

Ethiopia: land of slavery & brutality - League of Nations, Geneva 1935

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The above quote was an extract from a document or a memorandum presented by the Italian Government delineating the reasons for the expulsion of Ethiopia from the League of Nations, the forerunner of today's United Nations Organisation. The main point of their argument was the condition of slavery and gebbar (a slave-like system) to which Abyssinia/Ethiopia had reduced its subject populations in the southern half of its empire, while pillaging their lands.

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(I) CONDITIONAL ADMISSION OF ETHIOPIA TO THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS.

As regards the condition required by Article I of the Covenant [accord] regarding effective guarantees of a sincere intention to observe international obligations, the Sub-committee pointed out that, in the past, Ethiopia had not fully observed her international engagements. During the discussion it was stressed how difficult it was to reconcile Ethiopia's demand with the circumstance that Ethiopia, once admitted to the league, might sit in judgement on countries under mandate, more civilised than Ethiopia herself and not stained with the disgrace of slavery...

(II) POLITICAL STRUCTURE AND CONDITIONS OF ETHIOPIA IN RELATION TO ARTICLE I OF THE COVENANT [of the League of Nations].

(Summary):

Clear distinction between the Abyssinian State and the territories conquered by it. Difference of religion, language, history, race, and political and social structure. Negus's domination over non-Abyssinian populations. The gebbar system (a form of slavery) applied to subject populations. The Ethiopian overnment's responsibility for the decimation of the subject populations. Ethiopia's incapacity to possess a colony.

ABYSSINIA AND HER "COLONIES": DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE ABYSSINIAN STATE AND THE CONQUERED TERRITORIES.

On this subject it is first of all necessary to obtain a fundamental idea of the position. It is commonly said that Ethiopia is a national State in Africa which forms a single unit. Nothing could be further from the facts. The Ethiopian State, in its present form, is composed of two regions which are clearly distinct both geographically and politically.

(i) The old Abyssinian State, consisting of the regions inhabited mainly by Abyssinian populations speaking kindred languages derived from Southern Arabic. But the old Abyssinian State itself could not be called a national State, because even in those regions there are considerable non-Abyssinian minorities, such as the Agau in the Tsana and Nile regions, the Falasha of Semien, professing the Jewish religion ...and others. Nevertheless, their common allegiance to the dynasty of the House of Solomon, and the fact that for ages they [peoples of the northern half of Ethiopia] had belonged to the same group of States, have to a certain extent welded all these regions into a political unit which, though rough and shapeless in structure, might have a position of its own in the composition of present-day Ethiopia.

This Abyssinian State has well-defined and exact historical, geographical and ethnical boundaries. On the west, towards the Nile basin, and on the east, towards Danakil, the frontier of the Abyssinian State coincided with the edge of the plateau. The Abyssinians, a mountain people, are clearly distinguished by race, language and religion from the populations which inhabit the torrid Danakil plain and the valleys sloping down towards the Sudan.

To the south, the boundary of the Abyssinian State was marked by the course of the Blue Nile as far as its confluence with the Adabai, by the watershed between the Blue Nile and the Awash, and by the course of the river Awash as far as its entry into the Danakil plain. The territories beyond these boundaries, in the south, are inhabited by non-Abyssinian populations which, throughout the centuries of their history, have been traditional enemies of the Abyssinian State.

(ii) The non-Abyssinian areas recently conquered by the arms of the Negus Menelik.-Beyond the confines of this nucleus of the Abyssinian State there were, until forty years ago, other native States, some of which have a long historical tradition of independence. Among the principal may be mentioned the Emirate of Harrar, which comprised the regions between the river Awash, the Webi Shebeli, and the south-eastern edge of the plateau, having the inhabitants of Ogaden as tributaries. The Emirate of Harrar is a Moslem State which was ruled for centuries by the dynasty of its Emirs, and was the cultural and religious centre of Islam in South-East Africa. The continuous relations aintained

by the Emirate with the Arab countries of the Levant had brought that state up to a level of civilisation far superior to that of Abyssinia. We need only mention the fact that, even to-day, Harrar is the only town in the territory of the present Ethiopian State which is built of masonry and is not composed of huts hovels made of branches, apart from few buildings in Addis Ababa.

In the south-west, the kingdom of kafa was founded by the western Sidama peoples. The political and social constitution of this kingdom and its history (which comprises at least 600 years of independence, from the fourteenth century to the Abyssinian conquest) form the subject of various well-known works published only recently; and, not to quote Italian writers, we need only refer to the voluminous work of the Austrian traveller Franz Bieber.

In the south, there is the kingdom of Wollamo, founded by the Sidama populations of the Omo. How this peaceful little agricultural State was devastated and destroyed by the Abyssinians is described in a work by a Frenchman, M Vanderheyem, which is nothing less than an indictment of the Abyssinian State.

In the west, there is the Sultanate of Jimma, a Moslem State that became a centre in Westrn Ethiopia towards which Moslem currents flowed from Harrar and Egypt. Under the patriarchal administration of its sultans of the local dynasty, Jimma had reached a high degree of economic prosperity, which it retained, being the only Moslem State remaining independent of the Abyssinians until the Negus annexed it to Ethiopia a few months ago.

The Abyssinian State is completely different in every respect from these vast "colonies" which it has recently acquired:

- (a) In religion, because the Abyssinians are Monophysite Christians, whereas the Somali, Harrari, [deleted] [Oromo], Sidama are largely Moslem, and in part still pagan;**
- (b) In language, because the Abyssinians speak Amharic and Tigrai (Semitic languages), whereas in the conquered regions the languages spoken are totally different from the Abyssinian languages, but are interrelated among themselves-e.g.-Galla [Oromo], Somali, Kafi, Wolamo, etc.;**
- (c) In political and social structure, because the Abyssinian State is based on the feudal system, whereas the Emirate of Harrar was organised on the model of the States of the Arabian peninsula, and the Sidama States have a highly centralised organisation of their own;**
- (d) In race, because the Abyssinians are Semiticised people, whereas the [deleted], Sidama, Somali, Tishana, Yambo and the rest are Cushitic and Nilotic peoples;**
- (e) In history, because the Emirate of Harrar, for instance, has for centuries waged relentless warfare against the Abyssinian State. Indeed, this warfare might be said to constitute the whole history of Abyssinia itself; records of it existed from at least the fourteenth century onwards. The Abyssinian domination constitutes, in fact, the subjugation of a conquered people by its age-long enemy.**

DOMINATION OF THE NEGUS OVER NON-ABYSSINIAN POPULATIONS.

The Abyssinian domination in the conquered countries takes concrete form in the slave trade and the so-called gebbar system. The slave trade will be considered below. It should be pointed out here, however, that the slave trade is due not only to a desire for gain, but also to the idea, deep-rooted in the Abyssinians' mind, that their victories have left them absolute masters of populations which, in their eyes, are no more than human cattle.

This conception of the Abyssinians is confirmed by a typical incident narrated by Sir Arnold Hodson in his work *Where the Lion Reigns* (page 41): 'An old Abyssinian was shooting with the sight adjusted at more than a thousand metres. I said to the Dedjiajmatch [dejazmach] that the bullets might fall on the mountain and kill someone. He burst out laughing and said, "What does it matter if they do? There is nobody here but Shangalla [shankilla]" (Shangalla is the name given by the Abyssinians to the Nilotic peoples).

The gebbar system is a form of slavery, and is regarded as such by European writers and travellers. In each of the countries conquered and annexed by Abyssinia, a body of Abyssinian troops is stationed, comprising the soldiers themselves and their families. The inhabitants of the conquered country are registered in families by the Abyssinian chiefs, and to every family of Abyssinians settled in the country there is assigned one or more families of the conquered as gebbar. The gebbar family is obliged to support the Abyssinian family; it gives that family its own lands, builds and maintains the huts in which it lives, cultivate the fields, grazes the cattle, and carries out every kind of work and performs all possible services for the Abyssinian family. All this is done without any remuneration, merely in token of the perpetual servitude resulting from the defeat sustained thirty years ago. It amounts to what Anglo-Indians are accustomed to call "the law of the jungle".

The gebbar can never obtain freedom from their chains, even by ransom. They must not leave the land assigned for their work, and, if they run away, they themselves are subject to the terrible punishment which are inflicted in Ethiopia, and to which we shall refer shortly, while their village is bound to supply the Abyssinians with another family to be reduced to the condition of gebbar, in place of the fugitive family.

As to the effects of slavery and the gebbar system, all who know the facts are agreed: the non-Abyssinian regions of Ethiopia are becoming a vast desert. Every Abyssinian chief sent to those parts finds it necessary on his arrival to provide himself with slaves and his soldiers' families with gebbar. And when he leaves the conquered countries to be transferred elsewhere, he takes away with him, and allow his soldiers to take away with them, the greatest possible number of slaves and gebbar to be employed at his new residence. This constant draining of the population of the subject territories is particularly terrible, because the slaves and gabbar are decimated, during the long journeys, by hunger, thirst and ill-treatment from their Abyssinian masters. We quote evidence from non-Italian sources. Sir Arnold Hodson (*Seven Years in Southern Abyssinia*, London, 1927, page 146) writes of Kafa: 'There has recently been a change of Governors in Kafa, and, as usual, the outgoing official was taking away as much as he could in goods and slaves'. ... Thus the population of Kafa, which Cardinal Guglielmo Massaja

estimated at a million and a half before the Abyssinian conquest, is now reduced to 20,000. Again, whereas Vittorio Bottego estimated the population of the Burji in 1895 at 200,000, there are now no more than 15,000 people in the region. And Sir Arnold Hodson, who was Consul at Gardulla, not far from Burji, writes as follows (Seven Years in Southern Abyssinia, page 102): 'Burji had been sadly devastated quite recently, and very few natives were left there. The responsibility for this rests with a former Governor of Sidamo, named Ato Finkabo, who appears to have carried on a very flourishing business in slaves from these parts. In fact, he became so enterprising that most of the natives who were left fled to Conso and Boran to escape falling into his clutches'. George Montandon calculates (Au pays des himirra, page 223) that the population of Ghimirra has declined in a few years from 110,000 to 10,000. The responsibility of the Addis Ababa Government for this incredible state of affairs in the non-Abyssinian areas of the south is particularly great, because it has compelled some of the more warlike non-Abyssinian peoples to arm themselves in defence of their lives and liberty; and these foreign peoples, having acquired arms and ammunition, have in their turn become slave-raiders, preying upon the unarmed neighbouring tribes, and so have increased the destruction and the scourge of slavery. In conclusion we need only quote ...Major M Darley, who has had a very long experience of Ethiopian affairs, and who wrote in 1926, three years after Abyssinia's entry into the League (Slaves and Ivory, page 34): 'Abyssinia should be the heart of North-East Africa, but all the veins or roads, which should supply the rest of the starving body with nourishment, are blocked by the Abyssinian policy, abysmal and suicidal, of depopulation, retrogression and racial extermination'.

It will thus be seen that the Ethiopian State, administratively and politically disorganised as it is, carries the dire effects of its domination (slavery and gebbar) into vast regions of East Africa which were conquered by the arms of the Negus only a few years ago. It is surely in the interests of civilization that the Harrari, [deleted] [Oromo], Somali, Sidama, and other peoples which have for centuries formed separate national entities, should be removed from Abyssinian oppression. To effect an immediate settlement of this grave problem is, indeed, to act in conformity with the spirit of the covenant, which requires that colonisation should be carried out only by advanced States which are in a position to ensure the development and welfare of the native peoples...

The documents show:

- (a) That Ethiopia recognises slavery as a legal condition;
- (b) That raids for the capture of individuals for purposes of slavery are continuing on a large scale, especially in the southern and western regions of Ethiopia;
- (c) That the slave trade is still practiced;
- (d) that the Ethiopian Government participates directly in the slave trade by accepting slaves in payment of taxes and allowing detachments of regular troops to capture new slaves;
- (e) That, in addition to slavery proper, there exists the institution known as "gebbar", to which the population of non-Ethiopian [sic] regions are subject, and which is a form of servitude akin to slavery;

(f) That the Ethiopian Government has taken no account of the recommendations made to it by the committee of Experts on slavery, more particularly as regards the abolition of the legal status of slave, as appears further from the report submitted to the League of Nations in May 1935...

By her conduct, Ethiopia has openly placed herself outside the covenant of the League and has rendered herself unworthy of the trust placed in her when she was admitted to membership. Italy, rising up against such an intolerable situation, is defending her security, her rights and her dignity. She is also defending the prestige and good name of the League of Nations."

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File:Italian East Africa (1938–1941)-Harar map

