

INTRODUCTION



Objectives and Methodology

The Italo-Ethiopian war (3 October 1935–5 May 1936) was a turning point for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and probably one of the most significant events in its history. Coinciding with an important phase of the break down of the post-First World War order, the war marked the beginning of the ICRC's modern humanitarian action. Although the war only lasted for seven months, it had a profound effect upon the organisation. By the end, the ICRC was transformed and had shaped the instruments with which it would respond to the horrors of the next decade of war. Some of the decisions taken by the ICRC in 1935–36 still have an impact today.

This thesis sets out to answer two broad questions. The first relates to the two belligerents, Italy and Ethiopia. How did their governments and armies facilitate or hinder the Red Cross' humanitarian action? With regard to Italy, this involves the study of the bombings of Red Cross field hospitals deployed on the Ethiopian side; the treatment of Ethiopian prisoners of war and the effects of the use of poison gas on the humanitarian work. With regard to Ethiopia, this includes the study of alleged misuses of the Red Cross emblem by the authorities and the military as well as the treatment of Italian prisoners of war.

The second broad question concerns the ICRC and can be divided into four parts. The first part examines questions related to the institution itself: its organisation, composition and, particularly, the political beliefs of its members regarding Fascist Italy. It also analyses the role of Switzerland in the Italo-Ethiopian war as well as the personal and institutional relations between the hosting country and the ICRC. The second part concerns the way the ICRC responded to the humanitarian emergency caused by the

Italian aggression against Ethiopia. It describes the humanitarian operation of the ICRC and the involved National Red Cross Societies in favour of wounded and sick soldiers as well as prisoners of war – the two subjects covered at the time by international humanitarian law. The third part studies the measures taken by the ICRC to ensure respect for the provisions of the 1929 Geneva Conventions. It focuses on the inquiry into allegations of violations of the first Convention by the two belligerents and shows how this led to the ICRC's submission to Fascist Italy. The fourth part deals with Fascist Italy's chemical war against Ethiopia and its consequences on the ICRC in the field and at headquarters, especially the redefinition of the ICRC's role in times of war.

Although this study focuses on the ICRC it also covers the other components of the Red Cross movement: the National Red Cross Societies of the two belligerents – the Ethiopian and the Italian Red Cross; the Societies which participated in the medical relief operation as well as the League of Red Cross Societies. It is not only a study about the ICRC but about the Red Cross in times of war.

The study exclusively addresses matters, which directly concerned the Red Cross: the medical relief operation; the respect of the emblem; prisoners of war; and chemical warfare. Other subjects of controversy have not been examined, such as slavery – an important argument of Italy against Ethiopia; or breaches of The Hague law, such as the alleged use of dum-dum ammunition by the Ethiopians. The same applies to Ethiopia's accusations that Italy bombed towns, villages and churches. Mass bombings of largely civilian centres were a very new phenomenon of warfare. They did not cause a formal debate in the ICRC at the time. Such matters only became important for the organisation shortly before and during the Second World War. In this context it should not be forgotten that the civilian population became a subject of international humanitarian law as late as 1949.

With regard to the methodology, I have chosen a thematic approach in which events are developed generally in chronological order. While this approach allows a clear development of the themes, it has the disadvantage that the unfamiliar reader risks losing a synoptic view. However, this seems to me a minor disadvantage which is partly offset by the chronology of political and military events in Appendix 1.

The starting point of this study is the field where the action took place. An entire chapter examines the controversial and crucial question of the respect of the emblem by the two belligerents, less space was required to treat the subjects of prisoners of war and gas warfare. Once determined what exactly happened in the field and how much the delegates knew or could have known, the reaction of the ICRC in Geneva is examined.

At this point, it is important to underline that there are three striking differences between the time of the Italo-Ethiopian war and today. First, the

world of 1935–36 was still a largely Euro-centric world. The acceptance of Ethiopia as a member of the League of Nations in 1923 was a bold step because it meant that the African country was put on an equal footing with all other member states. People started to realise the implications of this decision during the build-up to the Italo-Ethiopian war. A dispute with a politically insignificant country, situated at the periphery of the world that mattered, suddenly endangered peace and cooperation in Europe. The instruments of collective security had been established in the first place for securing peace in Europe, not between a European country and one, which was considered to have barely fulfilled the conditions for admission into the community of states. It is therefore not surprising that many countries did not intend to strictly apply the Covenant when it came to defending Ethiopia's interests. The ICRC also held this view which inevitably affected its own operation vis-à-vis Ethiopia, causing it to take decisions which can be understood today only with great difficulty.

The second big difference concerns colonial affairs. Many people in Europe, even in Switzerland, which did not have overseas possessions, shared the belief that African peoples needed a European master for their own good. Ethiopia, a yet uncolonised country in a continent otherwise under European domination, was an anomaly in this regard. Many had sympathy with Fascist Italy's attempt to change this state of affairs. It is likely that most ICRC members, as well as its delegates in Ethiopia (Marcel Junod more than Sidney Brown) were of the same opinion. The problem is that these feelings were seldom openly expressed but existed subliminally. It is difficult to say to what extent they have influenced certain decisions but that they did is hardly contestable.

The third difference relates to the fact that in 1935 the Red Cross was the only humanitarian player bringing assistance to war victims. Even the ICRC despite having dealt with war since its foundation, was new to direct action in the field and had to come to terms with many problems for the first time. There were no other similar organisations, unlike nowadays when numerous International and Non-Governmental Organisations stimulate and compete with each other. Humanitarian action was not yet a business of professionals but an act of charity by amateurs.

Historiography on the Subject

There is a vast amount of literature about the Italo-Ethiopian war in general of which the bibliography gives a rapid but necessarily incomplete overview. Very useful for the purpose of this study was Angelo Del Boca's *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale*, of which the second volume is dedicated to the war itself (*La conquista dell'Impero*). Military history is well researched, in particular through the studies of Giorgio Rochat. The same

applies to gas warfare, for which Del Boca, Rochat and Roberto Gentili have made significant contributions.

Interestingly, the Italian bombings of hospitals under Red Cross protection have been given very little attention in Italian historiography and not much more was done on the Ethiopian side. This study fills the gap by using the information provided by the Italian military archives, in particular the *Archivio Ufficio storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Aeronautica* (AUSSMA). The same remark can be made for the subject of prisoners of war for which the *Archivio Ufficio storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito* (AUSSME) proved essential.

There are many histories about the Red Cross in general. Of particular importance were the studies of François Bugnion, *Le Comité international de la Croix-Rouge et la protection des victimes de la guerre* and André Durand, *De Sarajevo à Hiroshima*. An essential chapter of the ICRC's history during the Second World War has been examined by Jean-Claude Favez in *Das Internationale Rote Kreuz und das Dritte Reich. War der Holocaust aufzuhalten?* However, most ICRC operations in the wars leading to the Second World War have not been the object of in-depth research. This study of the ICRC and the Italo-Ethiopian war attempts to cover one of them while a similar study for the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) is unfortunately still lacking and would be an interesting subject.

Sources

Unpublished source material for this study, as far as the Red Cross is concerned, was first and foremost provided by the archives of the ICRC. Access included the *Archives personnelles Max Huber* which contain the President's correspondence with members of the ICRC and close relations. During my last visit to the ICRC in 2001, I was also permitted to consult the files kept in the safe where, amongst other items, documents concerning matters of personnel are kept. Source material from the ICRC was complemented by information originating from different Red Cross archives such as the British, Finnish, Swedish and Swiss Red Cross Societies, the latter two kept at the respective national archives. Of particular importance were the very complete archives of the Italian Red Cross at the *Archivio centrale dello Stato* (ACS) in Rome. Other archives and collections as detailed in the bibliography have shed light on more specific aspects.

Italian archives pose a distinct challenge in which research itself is often not the biggest. They demand, above all, a good portion of interpersonal communication skills with the result that research can become a more or less rewarding experience. All archives consulted for this study provided a wealth of often unexpected material. The *Fondo Graziani* in the aforementioned *Archivio centrale dello Stato* proved particularly useful. It contained

valuable information on most aspects of the military operations of the Italo-Ethiopian war, especially the telegram traffic between Rome and the High Command in Eritrea and Somalia respectively. At the same time, this *Fondo* allowed a precious insight into General Rodolfo Graziani's personality, thanks to the personal remarks, which he wrote in the margins of the documents. This was very helpful in order to understand the bombing of the Swedish Red Cross field hospital in Melka Dida. The *Fondo Graziani* also included the original photographs of this bombing raid.

The *Archivio Ufficio storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Aeronautica* (AUSSMA) contained all information on the bombing raids carried out by the Italian Air Force. The clearly arranged files allow the researcher to follow the events on a daily basis through the complete chain of command, from the Air Force Command to the pilot involved in reconnaissance or bombing. A cautionary remark must be made to the pilots' reports. Although they are normally originals, they cannot be blindly trusted. In one instance (the destruction of the Red Cross plane on 17 March 1936), a report was rewritten in order to make it conform to the others. Quite a number of original photographs, mostly of excellent quality, have also been kept in the files. Thanks to this archive, all bombing raids in which hospitals or material under Red Cross protection were involved could be studied, often in surprising detail.

The *Archivio Ufficio storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito* (AUSSME) contains several hundred files on the Italo-Ethiopian war. Exhaustive research is almost impossible, not only because of its volume but also because of the restrictions connected to its consultation. A strict rule is enforced that only three files can be ordered per working day of four hours only. This is bearable as long as the researcher knows where to look for the information. If, however, this is not the case, research becomes very difficult and often a simple question of luck.

For the political and diplomatic aspects, the two archives at the *Ministero degli Affari Esteri* contain all the necessary information: on one hand, the *Archivio storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri* (ASMAE) and, on the other, the archives of the former Ministry of Colonies, the *Archivio storico del Ministero dell'Africa Italiana* (ASMAI). The same restrictions on numbers of files to be consulted per day, as in the archives of the Army, are applied here, but the informative inventory and friendly staff help to overcome this practical and often nerve-racking obstacle to research.

The big difficulty for this type of study is the lack of Ethiopian government sources. Most of the government archives have been lost or destroyed, although some unorganised files apparently still exist in the old Menelik Palace in Addis Abeba, but no amount of door knocking at various offices and authorities during the early and mid-1990s opened its gates. Consolation stems from the fact that all (or at least the vast majority of) historians studying Ethiopian history have to come to terms with the same

problem. This type of challenge has been overcome thanks to: the Library of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies at Addis Abeba University which contains a vast collection of published sources; the Stephen Wright Collection with many newspaper clippings at the National Library & Archives in Addis Abeba; and finally eyewitnesses of whom quite a few were still alive at the time of research. They have provided precious firsthand information. Historic studies in Amharic are scanty and have not been taken into account for this study.

Once more, Italian archives come to the rescue of the historian, at least to some extent. Thanks to a very efficient and omnipresent intelligence service, the Italian army was able to collect lots of material about its adversary. In particular, the relevant services have intercepted a considerable number of communications between Emperor Haile Selassie and his field commanders. They are preserved in specific files in the already mentioned Italian archives. Although translated from the original Amharic into Italian by local employees, they give a *prima facie* accurate and very valuable picture of what was happening on the Ethiopian government side. However, it is unfortunately impossible to say how much of the total volume of Ethiopian communications the Italians were able to intercept in this way.

Transliteration

Transliteration from Amharic into English presents difficulties, which cannot be solved to the satisfaction of everybody. If a scientific system is used, the words become unreadable for a non-linguist, if a pragmatic solution is chosen, the system is sometimes arbitrary. Faced with this dilemma, the present study, like most others, destined for a wider public, prefers readability to a scientific approach.

Spellings of geographic names are made in accordance with the *National Atlas of Ethiopia*, Addis Abeba, 1988. If a particular location was not listed the original spelling, as much as possible in English, was used. With regard to names of persons, the most common spelling in English was normally chosen, such as Haile Selassie, selected from almost a dozen versions.

Last but not least, the glossary in Appendix 2 lists the meanings of the Ethiopian words and explains the Ethiopian military and court titles mentioned in this study.