

**INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT MOVEMENT - THE SECOND
ITALO-ETHIOPIAN WAR (1935-1936)**

Abstract:	<i>During the Second Italo-Ethiopian War (1935-1936), the mission led to the criticism of the Red Cross in the global arena because it violated the very same purpose that it promised to guard when establishing this international humanitarian movement as the institution failed to protect not only the Ethiopians but also their people are given the fact that they were the primary target of the Italians, their ambulances and hospitals being under attack. Italians were using asphyxiating gases and, most importantly, mustard gas which was prohibited in 1925. The Red Cross violated basic human rights when it refused to hold Italy accountable for its actions and let the Red Cross representatives be seriously injured without demanding justice on their part, without even criticizing the usage of the illegal gas. By not condemning fascist Italy, the Red Cross would gain personal benefits from it, but it did so at the expense of violating basic human rights.</i>
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Introduction

Officially founded in 1863 in Geneva, the International Movement of Red Cross and Red Crescent was created by a Swiss businessman by the name of Henry Dunant who was a firm believer that human life and health should be prioritized as he saw firsthand in the battle of Solferino how much damage an armed conflict cause and how little people can be prepared for these atrocities. Therefore, at his initiative, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement arose, with the main purpose of protecting human life and health above anything else. As stated on the official website, the institution still has the same interests in taking care of those who are searching for assistance. The institution acts before, during, and after disasters and health emergencies to meet the needs and improve the lives of vulnerable people⁹⁵⁷, it provides professional medical assistance and help, including on the battlefield, while ensuring respect for human beings and support to states of the world without any discrimination towards the ones that need assistance.

In the case of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War (1935-1936), the mission of the Red Cross ended with a great amount of criticism in the global arena because the institution violated the very objective it had set itself when establishing this international humanitarian movement. In 1935, Italy decided to go on the offensive in Ethiopia to turn it into a colony. Once the Red Cross gets involved that same year, the situation spirals out of control and the institution fails to protect its members from attacks by the Italian army. Furthermore, the Red Cross refused to criticize Italy when it should have, refusing also to put pressure on the Italian fascists to take

⁹⁵⁷ The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) is the world's largest humanitarian network international membership organization that unites 191 Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and supports them through a global secretariat, <https://www.ifrc.org/who-we-are/about-ifrc> (08.11.2023)

accountability for their unlawful crimes and make sure that those innocent lives lost during the battles, got closure and justice. Instead, this did not happen, and both parties are at fault. For the bibliography, books were used in both Italian and English, with electronic sources in both languages, and fully translated using personal linguistic knowledge acquired over the years.

As research methods, the analytical method was used to study in detail exactly what happened during the seven months in Ethiopia, the comparative method in terms of the reaction to Italy's war crimes, and, finally, the historical method that tells us about the actions of the Italian army against the Red Cross and, of course, the Ethiopian people. The work is structured in two chapters, the first being a historical contextualization of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War, its causes and unfolding, and the second chapter focuses on the participation of the Red Cross in this conflict, with all its implications and criticism.

The main purpose of this research is to establish the correctness with which the Red Cross carried out its activity on the territory of the African state, considering that the mission was not only a failure due to the lack of involvement at a macro level of the institution but also a rather controversial case in which an international institution refuses to put the interests of the people it promised to protect above its own. It comes with no surprise that any war was and remains the most aggressive form of reaction which is why there are international laws in place to prevent them and to diminish the potential war crimes, to protect human rights and freedoms during an armed conflict that usually has disastrous effects not only on those who decide to wage war, but more frequently on innocent people. In this case, innocent lives had no voice whatsoever, and no one, not even the humanitarian institution that had at its foundation the aim of protecting human beings at all costs, tried to be on their side and, most importantly, on the good side of history.

The purpose of this paper is not to provide as many historical facts as possible and neither to dive deep into Italy's imperialist ambitions and the hidden motives behind them, but it is simply a paper containing an assemble of reasons for which the legitimacy of both Italy and the IFRC should be put under question, and both deserve to be held accountable. One of them for the decision to break international law with its illegal actions in war, and the second one for not acting as a voice for its people and choosing to promote itself rather than advocate for the lives that were wrongfully lost.

The Outbreak of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War

For a more in-depth analysis of the mission of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in Ethiopia, it is necessary to consider the situation and historical context of that period because otherwise, the subject would miss important factors and pieces of information that played a huge part in the process of the war and, eventually, at the end of it. On October 3rd, 1935, the army of the Kingdom of Italy went on the offensive in Ethiopia because of their expansionist policy and their colonialism views. Earlier, in 1896, the Italian military forces, supported by the British, had tried to occupy the Ethiopian territory for the first time but failed miserably due to a few miscalculations of the Italian military strategy as they underestimated the number of the Ethiopian soldiers. Since then, Adwa has been remembered by the Italians as a defeat which has to be avenged⁹⁵⁸.

The second time, the fascist army, under the orders of Benito Mussolini, would not give up until victory and would not renounce, risking being humiliated yet again. With the coming to power of the National Fascist Party, led by Benito Mussolini, efforts were focused on materializing Italian imperialist ambitions on the African continent, and even from the early 1930s they started to prepare for an attack on the Ethiopian Empire which was under the leadership of Emperor Haile Selassie Ist. At the beginning of the armed conflict, Emilio de Bono, an Italian general, and later Minister of the Colonies of the Kingdom of Italy, gave the order to begin the offensive, with the Adwa and Adigrat areas as the first targets. Although Emilio de Bono had been planning this since 1932 and was a huge believer that to win this time around, Italy needed to have a powerful Air Force and, more relevantly, he advised that the invasion should be made by implementing violent bombing actions of all the major cities of Ethiopia⁹⁵⁹. Furthermore, the Italian military strategy had as a key component the usage of the asphyxiating gases. From before the start of the armed conflict, this strategy was being put in place and they had every intention of using it if the Ethiopians were proving to be more resistant than they

⁹⁵⁸ Subhas Chandra Bose, *The Secret of Abyssinia and its Lesson in Subhas Bose: Letters, Articles, Speeches and Statements*, Calcutta, 1994, p. 372

⁹⁵⁹ Ian Campbell, *The Addis Ababa Massacre: Italy's national shame*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2017, p. 35

thought. In fact, by the time the offensive in Ethiopia was launched, a large chemical weapons facility had been established covering over 12.5 hectares where poisonous liquids and gases were being prepared to achieve victory.

These facilities had over 17 warehouses for storage, 35.000 gas masks for the Italian soldiers, and decontamination materials. Ethiopians were not prepared for a battle of this magnitude, and although there were many recruits as Ethiopia did not have a problem concerning the number of the human military force, it lacked severely in terms of both military equipment and training of those who were about to embark into this bloody war⁹⁶⁰. The Italian army was visibly superior because the one hundred thousand men engaged in battle had, in the first phase, 2300 machine guns, 230 cannons, 156 assault tanks, and even 126 aircraft. The soldiers advanced without resistance, and the air force bombed Adwa and Adigrat, causing numerous civilian casualties⁹⁶¹.

An important date in this confrontation is October 10th when the first chemical bombardment of Gesha took place, a period in which the Red Cross was already involved and was aiding Ethiopia. On 28th November, Emilio de Bono was replaced by General Pietro Badoglio, who used for the first time in this war the asphyxiating gases and the mustard gas prohibited by the Geneva Protocol of 1925, he also consented to 76 quintals of explosives to be used to destroy Dessie and the tents of the Red Cross. From then on, the Italian army officially transformed this conflict into an enormous controversy, as they started using chemical weapons and attacking the hospitals and tents set up by the Red Cross. These two major actions completely broke international law and could have damaged Italy in the global arena if enough voices wanted to try and make that happen.

Although the Italian armed forces were more advanced in all aspects, the Ethiopian troops resisted the attacks as firmly as they could over seven months, with great confidence that they would triumph, as they had once before. Much of Ethiopian optimism stemmed from the propaganda methods that were used, as reported by British writer Evelyn Waugh: “The only department of the Ethiopian government that functioned effectively was the propaganda department[...] Disloyalty, cowardice, extreme physical frailty, and cruelty have been attributed to the invading army; for defenders, moderation, courage, wisdom, and constant success; and victims include almost only women, children, and medical personnel”⁹⁶².

On the other hand, Emperor Haile Selassie Ist wrote in his memoirs that it was a general sense of knowledge amongst the Ethiopians that Italy would conquer, and he knew for certain that his country was not in the least prepared for a conflict of this magnitude fighting with another country that did not only possess equipped soldiers but also were far more advanced when it came to military power. As he was proven to be right, between April and May of 1936, the fascist victory and conquest of this African territory became evident, and the Ethiopians could no longer hold them back or protect their home. Ethiopia would be under Italian control for five years, until 1941, when the British troops finally provided aid to the Abyssinian troops and Ethiopia was finally liberated, becoming a symbol of African strength and resistance⁹⁶³.

Involvement of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

From the first days of the conflict, the Red Cross offered its services to both Italy and Ethiopia, but the previous one refused help from the institution, declaring itself self-sufficient. Especially considering that Dr. Aldo Castellani, later named “the man who won the war” offered his services to the Italian army, resulting in a very low number of deaths recorded due to illness or injuries, which sparked amazement and admiration internationally, although Italy was still condemned for aggression on Ethiopia⁹⁶⁴. However, there were serious problems on the other side of the battle and Red Cross assistance was vital to the survival of the Ethiopian soldiers. There were very few doctors in Ethiopia even before this conflict started, and most of them were not

⁹⁶⁰ João Fábio Bertonha, *Paranoie fasciste? Il volontariato in favore dell’Etiopia durante la guerra del 1935-1936* in *Diacronie*, No. 14, 2, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.4000/diacronie.282> (04.11.2023)

⁹⁶¹ Patrizia Manno, *Crimini di Guerra*, <http://www.criminidiguerra.it/campagnaetiopia.shtml> (04.11.2023)

⁹⁶² Evelyn Waugh, *Waugh in Abissinia*, Sellerio Editore, Palermo, 1992, p. 55

⁹⁶³ Irina-Marina Manea, *How Africans Humiliated Europeans*, <https://historia.ro/sectiune/general/cum-i-au-umilit-africanii-pe-europeni-582328.html>, (04.11.2023)

⁹⁶⁴ Luca Borghi, *Man Who Won the War: Myth and Reality of Aldo Castellani's Role in Preserving the Health of Troops During the Italo-Ethiopian War 1935-1936*, Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2022, pp. 28-32

familiar with the Western methods that were far more practical in these life-and-death situations. They were mainly doctors, called Hakim, who used natural remedies and herbal cures.

Therefore, many of the doctors and medical personnel who came to help were part of European nations and part of Red Cross Societies⁹⁶⁵. 12 hospitals were installed in Ethiopia with the support of 28 national Red Cross Societies, an unprecedented number until that period, but it came with no surprise as it was the right thing to do and a good cause to get involved in and provide aid. However, humanitarian aid was starting to not be enough when the Ethiopians were no longer the only victims in this bloody conflict. Although it was strictly prohibited by the Geneva Convention in 1864⁹⁶⁶, members of the Red Cross were targeted, and injured and a few even died because of the Italian aggression. The rules clearly state that the medical personnel exclusively assigned to medical duties must be respected and protected in all circumstances, and even though the Kingdom of Italy had signed the Geneva Conventions, did not hold back from breaking the law once again.

Between December 30th, 1935, and January 4th, 1936, no fewer than fifty bombs were dropped on the Ethiopian Red Cross post in Dagahbur, Ogaden. On December 30th, 1935, the fascist aircraft bombed Swedish ambulances at Melka Dida, a camp in the Dolo Addo district of Eastern Ethiopia⁹⁶⁷. Another better-known attack was the Italian air raid on the Harar Hospital in March 1936, which was the largest Red Cross-operated facility in Ethiopia⁹⁶⁸. Moreover, Italy's fascist troops used mustard gas, including on the IFRC representatives, under the pretense of accusing the units bearing the Red Cross symbol of covering up Ethiopian military operations. As a result, they attacked many hospitals built mainly by the Swedish and British Red Cross, causing multiple deaths, although their number is uncertain⁹⁶⁹.

Moreover, years later, Rainer Beaudendistal would interview Dr. Edoardo Borra who was the director of the Italian Hospital in Addis Ababa and also part of the Red Cross during the fascist occupation and the conclusions that were being drawn were about the fact that Italy was very aware of the laws that it broke, but could not care less about the Geneva Protocol since they had a war to win and that was the only aspect that mattered. Dr. Marcel Junod was responsible for supervising actions, organizing hospitals, treating the wounded and, when it came time for an official visit to Rome to discuss with the Italian authorities procedures for an investigation into the alleged violations of the 1929 Geneva Convention on the Wounded and Sick on the Ground, per Article 30, Junod sent a telegram about the incident at Korem, when he witnessed mustard gas bombing by Italian warplanes.

In addition, Dr. Stanislaw Belau, who already knew the toxic gas as he served as a Polish officer in World War I and had identified mustard gas, plus two other chemical agents unknown to him, for being used in Ethiopia, had to be cited during the visit by the delegation consisting of President Max Huber, Vice-President Paul Logoz, Carl Jacob Burckhardt and Jacques Chenevière. The Red Cross delegation had substantial proof and eyewitnesses to attest to what happened, but something went wrong. The delegation failed to even present this evidence because of the secret discussions held there that most probably ended up with Italy convincing the Red Cross to arrange that would benefit both parties. As the criticism of Italy's actions was never part of the discussion, the visit consisted of ten short minutes in which the issue of illegal gas was never raised by the representatives of the Red Cross, failing to protect their people and to honor its main promise: to protect people's lives and health. Above all, the essential question is why they took part in this betrayal and refused at all costs to convince Italy to take accountability for its actions and to stop once and for all the aggression towards the medical personnel on the battlefield. There could be two possible reasons for this.

On one hand, experts speculate that it would have been a sign of diplomacy and a symbol of relations between the Red Cross and Fascist Italy, some even calling it “the sacrifice of truth on the altar of European

⁹⁶⁵ Quentin Colin Holbert, *Regional Influences on the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis, 1934-1938*, University of Calgary, 2019, p. 66

⁹⁶⁶ 1864 Geneva Convention, Article 2 (cited in Vol. II, Ch. 7); 1906 Geneva Convention, Articles 9–10, 1929 Geneva Convention, Articles 9–10, IHL Treaties - Geneva Convention, 1864 (icrc.org) (11.12.2023)

⁹⁶⁷ United Nations Archives (UNA), C.207.M.129.1936.VI, “Dispute Between Ethiopia and Italy: Communication from the Swiss Government, League of Nations, May 7, 1936, p. 1, <https://archives.ungeneva.org/dispute-between-ethiopia-and-italy-communication-from-the-polish-government> (11.12.2023)

⁹⁶⁸ Quentin Colin Holbert, *Regional Influences on the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis, 1934-1938*, University of Calgary, 2019, p. 68

⁹⁶⁹ Bernard Bridel, *Ethiopia 1935-36: mustard gas and attacks on the Red Cross*, “Le Temps Magazine”, 13.08.2003, Ethiopia 1935-36: mustard gas and attacks on the Red Cross - ICRC (11.12.2023)

diplomacy⁹⁷⁰. Although many severely criticized the institution for not taking the necessary measures to protect its members who died as a result of the usage of mustard gas and they did not ensure the implementation of the chemical weapons articles of the Geneva Conventions and Protocol, they were also sympathetic to the actions of the Red Cross because, on the international arena, Italy's supremacy was obvious and very few would have criticized it. Irish political activist George Bernard Shaw corresponds: "We only have to do one thing. Let us remain out of the conflict between Italy and Ethiopia and take care to remain on good terms with Italy"⁹⁷¹. On the other hand, experts also urge us to consider the very high probability of a secret arrangement between Italy and the IFRC of mutual benefits: the Red Cross needed to keep its silence, and, in return, Italy would have achieved a higher level of influence as an NGO on the global arena.

Conclusions

Finally, the mission of the International Movement of Red Cross and Red Crescent in Ethiopia provided good reasons to be criticized in the international arena because, whether it was a case of impressive European diplomacy as some called it or not, the Red Cross violated its principles and betrayed its only purpose as a global institution who swore to protect everyone in need. Moreover, it is quite possible that it was its interest in becoming more influential and powerful that caused it to drown itself in deep and furious water, a metaphor for the criticism that it received for lacking integrity and loyalty.

Just as an example of how the IFRC benefited from not raising its voice and advocating for both the Ethiopians and the Red Cross members who were lost or severely injured on the field, it is obvious that the relations between the League of Nations and the Red Cross only solidified after it refused to bring up Italy's serious crimes, although there was solid evidence with which Italy should have faced serious consequences. This could be potential proof, I might add, of a secret agreement between the great powers of the world and the international institution that, indeed, became stronger after the situation in the Second Italo-Ethiopian War, from a player on the fringes of the international stage, the Red Cross was now occupation center stage which is what the institution wanted all along to gain influence, to grow in number and popularity, to become sufficiently powerful that it could pose as a key point in international relations and affairs. It succeeded, even nowadays the Red Cross is a huge and well-known institution that is present all over the world but did it at the expense of innocent lives and, more importantly, at the expense of its members.

In conclusion, the actions or, better said, the lack of actions of this institution led to its criticism in the global arena, but it fulfilled another purpose: to increase its importance with the help of a powerful ally. However, its actions must be condemned, especially out of respect for the Red Cross members and Ethiopian troops who have not received any justice, not even to this day. On the other hand, it is also important to hold accountable Italy because it committed atrocities and respected no law whatsoever, only having one big and unjustified reason: to sustain its imperial hegemony. We condemn the IFRC's lack of integrity, but I must also condemn fascist Italy's actions, as journalist George Steer clearly stated: "But of the many that I saw dead or dying, there is not one of them whose blood does not lie on the head of Mussolini"⁹⁷². Aggressive actions and violent strategies toward thousands of people who have the right to life and health never were and never will be the solution. History shows us that countries that committed atrocities and leaders who were vicious and power-hungry always ended up being defeated, no matter how long they ruled or how much dominance and influence they had over the world. Barbaric mentalities will always lose to the detriment of progressive and diplomatic thinking which is exactly why countries that have the sole interest of expanding their power even though inconceivable brutality will undoubtedly crash and forevermore be criticized for their actions.

This should not be confused with the case of countries that have committed violent acts as self-defense or who have obeyed any form of limitation from aggressive conflicts as the law of war specifies. We understand wars are inevitable in some isolated cases, but completely forgetting about the *jus in Bello* is unforgiving as the rules are there for the protection of innocent lives, the protection of the Ethiopian lives, and the Red Cross members who are now lost because Italy could and would not obey some simple and clear rules.

⁹⁷⁰ Bahru Zewde, *Between Bombs and Good Intentions: The Red Cross and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935–1936* "African Studies Association", Vol. 50, No. 2, September, 2007 pp. 234-235

⁹⁷¹ Alberto Alpozzi, *Guerra di propaganda. Le bugie sul conflitto in Abissinia riciclate per l'Ukraine*, <https://italiacoloniale.com> (05.11.2023)

⁹⁷² Rainer Baudendistel, *Between Bombs and Good Intentions: The Red Cross and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-1936*, Berghahn Books, New York, 2006, p. 344

Furthermore, the Red Cross could not do that either as it failed in every aspect of what it promised and ended up putting its benefits above the people in need of their protection. For an institution that claims to have humanitarian aid at its origins and solid structure, the actions post the Italo-Ethiopian war in 1935-1936 do not show this at all. They are just as much to blame for the innocent lives lost in this armed conflict as it is fascist Italy. The writer Rainer Baudendistel states, and I tend to agree: "By walking a thin line between its interests and those of fascist Italy, the organization came dangerously close to complicity, by abstention, with the power that committed these violations"⁹⁷³.

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