Lasciapassare*.

³⁸ ACS, MAI, G, 15, Cerulli to Mussolini, 14 November 1935.

³⁹ Sbacchi, “Italian Mandate,” 11.

⁴⁰ Mori, *Mussolini*, 135.

⁴¹ De Felice, *Mussolini*, 714.

Vansittart). Another attempt at deescalation occurred in November when General Ezio Garibaldi was sent to London, tasked with presenting Italy's proposals. These included the transfer to Italy of already conquered lands, the cession of the Danakil and Ogaden regions, and a mandate – with Italian participation – over the remaining Ethiopian territories. These proposals were not taken into consideration by London, which believed that the proposals for negotiation should be more limited.⁴²

Meanwhile, military operations on the Ethiopian front had reached a stalemate. In late November, however, Italian intelligence discovered that Britain and France were drafting a mediation proposal, the Hoare-Laval Plan.⁴³ This offered Italy Tigray, Ethiopian sea access, an Italian economic zone under Ethiopian sovereignty, and international oversight of Ethiopia.⁴⁴ Although the proposal was promptly rejected by both Addis Ababa and the League of Nations, the Grand Council of Fascism approved it.⁴⁵ Hoare's subsequent resignation, however, derailed any further negotiation efforts. In this regard, opinions remain divided as to whether Mussolini approved the agreement or not.⁴⁶ With the collapse of the Hoare-Laval initiative, Italy found itself facing increased diplomatic isolation.⁴⁷

In this context, the regime increasingly relied on parallel initiatives led by intelligence services. On the initiative of the military intelligence, Mussolini tasked the businessman Jacir Bey with opening secret negotiations with the Negus, with the aim of ending the war by February 1936.⁴⁸

In December, contacts between Zervos and the Italian agent in Ethiopia became more frequent. He reported that, despite Haile Selassie's initial refusal to accept a protectorate, efforts were underway to find a formula "that would preserve mutual dignity."⁴⁹ Letters from the agent based in Djibouti also confirmed interest in economic compensations, mining and industrial concessions, as well as personal guarantees for the Ethiopian Emperor. Zervos asked if Italy would halt its offensive during negotiations, but Cerulli said Rome planned to continue its advance.⁵⁰

By January 1936, the military deadlock and the absence of an effective diplomatic resolution had reactivated negotiation channels. Within the Italian government, Lessona admitted the possibility of an outcome involving the conquest of Tigray and economic agreements.⁵¹ Italian diplomacy also sought to reengage with Britain through French mediation, aware of growing international hostility and reluctant to form a comprehensive alliance with Germany.⁵²

⁴² Mori, *Mussolini*, 137.

⁴³ De Felice, *Mussolini*, 715.

⁴⁴ Villari, *Storia diplomatica*; Mori, *Mussolini*, 226.

⁴⁵ Bianchi, *Rivelazioni*, 115.

⁴⁶ Mori, *Mussolini*, 235; Del Boca, *Gli italiani*, 465; De Felice, *Mussolini*, 723.

⁴⁷ Di Rienzo, *Il "Gioco degli Imperi"*, 52.

⁴⁸ Del Boca, *Gli italiani*, 499.

⁴⁹ ACS, MAI, G, 15, Telegram to Phosalex Pirée, 23 December 1935.

⁵⁰ ACS, MAI, G, 15, Nicolaos to Hortense, 25 December 1935.

⁵¹ Sbacchi, *Il colonialismo*, 10.

⁵² DDI, viii, vol. 3, no. 59, *Cerruti, to Mussolini*, 15 January 1936.

Mori and De Felice agree in noting that a large part of the Fascist leadership favored an understanding with London, driven by anxieties over Germany's activities in Ethiopia and Austria. Hitler had in fact supplied Ethiopia with war material – and, according to an Italian government document, also biological weapons – and was preparing to annex Austria.⁵³

Despite conciliatory overtures from the French, as Deputy Minister Suvich noted in a memorandum to Mussolini, the conditions for a new peace proposal had not yet matured.⁵⁴ On that same day – 23 January 1936 – however, Suvich outlined to Mussolini two potential solutions: a negotiated one within the League of Nations – granting a mandate over Ethiopia's peripheral zones – or a direct agreement with the Negus that, “even if reluctantly, would be accepted by the League.”⁵⁵ It is probably in these terms that the continuation of talks between Zervos and Cerulli should be interpreted.

In a letter to Mussolini, Cerulli listed the Ethiopian proposals put forward by Zervos on behalf of the Emperor. These included the transfer to Italy of large portions of Ethiopia's southern and eastern territory and a railway concession linking Eritrea and Somalia west of Addis Ababa. Ethiopia also proposed the assistance of the League of Nations (with Italy's participation), the restoration of pre-occupation status in Tigray, and the transfer of the port of Assab to Addis Abeba. Faced with Cerulli's intransigence, Zervos emphasized the internal political pressures weighing on the Emperor, who needed to secure some form of territorial or symbolic gain to justify a peace agreement. Zervos also asked whether Italy was willing to consider the Laval-Hoare plan as a framework for negotiations, the possible cession of Axum and the form of international assistance preferred by Italy, either under the aegis of the League of Nations or through a bilateral agreement. Cerulli replied by asking what kind of alliance (“I mentioned those that Great Britain maintains with Portugal, Iraq, Egypt, etc.”), suggesting a protectorate. According to the Italian envoy, Ethiopia's distrust of Great Britain and France had resurfaced, making a renewed alignment with Italy desirable for the Ethiopian leadership.⁵⁶

The interpretation of Italo-Ethiopian diplomatic dynamics in 1936 is further clarified by the fact that, by March of that year, negotiations had reached such an advanced stage that the possibility of establishing a protectorate was being considered excluding Britain, the League of Nations, and France from the negotiation process, despite France's ongoing efforts to promote a peace agreement within the framework of the League.⁵⁷

⁵³ Mori, *Mussolini*, 246; see Manfred Funke, *Sanzioni e cannoni. 1934–1936: Hitler e Mussolini e il conflitto etiopico* (Garzanti, 1972). Some documents held at the ACS refer to “biological warfare materials prepared in Germany for shipment to China ... requested in recent days by Ethiopian agents.” However, at the current stage of research, it is not possible to add anything further on this matter, which requires further investigation. See ACS, MAI, G, 1, Memorandum to Mussolini.

⁵⁴ DDI, viii, vol. 3, no. 40, Suvich to Mussolini, 10 January 1936.

⁵⁵ DDI, viii, vol. 3, no. 40, Suvich to Mussolini, 10 January 1936.

⁵⁶ ACS, MAI, G, 15, Cerulli to Mussolini, 26 February 1936.

⁵⁷ Quartararo, *Roma*, 201; DDI, viii, vol. 3, no. 347, Bova Scoppa to Mussolini, 2 March 1936; no. 354, Bova Scoppa to Mussolini, 3 March 1936; no. 401, Cerruti to Mussolini, 8 March 1936.

Indeed, diplomatic documents from the period confirm Italy's desire for "direct conversations between Italy and Ethiopia ... to proceed quickly ... with a subsequent report to the League of Nations," and for the cessation of hostilities to occur only upon the suspension of economic sanctions.⁵⁸ The rationale for this bilateral negotiation strategy is explained by Suvich in relation to a remark made by the Soviet ambassador to Rome, Stein: "if we want to find a solution to the Italian-Abyssinian conflict, the League of Nations must give the impression that it is not interested in the Negus and that negotiations must take place directly between us and the Abyssinians."⁵⁹

Parallel negotiations were conducted through Afework.⁶⁰ Italy's proposals involved retaining the Emperor on the throne, granting him a formal role in a nominally independent state, though one effectively under Italian influence, provided that Italy became its sole bordering power. In exchange, Rome expressed willingness to cede Assab and Axum. Another proposal preserved Ethiopian territorial integrity while instituting a mandate modeled on the Moroccan precedent, whereby Italy would exercise direct administration over certain regions for twenty years, after which local populations would be allowed to decide whether to integrate into Italian sovereignty.⁶¹

These contacts continued during the Italian offensive, even though they were officially denied at the diplomatic level.⁶² This likely reflects Italy's preference for direct negotiation with Ethiopia or may be explained by political considerations, as perhaps implied in a communication from Ambassador Cerruti in Paris to Mussolini: "it was evident that the Negus would have immediately initiated negotiations if a suggestion had come from London, or even a single word that removed any hope of further diplomatic support."⁶³

In the proposals being transmitted to Haile Selassie during this period, Italy expressed its willingness to recognize the Negus's control over part of Ethiopian territory, effectively outlining a framework for a protectorate. This intention is confirmed not only by official documentation but also by statements from persons close to Mussolini, who indicated that the Duce considered preserving a position of prestige for the Negus.⁶⁴ It is in this context that a letter sent by Cerulli to Zervos, dated after the decisive Italian victory at Lake Ashangi, should be interpreted. In it, Cerulli declared that Ethiopia had now fallen, yet added: "perhaps you could still salvage a few scraps [of Ethiopia]; but then they must immediately grant you full powers to negotiate and sign, without hesitating for a single minute," suggesting the potential for a territorial concession under the Emperor's nominal authority.⁶⁵

⁵⁸ DDI, viii, vol. 3, no. 414, Suvich to Mussolini, 10 March 1936; DDI, viii, vol. 3, no. 415, Suvich to Cerruti, 10 March 1936.

⁵⁹ DDI, viii, vol. 3, no. 527, Suvich–Stein conversation, 25 March 1936.

⁶⁰ Bahru Zewde, "The Ethiopian Intelligensia and the Italo-Ethiopian War 1935–1941," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 26, no. 2 (1993): 271–295; Carnevale, *La frattura*, 267.

⁶¹ Sbacchi, *Il colonialismo*, 12.

⁶² DDI, viii, vol. 3, no. 585, Cerruti to Mussolini, 4 April 1936.

⁶³ DDI, viii, vol. 3, no. 585, Cerruti to Mussolini, 4 April 1936.

⁶⁴ Sbacchi, "Italian Mandate," 583.

⁶⁵ ACS, MAI, G, 15, Cerulli to Mussolini, 4 April 1936.

On 16 April, following the occupation of Dessie, Badoglio invited Haile Selassie to cease hostilities and open peace negotiations, promising that, the Italian entry into Addis Ababa “would serve only to safeguard the Emperor’s life and restore public order.”⁶⁶ Meanwhile, in Geneva, Rome was invited to make a gesture of détente ahead of the signing of an armistice. Yet Italy insisted on the necessity of direct negotiations with Ethiopia, excluding the League of Nations.⁶⁷

As time passed and British intransigence toward a mediated solution appeared increasingly evident, the Italian government leaned toward the complete annexation of Ethiopia – despite French warnings to the contrary. Ambassador Chambrun urged the adoption of an international arrangement modeled on the Moroccan precedent.⁶⁸ By contrast, Aloisi argued that Italy needed to present the international community with a clear and irrevocable position regarding the Ethiopian question. He advised Mussolini to announce simultaneously the cessation of hostilities and the annexation of Ethiopia or, preferably, the establishment of an Italo-Ethiopian empire modeled on the British Indian Empire. This arrangement could have been accompanied by a local plebiscite and an affirmation of the formal continuation of Ethiopia’s state identity. According to the Italian representative in Geneva, while it had once been possible to negotiate with Britain under a framework allowing for a “partial solution,” the only remaining course of action was an autonomous and immediate solution – albeit one that would predictably provoke international hostility.⁶⁹ This sentiment was apparently shared by King Edward VIII, whom Grandi met secretly during this period of heightened tension between Italy and Britain. During their conversation, the monarch suggested that Italy should tone down its rhetoric concerning Britain’s “defeat,” noting that over time British public opinion would accept any agreement reached on Ethiopia.⁷⁰ Churchill, who also conferred with Grandi, expressed a similar view, insisting that attention should instead be redirected toward Europe to prevent German domination of the continent.⁷¹ In light of these considerations, Suvich’s perspective is particularly noteworthy. In a memorandum addressed to Mussolini, he weighed the pros and cons of full annexation while also emphasizing the need to pursue a “legally grounded solution.” After assessing various international scenarios, he recommended “working intensively on the ground to increase submissions, declarations of loyalty and allegiance from the chiefs, and proclamations from the local populations ...; to restore a semblance of formal authority to the leaders who have turned to us or may

⁶⁶ Lessona, *Verso l’Impero*, 216.

⁶⁷ DDI, viii, vol. 3, no. 683, Aloisi to Mussolini, 16 April 1936; Lessona, *Verso l’Impero*, 217: “Since the Geneva hook is about to break, it would be wise to prepare one here that would allow us to negotiate directly ... This step on our part, on the other hand, can only be beneficial from an international point of view.”

⁶⁸ DDI, viii, vol. 3, no. 755, Suvich–Chambrun conversation, 24 April 1936.

⁶⁹ DDI, viii, vol. 3, no. 785, Aloisi to Mussolini, 28 April 1936.

⁷⁰ DDI, viii, vol. 3, no. 785, Aloisi to Mussolini, 28 April 1936.

⁷¹ DDI, viii, vol. 3, no. 808, Grandi to Mussolini, 1 May 1936.

do so.” However, he added, “nothing prevents, should the opportunity arise, the insertion into this program of either a peace offer to the Negus or to another more or less legitimate Ethiopian representative, or a formal declaration of annexation on our part.”⁷² The French government similarly advised concluding peace “with any Abyssinian authority whatsoever, without even explicitly mentioning annexation, while considering the necessity of allowing the League of Nations to save face.” Paris also stressed Britain’s pivotal role in the matter, stating that “it would be desirable for the terms of such a peace to be communicated first and foremost to the British.”⁷³ However, the flight of the Negus from Ethiopia on 2 May 1936, provided Italy with an argument that there was no longer a legitimate counterpart with whom to sign a peace treaty. For this reason, the British ambassador to Rome, Drummond, proposed that “form be preserved by giving the solution the appearance of a negotiated peace,” which would make “recognition by other Powers possible.”⁷⁴

From the end of the war to the conclusion of negotiations via Cerulli and Zervos

A few months prior to the proclamation of the Italian Empire, Suvich had presented Mussolini with the opportunity to pursue a settlement concerning the Ethiopian issue, primarily with the aim of normalizing relations with the United Kingdom and avoiding a potentially dangerous international isolation.⁷⁵ Following the Italian occupation of Addis Ababa, the Duce gave several interviews to the press in which he asserted that, notwithstanding sanctions, Italy sought rapprochement with Western powers in order to avert a European conflict. According to Quartararo and De Felice, Mussolini – after exploring shared solutions with London, the League of Nations, and even the Negus – ultimately concluded that annexation was inevitable, though he was aware it would threaten any rapprochement with the United Kingdom. Both Quartararo and De Felice argue that Mussolini viewed military operations primarily as tools of diplomatic leverage rather than as preludes to full conquest. However, in their reconstructions, the Emperor’s flight marked the point of no return, precipitating the decision to proclaim the Empire. In contrast, Mori contends that Mussolini never seriously intended to negotiate with Haile Selassie, while Rochat and Dominionio cite a telegram in which the Duce explicitly ruled out any form of “shared sovereignty,” thus rejecting indirect rule solutions proposed by Badoglio and Graziani.⁷⁶

Contrary, therefore, to what De Felice and Quartararo claimed, namely that the Negus’s escape put an end to any possibility of negotiation, archival documents held at the Italian Central State Archive attest to continued contacts

⁷² DDI, viii, vol. 3, no. 817, Suvich to Mussolini, 2 May 1936.

⁷³ DDI, viii, vol. 3, no. 822, Cerruti to Mussolini, 4 May 1936.

⁷⁴ DDI, viii, vol. 3, no. 822, Cerruti to Mussolini, 4 May 1936.

⁷⁵ De Felice, *Mussolini*, 738.

⁷⁶ See Matteo Dominionio, *Lo sfascio dell’Impero* (Laterza, 2008), 97; Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, 77.

between the two parties through Zervos and Enrico Cerulli.⁷⁷ Their correspondence reveals that even after 9 May 1936 – the date of Mussolini’s proclamation of the Empire – the Fascist government maintained a channel of communication with the Negus, who had taken refuge first in Jerusalem and then in London. In the immediate aftermath of the proclamation of the Italian Empire, Cerulli received a letter from Zervos, now in Palestine with Haile Selassie, stating that he had been summoned by the Emperor to “arrange ... a definitive understanding.”⁷⁸ On 3 June 1936, Zervos, on behalf of the Emperor, sent a letter to Cerulli requesting urgent updates on the status of the negotiations.⁷⁹ The following day, Cerulli responded by reaffirming that the sole preliminary condition for any negotiation was the Negus’s recognition of the legal status resulting from the capture of Addis Ababa.⁸⁰ In reply, Zervos inquired about the advantages and concessions Italy was prepared to offer in exchange for a final peace agreement.⁸¹

A possible solution involving a sort of protectorate had already been discussed in European diplomatic circles after the end of the conflict. In April, Chambrun had warned Deputy Foreign Minister Suvich that relations with the United Kingdom could be compromised if Italy pursued the full annexation of Ethiopia.⁸² Similarly, on 6 May, French diplomat Alexis Léger emphasized that a reduced Ethiopian state – limited to its central core – should nonetheless retain an international personality and remain a member of the League of Nations.⁸³ Along the same lines, industrialist Alberto Pirelli – drawing on conversations with prominent British figures including Winston Churchill – suggested a solution analogous to that adopted in India: recognition of Italian authority by local leaders (*ras*), while preserving Ethiopian representation at international level. Archival documentation analyzed by Mori confirms that, in the months following the capture of the capital, both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of the Colonies developed plans for indirect rule over Ethiopia.⁸⁴ Under French diplomatic pressure, Mussolini avoided using the term “annexation” in his speech of 9 May and did not clarify whether the new adopted legal order (the Italian Empire) formally encompassed Ethiopia.⁸⁵

Indeed, Alessandro Lessona himself acknowledged in internal documents that a unilateral solution would have “decisive consequences” at the international level. As a maximal concession, he proposed the establishment of a residual Shoan state, entirely surrounded by Italian-controlled territory, formally placed under Italian protectorate, with the King of Italy recognized as Emperor of Ethiopia.⁸⁶

⁷⁷ Quartararo, *Roma*, 203; 16; De Felice, *Mussolini*.

⁷⁸ ACS, G, 15, Zervos to Cerulli, 9 May 1936.

⁷⁹ ACS, G, 15, Zervos to Cerulli, 3 June 1936.

⁸⁰ ACS, G, 15, Cerulli to Zervos, 4 June 1936.

⁸¹ ACS, G, 15, Zervos to Cerulli, 10 June 1936.

⁸² Mori, *Mussolini*, 270.

⁸³ Mori, *Mussolini*, 278.

⁸⁴ Mori, *Mussolini*, 278.

⁸⁵ DDI, viii, vol. 3, no. 822, Cerruti to Mussolini, 4 May 1936.

⁸⁶ Lessona, *Verso l'Impero*, 215.

On the diplomatic front, on 5 June Suvich informed Mussolini that in order to facilitate “the international resolution of the Italo-Ethiopian conflict,” it was necessary to offer “some formal satisfaction in the final settlement of the Ethiopian issue that would not excessively undermine the prestige of the League of Nations.”⁸⁷ This could take the form of a commitment to “report to the Assembly of the League on Ethiopia’s progress and on matters relating to fair trade practices for all nations.”⁸⁸

Meanwhile, the negotiations with the Negus not only continued but reached an advanced stage between June and September 1936. At the end of June, a personal meeting between Zervos and Cerulli took place.⁸⁹ On 16 July, one day after the official lifting of sanctions by the League of Nations, the Greek physician informed Cerulli that Haile Selassie wished to resume negotiations “on new and definitive grounds.” Zervos further emphasized the urgency of reaching a solution, which he deemed to be in the interest of both parties.⁹⁰

On 20 August 1936, Zervos, on behalf of the Negus, wrote with the aim of reaching a “decisive solution” that would guarantee lasting peace.⁹¹

A subsequent letter dated 10 September confirmed Haile Selassie’s intention to meet with Cerulli in London.⁹² According to Zewde, a meeting between Cerulli, Zervos, and the Ethiopian Foreign Minister Heruy Wolde Selassie took place in Amsterdam, although the precise date remains unknown.⁹³

Meanwhile, Zervos continued to send encrypted communications from London and requested financial support from Cerulli to sustain his mediation efforts at the imperial court. He also reported Soviet attempts to establish contact with the Emperor.⁹⁴ In a later letter, Cerulli appeared encouraged by the signs of openness from Haile Selassie, although he warned against the prolonged delays that had characterized earlier negotiations. At the heart of the negotiations, according to available sources, was the recognition of Italian sovereignty.⁹⁵

On 18 September 1936, a telegram received from Djibouti via Piraeus announced “better offers,” without further elaboration.⁹⁶ The following day, Zervos reported that only the Emperor would attend the Geneva meeting as an observer, at the insistence of his adviser.⁹⁷ On 30 September, in an address to the League of Nations, Haile Selassie proposed the creation of a “national home” for the Ethiopian people as a mechanism for definitively resolving the conflict. Ethiopian delegate Ato Lawrence Taezaz further stated that the Emperor was prepared to make “considerable sacrifices.”⁹⁸ In fact, the previous day, the Italian

⁸⁷ DDI, viii, vol. 4, no. 193, Suvich to Mussolini, 5 June 1936.

⁸⁸ DDI, viii, vol. 4, no. 395, Bova Scoppa to Mussolini, 29 June 1936.

⁸⁹ ACS, MAI, G, 15, Zervos to Rossi, 16 June 1936.

⁹⁰ ACS, MAI, G, 15, Zervos to Cerulli, 16 July 1936.

⁹¹ ACS, MAI, G, 15, Zervos to Cerulli, 20 August 1936.

⁹² ACS, MAI, G, 15, Zervos to Cerulli, 10 September 1936.

⁹³ Zewde, *A History*, 166. See also Giuseppe Puglisi, *Chi è? Dell'Eritrea* (Agenzie Regina, 1952), 79.

⁹⁴ ACS, MAI, G, 15, Zervos to Cerulli, 14 September 1936.

⁹⁵ ACS, MAI, G, 15, Cerulli to Zervos, 14 September 1936.

⁹⁶ ACS, MAI, G, 15, *Telespresso*, 18 September 1936.

⁹⁷ ACS, MAI, G, 15, Zervos to Cerulli, 19 September 1936.

⁹⁸ “Ethiopia Appeals for Deal on Peace,” *The New York Times*, 30 September 1936.

delegate Bova Scoppa had informed Mussolini of a conversation relayed by Cantilo, Argentina's representative to the League of Nations: Ato Lawrence had approached Cantilo, stating that the Negus, "now convinced that he could no longer rely on support from France or England, was eager to reach an honorable agreement with the Italian government." Bova Scoppa conveyed the proposals put forward by the Ethiopian delegate: the creation of a "small state" in western Ethiopia, in the Gore region, placed under Italian protectorate with Italian military occupation; recognition by the former Negus of the Ethiopian empire under the sovereignty of the King of Italy; upon the establishment of this small state, the Negus would abdicate in favor of the former crown prince, who would become the King of Gore. Taezaz added that, should the Italian government agree to negotiate on these terms, it would avoid a new military campaign in western Ethiopia, as Tafari would order Ras Desta and Ras Immirù to lay down their arms. Furthermore, the former Negus would immediately recognize the Italian Empire, thereby resolving the matter before the League of Nations.⁹⁹

These proposals were leaked to the *Giornale di Addis Abeba* two days later; a copy of the article is held in Cerulli's personal archive, at the Italian Central Archives.¹⁰⁰ However, the Italian delegate believed that it was no longer possible to create a nominally independent state, especially in western Ethiopia, on the border with Anglo-Egyptian Sudan.¹⁰¹

From November 1936 onward, the documentation becomes increasingly fragmented. It is nonetheless certain that contact with Zervos continued at least until 21 January 1937. In a letter dated 29 December 1936, Zervos wrote that he had received news from Cerulli through an intermediary. However, in a subsequent letter from January, the physician lamented the interruption of communications, despite his continued efforts.¹⁰²

Although the existence of additional documents that are currently unavailable cannot be ruled out, existing sources suggest that the negotiation channel involving Zervos and Cerulli was definitively closed in January 1937.

While negotiations via Cerulli and Zervos likely ceased at that point, discussions involving the former Negus continued. Through the Archbishop of Westminster and the Vatican Secretary of State, Eugenio Pacelli, the former Negus submitted a set of proposals to the Italian government: Haile Selassie expressed his willingness to abdicate in favor of his son, on condition that the act be officially and publicly declared in Ethiopia. He would then undertake to encourage the Ethiopian people to accept Italian rule. In return, he asked for the release of some prisoners dear to him, clemency towards the *abergnuoc* and guarantees of financial security for himself and his family. In addition, the letter requested that his son be allowed to undertake some economic activities within Ethiopia under strict Italian supervision.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ DDI, viii, vol. 5, no. 130, Bova Scoppa to Ciano, 29 September 1936.

¹⁰⁰ ACS, G, 15, *Giornale di Addis Abeba*, 2 October 1936.

¹⁰¹ DDI, viii, vol. 5, no. 131, Bova Scoppa to Ciano, 29 September 1936.

¹⁰² DDI, viii, vol. 5, no. 131, Bova Scoppa to Ciano, 29 September 1936.

¹⁰³ DDI, viii, vol. 6, no. 24, Pignatti to Ciano, 8 January 1937.

Three days later, Italian ambassador to the Vatican Pignatti informed Pacelli that “Mr. Tafari’s proposals could serve as a basis for further examination of the issue” though he opposed the idea of the son’s return to Ethiopia. He also requested the designation of a representative, authorized by the former Negus, to travel to Rome for negotiations.¹⁰⁴ The response came on 29 January: Haile Selassie – Pignatti wrote to Ciano – was “very pleased.”¹⁰⁵ The Emperor then appointed the Count of Sibour as negotiator, tasking him with asking the Pope to mediate “so that the Italian government might allow the existence of an autonomous territorial refuge in which the [Ethiopian] people could continue to live according to their traditions.” Pignatti opposed this request, reiterating that such terms did not reflect the basis of the negotiations previously agreed upon. Pacelli also expressed surprise at the proposal, although he declared himself “optimistic,” and according to reports, the intermediary himself expressed doubts about the feasibility of continuing the talks.¹⁰⁶ Negotiations were further interrupted the next day, on 19 February, when two Eritrean students attacked General Graziani, prompting a violent Italian crackdown. Nonetheless, on 8 March, Haile Selassie’s envoy once again approached the Vatican Secretary of State, conveying the former Emperor’s response: “the proposal,” it was stated, “was dictated by a sense of responsibility towards his people.” The former Negus further expressed hope that the “Cardinal Secretary of State might support him in persuading the Italian government to compromise.” Pacelli, however, informed Pignatti that he would exclude from negotiations with the count anything that could represent direct or indirect interference by Haile Selassie in Ethiopia.¹⁰⁷

Several months later, on 2 June, Pignatti reported that Haile Selassie was “prepared to resume discussions through the Secretary of State.” The ambassador replied that he did not trust the former Emperor, believing him to be behind the attack on Graziani during the negotiations. Nevertheless, Pacelli observed that a possible abdication might still prove advantageous for the Italian government.¹⁰⁸

According to documents, Haile Selassie attempted to reestablish contact with the Italian government and appointed Father Martindale for this purpose. The clergyman reported that the changed circumstances and financial conditions of the former emperor had forced him to attempt direct contact with the Italian government through the Italian embassy in London. The rationale for continuing negotiations was explained by Ambassador Grandi himself: in his opinion, a public declaration of submission to Italy by Haile Selassie would have weakened the position of those who used his status to contest Italian claims.¹⁰⁹

There are no further references to this issue in Italian diplomatic sources, but there are in British sources. According to these, the British government was in favor of negotiations through the Archbishop of Canterbury, and even considered to mediate between the parties, but believed that granting Haile Selassie

¹⁰⁴ DDI, viii, vol. 6, n.44, Pignatti to Ciano, 11 January 1937.

¹⁰⁵ DDI, viii, vol. 6, n.98, Pignatti to Ciano, 29 January 1937.

¹⁰⁶ DDI, viii, vol. 6, n.175, Pignatti to Ciano, 18 February 1937.

¹⁰⁷ DDI, viii, vol. 6, n.256, Pignatti to Ciano, 8 March 1937.

¹⁰⁸ DDI, viii, vol. 6, n.256, Pignatti to Ciano, 8 March 1937.

¹⁰⁹ DDI, viii, vol. 7, no. 565, Grandi to Ciano, 13 November 1937.

sovereignty over a territory was no longer feasible.¹¹⁰ This was both because it would have meant Italy's admission of defeat and would not have helped to end the guerrilla warfare, because it was believed that most of the country was no longer loyal to Haile Selassie. However, the British government was aware of Italy's offers of money in exchange for his abdication in favor of his son Asfa Wossen.¹¹¹

Another negotiation channel emerged in November 1938, when Ato Wolde Giyorgis Wolde Yohannes – Haile Selassie's private secretary – wrote from London to Major Steffens, a former honorary Ethiopian consul in Berlin, asking whether he would be willing to mediate a peace proposal. The letter stated that only Haile Selassie could put an end to the bloody conflict still raging in Ethiopia – the Italians having failed to impose their rule in the whole country – and called for an agreement between the parties. The absence of follow-up doomed this effort to failure.¹¹² Meanwhile, however, Haile Selassie continued to urge the Archbishop of Canterbury and the British government to intercede with the Italian government to grant him a territory under his sovereignty.¹¹³

Another negotiation route was initiated in Switzerland during the same period, spearheaded by the Bientry family. Ferdinand Bientry had worked as an engineer in Ethiopia before the war, and his wife, Daragonie Beressie, had lived at the Ethiopian court in her youth, becoming friends with Haile Selassie's son, Asfa Wossen.¹¹⁴ Asfa Wossen had already been in contact with the Italians previously and, through Wolde-Giorgis, contacted Madame Bientry, declaring his willingness to submit to Italian clemency, while urging the utmost discretion.¹¹⁵ According to sources, the prince was motivated by dynastic tensions and a desire to free himself from paternal and British influence. Asfa Wossen would use a trip to Switzerland or France to get special medical care and from there he would be hosted by the Bientry family, from whose residence he would start negotiations for his surrender to the Italian government.¹¹⁶

The Italian government expressed its support for the continuation of negotiations, probably, as we shall see later, in order to create a rift between Haile Selassie and his son.¹¹⁷ It was therefore proposed that the prince should reside in Italy, preferably in Turin, where his sister, Princess Romanework, already lived.¹¹⁸ The Italians drafted a memorandum proposing the following

¹¹⁰ The National Archives, Kew (TNA), Foreign Office (FO), 371/22010, Archbishop of Canterbury to Lord Halifax, 21 May 1938.

¹¹¹ TNA, FO 371/22012, Archbishop of Canterbury to Lord Halifax, 8 November 1938.

¹¹² Archivio Storico Diplomatico, Rome (ASD), Archivio Storico Ministero Africa Italiana (ASMAI), 1/12, Ato Woldeghirhis to Major Stevens, 7 November 1938.

¹¹³ TNA, FO 371/22012, Halifax to the Archbishop of Canterbury, 30 November 1938.

¹¹⁴ Sbacchi, "Secret Talks." Sbacchi was authorized to view the documents examined for this study but was asked to omit their precise archival location. Since then, no one else has written on the subject. We now know that the documents are preserved in ASD, ASMAI 1/12.

¹¹⁵ TNA, FO 371/22010, Foreign Office Minute, 10 March 1938; ASD, ASMAI, 1/12, Telegram, Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Ministry of Italian Africa, 17 March 1939.

¹¹⁶ ASD, ASMAI, 1/12, Telegram, Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Ministry of Italian Africa, 3 July 1939.

¹¹⁷ Sbacchi, "Secret Talks."

¹¹⁸ ASD, ASMAI, 1/12, Telegram, Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Mussolini, May 1939.

arrangement for Haile Selassie's son: a villa, a monthly stipend, a small entourage, freedom of movement and social relations, and audiences with the King and Head of government. However, this offer was subsequently reduced to a 15,000 lire stipend, with a smaller entourage and no audiences.¹¹⁹ In May 1939, the Italian government accepted slightly larger terms, authorizing Madame Bientry to travel to England and inform Asfa Wossen that he would receive a stipend of 20,000 lire – possibly increased to 25,000.¹²⁰ Despite being under close British surveillance, the prince confirmed his interest in continuing negotiations, suggesting a meeting in Switzerland after completing his studies at Cambridge. In a subsequent request, Asfa Wossen asked that upon his arrival in Switzerland there be an exchange of letters confirming submission, recognition of his rank in Ethiopia, and an advance payment of £10,000, part of a total £50,000 to be considered his personal estate. The Italians judged this sum excessive and rejected the recognition of any noble prerogative in Ethiopia, considering at most an honorary title, similar to what had been granted to Hassauna Pasha in Libya.¹²¹

International developments eventually brought negotiations to a halt. Italian authorities considered offering financial support to facilitate Asfa Wossen's departure, but only upon his arrival in Italy. The prince's final letter confirmed the operational difficulties and the need for direct contact with Mr. Bientry in England. However, the deteriorating political situation and the looming world conflict brought the negotiations to a definitive end.¹²² Curiously, one of the final documents in the folder held in the Italian archives reports that Asfa Wossen was later engaged, along with Zervos, in supplying arms to Ethiopian partisans.¹²³

Negotiating empire: Interpreting the Italian-Ethiopian talks

A valuable interpretive key to understanding the negotiations can be found in a reflection by Renzo De Felice in *Mussolini il Duce*. According to his reconstruction, following the end of the war, the primary aim of the Italian government was “to reaffirm both its commitment to the reconstruction of the Stresa Front and its efforts, as long as circumstances allowed, to negotiate directly with the Negus.”¹²⁴ Throughout this analysis, we have observed how historians from opposing interpretative schools converge, with regard to the Ethiopian campaign, on the centrality of the relationship between the Italian government and Great Britain. It has also been repeatedly demonstrated that the Fascist leadership was acutely aware of the risks of a conflict with London, of the importance the League of Nations held for the British, and consequently, of the need to reach an agreement that would allow Britain to “save face” – as Churchill himself

¹¹⁹ ASD, ASMAI, 1/12, *Negotiations for the Surrender of Emperor Haile Selassie and Asfauossen Tafari*.

¹²⁰ ASD, ASMAI, 1/12, Teruzzi to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 12 June 1939.

¹²¹ ASD, ASMAI, 1/12, Undersecretary of State, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 17 August 1939.

¹²² ASD, ASMAI, 1/12, Telegram, Teruzzi to Ministry of Italian Africa, 29 November 1940.

¹²³ ASD, ASMAI, 1/12, Telegram, Intelligence Military Service to the Ministry of Italian Africa, 14 May 1940.

¹²⁴ De Felice, *Mussolini*, 747.

highlighted.¹²⁵ Moreover, it has been shown that, at least until shortly after the end of the war, Mussolini's intention – confirmed by official documents – was to reach a “general agreement” with Britain. Such an agreement would have served to affirm Italy's status as a power on equal footing with Britain, particularly in the Mediterranean, especially considering that Rome had no intention of fully aligning with Berlin.¹²⁶ This strategic intent is clearly articulated in Guariglia's *Memoirs* from June 1936: “We [must] stand once again alongside Britain, above the dispute, in the role of arbiter rather than participant in European conflicts.”¹²⁷

The evolution of the negotiations should therefore be understood in this context. Fully aware of the practical and diplomatic complications that a conflict in Ethiopia might entail, Mussolini approached the Ethiopian issue with what Quartararo describes as an “open perspective.” The military mobilization in the Horn of Africa, the intensification of anti-British propaganda in British-administered territories, and the threat of alignment with Berlin can be interpreted as tactics to increase Italy's negotiating leverage with London. Italy's primary aim appears to have been the acquisition of either a mandate or protectorate over Ethiopia, or territorial concessions adjacent to its existing colonies. Evidence supporting this includes the drafting of plans for a protectorate over Ethiopia in the summer of 1935, rather than administrative programs alongside military preparations.¹²⁸ Moreover, in Guariglia's opinion, if Italy had left part of Ethiopia under the supervision of the League of Nations, Great Britain would have been willing to accommodate Italy's interests.¹²⁹

However, aware of the difficulties in reaching an agreement with Great Britain, the Italian government decided to follow two parallel paths: diplomatic negotiations on the one hand, military preparations on the other. In fact, although Mussolini's memorandum declaring his intention to resolve the Ethiopian issue by force was dated 30 December 1934, the first negotiations with Ethiopia in which the idea of a protectorate was raised began around the same time (March 1935) and continued after the end of the war. Indeed, the use of armed force does not exclude the possibility that Italy was aiming for a protectorate rather than large-scale annexation. In this sense, as we have seen in Guariglia's words, the threat of resorting to troops and their advance into Ethiopian territory can be considered a bargaining tool in the face of numerous deadlocks in diplomatic discussions and secret negotiations. On the other hand, Rome clearly understood that London would not accept an Italian protectorate or dominion over Ethiopia, particularly given Britain's own interests in the region. Already in the abovementioned Tripartite Treaty of 1906, Great Britain envisaged the Nile basin as its zone of influence in Ethiopia in the event of an unspecified “disintegration of Ethiopia.”¹³⁰ Furthermore, it feared the possibility that Italy might create a “Black Army” in the heart of the British Empire, which

¹²⁵ Mori, *Mussolini*, 278.

¹²⁶ See Quartararo, *Roma*; De Felice, *Mussolini*.

¹²⁷ Guariglia, *Ricordi*, 323.

¹²⁸ Sbacchi, *Il colonialismo*, 13.

¹²⁹ Guariglia, *Ricordi*, 265.

¹³⁰ ACS, MAI, G.12. *Considerazioni sul Tripartito*.

stretched from Cairo to Cape Town.¹³¹ As a result, Italy sought to assert prior agreements by reaching an understanding with Britain regarding the partitioning of Ethiopia or establishing terms for peaceful coexistence, as various documents cited throughout this article suggest.

As regards secret talks, until now historiography had only acknowledged the existence of secret negotiations during the conflict itself – without analyzing them in detail – but documents kept in Italian archives show that these talks had begun before the invasion and continued even after the proclamation of the Italian Empire. The fact that the invasion worked as a means of exerting pressure is confirmed by the fact that throughout the war, negotiations remained open, even when Italian military operations were progressing favorably. The proposals varied according to the military situation but consistently revolved around territorial concessions near existing Italian colonies and the establishment of a protectorate over the Amhara regions.

The very proclamation of the Empire – often interpreted by historians as the definitive conclusion of the matter – was not perceived as such by the Fascist leadership. Evidence of this lies in the intentionally vague formulation of the concept of the Empire and in statements by Lessona and Aloisi, who were close to Mussolini. These ambiguities should likely be interpreted in light of a desire to mend relations with Britain, as contemporary documentation confirms. Reconciliation with London would have also entailed making some concessions to the League of Nations.¹³² This, in turn, meant attributing a veneer of legitimacy to the conquest of Ethiopia – perhaps through a League-endorsed agreement with the Negus or an “Indian arrangement” as also confirmed by the British diplomatic documents.¹³³ Negotiations mediated by Zervos – particularly advanced between May and October 1936 – also seem to confirm this hypothesis. However, the initial British opposition perceived by the Italian side – together with the advice of part of the British establishment to proceed with annexation – the flight of the Negus and the concomitant developments in the international context rendered further negotiations on territorial concessions useless and ultimately pushed the regime towards complete annexation. This interpretation is confirmed by a statement by Foreign Minister Galeazzo Ciano during a conversation with Yugoslav Prime Minister Stojadinović: “those, namely the French and the British, who now advise resistance against Hitler, are the very same who encouraged the Negus to resist Italy militarily. Without them, Haile Selassie would probably still be in Addis Ababa. Mussolini would have left him there, under his authority.”¹³⁴

Another way to look at the negotiations, which is especially important for what happened after the takeover of Addis Ababa, is from a military point of view. The proclamation of the Empire did not correspond to actual control over Ethiopia. As late as December 1936, 250,000 Italian troops and 110,000 colonial

¹³¹ DDI, viii, vol. 4, no. 399, Bova Schioppa to Ciano, 29 June 1936.

¹³² See Aloisi, *Journal*, 378.

¹³³ TNA, FO 371/22010, Draft Reply to Parliamentary Question by Mr Mander, 23 February 1938, TNA, FO 371/22010, Foreign Office Minute, 6 April 1938.

¹³⁴ DDI, viii, vol. 6, n.345, Ciano-Stojadinovic talks, 26 March 1937.

ascari were still stationed in the territory.¹³⁵ The conflict had devolved into a guerrilla war, necessitating the launch of extensive policing operations.¹³⁶ In this context, an agreement with the Negus would have enabled the redeployment of troops to Europe, where tensions, particularly due to German expansionism, were escalating. As shown, the Italian leadership recognized the challenges of territorial control early in the campaign, with this understanding solidifying in subsequent months.¹³⁷ Keeping communication open with the Negus was therefore instrumental in potentially securing an agreement that would legitimize Italian dominion – at least partially – and also end hostilities with segments of the resistance loyal to him. Notably, the negotiations between Zervos and Cerulli appear to have ended between January and February 1937, coinciding with the assassination attempt on Viceroy Graziani on 19 February. Graziani, who had worked to dismantle the power of the *ras* and suppress the guerrilla through large-scale police operations, was reportedly “caught off guard” by the attack, which was followed by an “unimaginable harshness.”¹³⁸ In the ensuing days, former high-ranking officials were executed, and 400 notables were deported to Italy.¹³⁹ This event likely solidified the Italian government’s belief that no agreement with the Ethiopian leadership was possible. While the Zervos channel had also been maintained in the hope of reaching an understanding to facilitate governance, from that moment onward, large-scale repression became the norm. Only later did Amedeo of Aosta – who admired the British system of *indirect rule* – pursue a policy in stark contrast to Graziani’s. The continuation of negotiations after the seize of Addis Ababa and the Graziani attack should therefore be understood less as an attempt to establish a protectorate or the concession of a reduced part under Haile Selassie’s sovereignty – which had by that time become politically unfeasible – and more as a means of keeping open lines of communication. Furthermore, the belief – shared by the British government – that most of Ethiopia did not support the former Negus but was continuing the fight on its own, thus making useless a possible return, may also have played a role.¹⁴⁰ Moreover, while the initial negotiations appear to have been launched by the Italians, those following the attack on Graziani seem to have been initiated by the Negus, although the Italian government probably still viewed them favorably. In fact, obtaining the surrender of Haile Selassie or his heir, perhaps through a period of residence in Italy, could have been advantageous in the long term for controlling Ethiopia or securing a certain degree of international legitimacy.

¹³⁵ Nicola Labanca, *Oltremare: storia dell’espansione coloniale italiana* (Il Mulino, 2007) 200.

¹³⁶ Zewde, *History*, 171; Federica Saini Fasanotti, *Etiopia 1936–1940. Le operazioni di polizia coloniale nelle fonti dell’Esercito italiano* (Stato Maggiore dell’Esercito, 2010), 83.

¹³⁷ See Zewde, *History*; Labanca, *Oltremare*; Saini Fasanotti, *Etiopia*; Del Boca, *Gli italiani*.

¹³⁸ Labanca, *Oltremare*, 201; see Ian Campbell, *Il massacro di Addis Abeba. Una vergogna italiana* (Rizzoli, 2018), 77; Alberto Stramaccioni, *Crimini di guerra. Storia e memoria del caso italiano* (Laterza, 2016), 61.

¹³⁹ Paolo Borruso, *L’ultimo impero cristiano. Politica e religione nell’Etiopia contemporanea (1916–1974)* (Guerini e associati, 2002), 203. Also see Paolo Borruso, *Debre Libanos 1937: The Most Serious War Crime Suffered by Ethiopia* (Routledge, 2023).

¹⁴⁰ TNA, FO, 371/22012, Archbishop of Canterbury to Lord Halifax, 8 November 1938.

From the Ethiopian perspective, no historiographical study has addressed the issue of negotiations, which, as we have seen, are only briefly mentioned by Zewde. A partial reconstruction has been provided by Sbacchi, who asserts that within the exiled court there were three main factions: one in favor of recognizing the Italian Empire – partly also due to financial interests; one advocating for the Emperor to lead the Ethiopian resistance; and a third more inclined to adopt a wait-and-see approach.¹⁴¹

Therefore, as we have already noted, the Emperor's submission would have undoubtedly benefited Italy on both the international stage and the military front in Ethiopia – and indeed, the Italian government attempted to secure this on multiple occasions even years after the end of the war – the theme of the former Negus's viewpoint now becomes central. Unfortunately, this issue is not addressed in his autobiography, nor has it been thoroughly examined by British historiography, despite the fact that British intelligence was aware of the secret negotiations, even as the Italians denied their existence.¹⁴² According to Sbacchi, the Negus – disappointed by Great Britain, France and the League of Nations – repeatedly considered the possibility of recognizing Italian sovereignty – as also suggested by the negotiations conducted through Zervos and Cerulli – especially in light of the various financial offers he received over the years.¹⁴³ Nevertheless, the wait-and-see faction and the hope that the outbreak of a world war might alter the situation and lead to his return to Ethiopia ultimately prevailed – a hope that, in the end, materialized.

As for Asfa Wossen, it remains unclear whether he acted independently or under his father's guidance, possibly as part of a strategy to return to Ethiopia and lead the resistance. This interpretation would appear to be supported by unconfirmed reports of the Crown Prince's and Zervos's involvement in supplying the Ethiopian patriots.¹⁴⁴ Thus, the negotiations conducted by Zervos may also be interpreted as a tactic to gain time and keep diplomatic channels open, rather than a genuine attempt to reach an agreement. Furthermore, it should be noted that negotiations through the Bientry family were initiated by Asfa Wossen himself through his father's private secretary. Therefore, although the intermediaries described Asfa Wossen as motivated by a desire to free himself from his father, it seems unlikely that the Emperor was unaware of this. Especially considering how much the Negus trusted Wolde Yohannes.¹⁴⁵ Therefore, it might be hypothesized that Haile Selassie believed that the Italians would have viewed an agreement with his son more favorably. Hence, in conclusion, much like the Italian strategy, the Ethiopian approach might also be characterized as an "open perspective" – a cautious stance aimed at exploiting the most favorable circumstances as they

¹⁴¹ Sbacchi, "Secret Talks."

¹⁴² TNA, FO, 371/22012, Lord Perth to Mr Kelly, 10 November 1938; Haile Selassie and Edward Ullendorff, *The Autobiography of the Emperor Haile Selassie I: "My Life and Ethiopia's Progress" 1892–1937* (School of Oriental and African Studies, 1976); Sbacchi, "Secret Talks."

¹⁴³ Bodleian Library, MSS Lugard, 90, 6, Telephoned to Col. Sandford, 27 April 1938.

¹⁴⁴ See note 124.

¹⁴⁵ Zewde, *History*, 204.

arose. The fact that negotiations extended over several years supports this interpretation.

Conclusions

In conclusion, while the Italian motivations behind the negotiations conducted between 1935 and 1940 have been extensively addressed, there is a clear need for further analysis of the Ethiopian point of view. It remains to be understood whether the negotiations were seen by the Ethiopians as part of a cautious strategy aimed at waiting for more favorable conditions, or a deliberate tactic to mislead the Italian authorities by fueling false hopes of an agreement, thus distracting them from the repression of the resistance – or perhaps both. The failure to reach an agreement can therefore be attributed to a combination of factors, both international – such as the lack of an agreement with Great Britain before the end of the war – and internal to the various parties involved – the flight of the Negus, which prevented the possibility of a protectorate, and the wait-and-see strategy of the former emperor, who ultimately refused to surrender. However, further research is needed to complete the picture; this article is intended as a new contribution to research on the subject, aiming to encourage debate on the role of secret negotiations during an event that was crucial not only for Africa at the time but also for the Second World War.

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