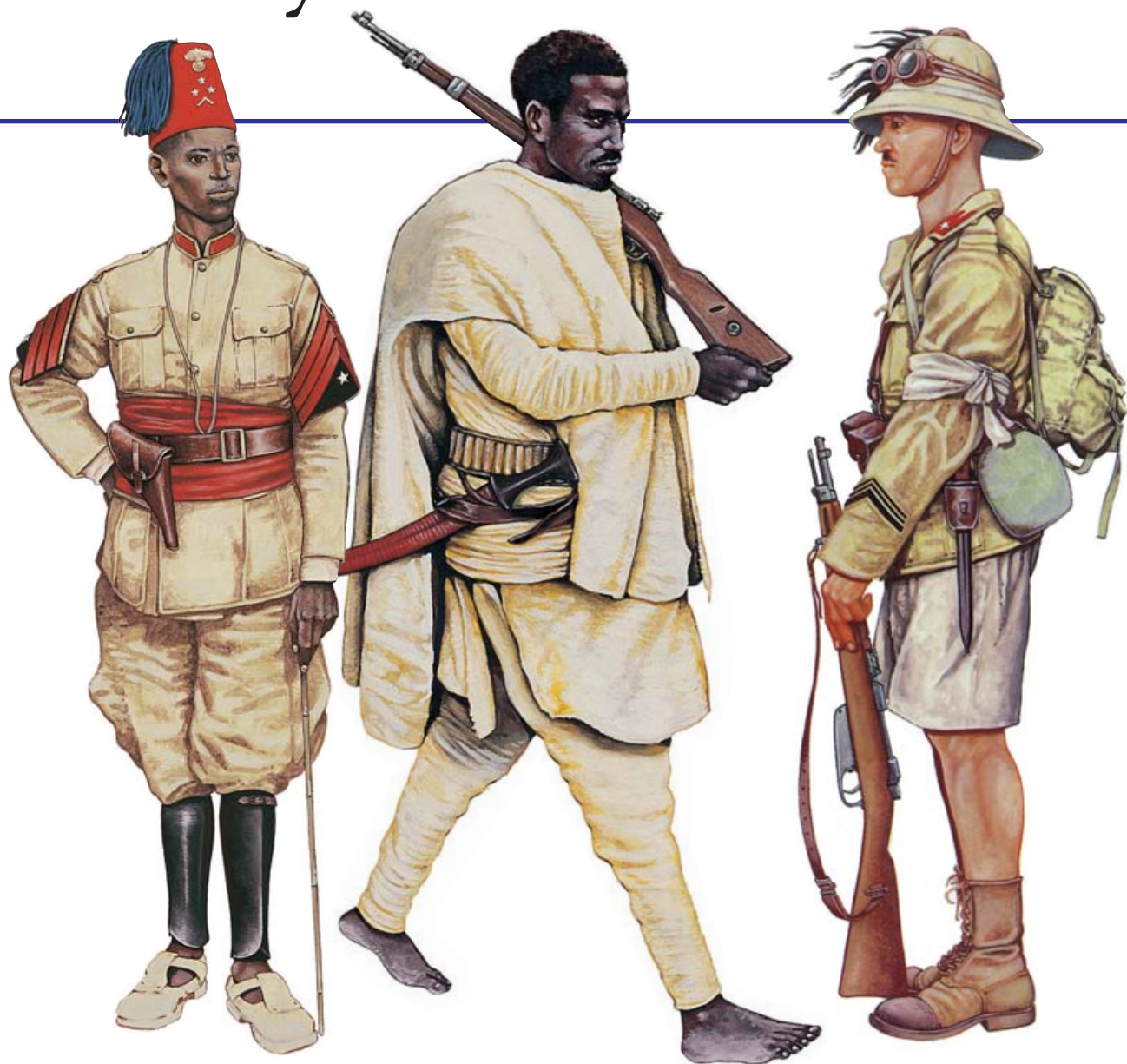


The Italian Invasion of Abyssinia 1935–36



David Nicolle • Illustrated by Raffaele Ruggeri

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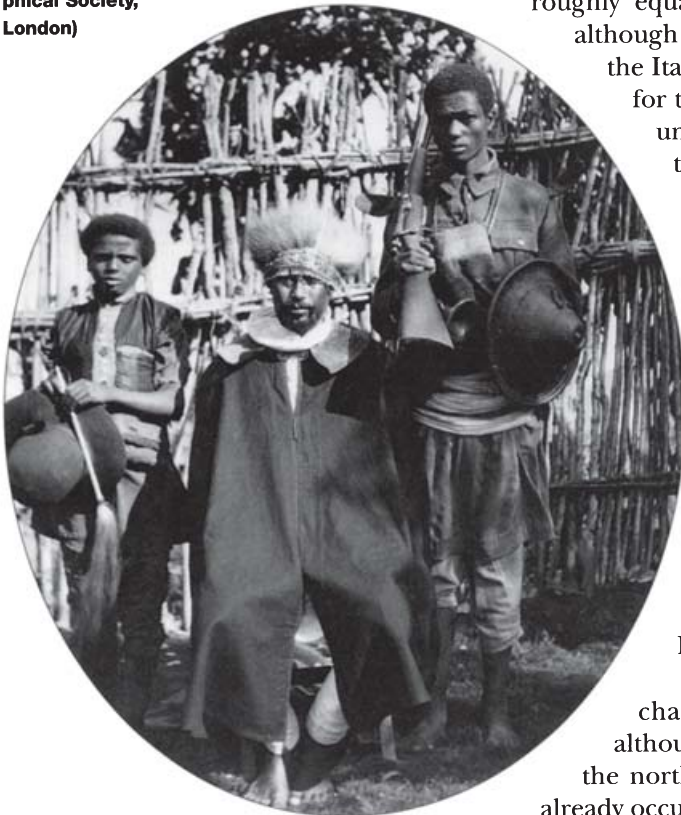
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Series editor Martin Windrow

THE ITALIAN INVASION OF ABYSSINIA 1935-36

INTRODUCTION

Fitaurari Wasene, the governor of Maji province in the deep south-west of the Ethiopian Empire, photographed in 1926. His official costume, including a long cape and a lion's mane headdress, remained unchanged until the Italian invasion. The Fitaurari's personal guard, with his simple khaki uniform, modern rifle and traditional leather shield, was also typical of Ethiopian provincial forces. A boy servant or slave carries the Fitaurari's ceremonial fly-whisk, which served as a symbol of rank, and his broad-brimmed sun-hat. (A.W. Hodson photograph, Royal Geographical Society, London)



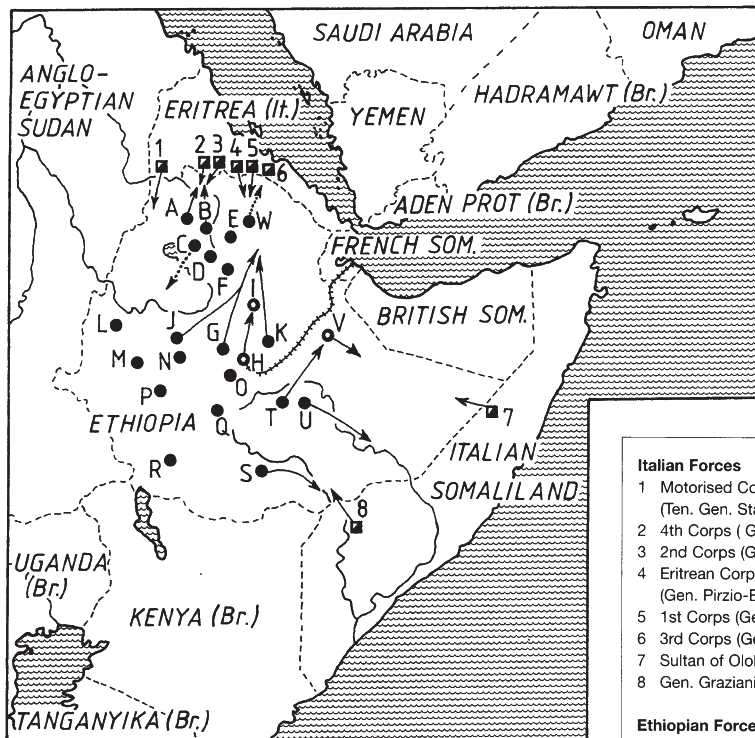
ETHIOPIA, or Abyssinia as it was known until modern times, is regarded as the oldest Christian country in Africa. It also has a substantial Muslim minority population in the north, the coastal areas and eastern lowlands, as well as tribal peoples who retain animist beliefs. Christianity has been linked to Ethiopia's sense of national identity for centuries, and was also associated with the dominant Tigrean and Amharic highland peoples. The city of Harar in the east of the country remained largely separate from the Christian kingdom of Abyssinia, however, and became a major centre of Islamic civilisation in East Africa,

When Eritrea regained independence in 1993, the Italo-Ethiopian War of 1935-36 began to be seen in a new light. This Red Sea coastal region of ancient Abyssinia was only integrated into the Ethiopian Empire in 1962, and since at least the 7th century AD, when Islam arrived on the offshore islands, its culture was very different from

Ethiopia itself. Today, the population of Eritrea consists of roughly equal proportions of Muslims and Christians, although the name Eritrea only dates from 1890 when the Italians derived it from the ancient Latin name

for the Red Sea – *Mare Erythraeum*. Islam was the unifying factor among the coastal towns and tribes, just as Christianity was in the highlands. As Islam spread, so the centre of gravity of Christian Ethiopia moved southwards from Axum to Lalibela and Gondar, and finally to Addis Ababa. The Ottoman Turks gradually took control of the coastal ports, eventually passing control to the Egyptians in the 19th century. Somalia never formed part of the Ethiopian kingdom. The interior was inhabited by Somali nomads, while the coastal ports were dominated by Arab merchant communities who fluctuated between independence and nominal recognition of the suzerainty of the main Muslim power in the western Indian Ocean.

A private Italian trading company purchased Assab in southern Eritrea in 1869, although since 1840 the British had an outpost on the northern Somali coast. Meanwhile Egypt, which already occupied the Sudan, extended its authority down



- Italian & allied forces
- Ethiopian forces
- Initial troop movements

Italian Forces

- 1 Motorised Column (Ten. Gen. Starace).
- 2 4th Corps (Gen. Babbini).
- 3 2nd Corps (Gen. Maravigna).
- 4 Eritrean Corps (Gen. Pirzio-Biroli).
- 5 1st Corps (Gen. Santini).
- 6 3rd Corps (Gen. Baftico).
- 7 Sultan of Olof Dinle.
- 8 Gen. Graziani.

Ethiopian Forces

- A Ras Immiru.
- B Degiacc Admassu Burru.
- C Gessesse Beiew (Army of Gojjam; deserts).
- D Haile Kebbede (Army of Wag).
- E Ras Seyum (Army of Tigre).
- F Ras Cassa (Army of Beghemder).
- G Ras Mulughiet (Mahel Safari 'Army of the Centre').
- H Emperor Haile Selassie (Kebur Zabagna 'Imperial Guard', at Addis Ababa).

- I Crown Prince (Army of Wollo, at Dese).
- J Bitwoded Makonnen (Army of Wollega).
- K Ras Kebbede & Degiacc Aberra Tedia (Army of Shoa).
- L Ras Mangasha Wube.
- M Degiacc Makonnen Endalkatchew (Army of Illub Abor).
- N Degiacc Hapta Mariam.
- O Degiacc Mangasha Wolde.
- P Ras Getachew Abate.
- Q Degiacc Makonnen Wossene.
- R Degiacc Abebe Damtew (Army of Genu Gofa).
- S Degiacc Desta Damtew (Army of Sidamo-Borana).
- T Degiacc Amde Mikael (Army of Arusi).
- U Degiacc Biene Merid (Army of Bale).
- V Degiacc Nasibu Zemanuel (Army of Hararge).
- W Degiasmacc Haile Selassie Gugsu (deserts to Italians).

the Red Sea into the Gulf of Aden and around Raas Caseyr (Cape Gardafui) until Ethiopia was virtually surrounded. Then came the Mahdist revolt and the British occupation of Egypt in 1882. Since Britain had no interest in the interior of the Horn of Africa, London encouraged others to take over from existing Egyptian garrisons. As a result the Italian government bought Assab from



The banner of the *Mahel Safari* or traditional Ethiopian 'Army of the Centre' was given to this force in 1934. It is decorated with an embroidered picture of St George and the Dragon, and was regarded as the War Flag of the Ethiopian army as a whole. It is also worth noting that the soldiers carrying this important banner are wearing traditional Ethiopian costume rather than modern-style uniforms.



An Ethiopian horseman who is almost certainly a member of the aristocracy because of his lionskin headdress and lionskin *lembd* or cape. Apart from the magnificence of his costume, shield and horse-harness, it is interesting to note that the man rides with a very simple, almost primitive, stirrup for the big toe only.

the private trading company and in 1885 sent two military expeditions to the ex-Turco-Egyptian port of Massawa in Eritrea. The Ethiopians moved into the Eritrean highlands and took control of Harar in the east, areas which had been held by Egypt. As the Italians pushed inland from Massawa, and the Ethiopian governor of Tigre probed northwards, there were inevitable clashes before the Treaty of Ucciali (1889) made Ethiopia an Italian 'protectorate'. Further Italian expansion during the anarchy which followed the death of the Ethiopian Emperor John culminated in disaster at the battle of Adwa (Adowa) in 1896, which not only forced Italy to recognise Ethiopian independence, but inflicted huge damage on Italian self-esteem. A less important result of Adwa was the foundation of Addis Ababa as Ethiopia's new capital. Originally consisting of Emperor Menelik's hilltop *gibbi* or palace, it was soon surrounded by the *gibbis* of other *rases*, or noblemen.

Italian progress in Somalia suffered no such setback. In 1885 outposts were established on the

Indian Ocean coast by treaty with the Sultan of Zanzibar, titular ruler of the area. Three years later, the local Sultan of Hobyo (Obbia) accepted an Italian protectorate and became Italy's loyal ally. By 1891 the Italian flag flew over the entire coast from Raas Caseyr to the Jubba River. For several years the Italian government leased trading rights and the obligation to maintain order to a private company, but it proved unable to cope with increasing local resistance led by Muhammad Ibn 'Abd Allah Assan, the so-called 'Mad Mullah', who was neither mad nor a mullah, but actually a notable Somali poet and patriot. As a result the Italian state took over direct control of Italian Somaliland in 1905. Meanwhile, the Ethiopians had moved no further east than the city of Harar, leaving the lowlands of the Ogaden Desert to those nomadic Somali tribes who also dominated the interiors of Italian and British Somaliland.

The situation changed dramatically during the First World War, when the Emperor Lij Jasu converted to Islam, made an alliance with Muhammad Ibn 'Abd Allah Assan and offered to put Ethiopia under the spiritual authority of the Ottoman Turkish sultan-caliph. His action has often been described as an act of insanity, but in reality Lij Jasu hoped to harness the warlike Somalis and the Muslim Galla tribes of eastern Ethiopia to crush the rebellious *rases*, or nobles, and unify his country. He also hoped for backing from the Ottoman army stationed in Arabia, and from German forces in Tanganyika. But this gamble failed, and Lij Jasu was toppled by the *rases* led by Ras Tafari Makonnen in September 1916. His ally, the 'Mad Mullah' Muhammad Ibn 'Abd Allah Assan, was attacked by British, French and Italian troops in Somalia. A month later Ras Tafari Makonnen led his private army into Harar and massacred a large part of the Muslim population, including many Somalis. This act left a legacy of bitterness against the dominant Amharic Christian