
The European Consequences of the Italian Aggression against Ethiopia*

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On the 3rd October 1935 the Italian troops invaded the lands of Ethiopia, one of the most ancient and underdeveloped Countries of the world.

The internal contradiction in the Stresa front made it clear that the British-French orientation of fascist Italy could not survive for long. The basic principles of British and French foreign policy were the preservation of the European *status quo* as established by the peace treaties at the end of World War I. In contrast, the basic principles of Italian and Hungarian foreign policy were the revision of this *status quo*. Mussolini was already getting ready for the aggression against Ethiopia, very much in contrast with his peaceable pronouncements in Stresa, half a year before.

The Hungarian Prime Minister, Gyula Gömbös, was informed of the plans against Ethiopia by Frigyes Villani, the Hungarian Minister in Rome. Following a conversation with Mussolini, Villani reported just on January 24, 1935, that «the sovereign ruler of Italy's fate wished to acquire, by force if necessary, an African empire suitable for colonization and for absorbing the Italian surplus population and that he had obtained France's support for this plan». The report shows that the military and fiscal circles, as well as public opinion «were not favorable»¹.

Gömbös welcomed the aggressiveness of the Italian fascists, because he realized that the Italian-Ethiopian war would put an end to the British-French orientation of Italy. The war would be a crushing blow to the League of Nations and to the principle of collective security, creating favorable conditions for the realization of Hungary's revisionist plans. In order to promote this rapprochement, Mussolini

* This article was written on the base of the author's book *Budapest-Rome in the shadow of Hitler's Germany, 1933-1940*, New Jersey, CHSP, Ed. P. Pastor, 2003.

¹ OL. KÜM. res. pol. 1935-23-70.

agreed to Hitler's request and recalled the Italian Ambassador, Vittorio Cerrutti from Berlin. Cerrutti barely concealed his anti-nazi feelings and he also had a Hungarian-Jewish wife, who was a thorn in Hitler's hide. The developments in the international situation made it possible for Bernardo Attolico, the Ambassador transferred from Moscow, to open a new chapter in German-Italian relationships².

At the same time, Hitler had not forgotten Mussolini's anti-German stand during the past two years and hence watched the initial failure of the Italian army with considerable malice. He wished that Italy would emerge weakened from this adventure and therefore Germany provided arms both to Mussolini and to the Negus³.

Even before the onset of the military action, Gömbös gave instructions to László Szabó, the Hungarian Military Attaché in Rome and Mussolini's friend: «As soon as the Italian troops cross the Ethiopian border, go see the Duce and assure him of our solidarity and comradesly cooperation». According to Gömbös' handwritten note to Kánya of October 5, Mussolini thanked Gömbös for his message and stated: «Italy will never be in a situation where she will not do everything for Hungary»⁴. It is interesting that in Szabó's report about his 35-minute conversation with Mussolini this sentence does not appear. Instead, it says: «From the expression of your friendship I see further proof that our comradeship in arms will lead to the achievement of Hungary's demands. This step has taken you closer to your goals because Europe, willy-nilly, will have to walk on a new path. You must feel that in me you have a strong supporter. A new horizon is opening before your eyes»⁵.

The hitherto unpublished memoirs of István Antal, Gömbös' press chief, contain many interesting data on the effects of the Ethiopian adventure on Hungary⁶.

Antal's memoirs show that the Hungarian stance on the League of Nations sanctions was formulated under very stormy conditions.

Antal begins his report about the session of the Council of Ministers: «It caused great surprise and even consternation when Kánya moved that we should vote along with Great Britain's "Aye"». Kánya proved to the Council that Italy had indeed acted contrary to the law of nations when she attacked Ethiopia, that Italy clearly and un-

² J. PETERSEN, *Hitler e Mussolini, la difficile alleanza*, Bari, Laterza, 1978, p. 365. It is a paradox of history that Attolico, who opposed Italy's excessive obligations to Germany, became one of the fathers of that very policy.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ OL. KÜM. res. pol. 1935-23-677.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Antal István visszaemlékezései (I. ANTAL, *Mémoires*, manuscript).

equivocally violated the 12th and 16th sections of the League of Nations Charter and that Italy evidently had to be condemned as an aggressor. Kánya also argued that a small Country could not stand up against the British Empire and the rest of the world.

Gömbös stated that he was shocked and appalled by the statement of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and explained that the British position was not clear from a legal point of view. Yet, «Even if the British position was 100% correct and Mussolini was absolutely in the wrong in this international debate, I could still not abandon him, that would be treason [...] If we were to accept Kánya's proposal we would forever lose the respect of the Italian people without gaining the respect of the gentlemanly British people».

With his characteristic oratorical exaggeration, Gömbös claimed that Hungarian public opinion would «sweep us out of office if we would deny Mussolini».

Antal, who was an eyewitness, reports that Gömbös was shouting when he finished his statement saying: «I would rather cut my hand off than sign such a resolution».

Minister of the Interior Miklós Kozma and Minister of Culture Bálint Hóman supported Gömbös.

Kánya, who «turned into a statue», then asked to talk to Gömbös privately and announced his resignation. On Gömbös' suggestion they went to see Horthy, who made a Salomonic decision accepting Gömbös' proposal but asking Kánya to remain in his position.

According to Antal, this smoothed over the governmental crisis in a few hours but the relationship between Gömbös and Kánya, never a very good one, fell apart completely and henceforth the cynical old diplomat openly worked to undermine and discredit the Prime Minister⁷.

Antal writes that Gömbös personally called the permanent Hungarian delegate to the League of Nations, László Velics, and instructed him to vote "No" on the issue of Italy's guilt and the sanctions⁸. At the October 9 vote there were 50 "Aye" votes and only four "No". Hungary, Austria and Albania, voted with Rome, breaking up the united front against aggression.

Baron Pompeo Aloisi, Mussolini's chief of cabinet who represented Italy at the debate in the League of Nations, reported on October 10: «The negative vote of Austria and Hungary produced enormous sensation and rouse violent indignation in British circles»⁹.

⁷ *Idem*, pp. 771-777.

⁸ *Idem*, p. 775.

⁹ Documenti Diplomatici Italiani (DDI), ser. 8. vol. II. p. 286.

Kánya was defeated in the sanction debate but his ideas were shown to have been correct. Hungary did not withdraw from the League of Nations and, perhaps because of this, Italy did not withdraw either.

C. A. Macartney, an expert on Hungarian affairs, came to see István Antal to convince him of the necessity of supporting the anti-Italian sanctions. Antal rejected the request, saying that Hungary could not abandon her ally, the only major power that stood with Hungary in her political isolation¹⁰.

In his memoirs, István Antal writes that Gömbös delegated Col. József Németh as liaison to the Italian High Command in Africa. Németh very conscientiously and regularly sent in his reports but these were not very favorable so far as the Italian methods of conducting the war or the martial spirit of the troops were concerned. This came to the attention of the Italian High Command and, after a few weeks, the Colonel had to be called back to Budapest¹¹.

On November 20, Mussolini told Villani that «British-Italian war was inevitable because the British are trying to strangle us»¹². Even though this war never happened, the anti-Italian sanctions of the League of Nations placed Italy into a diplomatically isolated position that hampered her ability to be active in Central Europe.

Mussolini was fully occupied with the Ethiopian conflict and asked that the meeting with Gömbös, planned for the end of 1935, be postponed. The altruistic explanation with which he justified this request is interesting and typical: «I believe that external manifestations of Italian-Hungarian friendship should be avoided at this time, primarily in Hungary's interest since this friendship might make her the target for attacks. It is also in Italy's interest since we do not wish to create the impression that we are bringing pressure on our friends, exposing them to the dangers threatening us»¹³.

On January 6, 1936 Mussolini made an important suggestion to Ulrich von Hassell. According to the German Ambassador in Rome

¹⁰ ANTAL, *Op. cit.*, pp. 769-770. C. A. Macartney is discreetly quiet about this episode in his otherwise fully documented book about Hungary between the two World Wars.

¹¹ ANTAL, *Op. cit.*, p. 758.

¹² Quoted in the annual report prepared by the Italian legation in Budapest for 1934-35 (ASMAE, Ungheria, 1935. Bundle 5). During Kánya's London visit in February 1936, he told the Italian ambassador there that the British government «was concerned about Italian-German rapprochement and for this reason did not wish to exacerbate the sanction issue» (ASMAE, Ungheria, Bundle 15, February 14, 1936).

¹³ OL. KÜM. res. pol. 1935-23-711.

the essence of the terribly important proposal was that Berlin and Vienna resolve the differences between them by themselves. «If thus the formally totally independent Austria were to become a vassal of Germany, he would have no objection. Thus the mistrust between Germany and Italy would come to an end and so would the Danube basin plots». The proposal to leave Austria to her fate was supported by the Young Fascists, led by Mussolini's son-in-law Galeazzo Ciano, but opposed by the Old Guard of the Ministry of Foreign affairs. Mussolini's deputy for Foreign affairs, Fulvio Suvich, wrote in a letter to the Duce: «In my opinion, sacrificing Austria would be a colossal mistake [...]. It is a mistake to think that Germany, arriving to the Brenner and to Tarvisio, would stop there [...]. Germany will make every effort to span the 100 Kilometers to the Adriatic»¹⁴.

Mussolini's proposal was the first step toward the complete renunciation of Austria's independence and his attitude toward the proposal resulted in Suvich's dismissal and Ciano's appointment as Minister of Foreign affairs about five months later.

Hitler listened to the proposal with great interest and expressed his hopes, via Hassell, that Mussolini would exert his influence in Vienna to bring it about¹⁵.

It became evident in February 1936 that Hitler wanted to re-militarize the Rhineland and that meant a serious violation of the Locarno treaty to which Italy was one of the signatories. Mussolini, who was deeply offended by Britain's and France's generally ineffective sanctions, assured Hitler, via Hassell, that the Italians would be just spectators of a violation of the Locarno treaty and would not participate in any British and French sanctions against Germany. «The sanctioners shall not sanction others», said Mussolini, and this was very significant when Hitler decided, on March 7, to initiate the very hazardous re-militarization of the Rhineland¹⁶.

Ulrich von Hassell described the role of the Ethiopian adventure in improving Italian-German relationship to Villani in his own sarcastic fashion: «The Negus deserves a statue in Berlin. It is due solely to him that there is such a rapprochement between Italy and Germany. It would have never happened otherwise»¹⁷.

The Italian invasion forces could break the resistance of the Ethiopian forces, an army equipped with medieval weaponry, only after six months of bloody fighting. It was not before April 20, 1935

¹⁴ PETERSEN, *Op. cit.*, pp. 412 and 415.

¹⁵ *Idem*, p. 412.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Idem*, p. 365.

that the handpicked troops of Ethiopian emperor Hile Selassie finally surrendered. On May 9, the Fascist Grand Council of Italy passed a resolution to the effect that Abyssinia became an integral part of the Italian Kingdom under the leadership of Emperor Victor Emmanuel III¹⁸.

One day later Mussolini ordered the heads of all the Italian diplomatic missions abroad to hand over the decree: «On communicating [the resolution] you may add verbally for the information of the Government concerned that, owing to the total cessation of the State of Ethiopia, the anarchy that was threatening the capital of the Country and the will manifested by the population liberated from the yoke of slavery, the Italian Government, which had to resort to arms for its own future security and defence, has placed all the territories and peoples of the former Empire under Italian sovereignty. Ethiopia, which has in this way become *de jure* and *de facto* Italian, will from now on enjoy the advantages of civil progress»¹⁹.

Indeed, the principal goal of the Ethiopian adventure was not the realization of the noble aims described by Mussolini. It was in fact one of the last colonial wars aimed at the acquisition of new territories and the subjugation of foreign peoples.

To the telegram sent to the Italian ambassadors in London and Paris Mussolini added: «Italy is ready to examine with the Government concerned the situation in an effort to take care that English/French interests are not prejudiced»²⁰.

However, as we could see, the Italian-Ethiopian conflict marked the end of Mussolini's English-French orientation and at the same time the beginning of reconciliation between fascist Italy and hitlerist Germany. Budapest welcomed the process in the hope that it would help realize its revisionist goals.

¹⁸ See A XX, század krónikája (*A Chronicle of the 20th Century*), Officina Nova, pp. 497-501.

¹⁹ DDI, s. 8, vol. IV, p. 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*