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The use of chemical weapons in the 1935–36 Italo-Ethiopian War

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I. Introduction

On 3 October 1935 the Second Italo-Abyssinian War (also referred to as the Second Italo-Ethiopian War) began when Italian forces crossed into the territory of present-day Ethiopia (also referred to as the Ethiopian Empire or Abyssinia). Tensions between the countries dated to at least 1887, when Italy first invaded Ethiopia.¹ The second war was expected and tensions had been growing since the December 1934 Wal Wal incident in which Ethiopian and Italian soldiers clashed at a fort constructed by Italy at an oasis at Wal Wal. The fort was on Ethiopian territory and Italy, in constructing it, meant to provoke a border demarcation dispute between Ethiopia and Italian Somaliland.²

The main thrust by the Italian forces was through the central high plateau of Ethiopia, a region that was attractive for operations because it enjoyed a temperate climate and Ethiopia's agriculture was concentrated there. The region was also farthest removed from British and French colonial possessions, and large-scale Italian operations were therefore less likely to trigger a reaction from those powers.

General Emilio De Bono was the commander of Italian forces in East Africa, including the Eritrean, Libyan and Somali colonial units. Italian forces had more modern military equipment than the Ethiopian forces generally, and Italy also possessed tanks and a larger, more sophisticated air force.³ Ultimately, about 110 000 Italian soldiers were pitted against approximately 800 000 Ethiopians.

The Ethiopian forces under the overall command of Emperor Haile Selassie had largely outdated equipment that included rifles and artillery, but most Ethiopian soldiers were armed with traditional weaponry, especially spears.

¹ Italian forces were been defeated by Abyssinia at the Battle of Adowa on 1 Mar. 1896. This incident and a desire to acquire a larger colonial presence motivated the Italian decision to attack in 1935.

² See the speech by Haile Selassie to the Assembly of the League of Nations, 30 June 1936, reproduced in League of Nations, Records of the sixteenth ordinary session of the Assembly, Plenary meetings (June 30th to July 4th, 1936), Text of the debates, Part II, *League of Nations Official Journal*, 1936, pp. 22–25.

³ The Italian forces initially had 300 aircraft. Pittman, J. M., *Historical Tactical Study, Italo-Abyssinian War, 1935, Organization of the Theater of Operations and Strategical Conduct of the Campaign* (US Army Infantry School: Fort Benning, GA, [1936]), p. 5.

The Emperor's Imperial Guard was the best equipped and trained of the Ethiopian forces and totalled approximately 15 000 men.⁴

In going to war, Italy broke both the 1928 Italo-Ethiopian Treaty of Friendship and its obligation as a member of the League of Nations not to resort to war as a means of state policy.⁵ In particular, the Treaty of Friendship called for peace between the two nations for at least 20 years and stated that the resolution of disputes should be referred to the League of Nations. League of Nations documents are an important source of information about the conflict because both states were members of the organization and both issued statements regarding the reasons for and conduct of the war.⁶ Discussions were carried out partly within the framework of the Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use in War of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare of 1925 (Geneva Protocol), which fell under the mandate of the League of Nations.⁷

Both armies committed atrocities.⁸ The war is also remembered for Italy's successful use of chemical weapons, primarily the blister agent sulphur mustard.⁹ The use of sulphur mustard was particularly effective because the Ethiopian soldiers wore traditional light desert garb that exposed the skin. In addition, Ethiopian soldiers typically wore sandals or were barefoot.

⁴ Xylander, R. von, 'Military problems in Ethiopia', *Wissen und Wehr* (1935), p. 15, quoted in Pittman (note 3), p. 6.

⁵ Italy joined the League of Nations in 1920 and Ethiopia joined in 1923. See Yale Law School, 'The Covenant of the League of Nations', <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/leagcov.asp#>.

⁶ Another source or information is the military observers sent by the United Kingdom to the combat areas. See also International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), 'Les ambulances à Croix-Rouge du CICR sous les gaz en Ethiopie' [The ambulances of the Red Cross (ICRC) in the gas in Ethiopia], 13 Aug. 2003, <<http://www.icrc.org/web/fre/sitefre0.nsf/html/5RQERS>>; and ICRC, 'Ethiopia 1935-36: mustard gas and attacks on the Red Cross', 13 Aug. 2003, <<http://www.icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/iwpList96/DEB07F09BE30F4B8C1256DB000479398>>.

⁷ The Geneva Protocol was signed on 17 June 1925 and entered into force on 8 Feb. 1928. Its text is available at <http://www.sipri.org/contents/cbwarfare/cbw_research_doc/cbw_historical/cbw-hist-geneva-parties.html>. For a summary of the negotiations on chemical warfare by a League of Nations Secretariat official see de Madariaga, S., *Disarmament* (Oxford University Press: London, 1929), pp. 158-64.

⁸ E.g. League of Nations, Emasculation and decapitation of Italian prisoners, statement by the Belgian Lieutenant A. Frère, former military advisor to Ras Desta, *League of Nations Official Journal*, Annex 1605, July 1936. See also an Italian documentary with footage from the combat, pictures of primary documents and interviews, including with historian Angelo Del Boca. YouTube, 'Un'eredita scomoda' [A troubled inheritance], <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBZT-9f-bIk>> and <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1JT0nq3bS-w&feature=related>>.

⁹ Sulphur mustard has been called the 'king of war gases' for its ability to cause casualties and its persistency. It was introduced onto the battlefield in 1917 and was responsible for more than half of all chemical weapon casualties in World War I. According to Gilchrist, approximately 2-3.3% of those exposed to sulphur mustard during the war died. However, the figure has been challenged as unreliable. Exposure to sulphur mustard can promote the development of infections by the damage it causes to the respiratory system. It can also cause genetic mutations and there is strong evidence suggesting that those exposed to sulphur mustard will develop health problems, including chronic respiratory disease, cancer and an increased risk of blindness. There is a high incidence of cancer of the windpipe among Iranian mustard casualties from the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War. Gilchrist, H. L., *A Comparative Study of World War Casualties from Gas and Other Weapons* (Chemical Warfare School: Edgewood Arsenal, MD, 1928), p. 49

II. Use of chemical weapons in the war

Chemical weapons do not appear to have been used in the war until Ethiopia launched its ‘Christmas offensive’ of 1935, which blunted an Italian offensive and succeeded in temporarily cutting off some communication and supply lines.¹⁰ In December 1935 Italian aircraft dropped tear gas grenades and asphyxiating gas over the Takkaze Valley in north-eastern Ethiopia. Italy controlled the air and initially dropped sulphur mustard air bombs but later shifted to the use of aerial spray tanks.

Sulphur mustard air bombs reportedly caused most of the chemical weapon casualties.¹¹ The use of sulphur mustard played an important role in shifting the momentum of fighting in favour of the Italian forces and in demoralizing the Ethiopian forces. Its use resulted in many long-lasting, painful injuries and in a significant number of deaths.¹²

Italy also used chemical weapons in the Battle of Shire (29 February–2 March 1936), the Battle of Maychew (31 March 1936) and in attacks on the remnants of Ethiopian forces in the Lake Ashangi region starting in April. The last reported use of chemical weapons by Italy was in April 1936.¹³ That month the Ethiopian Government also provided a list of towns it said had been attacked with chemical weapons (see table 1).

Italy’s use of chemical weapons had a strategic effect on the conduct of the war and, as operations progressed, Italian forces were able to deliver large quantities of sulphur mustard against target areas. Chemical weapons were used to protect the flanks of Italian supply routes and lines of attack and as a ‘force multiplier’ to increase disruption in the Ethiopian forces by hindering communication, demoralizing troops and confusing troop movements.¹⁴ A Soviet estimate states that 15 000 of the 50 000 Ethiopian casualties in the war were caused by chemical weapons.¹⁵

¹⁰ According to a report deemed unreliable Italy may have first used a chemical weapon (chlorine) in southern Ethiopia in October 1935. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *The Problem of Chemical and Biological Warfare*, vol. 1, *The Rise of CB Weapons* (Almqvist & Wiksell: Stockholm, 1971), p. 143.

¹¹ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (note 10), p. 143.

¹² Given the nature of the conflict and the exaggerated statements made about it, accurate numbers will probably never be ascertained with reasonable certainty.

¹³ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (note 10), p. 144. See also table 1 in this paper.

¹⁴ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (note 10), pp. 145–46.

¹⁵ Stepanov, A. A. and Popov, J. N., *Khimicheskoe Oruzhiye i Osnovy Protivokhimicheskoi Zashchity* [Chemical weapons and principles of anti-chemical defence] (Moscow, 1962), quoted in Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (note 10), p. 142.

Table 1. Ethiopian towns attacked with chemical weapons in the Second Italo-Abyssinian War

Town	Date of attack
Takkaze	22 Dec. 1935
Amba Alaa	26 Dec. 1935
Borena	31 Dec. 1935
Sokota	10 Jan. 1936
Makale	21 Jan. 1936
Megalo	Feb. 1936 ^a
Waldia Road	27 Feb. 1936
Quoram	16 Mar. 1936
Ylanserer	17 Mar. 1936
Quoram	17–18 Mar. 1936
Irga Alem	19–21 Mar. 1936
Indomahoni	29–30 Mar. 1936
Quoram	4–7 Apr. 1936

^a The exact day was not available to the Ethiopian Government.

Source: League of Nations, Letter, dated April 13th, 1936, from the Ethiopian Representative to the Secretary-General, 13 Apr. 1936, *League of Nations Official Journal*, Annex 1592, Apr. 1936, pp. 479–80.

III. Italy's chemical warfare capability

During World War II the Military Intelligence Division (G-2 Intelligence) of the United States War Department produced a series of 'tentative lessons bulletins', including several on Italy's chemical warfare capabilities. These bulletins referred to Italy's use of chemical weapons during the Second Italo-Abyssinian War. One bulletin stated that an unnamed report confirmed Italy's use of 105-mm artillery shells filled with sulphur mustard and the World War I irritant or 'mask breaker' diphenylchloroarsine; the effect of these shells was listed as 'above expectations'. The bulletin also stated that 4336 aerial bombs filled with sulphur mustard and 540 aerial bombs filled with diphenylchloroarsine had been used against Ethiopian forces. Italy maintained chemical warfare storage facilities in Libya at Benghazi and Tripoli during the war against Ethiopia. British forces later captured chemical warfare materiel at Benina, outside Benghazi, during World War II that included 96 drums of blister agent (suspected to be sulphur mustard).¹⁶

¹⁶ US Military Intelligence, 'Notes on Italian chemical warfare', *Tentative Lessons Bulletin*, no. 138, G-2/2657–235 (US War Department: Washington, DC, 30 July 1941), declassified. Information in the bulletins is from official sources and had been 'reasonably confirmed'. The notes contained in bulletin no. 138 are based on information compiled by the British War Office as of Mar. 1941.

IV. Reaction to the use of chemical weapons in Ethiopia

Haile Selassie and the Ethiopian foreign minister repeatedly protested against the use of chemical weapons in letters to the League of Nations and elsewhere.¹⁷ Chemical weapon use in Ethiopia was also extensively reported in Europe due to the presence of European military observers and advisers and medical staff attached to various ambulance units and the Ethiopian Red Cross.¹⁸ Information was provided on Italian military attacks on Red Cross vehicles and medical aid stations.¹⁹

The medical staff reported on Italy's use of chemical weapons, including sulphur mustard, describing its appearance, smell and the type of wounds inflicted. When the type of weapon could not be determined, the effects were described.²⁰ The international medical staff also described the experience of being taken prisoner by the Italian forces, noting that they were sometimes compelled to sign statements that the accusations of chemical weapon use by Italy were untrue.²¹

Military observers from non-combatant countries were attached to Italy's armies. One of them, Major Norman E. Fiske, a US cavalry officer, wrote at least four reports on the initial phases of the war for the US Army's Military Intelligence Division.²²

In June 1936 Haile Selassie gave a speech to the League of Nations in which he condemned Italy's use of chemical weapons against Ethiopia. He also accused the League of Nations of violating Article 16 of its Covenant, which states that should any member of the League resort to war 'in disregard to its covenants under Articles 12, 13 or 15, it shall ipso facto be deemed to have committed an act of war against all other Members of the League'.²³ Selassie also criticized the League of Nations for permitting Italy to use the Suez Canal to transport troops and war materiel. He stated that 'Sprayers were installed on board aircraft so that they could vaporise, over vast areas of territory, a fine, death-dealing rain. Groups of nine, fifteen, eighteen aircraft followed one another so that, from the end of January 1936, soldier, women, children, cattle, rivers, lakes, and fields were constantly drenched with this deadly rain'. Selassie additionally stated that sulphur mustard had killed tens of thousands of Ethiopians.²⁴

¹⁷ E.g. League of Nations, Letter from the Ethiopian representative to the Secretary-General, C.12.M.11.1936.VII, 3 Jan. 1936; and League of Nations, Telegram from His Majesty the Emperor of Ethiopia to the Secretary-General, C.506.M275.1933.VII, 30 Dec. 1935.

¹⁸ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (note 10), p. 144.

¹⁹ League of Nations, Telegram from the Ethiopian Government to the Secretary-General, C.107.M.48.1936.VII, 5 Mar. 1936.

²⁰ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (note 10), p. 144.

²¹ League of Nations, Appendix II, Evidence given by Dr. Belau at 9 a.m. on March 23th 1936, at the 'Clinique Général', Geneva, in the presence of Mlle. Odier and M. Boisier, members of the International Red Cross Committee, *League of Nations Official Journal*, Apr. 1936, pp. 477–80.

²² See Pittman (note 3), p. iii.

²³ Covenant of the League of Nations (note 5), Article 16.

²⁴ Speech by Haile Selassie to the Assembly of the League of Nations (note 2), pp. 22–25.

V. Legal considerations

Many of the states that became party to the Geneva Protocol reserved the right to retaliate in kind if first attacked with chemical weapons or if they entered into hostilities against a state or coalition of states that had not acceded to the protocol.²⁵ Both Ethiopia and Italy were party to the 1925 Geneva Protocol, although Italy argued that the protocol did not prohibit the use of chemical weapons in retaliation to war crimes.²⁶ In letters to the League of Nations, Italy accused Ethiopian forces of violating several articles of the Geneva Protocol by their extensive use of dum-dum bullets, and ‘savage and bloodthirsty aggression against non-combatants’.²⁷

VI. The end of the war and its aftermath

Emperor Haile Selassie left the country in May 1936 and Italy formally annexed Ethiopia after it occupied Ethiopia’s capital, Addis Ababa. Rodolfo Graziani was appointed as viceroy and governor general of Ethiopia, and Pietro Badoglio became Prime Minister of Italy briefly at the end of World War II. In 1996 Italy officially acknowledged that it had used chemical weapons in Abyssinia, confirming the allegations that had been made in numerous publications describing the campaign.²⁸

The failure of the League of Nations to intervene reflected the international political climate of the 1930s and the fact that the League of Nations took decisions by consensus.²⁹ France and the United Kingdom were arguably the most active and strongest states in the League of Nations, and they also saw Italy as a potential ally against Germany. Italy’s development and use of chemical weapons occurred within the broader context of the development of chemical weapons and the consultations on these weapons at various levels among the leading military powers of the time.³⁰

²⁵ Italy ratified the Geneva Protocol on 3 Apr. 1928; Ethiopia acceded to it on 20 Sep. 1935. States having reservations to the Geneva Protocol have progressively withdrawn them in recent years. Neither Ethiopia or Italy appears to have made reservations when it became party to the protocol.

²⁶ The legal argument concerning the use of chemical weapons in the war is discussed in Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *The Problem of Chemical and Biological Warfare*, vol. 3, *CBW and the Law of War* (Almqvist & Wiksell: Stockholm, 1973), pp. 143–49.

²⁷ League of Nations, Letter from the Italian Government to the Secretary-General, C.35.M.13.1936.VII, 16 Jan. 1936; and League of Nations, Abyssinian atrocities committed against Italian workmen: protest by the Italian Government to the League of Nations, document 208481/9, 9 Mar. 1936.

²⁸ E.g. Del Boca, A., *The Ethiopian War, 1935–1941*, tr. P. D. Cummins (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL, 1969). The book was originally published in Italian in 1965 and is regarded as a fundamental reference because the author interviewed Ethiopian and Italian participants, including Selassie, and because important primary Italian documents are referenced. See also Baer, G. W., *Test Case: Italy, Ethiopia, and the League of Nations* (Hoover Institution Press: Stanford, CA, 1976).

²⁹ The constituent bodies of the League of Nations were the Assembly, the Secretariat, the Council and the ad hoc commissions. The Assembly met once a year, while the Council met 3 to 4 times a year. Commissions were created by the Council to address specific issues.

³⁰ E.g. the German chemist Hugo Stoltzenberg assisted Italy with the construction of sulphur mustard production. Italy and the Soviet Union also hosted reciprocal technical visits on chemical weapon matters. See Garrett, B. C. and Hart, J., *Historical Dictionary of Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical*

Today both Ethiopia and Italy are parties to the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC).³¹ The convention requires that chemical weapons abandoned by a state after 1 January 1925 on the territory of another state without the consent of the latter should be declared and verifiably destroyed. Since the entry into force of the CWC three of its parties have declared abandoned chemical weapons on their territory: China, Italy and Panama.

Old conventional munitions, some dating from the 1930s, are present on Ethiopia's territory; it is possible that chemical munitions may also eventually be uncovered in Ethiopia. If that were to occur, the concerned parties would certainly undertake to consult with each other, including in the framework of the CWC, on the appropriate and relevant measures that should be taken.

Warfare (Scarecrow Press: Lanham, MD, 2007) pp. 200–201; Hart, J., 'Historical note: 1934 visit by Soviet CW technical mission to Italy', *ASA Newsletter*, no. 100 (20 Feb. 2004), pp. 16–17; and Fishman, Y., Report of the Preliminary Results on Trip to Italy by the Military–Chemical Mission, Report to Soviet Commissar of Defense Voroshilov, 11 Aug. 1934, Russian State Military Archive (RGVA), (in Russian).

³¹ The Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction was signed on 13 Jan. 1993 and entered into force on 29 Apr. 1997. Its text is available at <<http://www.opcw.org/chemical-weapons-convention/>>. See CWC, Article II, para. 6.