



## The Dutch in the Second Italo-Abyssinian War

*The Dutch Red Cross ambulance: its actions and reactions*

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Image 1: CH.W.F. Winckel & A.C. Belmonte, *Het Nederlandsche Roode kruis in Ethiopië* (Amsterdam: 1936).

## Introduction

*"We have decided to bring to an end the most unequal, most unjust, most barbarous war of our age, and have chosen the road to exile in order that our people will not be exterminated and in order to consecrate ourselves wholly and in peace to the preservation of our empire's independence ..."*<sup>1</sup>

*-Haile Selassie, 10 may 1936*

This quote is from a telegram written by Haile Selassie, the Emperor of Abyssinia, on 10 may 1936 to the League of Nations. In this quote he announced his decision to stop the Second Italo-Abyssinian War which was fought from October 1935 until May 1936. Haile Selassie characterized the war as the most barbarous and terrifying war of his age. Nonetheless the Emperor still strived, although Abyssinia lost the war, to keep his country independent.

Since the scramble for Africa took place, which started roughly in 1880 and ended at the start of the First World War in 1914, African nations were ruled by colonial powers. These colonial powers, of which the biggest participants were France and Great-Britain, ruled over approximately ninety percent of the entire African continent. The ten percent that was still independent consisted of two countries which were Abyssinia (Ethiopia) and Liberia. Italy, which was under the rule of the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini since 1922, wanted to re-live the great history that Italy has had in the time of the Roman Empire. Mussolini wanted to rebuild an empire and chose, not unsurprisingly, Abyssinia as his target. Later, multiple reasons will be taken broadly into account, but foremost Mussolini wanted revenge for the first Italo- Abyssinian War which was lost by Italy in 1896.

The fascism of Mussolini grew strongly in popularity during the Economic crisis that started in 1929, named the Great Depression. The core of Mussolini's fascist ideology was the one man leadership of himself with barely any limits to his power, the creation of national unity and the existence of one massive political party. In order to receive as much support of the population as was needed, in this time of economic crisis, Mussolini nationalized many companies and launched several government programs to fight unemployment. To finance all of these, Mussolini launched an initiative called 'Gold for the Fatherland' in which he asked the population to donate their gold jewellery for the cause of the state. As part of this program, many married women gave their golden marriage ring to the state in return for an iron one. All these efforts together, with the cult around Mussolini's personality, had one core aim which was to create unity among the population. They would follow their leader and his goals. Mussolini's foreign policy had the aim of creating a new Roman Empire that would include parts of Africa. From 1925 until 1934 Italy was quite stable, prosperous and secure and a large part of the population adored Mussolini. The public opinions in

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<sup>1</sup>J. Dungan & L.D. Lafore, *Days of Emperor and Clown: The Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-1936* (1973), 204.

other parts of Western Europe were less positive and held fear.<sup>2</sup> Mussolini's outward ideas to other states are characterized by his words below:

*"Democracy is talking itself to death. The people do not know what they want; they do not know what is the best for them. There is too much foolishness, too much lost motion. I have stopped the talk and the nonsense. I am a man of action. Democracy is beautiful in theory; in practice it is a fallacy. You in America will see that someday".<sup>3</sup> – Benito Mussolini, 1928*

The second Italo- Abyssinian War started in 1935 and ended in 1936. What is special about this war is that several European countries like Great Britain and the Netherlands sent an ambulance under the banner of the Red Cross to Abyssinia to help the Abyssinian war casualties. In this paper the operation of the Dutch Red Cross will be the main focus. The main question is: What role did the Dutch Red Cross play in the Second Italo-Abyssinian War and what perceptions did the Dutch have of it? To answer this question an examination will take place of the Dutch ambulance and the Second Italo-Abyssinian War. Furthermore the thoughts and ideas of the population of the Netherlands will be examined and will be presented in a broader context.

To truly get a good understanding of the entire situation I will first briefly analyse the period from the beginning of the 20s until the start of the second Italo- Abyssinian War. The 20s were a relatively prosperous period for Abyssinia. In 1923 they joined the League of Nations with the support of Italy and in 1924 Haile Selassie, at the time still called Ras Tafari Makkonen, travelled through Europe and visited many national leaders. In Abyssinia Haile Selassie headed towards supreme power. On 2 November 1930 Haile Selassie officially received his name and became Emperor of Abyssinia. Many European representatives attended this ceremony and gave all sorts of gifts. Foreign consulates, like those of the British and Italians, established in the country and created a sphere of influence. Haile Selassie, eager to modernize his country, accepted this influence due to the need of foreign help. Nonetheless we can see that he knew the risks of relying too much on the major colonial powers like France, Italy and Britain, because he picked his most important advisors from smaller countries of which they had no direct borders with. One of the more important advisors were the Belgians who trained the imperial guard. Together with this military reform Haile Selassie reformed the political landscape. A constitution was created and new foreign advisers from Switzerland, Britain and the United States of America were installed. The new constitution created some turmoil under the traditional provincial rulers while the Emperor tightened his grip upon them. At the end Haile Selassie increased his control over the five great provinces.<sup>4</sup> From the 1930s the

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<sup>2</sup> A. Mockler, *Haile Selassie's War* (Oxford: 2003), 25-30.

<sup>3</sup> Benito Mussolini quote, 1928, <<http://www.azquotes.com/quote/906207>>, 16-5-2017.

<sup>4</sup> Mockler, *Haile Selassie's War*, 4-20.

Abyssinians, British and Italians strived to exactly define their boundaries. Agreements were settled between these countries and the only true difficulty proved to be the Italo-Abyssinian frontier in which tensions started to rise. Eventually it ended peacefully but not for long. Mussolini started considering the conquest of Abyssinia from 1932 onwards.

The relevant period for this research is the period of the seven months of war between 1935 and 1936, and the period shortly after when we can see opinions about whether the Red Cross operation was a success or failure. By researching both primary and secondary sources this paper will be divided into three chapters that will all have different perspectives on the war. The first chapter will consist mostly of a context chapter in which the second Italo- Abyssinian War will be discussed in all its details. One of the main goals will be to give a greater understanding of the war and the country in which the Dutch ambulance had to do their work. The sources that are used for this chapter consist of newspaper reports and secondary literature. The second chapter will examine what role the Dutch ambulance played and for what reasons they engaged themselves in this war. The sources that will be used will mostly consist of primary sources of the Dutch Red Cross that can be found in the National Archive in The Hague complemented with three books written in 1936 by participants of the Dutch ambulance. The last chapter will examine the Dutch perspective of this war. This will show us the broader held idea of the war and gives us relevant information of the ideas that lived among the Dutch population during the war. The Dutch perspective will be analysed by reports given about the war in several newspapers and magazines which can be found in *Delpher* and in a collection of newspaper clippings that are in the possession of the African Studies Centre in Leiden.

The relevance and aim of this research has multiple sides. First of all a history will be written about the Dutch Red Cross in Abyssinia of which there is basically no literature in existence. All the literature aims at the wider story of the Second Italo-Abyssinian War and not at the efforts that for example in this case the Dutch Red Cross made. The book that deals with the efforts of the Red Cross is called *'Between Bombs and Good intentions; The Red Cross and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-1936'* written by Rainer Baudendistel. While this book claims to be the missing part besides all the books about military warfare and gas warfare, it is incomplete. The sources that were used in this book are mainly from the Italian archives, the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) and from the Red Cross Archives of the British, Finnish, Swedish and Swiss.<sup>5</sup> The core of the book is to present a case study of the difficult situation in which aid agencies find themselves in a warzone. It deals with the Red Cross in the Second Italo-Abyssinian War and tells about the use of poison gas, the prisoners of war and the way in which Mussolini manipulated the ICRC for his own benefit. The missing part is clearly the Dutch ambulance of which the expedition is very well documented. This

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<sup>5</sup> R. Baudendistel, *Between Bombs and Good intentions The Red Cross and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-1936*(New York: 2006), 4-6.

can be found in both the Dutch National Archive in The Hague and in the several books the expedition members have written in 1936. With this new perspective of the Dutch on this war we might be able to receive an entire new perspective while they came to support the casualties of the war and not to fight them. Finally it will also be of great relevance to put the ideas and thoughts of this study in a broader perspective and in the context of the time. Is there a growing fear for fascism like in other countries or did the Dutch have their own reasons to involve themselves in this war. Also the subject of racial stereotypes which were very common in the 1930s will be touched upon and analysed. On top of that the Second Italo-Abyssinian War took place shortly before World War II of which the impact on the Netherlands was immense. While the balance of power in Europe was already shaking during the Second Italo-Abyssinian War it might be seen, alongside with the frequently studied Spanish Civil war, as the undiscussed precursor of World War II.

The historiography about the Dutch Red Cross ambulance in Abyssinia is very scarce and as mentioned above basically non-existent at all. Nonetheless some books mention this mission as one of many others. The bigger topic about the Second Italo-Abyssinian War is much better studied and has multiple literary works. One of the first books about this war is called *The war in Abyssinia; A brief military history* (E. Hamilton, 1936). This book was written shortly after the war and has as its goal to give a more objective view about the war than the newspapers often did. The book is written from the Italian perspective and chronologically discusses the military events. The sources which are used are also only from Italian official sources. Therefore the only value of using this book is to see and study the Italian side of the war. The book *The civilizing mission: the Italo-Ethiopian war 1935-1936* (A.J. Barker, 1968) does not argue what its title suggests, namely that the conquest was a civilizing mission. The book discusses multiple sides of the war. The military part in which he shows the huge difference between the Abyssinian and Ethiopian side is described in detail. Besides these military events also other sides like the political and diplomatic impact is discussed. Here the focus lays on Great Britain's policy which, as Barker calls it, had a 'double policy'. They wanted to keep Mussolini as a friend in Europe but also were against the invasion of Abyssinia. The book *Legacy of Bitterness: Ethiopia and Fascist Italy, 1935-1941* (A. Sbacchi, 1989) is truly seen as a collection and combination of numerous works on this topic. It consists of ten chapters which can be characterized as ten different essays instead of a book. The author tries to narrow these ten essays down into four main issues. These issues are the war itself and the public opinion within Italy and Abyssinia, the casualties of both Abyssinia and Italy, the relation between the Italians and the Abyssinians and vice versa and lastly the recognition of the Italian empire by foreign countries. Besides this overarching book, the book *Haile Selassie's war* (A. Mockler, 2003) is a book of the same kind but way more cohesive. It starts in 1896 with the First Italo-Abyssinian War where after it discusses the second one. The author underlines his admiration for Emperor Haile Selassie multiple times and provides a great

amount of information about the structure of Abyssinia in order to understand the developments. Furthermore at the end of the book the situation and developments after the war when the British invaded is discussed. The book *Haile Selassie I The formative Years, 1892-1936* (H.G. Marcus, 1987) dedicates one chapter on the Second Italo-Abyssinian War which basically summarizes the main events. More specifically about the work of the Red Cross within this war there is basically one leading book named *'Between Bombs and Good intentions; The Red Cross and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-1936'* (R. Baudendistel, 2006). As mentioned above, it presents a case study about the difficult situation of aid agencies within a warzone. Many Red Cross ambulances are studied within this book but the Dutch with its wonderful sources have been neglected entirely. Besides this book the article *Force versus law: The international Committee of the Red Cross and chemical warfare in the Italo-Ethiopian war 1935-1936* (R. Baudendistel, 1998) focusses on the international Red Cross and its role, or basically absence of one, within the accusation of chemical warfare during the Second Italo-Abyssinian War.

## Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework in which this thesis will be placed is about the perceptions of the media in comparison with historical research. What is meant by perceptions of the media is the influence which the media might have on the opinions of individuals and communities. Within this theory a distinction is made between these individual and public opinions.

Individual opinions are, in a most basic definition, defined as ‘the expression of an evaluative judgment on a specific object, with direction and strength as the basic characteristics’.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless there are many perspectives on these individual opinions and quite often they are seen as a temporary construction which might change when new information comes across. The most common way to receive this information due to the media is by the so called mass media. Because of their spread of information by for example newspapers they might influence people on a daily basis and therefore might change or form opinions. The way the media frame their issues might influence the interpretation of the individual (framing theory). Besides this the media influences the interest which people have for a certain topic (agenda-setting theory) and in some degree determine what topic they want to highlight (priming theory).<sup>7</sup> Also of huge importance is the frame of reference of the individual which consist of the person’s norms and values. Information which is of no interest to the particular person will not be processed.

Public opinions are commonly defined as ‘the predominant idea, sentiment, or attitude held by members of a social grouping on specific social and political issues’.<sup>8</sup> These can also be divided in two main definitions. First of all there is the *reductionistic* definition. This definition argues that public opinion is nothing more than just a combination of individually-measured opinions. On the other hand there is the *holistic* definition. This definition argues that the public opinion is a collective entity and exceeds individual opinions. The role of the media within displaying and representing these public opinions should not be underestimated. It is even stated that it is the media who makes individual opinions *public*. On the other side it is also said that the mass media is an important source for public opinion. While media often has a close relation with the public they are seen as important representations of public opinion. This means that when the media is selective in what they publish as public opinion they might influence people’s perceptions of public opinion.<sup>9</sup> Besides these different theoretical definitions about public opinion, also the quantity is an important factor. There

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<sup>6</sup>N. Sonck, *Opinion Formation: the Measurement of Opinions and the Impact of the Media* (2010) <[https://lirias.kuleuven.be/bitstream/123456789/263878/1/DoctoraatNathalieSonck\\_2010vfinal.pdf](https://lirias.kuleuven.be/bitstream/123456789/263878/1/DoctoraatNathalieSonck_2010vfinal.pdf)>, 24-5-2017, 173.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, 174.

<sup>8</sup>E. Shiraev & R. Sobel, *People and Their Opinions. Thinking Critically About Public Opinion* (New York: 2006), 2.

<sup>9</sup> Sonck, *Opinion formation*, 183.



are mainly three quantities in which can be spoken of a public opinion. Firstly, when more than the majority but not the entire population shares the same opinion. Secondly when the majority of the population shares the same opinion (>50%) and thirdly when the biggest group within a population has the same opinion.

What we have seen here is how opinions are formed with twisted facts and a particular presentation of them. This framing by the media is quite often the result of outside pressures. What we see is for example state governments who have control over the media and basically decide what they are allowed to tell and what they are not allowed to tell. But also non-governmental organisations like for example the WHO do have their influence on what is told. The political and financial elite of the world basically decides what is shown and therefore we cannot really speak of a free press.<sup>10</sup>

This theoretical framework of perceptions of the media and its influence on the public opinion will be taken into account in the second and third chapter of the thesis in which the Dutch perspectives on the war will be discussed. Considering the importance of newspapers in creating a public opinion it will first of all be analysed what the press stated. As a result of that I will examine what this meant for the ideas and thoughts of the Dutch community.

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<sup>10</sup> E.J. 'Bron, de invloed van de media op het denken van de massa' (2015)  
<<https://ejbron.wordpress.com/2015/01/15/de-invloed-van-de-media-op-het-denken-van-de-massa/>> 22-5-2017.

## Materials and methods

The sources that will be used in this thesis are different in kind and nature and need to be analysed in different ways. In this part these different kinds of sources will be discussed in succession. The sources which will be discussed are: the newspaper articles, the three books of the members of the expedition, the archival material and the secondary literature. Often we will see that an interaction between different kinds of sources took place and therefore they will also be discussed together.

First of all the newspaper articles, which are mostly used in chapter three, will be analysed. The most important thing when we read these newspapers is to look at what kind of ideas or ideology it pursues. Were they for example in favour of white supremacy from a specific kind of ideology? Or were they most of the time taking a neutral position within certain debates? Besides this positioning of the newspaper it is also of huge importance to compare these with for example other newspapers and primary and secondary literature. The newspapers are chosen to analyse first of all how the Dutch were informed about the mission and secondly to see to what extent the Dutch were in support of the mission. As a result of this basically all the articles that are used are from the period between October 1935 and May 1936. Furthermore the chosen articles will include different periods of the war which will be chronologically discussed. The newspaper 'de Telegraaf', which is used frequently, was for example a popular newspaper which aims at bringing informative news and amusement at the same time. Therefore this newspaper might present the facts in a different way or might generalize their headlines.<sup>11</sup> As a counterpart to this newspaper 'De Tijd: godsdienstig-staatkundig dagblad', which was a catholic newspaper, will be used in order to exclude any discrepancies. As a third point of view the regional newspaper 'Provinciale Overijsselsche en Zwolsche courant' will also be used to be able to compare the outlined image. Also the liberal newspaper 'Het Vaderland: staat- en letterkundig nieuwsblad' and the liberal and economical orientated 'Algemeen Handelsblad' will be used in order to represent different parts of the Dutch society at that time.<sup>12</sup>

It is of big importance to stress that these newspapers are all found in an online database called *Delpher*. These digitalized newspapers are taken from their original context and therefore we must be aware that the interpretation of the sources might be different. The first question to ask is whether you can have the same interaction with a primary source when it is digitalized. When the nature of the source changes from something you can touch to something digital it can influence

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<sup>11</sup> 'De Telegraaf: het geheim van de grootste krant van Nederland' <<https://telegraaf-archieff.nl/geschiedenis-van-de-telegraaf.php>>, 22-5-2017.

<sup>12</sup> In the 1930s pillarisation was a common phenomenon within the Dutch society. Four pillars were in existence which were the Liberals, Socialists, Catholics and Protestants. These four pillars all had their own political parties, newspapers and social institutions.

your analysis and as a result we might lose some specific information.<sup>13</sup> Also to take into account is the fact that in these digital databases only a small part of all the newspaper material is digitalized. The part which is digitalized is also selected by persons and therefore far from neutral.<sup>14</sup> The last remark about the study of these newspapers is that people should realise that terms and meanings might have changed over time and that in order to have the best result you need to use the terms which were common in the studied period.<sup>15</sup> Specifically for this thesis attention needs to be given to the changed name of Abyssinia into Ethiopia.

The three books which are written by the members of the expedition deserve special attention as well. The books are called *'Het Nederlandsche Roode kruis in Ethiopië; waar onze vlag eens wapperde'* written by Dr Ch.W.F. AN Winckel and Dr A. Colaco Belmonte, *'Tusschen bommen en roovers; met de Nederlandsche Ambulance in Abyssinië'* written by A. van Schelven and *'Doktoren op Marsch'* written by G.M.H. Veeneklaas. All the books are written shortly after the expedition which argues in favour of their trustworthiness. To reconstruct the mission of the Dutch ambulance these books are of great value. We basically cannot get closer to the mission and the thoughts and ideas of the members. When we compare these books with each other we can fill in the gaps, we can see discrepancies and we can see multiple sides of the stories. This doesn't mean that one person is right and the other is wrong. It shows how different people experience different kind of events, but also how the members experience and perceive the same events in different ways. Also the authors of the books need to be taken into account. All of them were well educated, experienced and tough men who were picked from the great amount of letters of application. Besides this the three books will be compared to the official daily reports of the Dutch Red Cross mission which can be found in the National Archive in The Hague.

The letters and daily reports in the National Archive in The Hague are very useful. The letters which are written by the inhabitants of the Netherlands who were willing to join the mission show that the interest from the society was enormous. Most of these men were well-educated and prosperous which made them able to leave their home and join the mission. The daily reports show a great amount of facts and basically tell the day by day activities of the Dutch ambulance. They are written for the headquarters in the Netherlands and therefore show less emotion and more facts than the books. Nonetheless it is of great help to compare these daily reports with the books to exclude any discrepancies in the mentioned events.

Finally there are the secondary sources that are used in this research which consist of books and articles. These sources need to be compared with the primary source material. To take into

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<sup>13</sup> G. Zaagsma, 'On Digital History', *BMGN- Low Countries Historical Review*, 128:4 (2013), 19-25.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, 21.

<sup>15</sup> H. Piersma & K. Ribbens, 'Digital Historical Research; Context, Concepts and the Need for Reflection', *BMGN- Low Countries Historical Review*, 128:4 (2013), 88

account is the point of view the author pursues in his work. Attention needs to be paid to the background of the author, the relation of the author to this specific topic and the time in which it is published.

## The Second Italo-Abyssinian War

The main focus of this first overarching chapter will be to chronologically discuss the Second Italo-Abyssinian War and by doing this, provide a context for the smaller topics that will be discussed afterwards. The chapter will start at the beginning of the 1930s, where we will see that the idea of Mussolini to conquer Abyssinia started to cross his mind. The end of the chapter will be the end of the Second Italo-Abyssinian War in 1936. By doing this we will also touch upon some of the main issues of the later chapters namely the harshness, bitterness and ideas of this war.

### *Pre-war build up*

The majority of the Italian population did not favour any colonial war before 1935. The concerns of the Italian population were broad, while a great part of the population suffered because of the economic crisis and were barely able to take care of themselves. Besides this the population had no belief in Mussolini's idea that an African war would solve the economic problems. They doubted if they could win a war against Abyssinia because of their previous defeat in the First Italo-Abyssinian War in 1896. Furthermore the Italians believed that the costs would be far greater than the benefits and that a war might cause a conflict with Great Britain. In order to prevent the population from truly resisting the war and spreading these thoughts, the Fascist regime took root in all layers of society. Secret informants wrote reports to the authorities about the thoughts of the people regarding a war. The idea was that it was finally Italy's turn to conquer a rich territory while France and Britain had done that so often before.<sup>16</sup> While all these ideas were circulating, the Italian government started to raise taxes and basically all the goods rose in price. All the classes were affected by this rise and unemployment could be seen in all layers of society. Besides this, Italy also tried to justify an intervention by showing cruel pictures of the Abyssinian justice system and slavery. Nevertheless a war did not start yet but that was soon to be changed.<sup>17</sup>

The first true sign of ongoing trouble is known under the name Walwal crisis. The core of this crisis is a treaty of 1928 between Italy and Abyssinia. In this treaty the exact borders of Italian Somaliland and Abyssinia were settled. The place called Walwal was within the Abyssinian part but Italy nonetheless built a fortress in this area in 1930. A few years passed by and on the 29<sup>th</sup> of September 1934 both Italy and Abyssinia agreed to prevent having any harmful actions against each other. Two months later a force of Abyssinian militia arrived at the fortress and asked the Italian

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<sup>16</sup> A. Sbacchi, *Legacy of Bitterness: Ethiopia and Fascist Italy, 1935-1941* (1989), 36-37.

<sup>17</sup> N.V. Patria, 'Abyssinië' (Antwerpen: 1935), Afrika studiecentrum Leiden, HC 4332.

garrison, which consisted of people from Italian Somaliland, to withdraw. Word was sent to the Italians who reacted with sending reinforcements under Captain Cimmaruta. On the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> of December the Italian Somali forces and the Abyssinian forces fought with each other without having a clear reason. It resulted in the death of 107 Abyssinians and 50 Italians. Both sides claimed that the opponent started the fighting and the truth remains vague, but what is clear is that neither side tried to avoid a fight.<sup>18</sup> The Abyssinians appealed the League of Nations and demanded that the arbitration clause that was included in the treaty of 1928 should be used, but the Italians rejected. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of December the Italians attacked another place called Gerlogubi with planes and tanks and the Abyssinians pulled back. Because of the appeal to the League, the Abyssinians had created a European crisis at Geneva and received much publicity. Mussolini's respect was at stake and while Selassie made a wise political move he also made Mussolini and the Italian population eager to save their prestige.<sup>19</sup> From this point forward, war came even closer.

The next few months Selassie and Mussolini seemed to be playing a poker game with each other and constantly underestimated and misjudged each other. The rise of Hitler in Germany was of great help for Mussolini and cooled down the crisis in the League about Abyssinia. France and Great Britain really wanted to maintain the alliance with Mussolini with the rising threat in Germany and would therefore give him a free passage in Africa.<sup>20</sup> What was even more important is what was called the Franco-Italian alliance in which Italy promised to support France against Germany and in return Italy would receive a free hand in Abyssinia. In England on the other hand there was a strong public opinion against Italy with its fascism. On the 12<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> of February 1935 multiple Italian divisions sailed to Somalia and Eritrea. Mussolini and Haile Selassie both gave a speech in their parliaments with a clear war sentiment which led to the start of a true mobilization in the countries. The army of Haile Selassie was trained by Belgian officers. It had a total of 12 airplanes and new squadrons were created with cavalry, camels and cars. In January 1934 Selassie appointed, besides the Belgians, a Swedish officer and adviser of which more came in the summer of that year to run an officer cadet school.<sup>21</sup>

The Italians sailed tens of thousands of men to Africa who mobilized themselves at two fronts from the north and south of Abyssinia. Also a great amount of correspondents travelled to Africa to report this massive gathering. The Abyssinian army was more organized in a provincial way and every provincial leader came with his own army to come to the aid of Emperor Haile Selassie. The armies consisted of a great amount of men but most of the time only half of them had rifles and these rifles were very old. In September the developments started to increase in a quick pace. The

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<sup>18</sup> H.G. Marcus, *Haile Selassie I The Formative Years, 1892-1936* (London: 1987), 147.

<sup>19</sup> Patria, 'Abyssinië', 3-6.

<sup>20</sup> Mockler, *Haile selassie's war*, 42-43.

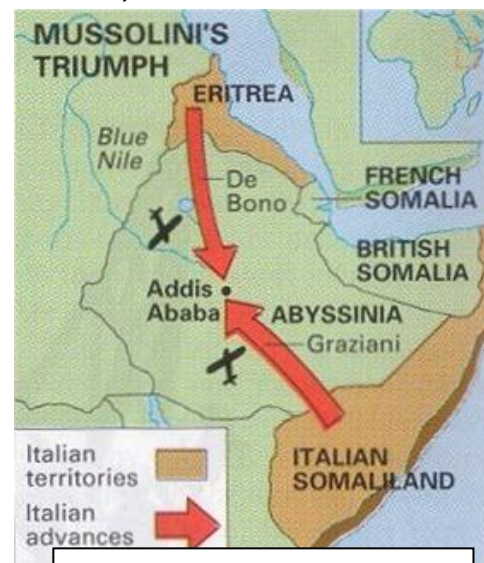
<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, 50.

League of Nations received some last minute concessions of Haile Selassie in favour of Italy. It proved to be too late while the Italian fleet moved towards the Mediterranean. Haile Selassie asked the League for neutral observers who should be stationed at the borders. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of October a force from Eritrea took possession of a mountain just inside Abyssinia. The following day the proclamation of war was read out at the court of Haile Selassie. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October approximately hundred thousand Italian forces marched into Abyssinia.<sup>22</sup>

### *The war*

The first days of the war were actually surprisingly peaceful while the Italian armies marched towards several goals in three columns from the north, east and south. The armies consisted of Italians, Somali's and Eritreans. Mussolini spoke immediately to the Italian people and reminded them that they had waited for 40 years since their defeat in 1896. It was now time for 'our place in the sun'. After four days the three armies occupied several cities without having fought any serious battles. Italian planes dropped bombs on several cities which made the Abyssinians flee to the mountains.

Haile Selassie's orders were clear. He ordered his armies to fall back to show the world who was the real aggressor. While the Abyssinians waited for their moment, the Italians started to have problems of their own. Several tanks got overheated in the hot desert lands and some men could not handle the heat. Nonetheless some of the Abyssinians were highly impressed by the Italians and the first blow for Haile Selassie was the betrayal of one of his commanders Haile Selassie Gugsu, who chose side for the Italians and was used since then for their propaganda. This occasion meant an increased



suspicion of the Abyssinians towards each other while they started to wonder who would be next. The Italians, with the knowledge of the existing rivalries, tried to make more nobles to change side but the inner-cohesion of the Abyssinian ruling class proved stronger than expected.<sup>23</sup>

After the three armies conquered the first cities the commanders made their armies halt so that they could advance slowly but secure. They were building roads and supplying centres before each new stage and avoided fights whenever it was possible. The first serious fighting occurred on

<sup>22</sup> E. Hamilton, *The war in Abyssinia* (London: 1936), 7.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, 21.

Image 2: <https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/index.php?threads/grande-italia.533654/>, 2-6-2017.

the left flank on the 12<sup>th</sup> of November, when a group of 2.500 Italian forces got ambushed by the Abyssinians. The fighting went on the entire day and the Italians, while having the majority of men, were severely damaged. During the night the Abyssinians withdrew themselves and left the weakened Italian forces in the desert. They would only arrive at a town four days later.

Meanwhile in Europe tension started to rise as well. In Great Britain general elections were held and both parties were not in favour of Italy. The Labour Party, who lost the elections, wanted to go to war and was willing to close the Suez Canal. The National Government, who won the elections, was a tiny bit less harsh but still insisted that the sanctions of the League of Nations would be imposed. France backed these plans as well. Mussolini saw only one solution to this rising threat and this was a quick victory in Abyssinia. The urgency was created because of the potential oil sanctions that might be imposed and could bring the war to a halt. The voting would be on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December in Geneva and Great Britain was most likely to be in favour of the imposition.<sup>24</sup> Therefore Mussolini wanted to gain as much territory before the voting and every officer that was not quick enough was replaced.

On the southern front there had been a couple of skirmishes and one event of big importance, namely the death of the Abyssinian noble and army leader Afework. Afework led an army of 3.000 underequipped men while the Italians came with a big army with many tanks, airplanes and machineguns. The majority was not needed because on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November twenty airplanes bombed the fort where Afework died a couple of days later because of his injuries. The death of Afework demoralized his army and when the Italian soldiers reached their camp it was deserted. The Abyssinian position became ever more vulnerable but nonetheless two events increased their moral. First of all they ambushed on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November the column of colonel Maletti and disabled a few tanks. The other event was a visit by Emperor Haile Selassie himself. Haile Selassie was occupied with two things, namely diplomatic moves in Geneva and military matters at his court to improve the men's moral. Haile Selassie also received aid from foreign countries and organizations which was mostly medical. While the Abyssinian army did not have a high standard medical service, the Red Cross which consisted of several volunteer units from Britain, Sweden, Egypt, Holland and Finland, came to their aid.<sup>25</sup>

Up to that moment the Italians fought against small groups of Abyssinians, but there was more to come. On the 17<sup>th</sup> of October the army of Ras Mulugueta, also Minister of War, consisting of 70.000 Abyssinians, left the Emperor and moved north and another noble named Ras Kassa raised an army of 160.000 men of which a part moved north as well. For the eastern front an army of 25.000 men was raised by Ras Imru to which later another 10.000 were added. Events were unfolding in the

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<sup>24</sup> A.J. Barker, *The civilizing mission: the Italo-Ethiopian war 1935-1936* (London: 1968), 173-190 & 211.

<sup>25</sup> Hamilton, *War in Abyssinia*, 69-72.



north and the Emperor travelled there as well to encourage his army for the upcoming battle.<sup>26</sup>

This great army in the north was arriving at their headquarters at Dessié in the end of November and started to mass. The Italian army with their headquarters in Makalle was shattered in one long line and communication was sketchy. On December 6, Dessié got bombed and Haile Selassie himself fired shots at the airplanes. On top of that a great shock went through Europe when news came that the Italians had bombed an American Hospital in which the Red Cross was active. Bombing the Red Cross was a serious violation of international law. Both Italy and Abyssinia had agreed to live up to the agreement in which was stated that no harm should be done to the Red Cross. These two events were both in favour of Abyssinia while the European press started to write against the Italians. Nonetheless the oil sanctions were not imposed on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December and therefore Mussolini received time for a more controlled war.<sup>27</sup>

When Ras Kassa and Ras Mulugueta arrived with their great armies in the north, the Italian commander Badoglio had gathered his army as well. Badoglio's army consisted of sixty well equipped battalions which all had between 400 and 2000 men. The army of Ras Imru got bombed for the first time on the 4<sup>th</sup> of December which halved its strength. Nonetheless they marched on and in the night of the 15<sup>th</sup> of December they conquered two forts. After this success an attack on an Italian patrol failed and through this the Italians were warned that the Abyssinians were close. As a reaction the Italians under command of Major Criniti gathered and fighting soon occurred. Criniti got wounded and two Italian officers were killed which made the remaining Italians flee. A part of them surrendered themselves and others fought themselves to death. A first victory for Ras Imru and the Abyssinians was a fact and while the Italians did send a column for a counter-attack they got ambushed and were forced to retreat. This first battle proved that the Abyssinians were a very good match in an open fight with the Italian troops in which no airplane could intervene.<sup>28</sup> Ras Imru divided his army in two parts, of which a few thousand went for a supply depot in Eritrea while the others remained at a valley. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December the part that went for Eritrea, including Ras Imru got bombed by Italian airplanes. But this time it were no explosives but cylinders that scattered when they hit the ground and consisted of a poisonous mustard gas. The planes went on their way to the other part of Ras Imru's army and continued dropping their mustard gas. The morale of the troops decreased instantly and Imru had no other choice then falling back. What started as a great victory ended in misery.<sup>29</sup>

Gas warfare was officially prohibited after World War I within the Geneva protocol which was ratified on the 17<sup>th</sup> of June 1925 and initiated by the League of Nations. The International Committee

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<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, 72-73.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, 75-76.

<sup>28</sup> Barker, *Civilizing mission*, 218-219.

<sup>29</sup> Marcus, *Haile Selassie I*, 172-173.

of the Red Cross (ICRC) was in strong support of this prohibition and had great satisfaction when the treaty was ratified. When the Second Italo-Abyssinian War broke out, both Italy and Abyssinia were a party within this agreement. But while gas warfare was banned, Italy still used the poisonous gas during the seven months in which the war took place. Both Abyssinian soldiers and citizens were among the casualties of this terrible method of warfare. The gasses were the well-known ones, mustard or yperite gas, that were used in the First World War. The Abyssinians had no equipment to protect themselves against this kind of attacks and did not have the medical knowledge and equipment to help the casualties afterwards. The scenes were horrific and most of the time came close to a complete slaughter. The members of the several Red Cross missions that were active in Abyssinia were all clearly aware that the Italians were using these prohibited methods and reported it to the ICRC headquarters in Geneva. The League of Nations asked for the support of the ICRC, which had this clear evidence of the use of gas in their possession, but it was not given. The ICRC was unwillingly placed as an arbiter in between Italy and the League of Nations and was seen as an authoritative eyewitness. The ICRC did not mention gas at all in their official reports and the following two reasons lay at the core of this. First of all the ICRC did not want to involve itself in any political debate while it was at its core a neutral humanitarian organisation. Secondly the reports that were given by the Red Cross members were strictly reserved for Red Cross purposes only.<sup>30</sup> While it was so clear that Italy was committing these barbarous war crimes in Abyssinia it was the lack of authoritative evidence which created the opportunity for them to get away with it.

Haile Selassie gave new orders to all of his Rases which had the goal to encircle the Italians. This meant for the Italians that reinforcement in one place would mean a weakening somewhere else. Badoglio therefore informed Mussolini that the offensive was called to a halt because of an upcoming Abyssinian offensive. Nonetheless the Italians attacked first in the Tembien region on the 20<sup>th</sup> of January. Perhaps unaware of the strength of the Abyssinians at that location, it consisted of approximately 100.000 men, they tried to outflank the Abyssinian flanks but were halted in their attempt. The Italian tactics did not differ from their first battle and again during the fighting many of the Italian officers got killed and the withdrawal of the Italians was a fact. The next day fighting went on and it seemed like the pass, for which they were fighting, would fall in Abyssinian hands and would therefore split the entire Italian front open. This would mean an open route to Eritrea and a cut off of a great amount of troops. Badoglio was already planning its retreat when good news for the Italians came, an Eritrean Division arrived as reinforcement. Ras Kassa kept on fighting until the evening of the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January but then fell back to their former position. The second Abyssinian

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<sup>30</sup> R. Baudendistel, 'The ICRC and Chemical Warfare in the Italo-Ethiopian War 1935-1936', *Journal: International Review of the Red Cross Archive*, volume 38, 1998, 82-93.

offensive was called to a halt.<sup>31</sup> The Italians noticed that the Abyssinians still basically used one tactic namely the mass attack. The Abyssinians had surprisingly held their ground in the north until now. The Italian tanks proved not decisive in this mountainous country, the Abyssinians adapted quickly to the bombing raids and the common enemy made the Abyssinian nobles forget their feuds. The only true problem was the poisonous gas.<sup>32</sup>

From the beginning of the war the southern front seemed to be the most important in the eyes of Haile Selassie. In the north the goal was to prevent the Italians from invading but in the south, to which the more modern troops and most prestigious officers went, they wanted to invade Italian Somaliland. The southern Italian commander was named Graziani and he was a serious threat for the well trained army of Ras Desta who moved from the start of November through the southern Sidamo province with 20.000 men. Nonetheless a smaller Abyssinian army led by Dejaz Beiene was the first one to fight in the south against a raiding party of 1.000 Italians. The fight seemed of minor importance but because Dejaz got badly wounded the morale cracked and both sides fell back.<sup>33</sup> During these first weeks of southern fighting commander Graziani also intercepted a wireless message from one of the Rases in which tactics were discussed and panic prevailed. More of these interceptions were made by Graziani and Badoglio, which made the Italians aware of every big move the Abyssinians were about to make. Until January the Italians moved north and on the 6<sup>th</sup> of that month heavy bombing occurred on Ras Desta's forces. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of January the Italian troops moved forward and broke through the Abyssinian line of defence while the tanks proved way more useful on these flat lands in the south. The Abyssinian army in Sidamo was forced to retreat in panic and the Italians had their first huge success. Nonetheless the Italians had internal problems as well. Many Eritrean soldiers who served at the southern front deserted and a part joined Ras Desta just before another attack on the remainder of Ras Desta's army. Although a new frontline was formed the first defeat of Ras Desta's army came as a blow for Haile Selassie because it were his best trained soldiers of which only 10.000 were left.<sup>34</sup>

From this moment onward things started to change for the Abyssinians in a quick pace. In the north the Italians reinforced huge armies and several battles were about to take place in February. Ras Mulugueta with his approximately 75.0000 men had taken shelter on the mountain plateau named Amba Aradam and installed a defence work. Here the Ras waited for an attack of the Italian forces of Badoglio. The movement of these Italian troops started on the 10<sup>th</sup> of February and the goal was to encircle the entire mountain so that Mulugueta's forces had no escape route at all. Before the ground forces went on the attack the Italian air force had bombed the mountain for days. On the 13<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Hamilton, *War in Abyssinia*, 69-71.

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem, 86.

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem, 90-91.

<sup>34</sup> Barker, *Civilizing mission*, 243-245.

of February the first confrontations took place and the surrounding of the Italian forces became ever tighter. Nonetheless Ras Mulugueta received help from the army of Makonnen who prevented the Italian troops from a total enclosure. Heavy losses were made and Makonnen himself was badly injured and died the next day. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of February the Italians started their frontal attack and heavy fighting occurred. Ras Mulugueta's army had been on the mountain for weeks. They lived in caves and were heavily bombed which had broken the moral. The army got relatively easily defeated and the majority of the men died or escaped along with their Ras. This was the biggest colonial battle ever fought but the Abyssinians had no chance of winning it.<sup>35</sup> Ras Mulugueta tried to regroup his army and joined other Rasses with his men who as a group went to the city named Mai Ceu. In addition to this army the Emperor left Dessié with his best soldiers and moved north as well. The Abyssinian forces that gathered at Mai Ceu would not stay there for long because of continuous bombing of the Italians. While under heavy fire the Abyssinians tried to flee further south and during this attempt Ras Mulugueta died.<sup>36</sup>

With both Makonnen and Ras Mulugueta dead the moral dropped and the Italians started their second attack. The army of the Abyssinians declined enormously from the eventual 150.000 armed men to only 50.000. Nonetheless Ras Kassa, who led this army now, had a lot of confidence that the Italian forces would be unable to conquer the mountain. This turned out to be a mistake because of an underestimation of the Italian mountain skills. On the 27<sup>th</sup> of February a small group of Italian forces climbed during the night to the top of the mountain and took control of the top. The entire next day fighting took place from both the top and bottom of the mountain. The Abyssinians were unable to hold their position. The Italian air force once more proved to be decisive but a group of Abyssinians with Ras Kassa managed to escape. Now that the Italians made this army retreat the focus of Badoglio went to Ras Imru.<sup>37</sup> Badoglio expected that Ras Imru would be very much on the defence. This turned out to be wrong. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March the Italian airplanes started to bomb the shelters of Ras Imru's men but instead of waiting till it was over the Abyssinians chose for a frontal attack. The Abyssinians actually drove the Italians with this close combat fighting back for a couple hundred yards. The fighting that occurred here was the hardest for the Italians so far but while they outnumbered the Abyssinians with both men and weapons they held their ground and killed a lot of them. The next morning the Italians went for the attack again but the Abyssinians were retreating under heavy bombing of the air force. Ras Imru's army fell apart and by the middle of March he only had his own personal bodyguard of 300 men left.<sup>38</sup>

After all this fierce fighting the Abyssinian armies were disintegrating. The entire north was

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<sup>35</sup> Ibidem, 229-232.

<sup>36</sup> Mockler, *Haile Selassie's war*, 103.

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem, 104-106.

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem, 109-110.

lost to the Italians. Besides this a link between both Graziani's and Badoglio's forces came ever closer. The Italian airplanes dropped a great amount of pamphlets about the Italian victory in the north to demoralize the remaining Abyssinian forces. From this point Haile Selassie started to summon a new army. The presence of the Emperor resulted in a great amount of men who listened to his call and even Ras Kassa and Ras Seyum came with their troops. They faced the Italian forces at the city named Mai Ceu where the well-equipped Abyssinian army was led by Haile Selassie himself.<sup>39</sup> With the presence of Haile Selassie, the presence of veterans that served in the First Italo-Abyssinian War and the fact that they were going for the attack made the moral high. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of March the Emperor held a feast where after a council of war took place. The Emperor wanted to attack that night but some high officials wanted to postpone it. The attack was eventually postponed to the 28<sup>th</sup> or 30<sup>th</sup> of March while fighting on a Sunday was unthinkable. At the end the attack was finally launched on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March, which gave the Italians days to heavily fortify their defence.<sup>40</sup> In the early morning the Abyssinians opened the attack and many Italians were killed by their mortars. Nonetheless the Abyssinians proved to be unable to quickly overrun the enemy defence while the Italians just stuck to their place and awaited the attack. Ras Kassa's army nearly forced a breakthrough at a weaker point of the defence line but once again the Italian airplanes with their machine guns and bombs forced them back. A third attack was ordered by the Emperor who was accompanied by the imperial guard. This attack broke through the first line of the Italian defence but the second line with the fresh soldiers proved a bridge too far, after a few hours the imperial guard fell back. Both sides had heavy losses and the next day Haile Selassie ordered for one last all-out attack. The Abyssinians lost this battle and were forced to retreat to Quoram. The Emperor was willing to attack again next day but the chiefs and leaders met in a council and rejected his plan. Only by night the Emperor agreed to retreat.<sup>41</sup>

In April 1936 the situation became disastrous for the Abyssinians. The north was lost with most of its armies, the imperial army retreated and the only hope that still remained was the southern army and the Emperor himself. While the Abyssinian army retreated the Italians took their chance to once again bomb the retreating army with explosives and mustard gas. On top of this the retreating army was flanked by the horseman of Galla and therefore had no escape route. A great amount of Abyssinians died during these always continuous bombings. The conclusion of the Emperor was that a retreat turned out to be impossible. As a result they moved to the highlands to hide themselves and movement only took place during the nights. Haile Selassie ordered guerrilla warfare although he also knew that the possibility of success was small. Furthermore he ordered the

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<sup>39</sup> Ibidem, 113-114.

<sup>40</sup> Marcus, *Haile Selassie I*, 176-177.

<sup>41</sup> Hamilton, *War in Abyssinia*, 104-109.

general mobilization in the capital which meant that all men had to take up arms.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile the Emperor devoted himself to praying for three days where after he went to Dessié. Here he found out that the city was abandoned which meant that the way to the capital city Addis Ababa laid open. At least that was what Badoglio expected. Nonetheless the Abyssinians created a last point of resistance at a pass named Ad Termaber. Here they would for the final time try to resist the Italian army.

Meanwhile in the south Graziani moved up and faced an Abyssinian army of approximately 10.000 men who, under their leader Dejaz Abebe, still had a high moral. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of April they fought against the first Italian army, but once again an Abyssinian army got encircled and was forced to retreat. Hereafter all fronts in the south advanced and on the 30<sup>th</sup> of April the army of Graziani entered the capital of the province Ogaden, named Dagghabur.<sup>43</sup> On the other side of the empire the weak Abyssinian army at the pass of Ad Termaber had lost its moral and many deserted. With the Italian force approaching reinforcement was promised but never arrived. It turned out that the reinforcement had left the capital too late. The army at Ad Termaber made its retreat, just like all the Abyssinian armies, back to the capital.<sup>44</sup>

In May Haile Selassie arrived in Addis Ababa. The city was grabbed by panic while the arrival of the Italian columns could be any moment. A new plan was made in which the Emperor with his government would fall back further in land. Some of his Rasses, like Kassa and Seyum, would wage guerrilla warfare from then on. Besides this Haile Selassie begged and hoped that Europe would turn itself against Italy. The next morning the Emperor had changed his mind and ordered the defence of the capital by an imperial Decree. It turned out that at this time of war even those were not always obeyed. Another council was held in which the majority agreed that armed struggle would lead nowhere and that the only hope was the League of Nations. Besides this the general thought was that the Emperor should flee from the country and so he did. His entire staff and empress went on the train in Addis Abeba. The Emperor himself was not on the train yet to mislead some of the council men who would have tried to stop him. He drove by horse to another train station and went on the train.<sup>45</sup>

With almost every authority absent the inhabitants started to loot the city and ideas took root to set the city on fire before the Italians arrived. Fighting occurred between the inhabitants and the goal of the majority was to get possession of guns. A part of the inhabitants nonetheless prepared themselves for the guerrilla warfare against the Italians. Another part of the looters started to attack the embassies and even a leader of the British Red Cross who tried to help the wounded was shot. Meanwhile the Emperor was close to safety. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May he reached a French

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<sup>42</sup> Mockler, *Haile selassie's war*, 120-122.

<sup>43</sup> Hamilton, *War in Abyssinia*, 115-116.

<sup>44</sup> Mockler, *Haile Selassie's war*, 128-132.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, 136.

enclave. The Emperor started to change his mind and wanted to return to Ras Desta to help them fight. Soon he was brought to sense by some British advisers and seemed to understand that it was a lost cause. With a British boat he sailed to Haifa and by then the Italian forces arrived and took control of Addis Ababa.<sup>46</sup> The lootings of the Abyssinians were used by Mussolini as a legitimation for the war while it showed how barbarous the Abyssinians behaved. International reactions nonetheless seemed to understand how misleading this was. Churchill's reaction was the following one:

*'Mr. Mussolini must be only too glad at the present spectacle. It throws a rather vivid light on the reactions of a people which is today turning on even the Power which imposed sanctions.'*<sup>47</sup>

In Italy Mussolini announced at the Piazza Venezia in Rome that the city of Addis Ababa has fallen and that the glorious army of Marshal Badoglio has done its job. The majority of the inhabitants of the city fled into the mountains when they saw the approaching armies. The following days Italian patrol posts were created throughout the city. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of May 50.0000 refugees returned to the city to live their normal lives again. Others remained in the hills to fight an unorganized guerrilla warfare. Ras Imru and Ras Seyum who were supposed to lead this held themselves on the background while they had no chance of winning anything. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of May Mussolini finally announced that the annexation of Abyssinia was completed although there was no formal surrender yet. The popularity of Mussolini with his fascism was at its peak that day.<sup>48</sup>

### *Aftermath*

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of June the entire Horn of Africa was renamed as *Africa Orientale Italiana*. The only real problem that the Italians still faced were several Rasses and high ranked officials who did not turn themselves in and were actually gathering for resistance. An organized attack on Addis Ababa took place in July. This attack was easily knocked down by Graziani who had relieved Badoglio in the capital. The two most important Rasses who were still putting up some resistance were Ras Imru and Ras Desta. They were the main focus for the Italians to hunt down.

Ras Imru went to Gore by the middle of June in the south-west of the country. He often had contact with Europe and especially London because of the British consulate. Nonetheless Ras Imru had very little faith in a positive outcome for the Abyssinians. This was because of his experience with the ever continuing bombing and pursues from the Italians. He therefore asked Haile Selassie to open

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<sup>46</sup> Hamilton, *War in Abyssinia*, 127-131.

<sup>47</sup> Mockler, *Haile selassie's war*, 142.

<sup>48</sup> Barker, *Civilizing mission*, 267-268.

up negotiations with the Italians for their surrender. Furthermore Ras Imru had a lack of money which was needed to sustain his army which consisted of motivated but very young cadets. Haile Selassie wrote some letters to Ras Imru and his men in which he said that he is coming back along with European aid soon. This news raised the motivation of the troops and made sure that the armed resistance went on. At the end of November the Italian columns had moved to Gore and Jimma and occupied it. Every Abyssinian who involved himself in activities against the Italians was imprisoned and often killed. Ras Imru's camp with approximately 3.000 well-armed men lay in the forest between these two cities.<sup>49</sup>

From November we can see that the hunt of the Italians on the remaining Abyssinians had the highest priority. The Abyssinians went from hideout to hideout and the encirclement of the Italians became ever tighter. In December the areas became particularly small and on the 13<sup>th</sup> of that month Ras Imru was caught and a heavy fight occurred. Five days later Ras Imru and his men had nowhere to go and negotiations started. An unconditional surrender was given in return for a safe passage of the children, women and old men that were with Ras Imru. The next day he surrendered and the Italians brought him to the capital where after he was handed over to Mussolini. Six months after the Emperor had left the country the final resistance and hope in the south-west was broken.<sup>50</sup>

The two other provinces that were still in the hands of the Abyssinians were Sidamo by Ras Desta and Bale by Dejaz Beiene. In November also these two areas came under ever increasing pressure by the Italian columns. Ras Desta escaped to the south on the 7<sup>th</sup> of January and joined with the forces of Dejaz Beiene who had manoeuvred for weeks through the enemy lines. The final battle started on the 18<sup>th</sup> of February and no negotiations were held. Dejaz Beiene was taken prisoner and killed shortly afterwards along with the biggest part of his army. Ras Desta managed to escape and a manhunt was held until the 23<sup>rd</sup> of February when his hideout was surrounded. He was killed the same day.<sup>51</sup> With this final act the war was totally over and the entire country was in Italian hands.

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<sup>49</sup> Mockler, *Haile Selassie's war*, 163-167.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, 168-169.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, 172-173.



## The role of the Dutch Red Cross ambulance

In this chapter the focus will be on the role of the Dutch Red Cross ambulance in the Second Italo-Abyssinian War. The aim will be to both give an outline of the entire operation and to show the reasons for the engagement in this war. On top of that a close examination of the experiences of the members will take place. The sources that will be used consist of two bodies of materials. The first consists of three books that were all three written in 1936 by participants of the mission. They are called '*Het Nederlandsche Roode kruis in Ethiopië; waar onze vlag eens wapperde*' written by Dr Ch.W.F. AN Winckel and Dr A. Colaco Belmonte, '*Tusschen bommen en roovers; met de Nederlandsche Ambulance in Abyssinië*' written by A. van Schelven and '*Doktoren op Marsch*' written by G.M.H. Veeneklaas. In addition to these three books materials of the Dutch Red Cross from the National Archive in The Hague will be used. These materials consist of daily reports, application letters and letters from companies who offered their aid in the form of supplies.

### *Preparations*

When the hostilities between Abyssinia and Italy started in autumn 1935, the general feeling at the Dutch Red Cross was that after many years they finally had the opportunity to give aid in a warzone. The news that a mission would be initiated was spread due to several newspaper publications. The Dutch population immediately showed that it was willing to help by sending donations to the headquarters of the Dutch Red Cross. Most of the donations were given by companies of all sorts of particular branches. For example there is the company called 'N.V. Alvana' which is a cigar company and donated two crates of cigarettes and tobacco and another company which supplies Whisky and Genever. Another company is called 'De beste boter' which gave 61.6 kilogram of butter. Also medicines and food conserves were given by companies like 'Brocades-Atheeman & Pharmacia' and 'Beverwijksche Conservenfabriek'.<sup>52</sup> Still the question was whether the Dutch Red Cross would send materials and goods to Abyssinia or to actually send a Dutch ambulance to personally carry out the goals of the Red Cross. The recruitment of volunteers was no problem at all because many people asked, by sending letters of application to the headquarters, if they could join the mission. Many of these application letters can be found in the Dutch National Archive in The Hague. The first one arrived on the 25<sup>th</sup> of September and the last ones at the end of October. What is clear from all these letters is that those who wrote the Dutch Red Cross can be identified by their name and titles as the upper class of the society. Also judging, by the jobs they held, it is clear that these were all educated

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<sup>52</sup> National Archive in The Hague, 'Archief van het hoofdbestuur van het Nederlandse Rode Kruis' Daily reports, inv.nr. 323, Nr. I27101.

men. The writers were bankers, lawyers, administrators and of course lots of doctors or other medical professionals. The majority also writes about an experience of several years in the Dutch Indies within all sorts of sectors to show their experience abroad.<sup>53</sup>

The always neutral Red Cross offered their aid to both the Italian and Abyssinian side, but while the Italians said that they had enough resources and doctors the Abyssinians accepted the offer straight away.<sup>54</sup> This is how by the end of October the Dutch Red Cross mission was initiated with the aim to help those who suffer of injuries from the battlefield. Only men were able to take part in the mission. The general idea within Abyssinia was that it would be too dangerous for women with so many men around them. Besides this the knowledge about Abyssinia was scarce and only a few people had been there.<sup>55</sup> One of the few that had knowledge about the country, because he had lived in Abyssinia for three years, was called Ir. de Vries and he obviously joined the mission which consisted of nine participants. De Vries was the one that had to make most of the decisions in the preparations while he knew what types of supplies were needed. The other members of the expedition were the doctor and leader Ch. W.F. Winckel, the doctor A. van Schelven, the surgeons J.N. van der Does, A.H.M. Colaco Belmonte, G.M.H. Veeneklaas and the assistant doctors and nurses C. Lampe, W. Hagestein and P. van den Honing. The supplies were partly already in possession of the Red Cross but a great amount of supplies had to be bought as well. Eventually the Dutch ambulance took 600 crates and bales with them with all sorts of supplies. It consisted for example of medical instruments, household items, tent materials, bandages and guns to protect themselves and hunt. Striking is that they also took gas masks with them which shows that they were well aware of the actions of the Italians. The members of the expedition were also vaccinated for all kinds of tropical and contagious diseases.<sup>56</sup>

### *The mission*

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of December 1935 the nine members of the expedition left under great support from Rotterdam and sailed to Djibouti. Before they left they made a brief visit to the royal family, namely Princess Juliana and Queen Wilhelmina. The royal family was highly in favour of the mission and wished them good luck. Princess Juliana was the chairwoman of the Dutch Red Cross at the time and kept a close relationship during the mission. When the ship sailed away the national anthem was

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<sup>53</sup> National Archive in The Hague, 'Archief van het hoofdbestuur van het Nederlandse Rode Kruis' letters of application, nr. 321, Nr. I27101.

<sup>54</sup> Baudendistel, 'The ICRC and Chemical Warfare', 85.

<sup>55</sup> CH. W. F. Winckel & C. Belmonte, *Het Nederlandsche Roode kruis in Ethiopië, waar onze vlag eens wapperde* (Amsterdam: 1936), 1-3.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*, 5-7.

played and a great amount of people gathered to wave them goodbye.<sup>57</sup> After three weeks of sailing the Dutch ambulance arrived, on the evening of the 24<sup>th</sup> of December, in Addis Abeba where they would stay for some time. The journey was not without accidents. On one of the first days Dr Belmonte fell of the stairs and got badly injured on his leg. Luckily, with the great amount of well-trained doctors around him he could be treated properly and recovered quickly.<sup>58</sup> The first days they slept in a dirty hotel where after they found residence in an Italian hospital where ironically the Abyssinian Red Cross had its base. The following days the members of the expedition went to explore the city which they described as a chaotic one in which a great amount of people live in a small area without streetlights, waterworks and municipal sanitation. The members of the ambulance also recognized that the Abyssinians had tried to create a western and European style in their cities. Furthermore the general impression of the Abyssinian army was a chaotic one without any clear structure or equipment. At the time there was no health service at all in Abyssinia with the exception of a few doctors and hospitals which were initiated by foreign countries and some missionaries.<sup>59</sup> They also came across the Abyssinian definition of being on 'time' which was basically absent at all. The big cultural differences deeply impressed the doctors and was very much highlighted in the first reports.

The Italian hospital was in great contrast with what the Dutch had seen before. The building was extremely modern, consisted mostly of European products and became in its entirety available for the Dutch. In this hospital the preparations for the mission to the frontline started. The northern and southern fronts were far away from Addis Abeba and therefore no medical aid had to be given yet. A part of the preparations was to educate approximately 10 untrained Abyssinian nurses to help the Dutch with their upcoming



work.<sup>60</sup> After a few days an official message came from Emperor Haile Selassie in which he made clear that he wanted the Dutch Red Cross ambulance to move to the northern front. The plan was that the Dutch would form a base hospital in Dessié and two outposts at the front to support the

<sup>57</sup> A. van Schelven, *Tusschen bommen en roovers* (Amsterdam: 1936), 13-15.

<sup>58</sup> National Archive in The Hague, Daily reports, part 2.

<sup>59</sup> Winckel & Belmonte, *Roode kruis*, 106-112.

<sup>60</sup> G.M.H. Veeneklaas, *Doktoren op Marsch* (Nijkerk: 1936), 41-42.

Image 3: Winckel & Belmonte, *Roode kruis*, 128.

English ambulance and two small Ethiopian ambulances which were already active at the northern front.<sup>61</sup>

While the Emperor himself had summoned them, preparations for the journey started immediately. Training with gas masks, off road driving and weapons were exercised. The vehicles that the ambulance had taken with them proved to be pretty much useless in the rough terrain they had to cope with. Only one road existed from Addis Abeba to the north and even this road is described as an off terrain course in which even rivers had to be crossed.<sup>62</sup> They therefore created two caravans of 350 mules which were led by approximately fifty natives, also called *Nagadi's*. Six of the Dutch Red Cross members would join this caravan while the three others would ride with the trucks on the so-called road. On the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of January the two caravans left from Addis Abeba and followed the mule path to Dessié. Besides the six Dutch Red Cross members, the *Nagadi's* and the mules, they also took a group of armed men with them for their protection. These men were called *Sebanja's*.<sup>63</sup> The *Nagadi's* proved difficult to deal with because they were paid in advance of the trip. Van Schelven writes about a day on which almost all of the *Nagadi's* were clearly seeking to sabotage the undertaking. They refused to prepare their mules because they argued that it was a holiday. Nonetheless the Dutch Red Cross members managed to cope with it by using the Abyssinian way of dealing with this: by getting angry and making threats. To fully get rid of the sabotage of the *Nagadi's* the Dutch invited a district head. This person made even greater threats to them where after the remaining part of the journey



Tea after the first day march from Addis Abeba to Dessié (Img. 4)

barely contained any problems at all.<sup>64</sup> The last days of the journey to Dessié were not easy for the Dutch Red Cross members due to heavy rain and fog. The hardened Abyssinians on the other hand seemed to not care about the weather conditions.

After eleven days in the wilderness the six members of the Dutch Red Cross arrived at their outpost at Dessié on the 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> of January. Dr Winckel, Dr Belmonte and Ir. de Vries, were already there since the 21<sup>st</sup> of January because they had travelled with the trucks. Both caravans

<sup>61</sup> National Archive in The Hague, Daily reports, part 5.

<sup>62</sup> Winckel & Belmonte, *Roode kruis*, 60-66.

<sup>63</sup> Ibidem, 84-87.

<sup>64</sup> Veeneklaas, *Doktoren op Marsch*, 66-71.

Image 4: Winckel & Belmonte, *Roode kruis*, 4.

arrived in a good condition.<sup>65</sup> After two months of travelling they arrived in Dessié and finally reached their destination. The first impression of Dessié was that the war had truly left its impact here when comparing it to Addis Abeba. The inhabitants were frightened, buildings were destroyed and daily life was disrupted. The Dutch ambulance stood under the protection of the French government while the Dutch had no representatives in Abyssinia. The French had informed the Dutch ambulance that the fathers of the Lazarists in Dessié would welcome them with open hands.<sup>66</sup> On this terrain the Dutch ambulance settled their camp and started to furnish and prepare their hospital. After a few days the hospital was organized and the work for which they came, namely nursing and saving lives, started. The original intention was that the Dutch ambulance would move to the left wing of the northern front, but while one of the Rasess revolted, no European ambulance was sent to that area. Later on the English went to the northern front and while it would have taken the Dutch another month of travelling, they were glad that it went this way.<sup>67</sup>

Only a few days later an honourable invitation arrived from Emperor Haile Selassie to dine with him. In Red Cross uniform they went to a former Italian consulate, which served as a mansion of Haile Selassie. It was located on a mountainside in Dessié. The first part of the journey was done by cars which were sent by the Emperor, but the last part had to be hiked while the terrain was too rough for vehicles. When they arrived they were introduced to the Emperor and A. van Schelven describes the Emperor as someone with dignity and calmness. After a short introduction, in which the Dutch Red Cross members did not talk directly to the Emperor, but through an interpreter, they went to the dining room. With the Emperor at the head of the table an entire European meal was served including wine and meat. Champagne was also served to all European guests no matter what time of the day it was.<sup>68</sup> There wasn't a lot of talking during the meal and when the Emperor asked something it was once again done through the interpreter. This distance showed to the Dutch the enormous prestige and status which Haile Selassie had within his country.

On the way back from the meal they suddenly drove into ten English Red Cross trucks. No Englishmen were around but when they opened one of the trucks several injured Abyssinians from the fighting at Woldia lay in the back. A few moments later an English doctor came towards them and said that he was searching for the Dutch ambulance while the English ambulance had no capacity to help these people. The journey of the English trucks had taken a couple of days and a lot of the injuries started to fester.<sup>69</sup> When they arrived at the hospital work started immediately and the Dutch started to nurse their first war casualties. After a short night rest, work continued in the early

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<sup>65</sup> National Archive in The Hague, Daily reports, part 10.

<sup>66</sup> Veeneklaas, *Doktoren op Marsch*, 102.

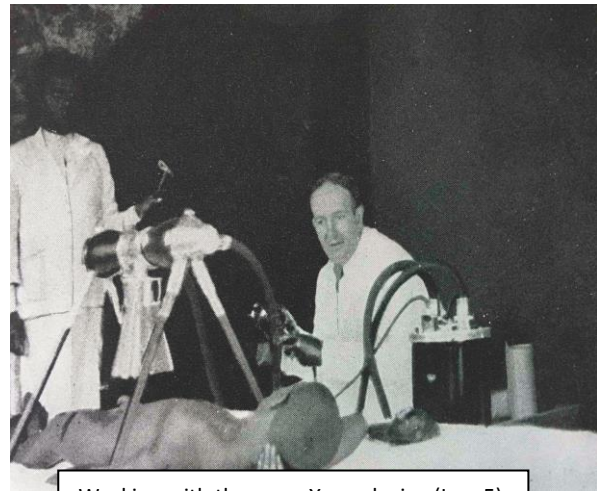
<sup>67</sup> *Ibidem*, 117-122.

<sup>68</sup> Winckel & Belmonte, *Roode kruis*, 39-44.

<sup>69</sup> National Archive The Hague, Daily reports, part 11.

morning. Wounds had to be cleaned and sometimes even an amputation had to take place when it started to fester. The characters of the patients were described as easy and tough while they believed that a good therapy should be painful. On the other side they ate a lot of raw meat and refused to drink milk while it was meant for children. The Emperor came to visit the hospital on the 4<sup>th</sup> of February and offered a bull for his gratitude. He had a great interest in the hospital, wanted to see every room and paid a visit to every patient. Haile Selassie even started to talk directly to the members of the Dutch Red Cross in French which was quite extraordinary and showed a high degree of appreciation. A few days later the bull was ritually slaughtered by some of the natives. This was done by cutting its throat and making sure that it fully bled out. When this was done the Abyssinians believed that the soul of the animal had left its body.<sup>70</sup>

During this period the camp started to look more like a hospital while all the machines and medical instruments were set up. The first time the Dutch truly understood the fear of the Abyssinians was when they started the engine of the X-ray device. The machine made such a loud noise which made the patients run outside while they thought an Italian airplane flew right over them.<sup>71</sup> The main problem was the lack of a running water supply. This meant that every time fresh water was needed it had to be picked up from the valley behind the hospital. Also the absence of women became clear in all sorts of domestic activities of which these men were



Working with the scary X-ray device (Img.5)

unfamiliar with. Furthermore the moral support which women can give and the attitude they have is something that A. van Schelven mentions and misses. Due to the high infection rate of all the wounds, a lot of bandages were burned after they were used because the cleaning machine had not yet arrived. On top of that diseases formed a severe problem while malaria, dysentery and louse were very common and flies were literally everywhere.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore the poor part of the population often tried, when they had finished their medication, to take the blankets with them. Many times they were chased down and were forced to give the blanket back which indicates the scarcity of the supplies which had to be dealt with. On the other hand it also shows the different kind of patients which they medicated when comparing them to their patients in the Netherlands. The supply of war casualties by the English Red Cross trucks became a constant flow and the average

<sup>70</sup> Winckel & Belmonte, *Roode kruis*, 45-48.

<sup>71</sup> Ibidem, 70-71.

Image 5: Veeneklaas, *Doktoren op Marsch*, 100.

<sup>72</sup> Ibidem, 94.

amount of seriously injured patients from all layers of the society was approximately 100. The doctors started in the early morning and ended when the night had fallen.<sup>73</sup>

The Abyssinians did not only send humans to the hospital. On one day an officer of the Emperors personal guard came to the hospital with a seriously ill pedigree dog. After some questioning the dog turned out to be the Emperors favourite, with the name 'Rosa'. Its entire life it had lived at the court of the Emperor and the dog was originally a gift from the Italian king. The favourite dogs of the emperor were allowed to sleep in his bed and often peed on the shoes of his guests. The men to who this happened was not allowed to move away while the emperor had someone in his household whose job it was to clean the shoes.<sup>74</sup> Eventually the Dutch ambulance managed against all odds to cure this dog. As a result the reputation of the doctors at the court of Haile Selassie raised and by some they were even called 'miracle doctors'. After this the amount of court members that asked the Dutch ambulance to help them with their illnesses and injuries started to increase.<sup>75</sup> The Emperor was so delighted about the good medical service of the Dutch ambulance that he asked them to come with him to the front near Quoram, which eventually happened after a month. In between this period, it became clear that the originally distrusting Abyssinians started to have more faith in these Dutch doctors and actually appreciated them. The skills of the doctors were of such a high level that it made the Abyssinians put their xenophobia aside.

The Italian bombings in Dessié occurred almost on a daily basis. The Italians most likely knew from their spies that the Emperor was in this region.<sup>76</sup> The Red Cross camp was nonetheless never the target or at least never got hit, although sometimes the bombs exploded only a few hundred yards away from the camp. Other Red Cross ambulances from the Swedish and English were being bombed by the Italians and therefore it became clear that they had to be alert and cautious. The response of the Italians was that these ambulances were too close to the Abyssinian units and therefore were characterized as an unfortunate part of the collateral damage.<sup>77</sup> The Italians could obviously not admit that the Red Cross camps were their targets while this would once again be a serious violation of international law. The Dutch would therefore never reside too close to the Abyssinian armies. While the work they did in Dessié gave them a great satisfaction, the Dutch ambulance nonetheless kept their promise to the Emperor. After a month a part of the Dutch ambulance went on the road again to Quoram to form an outpost near the front, while others stayed at the base camp in Dessié.

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<sup>73</sup> Schelven, *bommen en roovers*, 142-145.

<sup>74</sup> R. Kapuscinski, *The Emperor Downfall of an autocrat* (New York: 1978), 5.

<sup>75</sup> Ibidem, 152-154.

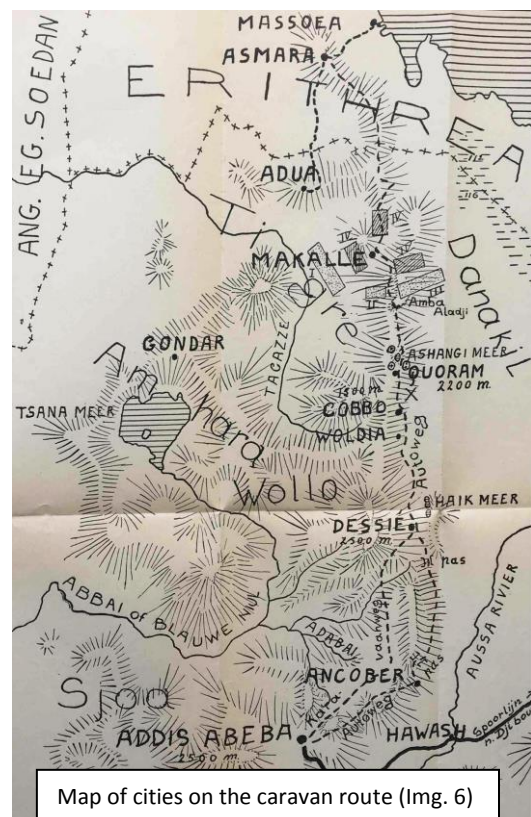
<sup>76</sup> The National Archive in The Hague, Daily reports, part 13.

<sup>77</sup> Schelven, *bommen en roovers*, 160-163.

## The split off to Quoram

The journey to Quoram was organized the same way as the previous journey from Addis Abeba to Dessié. This meant that two caravans were created and that the members of the Dutch ambulance who went to Quoram were divided among them. One was led by Dr Van Schelven and Dr Veeneklaas and the other by Dr Van der Does and Dr Lampe. News came from the Emperor that he would head towards the front the next day. The Dutch ambulance should get ready to leave and was going to be escorted by some trucks. When this truck came it was already overloaded with people and goods and there was no place for any items to take along. Therefore the Dutch decided to wait for another truck, which was promised but never arrived. The Emperor had already left Dessié during the night of the 21<sup>st</sup> of February. What is remarkable is that when the Emperor had left Dessié the bombings on Dessié stopped straight away. This gave the Dutch at least a suspicion that there must have been Italian spies everywhere and that they knew the exact plans and movement of the Emperor. While they went to the consulate on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February it was clear that the remainder of the Emperor's household would take no action without the order of the Emperor. Therefore the Dutch ambulance had to wait. After four days of waiting nothing had changed yet and the Dutch ambulance decided that both the caravans would make the journey without any escort.<sup>78</sup> The caravan which was led by Van Schelven and Veeneklaas left on the 27<sup>th</sup> of February and had travelled for a day when suddenly thirty Sebanja's arrived at the camp. The promised police escort had arrived after all and it was once again clear, that in order to get things done in Abyssinia you need to be resolute, stubborn and patient.

The further they went north the rougher the terrain got and the scarcer the population. When they arrived at the city called Woldia on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March, which lies in between Dessié and Quoram, they called to the leader of the expedition in order to tell him their location. When they wanted to continue their journey they heard rumours about bandits that were active further up the road. In order to be certain of no



<sup>78</sup> Winckel & Belmonte, *Roode kruis*, 133-135.

Image 6: Van Schelven, *bommen en roovers*, additional map.



further trouble the Dutch Red Cross members went to the local chief to ask about the situation. This man said that at least thirty more Sebanja's were needed in order to safely travel through this region. These extra Sebanja's would only arrive in three to four weeks and there was no time for this. Besides this the Dutch had guns as well and with the thirty Sebanja's who already protected them they made the choice to continue their journey. When they wanted to leave Woldia another problem arose. The Nagadi's and Sebanja's were contracted by a verbal agreement in which the deal was to bring the caravan to Woldia while their leaders agreed with a written agreement which said to escort them to Quoram. This was done because the Nagadi's and Sebanja's did not want to go beyond Woldia because of the bandits. After some firm shouting and threatening by a man of the Emperor, most likely with threats in the line of corporal punishment, they nonetheless agreed to carry on.<sup>79</sup> On the road to Quoram the ambulance ran into a small group of a hundred Abyssinian soldiers under the command of Lieutenant Birrou. At first it was a relief for the ambulance to see the soldiers travelling on this road and they hoped the bandits might be too frightened to attack. On the other hand the ambulance did not want to stay too close to the soldiers while they might become the target of the Italian airplanes.<sup>80</sup> The relief of which Van Schelven wrote turned out to be premature.

While the caravan was on the move suddenly one of the Sebanja's shouted '*Shiefta's!*', which was the local name for the bandits, and immediately they started to fire their guns. The Dutch were totally surprised while they did not want to be the attacking party. From behind they heard loud footsteps coming towards them. When they came closer it turned out that it were not the shiefta's but Lieutenant Birrou with some of his men. Birrou and his men searched the entire area but the shiefta's were already gone. When Birrou told his man to fire on the bushes the fire nonetheless was answered and a firefight of approximately an hour occurred in which some shiefta's



Even the mules had difficulties with the caravan route (Img. 7)

were killed and injured. When the caravan started to move on they were followed by the shiefta's in a distance. The situation became tense and while Birrou and his men stayed nearby the feeling of safety was gone. This feeling proved to be the right one because when they went through the area of Cobbo, which was known for its bandits, suddenly some shots came out of the bushes. When they searched the area none of the attackers could be found.<sup>81</sup> During the middle and hottest part of the day a nap was held which would last until 4 pm. When the Dutch woke up at 2 pm the entire camp was gone and only the mules on which they were riding still remained. It turned out that the Nagadi's

<sup>79</sup> Veeneklaas, *Doktoren op marsch*, 130-132.

<sup>80</sup> Schelven, *bommen en roovers*, 178-184.

Image 7: Veeneklaas, *Doktoren op Marsch*, 77.

<sup>81</sup> Veeneklaas, *Doktoren op marsch*, 133-134.

had packed everything and chose to leave at 2 pm instead and within half an hour the Dutch and their interpreter had caught up with the group. While it was too hot to travel during the day, the majority of the long distances were covered during the night.<sup>82</sup>

The next day on the 5<sup>th</sup> of March things started to get ugly. After a few hours of travelling in the night the caravan walked on the 4<sup>th</sup> of March into two natives who were attacked by Shiefta's and were stripped from all of their possessions. While it was not certain if these Abyssinians were telling the truth the decision was made to wait until the morning of the 5<sup>th</sup> of March. There was a high tension in the camp and suddenly a man in a typical white cloak jumped out of the bushes and shouted all kinds of words with his gun in the air. It turned out to be one of the Sebanja's of the merchants that got robbed the previous day. The caravan continued their journey in the early morning and suddenly two shots were fired at the front of the caravan. The two members of the Dutch Red Cross who led this caravan prepared themselves to fight among their Sebanja's. Again shots were fired and this time from the bushes at the back of the caravan. The Shiefta's were supplied with guns by the Italians while they noticed that they in this way could disrupt the supply routes of the Abyssinians. Multiple silhouettes moved through the bushes, some with guns and some with shields and spears. At a certain point the Sebanja's retreated themselves to the rear and before they knew only the two Dutch and the interpreter were still in the front. A few moments later A. van Schelven was hit by a bullet in his chest and he lost his consciousness. When Van Schelven woke up the Shiefta's were all around him and they took his guns and tried to take his clothes. After some struggling Van Schelven noticed a lifeless body beside him. It was Wolde Mariam, the interpreter, who fought until death where after Van Schelven lost his consciousness again. When he woke up most of the Shiefta's were gone and he crawled towards some bushes to hide himself until aid arrived. During this period multiple Italian airplanes flew over and bombed the place with the crates and dead bodies. The bullet that hit Van Schelven broke his rib and went through his lung before it went out of his body on the other side. With his belt and his shirt he tried to close the wound to prevent further blood loss. The entire day and the following night he laid there waiting to get stronger and for help to arrive.<sup>83</sup> Veeneklaas on the other hand had seen the opportunity to escape and while the bandits were searching for him he was hiding in the bushes. By the next day Veeneklaas tried to reach the mountains on which Abyssinian soldiers had their camps. During the early morning he reached this goal and was saved.<sup>84</sup>

Only by the evening of the second day Van Schelven decided to stand up and started to walk towards Quoram. The situation seemed hopeless but at a sudden moment he reached a village that

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<sup>82</sup> Schelven, *bommen en roovers*, 205-209.

<sup>83</sup> Ibidem, 216-233.

<sup>84</sup> Veeneklaas, *Doktoren op marsch*, 147-150.

was most likely inhabited by the Shiefta's. Van Schelven nonetheless went towards it because it was his only chance of surviving. He laid himself in one of the houses.<sup>85</sup> An old couple started to help Van Schelven and the next days they travelled from one village towards another in which Van Schelven noticed multiple items of the caravan. In one of these villages one of their Nagadi's was present whose story Van Schelven could not understand. When Van Schelven was led out of his rest place a small group of mules was prepared for the journey to Quoram. The journey was long and harsh and the small group often ran into a great amount of Abyssinian soldiers who were preparing to fight. During this journey Van Schelven truly experienced how ugly this war was. The Mules that were used by the army were all exhausted and multiple mules died. Besides this they also ate from the grass that was poisoned by the Italian bombs. The poison caused a horrible death for a great amount of them. After a long walk Van Schelven and his caravan ran into some English men. They knew that the Dutch ambulance was nearby and asked if he was the missing Doctor. He was laid down in a tent and the next moment when he woke up he was surrounded by his Dutch colleagues, including Dr Veeneklaas, who escorted him to the Dutch camp.<sup>86</sup>

While the other caravan of Van der Does and Lampe had less problems during its journey it still was pretty tough. This caravan already left on the 11<sup>th</sup> of February and arrived on the 22<sup>nd</sup> in Quoram. Many things were quite similar with the other caravan like the ever continuing rain and the Italian airplanes that flew over all too often. But this caravan had a problem of their own while a great amount of their mules died. When they left Dessié they had 67 of them and at the moment they arrived in Quoram only 20 were left. The interpreter of their group named Foeffa had a brilliant idea to protect them from the Shiefta's. He told that every person in this area was in one way or the other part of the bandits. He therefore went to a village head and arranged an escort by some of these bandits. It turned out to be a great move while they were not attacked once. In Quoram they had met the other members of the Dutch ambulance that went by car and settled their camp. During the first days in Quoram there were not only war casualties that searched for help but also members of the English ambulance. This English ambulance was bombed by the Italian airplanes even though the Red Cross was clearly visible on the tents. No Englishmen died but a great amount of patients did. After this incident the English ambulance created a base within a cave.<sup>87</sup> Haile Selassie showed a high degree of interest in the well-being of the Dutch ambulance and therefore sent his secretary to see how they were doing and to supply them with what was lost and needed.

With the English ambulance as their example the Dutch ambulance went out to seek for a protective cave for their camp as well. Dr Van der Does and Dr Lampe eventually found one and the

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<sup>85</sup> Schelven, *bommen en roovers*, 242-254.

<sup>86</sup> Ibidem, 256-257.

<sup>87</sup> Ibidem, 258-263.

next days they started to move their equipment and install the cave for its function. This had to be done pretty fast because during the caravan trip from Dessié to Quoram they had lost a lot of their items that were much needed when an Italian attack would occur. For example they had only two gas masks left and no waterproof clothes. Besides this all the members of the Dutch ambulance were clearly weakened by the past weeks and some became ill, had infections or were run-down. When the cave was installed they took shelter in it and patients started to come. The cave was 40 meters long, between 4 and 5 meters deep and was located at a 1.5 hour walk from the valley, high in the mountain. For the first time since weeks the Dutch ambulance felt that they were in a relative safe location. While the Red Cross of course strives for a neutral position in any conflict, the Dutch started to see the Italian airplanes as their enemies while they and their Red Cross colleagues had suffered a great amount of injustice.<sup>88</sup> Besides this the cruelties which the Italians committed against the Abyssinians also had its influence on this feeling. During these days the actual work started but Van Schelven who still awaited a long recovery could not do anything. An airplane arrived nearby to bring him to Addis Abeba. No further news came until the next day when Foeffa came with the news that the Abyssinian airplane was most likely destroyed by the Italians. A second airplane came later that day but while Van Schelven was escorted by Dr Lampe to the Red Cross airplane the news came that also this airplane was bombed and destroyed.<sup>89</sup>

The two made the decision to move on to the cave of the Emperor because here they might have an opportunity to go to Addis Abeba. The duration of the trip towards the Emperor took approximately two hours through a devastated land. Every now and then bombs dropped around them and injured Abyssinians and dead mules could be seen everywhere.<sup>90</sup> When they arrived at the Emperor the promise was made that Van Schelven would soon be transported to Dessié and until then they remained his guest. Going by airplane proved to be impossible. Therefore they went by trucks to Dessié where they most likely could take an airplane to Addis Abeba. Before Van Schelven left he received a distinction called 'officier de l'ordre de la Trinité de l'Éthiopie' from the Emperor where after they said each other farewell.<sup>91</sup> Van Schelven went with the truck to Dessié and Dr Lampe was escorted by two Abyssinian soldiers back to the cave of the Dutch ambulance. When Van Schelven arrived in Dessié he was reunited with the other Dutch Red Cross members who stayed at the base camp. The base camp had changed a lot since they left. The patients were lying everywhere and great amounts of casualties were medicated by Dr Belmonte, Dr Winckel, Hagestein and Van den Honing. Van Schelven left after three days in Dessié on the 28<sup>th</sup> of March by airplane to Addis Abeba and from there by boat towards the Netherlands. During this period Dr Van der Does and Veeneklaas

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<sup>88</sup> Ibidem, 273-276.

<sup>89</sup> Winckel & Belmonte, *Roode kruis*, 122.

<sup>90</sup> Schelven, *bommen en roovers*, 287-290.

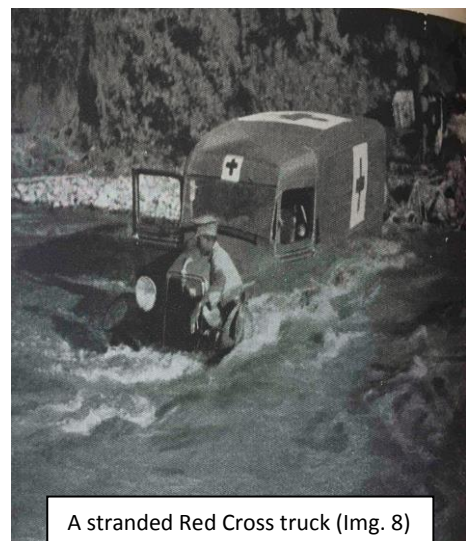
<sup>91</sup> Ibidem, 296-300.

were also send back with two trucks with de Vries to Addis Abeba in order to get new supplies for the outpost which they had lost during the travelling with the caravan. One of these trucks was left behind because it was stuck in the river and Veeneklaas stayed there in order to wait for support.<sup>92</sup>

### *Achievements*

Eventually by the end of March the entire outpost was called back to Dessié. The outpost had worked under the toughest of circumstances with bombing raids every day and an immense amount of casualties. This was all done in a dark and moist cave.<sup>93</sup> Nonetheless in these four weeks in Quoram they also nursed hundreds of patients and therefore it can't be seen as a complete failure. They drove with an English truck back to Dessié and the equipment and materials would come later by mules. This equipment was never seen again. At the end of March all of the members of the outpost namely: Van der Does, Veeneklaas and Lampe had left the north and eventually returned to Dessié or went to Addis Abeba. With this the entire plan of the Dutch Red Cross was over. The idea to have an outpost close to the front to give direct aid and prepare casualties for the transport to the base camp in Dessié for their full recovery had never truly succeeded. But even without this outpost the patients came in great amounts to the Dutch hospital and on a daily basis approximately a hundred patients were nursed. The toughest period was from the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February until the 13<sup>th</sup> of April in which 218 patients were nursed of which basically all had surgery at least once. The general impression of the patients is that they had faith in the Dutch doctors and completely trusted on their knowledge. The good reputation spread and eventually high ranked officers came to the Dutch ambulance as well.

On the 13<sup>th</sup> of April after 3 months of active nursing the entire operation in Dessié came suddenly to an end. This was because they were working in the territory of the losing side. They were therefore forced to retreat along with the Abyssinian army. In the first days of April the Abyssinians lost some decisive battles. The amount of airplanes that flew over Dessié increased on a daily basis and retreating troops of the Emperor created chaos in the city. But while the two trucks had not yet returned from Addis Abeba and communication proved impossible, there was no retreating



A stranded Red Cross truck (Img. 8)

<sup>92</sup> National Archive in The Hague, Daily reports, part 19.

<sup>93</sup> Winckel & Belmonte, *Roode kruis*, 58-59.

Image 8: Veeneklaas, *Doktoren op Marsch*, 189.

yet. Eventually the dangers became too big and while the Red Cross members were only able to protect the hospital with their guns they decided to leave. The next day De Vries finally returned from Addis Abeba. Only a few items could be taken along but at least they could finally leave and did so during the night. The next day they drove into Veeneklaas who had been there for days and whose truck was finally lifted out of the river. They picked him up and drove further in two groups towards Addis Abeba.<sup>94</sup>

When the news of retreat spread Dr van den Does who was still in Addis Abeba had left for the Netherlands as well. Eventually it became a difficult situation for one of the groups while the Abyssinians were not eager to give up yet and blew up a mountain pass to block it for the Italian armies. As a result one group of the Dutch ambulance could not pass it either and therefore was more or less trapped between this mountain and the upcoming Italian armies. With some help of the English ambulance they nonetheless managed to get over the pass by mules and on the 20<sup>th</sup> of April the seven Dutch members of the expedition who still were in Abyssinia came together in Addis Abeba. It was clear that the situation in Addis Abeba had totally changed from when they had left the city a couple of months ago. The Italian airplanes now flew over the main capital as well and panic was clearly visible. Shortly after they arrived in Addis Abeba a message came from the Red Cross in which they were called back with the words 'sans delai' which means as much as 'right now'.<sup>95</sup> On the 24<sup>th</sup> of April they went by train to Djiboeti with only a very small part of the equipment which they had when they came. By train it took them three days to get to Diredawa and five days later they went by ship back to Rotterdam. On the 19<sup>th</sup> of May they arrived and the mission of the Dutch Red Cross ambulance had reached its end.<sup>96</sup> In the Netherlands the members were welcomed by the queen and princess and a great amount of people who gave them a great applause.

After the mission the members of the Dutch ambulance came with a small announcement in which they told about the difficulties with which they had to deal with during the mission in Abyssinia. First of all they addressed certain bigger difficulties for the Dutch ambulance. These consisted of the huge distances that had to be covered on very bad roads which resulted in a difficult and sometimes impossible transport of the casualties. Besides this the population had a huge lack of education and the climate and diseases made the situation very harsh. After this some specific difficulties were named which made the working conditions of the ambulance tough. The lack of homogeneity of the population made certain groups very suspicious and hard to work with. Haile Selassie had to do too much work by himself while his environment was incompetent and the Abyssinians were unknown with the basic nursing of wounds. Besides this the Abyssinians had a clear

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<sup>94</sup> Ibidem, 141-148.

<sup>95</sup> The National Archive in The Hague, Daily reports, part 21.

<sup>96</sup> Winckel & Belmonte, Roode kruis, 149-155.

xenophobia for all whites and a lack of understanding of what the Red Cross stood for. The Italians also had a lack of respect for the Red Cross and made their work very difficult while they most likely bribed the Shiefta's to disorganize their work and bombed Red Cross camps.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> The National Archive in The Hague, Daily reports, final report.

## A Dutch perspective

In this chapter the perspective of the Dutch society will be analysed by using all sorts of Dutch articles from newspapers and magazines. From this perspective we will see what kind of feeling lived among the inhabitants of the Netherlands towards the mission and the war. It will give a greater overview about the role the Dutch ambulance had to play and played according to public opinion in the Netherlands. Also a short section will be dedicated to the general thoughts of the Dutch population towards Abyssinia. The newspapers that will be used are 'De Telegraaf', 'Provinciale Overijsselsche en Zwolsche courant', 'Het Vaderland: staat- en letterkundig nieuwsblad', 'Algemeen Handelsblad' and 'De Tijd: godsdienstig-staatkundig dagblad' which represent different kinds of the pillarized Dutch society at the time. 'De Telegraaf' became in the 1920s and 1930s the biggest national newspaper and also started to focus on people with lower incomes.<sup>98</sup> The 'Provinciale Overijsselsche en Zwolsche courant' was a regional newspaper with daily publications. 'Het Vaderland: staat- en letterkundig nieuwsblad' was a liberal newspaper with its origins in The Hague. 'De Tijd: godsdienstig-staatkundig dagblad' was a catholic oriented newspaper with daily publications and the liberal 'Algemeen Handelsblad' mainly focussed on economics.<sup>99</sup>

One of the first articles about the conflict was placed on the 26<sup>th</sup> of June 1935 in the national newspaper 'de Telegraaf'. It wrote about a new conflict between Italy and Abyssinia. When the last Sultan of Djimma died the Italians wanted to have a sphere of influence in this region. Djimma is located in the west of Ethiopia and lies approximately 700 kilometres from the Italian colonies. The Italians argued that by international agreements this region was part of the Italian sphere of influence. The Abyssinians on the other hand argued that Djimma had always been a part of their territory and was governed by the national government in Addis Abeba. Besides this a treaty between Italy and Abyssinia was in existence. This treaty formulated precisely what Italy was allowed to do in this region.<sup>100</sup> The newspaper does not yet take a definitive stand although the argument which the Abyssinians made receives more attention. It is nonetheless argued at the end of the article that Italy's claim had no justification at all.

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of September the national newspaper 'de Telegraaf' placed a small article in its newspaper with the title 'Italië's troepen als politiemacht in Abessinië?'. It tells about the possibility

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<sup>98</sup> M. Wolf, *Het geheim van De Telegraaf – Geschiedenis van een krant* (Amsterdam: 2009) & 'De Telegraaf: het geheim van de grootste krant van Nederland' <<https://telegraaf-archief.nl/geschiedenis-van-de-telegraaf.php>>, 22-5-2017.

<sup>99</sup> G. Durnez, 'de tijd 125 jaar', *Ons Erfdeel*, jaargang 14, 1970-71, <[http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/\\_ons003197101\\_01/\\_ons003197101\\_01\\_0058.php](http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_ons003197101_01/_ons003197101_01_0058.php)>, 25-5-2017.

<sup>100</sup> De Telegraaf, moeten de Italianen Abessinië verlaten?, 26-6-1935, p.2, <<http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:110570768:mpeg21:a0027>>, 22-5-2017.



that the Italian forces in Abyssinia might be recognized as a police force active in name of the League of Nations.<sup>101</sup> This means that, if this had happened, the League of Nations accepted and agreed the Italian claims which had no legal grounds at all. Obviously this did not happen but they gave thought about doing so which shows the huge importance of having Italy as an ally in Europe.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of December a large article appeared in a local newspaper called 'Provinciale Overijsselsche en Zwolsche courant'. In this article a great amount of attention was given to the speech of Princess Juliana in which the Dutch Red Cross ambulance was addressed and waved goodbye. Princess Juliana was, as we have seen above, highly in favour of the mission of the Red Cross. The article tells that every member of the ambulance had an individual conversation with the Princess in which they gave information about the upcoming events. Also a speech was given by Princess Juliana. She said that after weeks of intense preparations from both the Netherlands and the oversea territories the time had come to give aid to the casualties of war. Princess Juliana also pointed out that the mission was a wish of the 'Fatherland' which will keep a close eye on its proceedings. The members of the Dutch ambulance were not only representatives of the Dutch Red Cross, but also represented the entire Dutch nation. The article also writes about the immense support of the Dutch people. This can be seen in for example the great amount of committees in The Hague and Rotterdam who supported the mission enormously. Also the huge number of applications to join the mission was pointed out. It is even said that before the mission was officially announced a great amount of letters had already arrived.<sup>102</sup> The statements that are made in this article clearly show the high participation and motivation within the entire Dutch nation and Empire to support and join this mission. Although in the 1930s the general beliefs about people with African roots were all over the world still based on racial stereotypes. This participation clearly was a voice against it. For example in the Netherlands cartoons which were called 'Perry Winkle and the Rinkeydinks', later from 1936 called 'Sjors and Sjimmië', were spread in the newspapers. These cartoons give a great view on the racial stereotypes which existed in the 30s and continued decades after. In these cartoons the boy called Sjimmië is from Africa and black and Sjors is Dutch and white. Sjors is always seen as the most intelligent one of the two and Sjimmië cannot even speak properly Dutch.<sup>103</sup> With this example it becomes even more fascinating that such a huge support was given to the African Abyssinians in a war against Italy.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of December 1935 the national newspaper 'De Tijd: godsdienstig-staatkundig dagblad' announced that the first fighting in Abyssinia had occurred. They report about how the

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<sup>101</sup> De Telegraaf, *Italie's troepen als politiemacht in Abessinië?*, 8-9-1935, p.13, <<http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:110576411:mpeg21:a0329>>, 22-5-2017.

<sup>102</sup> Provinciale Overijsselsche en Zwolsche courant, *De ambulance naar Abessinië; het vertrek uit Rotterdam*, 3-12-1935, p.3, <<http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=MMHCO01:000088742:mpeg21:a0021>>, 22-5-2017.

<sup>103</sup> Sjors en Sjimmië, <<http://www.sjors-en-sjimmië.nl/SjoSjiHistory/index.asp>>, 8-6-2017.

Italian forces moved across the border and eventually ran into an Abyssinian army. The article stresses the big and poignant difference in the equipment of both parties. Also the tactics were of a huge difference and therefore the fighting was in the advantage of the Italians from the start. Furthermore the newspaper reports that the council of the League of Nations will come together and that its job is to think about sanctions against Italy. Another article in the same newspaper has the title 'Is Italy responsible?'. In this article a message from the minister of foreign affairs of Abyssinia was laid out. It states that since 1934 the Abyssinian government has tried to reach a peaceful solution. Italy on the other hand never had this intention and started to send troops as early as August 1934.<sup>104</sup> Although nothing is said about the Dutch opinion in this article, the fact is that they posted a translation of the message in the newspaper and wanted to spread it. Besides this the article is clearly in favour of the Abyssinians while they more or less argued that the Abyssinians never had a fair chance and that the job of the League of Nations was to imply sanctions on Italy.

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of December 'De Telegraaf' released an article with the title 'the Emperors protest at the League of Nations'. The core of this article tells about Haile Selassie's claim that Italy is violating international law. This is done by the bombing raids of the Italian airplanes on cities which resulted in a great amount of innocent casualties including women and children. Furthermore the bombings on the Red Cross camps are in violation with international law. Haile Selassie asks in this message for support of the League of Nations.<sup>105</sup> The article did not clearly position itself against Italy but by showing the ideas and thoughts of Haile Selassie it clearly helps to spread the ideas of the Abyssinians and to win support against these cruel stories.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of January 1936 the national newspaper 'De Tijd: godsdienstig-staatkundig dagblad' came with the news 'An ambulance bombed again?' The article tells that at Woldia a heavy bombing once again occurred on a Red Cross department. The information came from Abyssinian sources who claimed that three Italian airplanes aimed at and destroyed the Red Cross camp. The news also spread that the Red Cross would fall back from Abyssinia until safety could be guaranteed. But a representative of the Red Cross in Abyssinia countered this immediately.<sup>106</sup> Once again the huge interest of the Dutch public becomes clear with the publication of this message. Besides that, the title of the article and the news it spread makes clear that at least certain questions were raised in the newspapers and in the minds of the Dutch.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of January 'De Tijd: godsdienstig-staatkundig dagblad' wrote that the bombings

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<sup>104</sup> De Tijd: godsdienstig-staatkundig dagblad, is Italië verantwoordelijk?, 5-10-1935, <<http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010540569:mpeg21:a0010>>, 22-5-2017.

<sup>105</sup> De Telegraaf, 's Keizers protest bij den Volkenbond, 7-12-1935, p.2, <<http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:110576610:mpeg21:a0032>>, 22-5-2017.

<sup>106</sup> De Tijd: godsdienstig-staatkundig dagblad, Weer een ambulance gebombardeerd?, 16-1-1936, <<http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010539855:mpeg21:a0108>>, 22-5-2017.

of the Red Cross hospitals were according to the Italians the fault of the Abyssinian army because they moved too close to these hospitals. The same argument was made for the death of a great amount of women and children. According to the Italians they came along with the troops and were even amongst them during the fighting.<sup>107</sup> With this message the Italians were clearly trying to justify their actions and consequences. In the newspaper it was nonetheless clearly stated that it was the argument of the Italians themselves. This implies that the newspaper just passes through the words.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> of January a small announcement was made in 'Het Vaderland: staat- en letterkundig nieuwsblad' about the donation of 3200 guilders from both Curacao and Aruba in order to finance the mission to Abyssinia.<sup>108</sup> This huge amount of money and support from Curacao and Aruba came not without a reason. Obviously a great amount of people who lived in Aruba and Curacao had African roots. Within Africa only one country had succeeded in remaining independent until then. This country was obviously Abyssinia and therefore it was seen as the Babylon of Africa and a beacon of hope. Haile Selassie himself was by some seen as a God or a messiah and the movement of the Rastafari's started with him. The term Rastafari comes from Haile Selassie's original name Ras Tafari Makkonen. The inhabitants of Curacao and Aruba were dedicated to these beliefs of the Rastafari's which are based on the Bible and the divinity of Haile Selassie. For these reasons the Dutch inhabitants of the oversea territories were willing to donate a great amount of money for the Abyssinian cause.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of February an article in 'De Telegraaf' was published which tells that millions of people donate millions of money to the international Red Cross in Geneva. Also the Dutch population and Dutch members of the Red Cross are mentioned and are seen as big participants in this flow of money.<sup>109</sup> This once again shows that the interest of the Dutch population was huge and that any racial stereotype which was in existence at the time had less value than the moral duty to help these innocent Abyssinians.

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of February 'Het Vaderland: staat- en letterkundig nieuwsblad' placed an article which discusses how recognizable the Red Cross signs are from the point of view of an airplane. This recognisability has been tested at Soesterberg in the Netherlands. The article tells that from different heights the Red Cross emblems could only be seen if you knew that it was out there. The conclusion of the article and the tests is that it is very well possible that mistakes can be made while the Red

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<sup>107</sup> De Tijd: godsdienstig-staatkundig dagblad, Ons eigen kruis, 19-1-1936, <<http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010539860:mpeg21:a0029>>, 22-5-2017.

<sup>108</sup> Het Vaderland: staat- en letterkundig nieuwsblad, voor de Nederlandsche ambulance in Abessinië, 21-1-1936, <<http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010016393:mpeg21:a0030>>, 24-5-2017.

<sup>109</sup> De Telegraaf, de millioenen van het Roode kruis, 1-2-1936, p.2, <<http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:110576693:mpeg21:a0036>>, 22-5-2017.

Cross signs are very small from such heights and not clearly visible.<sup>110</sup> Actually this is one of the first articles in the Dutch newspapers in which the Italians are supported and in this case even by an experiment. If the Dutch population accepted this experiment as the truth, is a question which cannot be answered. But after all the messages of the wrongdoing of the Italians it is unlikely that this single article did much good for the Italian cause.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 'De Telegraaf' posted a huge article written by Veeneklaas in which he writes about his experiences in Abyssinia. The Nagadi's were misleading them as we have seen in chapter two while they wanted to rest on a feast day. This entire experience was written down in the newspaper and therefore must have had a broad audience with a great amount of interest in these stories.<sup>111</sup> With all these articles about Abyssinia the Dutch population must have also spoken about it amongst each other and debated about certain events and developments.

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of March 'De Telegraaf' writes a huge article about the influence of the situation in Europe on the war of Italy versus Abyssinia. On the one hand the rise of Hitler is a positive development for Italy while France and England both wanted Italy as a partner against this rising threat. The article argues that because of these European problems it should be easier for Mussolini to stop the war in Abyssinia because he would lose less prestige and can be proud of his military achievements. On the other hand the rising threat in Europe also has some downsides for Mussolini. All the threats they made about leaving the League of Nations and abolishing certain agreements would make them more vulnerable for Germany as well.<sup>112</sup> With this article we might argue that we can see the actual build-up for World War II. Tension throughout Europe started to rise and England and France were already afraid of Germany which resulted in a weak attitude towards Italy's aggression in Abyssinia. Together with the Spanish Civil War the pretext for World War II was unfolding.

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 'De Tijd: godsdienstig-staatkundig dagblad' gives attention to the words which the minister of Foreign Affairs of Abyssinia spoke at a convention in Paris. He argues that the Italians dropped bombs on Red Cross hospitals, used poisonous gas, were killing innocent civilians and destroyed churches and holy places. Again all the trust and hope of the Abyssinians laid in the hands of the League of Nations.<sup>113</sup> We can see a true desperation in this article from the Abyssinian side. Never were they in favour of fighting this war and the cruelty of it made them see only one

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<sup>110</sup> Het Vaderland: staat- en letterkundig nieuwsblad, De herkenbaarheid van het Roode kruis uit vliegtuigen, 17-02-1936,p.3, <<http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010016441:mpeg21:a0164>>, 22-5-2017.

<sup>111</sup> De Telegraaf, moeilijkheden onze karavaanreis, 3-3-1936, p.3, <<http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:110576741:mpeg21:a0092>>, 22-5-2017.

<sup>112</sup> De Telegraaf, nog geen bericht van de ambulance in Abessinië, 17-3-1936, <<http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:110576763:mpeg21:a0006>>, 22-5-2017.

<sup>113</sup> De Tijd: godsdienstig-staatkundig, Een verklaring van Abessinië, 22-03-1936, <<http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010539814:mpeg21:a0003>>, 22-5-2017.

solution which was the intervention of the League of Nations.

On the 28<sup>th</sup> of March 'De Tijd: godsdienstig-staatkundig dagblad' gives an announcement about the fate of the Dutch ambulance. It tells that the rumours about the robbery of the caravan of Van Schelven and Veeneklaas cannot be confirmed yet. The board of the Dutch Red Cross does everything to clarify this situation and is seeking for contact with the French ambassador in Addis Abeba.<sup>114</sup> On the 7<sup>th</sup> of April a small message can be found in 'De Tijd: godsdienstig-staatkundig dagblad'. The message says that although the mandatory term of the mission of the Red Cross ambulance is over the majority of the members were willing to stay. The Dutch Red Cross is able to at least finance the mission until June.<sup>115</sup> These two articles are pure informative articles to keep the Dutch population up to date about the recent developments and events of their deputies in Abyssinia.

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of April an article called 'Toxic gasses in Abyssinia' can be found in the 'Algemeen Handelsblad'. In this article we can find a clear support for Abyssinia in order to do further investigations to see to what extent the Italians are using gasses and are violating the Geneva protocol. Nonetheless it is made clear that the allegations that Italy made also have to be investigated.<sup>116</sup> On the 11<sup>th</sup> of April 'De Tijd: godsdienstig-staatkundig dagblad' once again puts forward the protests of both Abyssinia and Italy who both argue that the other party was violating international law. Italy argued that the Abyssinians bombed an Italian hospital. Abyssinia was on their turn very much offended that several commissions argued that both parties should be treated in the same way. This is rather strange according to the Abyssinians while the League of Nations had declared that the Italians were the attacking party.<sup>117</sup> Although the newspapers tried to be neutral the emphasis was more on the allegations that Abyssinia made then on the ones that Italy made. Besides this, the arguments of the Abyssinians were seen as stronger, while they are based on clear facts.

On the 11<sup>th</sup> of April 'De Tijd: godsdienstig-staatkundig dagblad' puts forward an article about the ambulance at Quoram. It tells that the ambulance fled into a cave because of Italian bombings and mustard gas. The ignorance of the Red Cross sign was increasing and the feeling of safety while wearing this banner started to decline. When they moved into the cave this feeling of safety finally

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<sup>114</sup> De Tijd: godsdienstig-staatkundig, Het lot van onze ambulance, 28-3-1936, <<http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010539824:mpeg21:a0006>>, 22-5-2017.

<sup>115</sup> De Tijd: godsdienstig-staatkundig, Onze ambulance in Abessinië, 7-4-1936, <<http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010534700:mpeg21:a0035>>, 22-5-2017.

<sup>116</sup> Algemeen Handelsblad, gifgassen in Abessinië, 8-4-1936, <<http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010664696:mpeg21:a0004>>, 22-5-2017.

<sup>117</sup> De Tijd: godsdienstig-staatkundig, protesten van Italië en Abessinië, 11-4-1936, <<http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010534708:mpeg21:a0020>>, 22-5-2017.

returned and gave them comfort.<sup>118</sup> This message clearly showed the emotional side of the members of the Dutch ambulance. They lived in fear of the Italian airplanes and as mentioned in the previous chapters they started to see these as their true enemies. They felt that a great amount of injustice was done to them and sided in their minds with the Abyssinians who suffered this great amount of fear and injustice with them.

On the 11<sup>th</sup> of April 'De Tijd: godsdienstig-staatkundig dagblad' published an article in which the Italians claim that this newspaper was anti-Italian because of some of the articles it published. Therefore the Italians did send two reports about Abyssinians who committed cruelties against the Italians and misused the Red Cross emblem. The newspaper reacted in this same article with the words that they most likely will have to disappoint the Italians. First of all they argued that they had never been anti-Italian. Secondly the pictures which the Italians did send along with their reports are assuming that they are objective and cruel, but this does not justify the cruelties of the Italian army against the innocent civilians. The article also argued that it had always praised Italy for its glorious history and that it understood its expansion drift. However this is exactly why the newspaper wrote critique on Italy while such a great and glorious nation should have acted according to international law which they officially accepted. Therefore they should have instead made a claim at the League of Nations against Abyssinia before starting this war on its own. Whatever the Abyssinians did, the Italians as a civilized nation should have never bombed open cities and Red Cross hospitals, used toxic gas and killed women and children.<sup>119</sup> What we see here is that the newspaper at first had the idea that Italy was a civilized nation with humanitarian and rational ideas. This turned out to be wrong because of their constant violation of international law. While the article argued that Abyssinia might have made the same kind of mistakes it is nonetheless clear that Italy never should have done so.

In the 'Algemeen Handelsblad' of the 15<sup>th</sup> of April the announcement was made that Dr Van Schelven had returned to the Netherlands and the first stories of his experiences were given. He argued that after all it was a stupid decision to split the Dutch ambulance into different sections. Furthermore he argued that Abyssinia is too big and that you cannot speak about a nation with one population. In another article in the same newspaper, news is spread that the Italians had taken control of Dessié. Therefore the position of the Red Cross ambulance is uncertain while no information is available.<sup>120</sup> It indicates that due to Italian presence in the area the Red Cross cannot

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<sup>118</sup> De Tijd: godsdienstig-staatkundig dagblad, Onze ambulance in Quoram, 11-4-1936, <<http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010534709:mpeg21:a0212>>, 22-5-2017.

<sup>119</sup> De Tijd: godsdienstig-staatkundig dagblad, Italië in den oorlog, 11-04-1936, <<http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010534709:mpeg21:a0001>>, 22-5-2017.

<sup>120</sup> Algemeen Handelsblad, Wat geschiedt er met onze ambulance?, 15-4-1936, <<http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010664705:mpeg21:a0003>>, 22-5-2017.

do its job properly. Therefore it sends a negative message about these Italians and once more shows that the facts that were spread were against them.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> of April an article was published in 'De Tijd: godsdienstig-staatkundig dagblad' in which the League of Nations was heavily critiqued. The League of Nations had been an organization without any strong actions or statements for years. When Italy attacked Abyssinia the League announced economic sanctions. The public opinion was highly in favour of these while finally the League would strive for justice. Soon this enthusiasm disappeared while it became clear that the majority of the countries did not want to give up their economic benefits and were unwilling to send soldiers. The public opinion became against the League because once again it had failed to fulfil its ideals. In the Netherlands more and more of these thoughts were spread. All had the core idea to leave the League of Nations before further escalations. This idea was not only spread in the Netherlands but also in the United States, Belgium, Switzerland, France and England.<sup>121</sup> The article shows again that besides Italy and Abyssinia a great amount of other countries were absorbed in this conflict due to the League of Nations. But without an adequate answer of the League, the public opinion of the inhabitants of its members was turning against the organisation. It became clear that the League was an organisation without any decisive power.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> of May 'Het Vaderland: staat- en letterkundig nieuwsblad' published an article in which some facts of the daily reports from the last couple of weeks were given. It is mainly an informative piece, but it is clear that the readers of this newspaper must have had a huge interest in facts like these. Besides this it is announced that princess Juliana will be present when the members of the Dutch Red Cross ambulance arrive in Rotterdam.<sup>122</sup> They were welcomed as heroes and deputies of their homeland. The royal family and the Dutch population were proud of their achievements and hard work. In the newspaper 'Het Vaderland: staat- en letterkundig nieuwsblad' different small announcements can be found about the robbery on the Dutch caravan. Every time an update was given about the information that was available. At first, no information could be given but later on it became clear that all members of the Dutch ambulance were still alive and safe. The constant updates show that there was a constant interest about the well-being of their countrymen.

The general knowledge about Abyssinia was at first very small in the Netherlands. The public had no idea what language was spoken at all. An article in the collection of newspaper clippings discusses the languages. It turns out that all the different communities who live throughout Abyssinia speak their own language.<sup>123</sup> The majority of the Dutch had no clue at all and thought about

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<sup>121</sup> De Tijd: godsdienstig-staatkundig dagblad, Los uit den Volkenbond!, 20-5-1936, <<http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010534734:mpeg21:a0001>>, 22-5-2017.

<sup>122</sup> Het Vaderland: staat- en letterkundig nieuwsblad, Onze ambulance in Ethiopië, 15-5-1936, <<http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010016590:mpeg21:a0010>>, 22-5-2017.

<sup>123</sup> Abessinië 1, Welke taal spreekt men in Abessinië, Africa Studie Centre Leiden.

Abyssinia as basically every other African country. This means underdeveloped, poor and chaotic.

The vision of the Dutch on Haile Selassie called the 'Lion of Juda' is also discussed. He is seen as a lonely person who lived his life between lazy ministers, beggars and negligent soldiers. Haile Selassie is seen as the hardest worker of the country. The article also argues that, if it is true that there is an old and new Abyssinia he is definitely the personification of the new one. Besides this it is argued that the Emperor is a man with many talents, but that he would be able to accomplish so much more if he would get rid of his 'dumb' environment.<sup>124</sup> This meant that the view of and ideas about Emperor Haile Selassie were actually very positive, as he was seen as a most intelligent men.

While the Netherlands did not get too much involved in the internal issues of Abyssinia as a political actor, the English most definitely did. Many Dutch articles reported about these debates and appeals to the League of Nations. News even spread that the English voted against the recognition of Italy's claim of Abyssinia.<sup>125</sup> After the actual conquest of Abyssinia the politics in the Netherlands moved towards recognition of Italy's claim. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 1938 a request from certain politicians was accepted in the Second Chamber of the State's General to question the recognition of the king of Italy as Emperor of Abyssinia. This made clear that not everyone was happy with this recognition. A message on the 24<sup>th</sup> of December 1937 speaks of a great indignation because so many Dutch people went on holiday to Italy again so shortly after this cruel war. The article argues that the Dutch society simply swallows this lawlessness and lack of morality. In addition to that, the conclusion of the article is that even these cruel events cannot bring the public opinion in resistance any more.<sup>126</sup>

Most of the discussed articles focus on bringing facts about the war. It is clear that most of these facts were in favour of the Abyssinians and against the Italians. The public opinion in the Netherlands therefore was most likely in favour of the Abyssinian side. The enthusiasm for the Red Cross mission and the financial support, which was given, clearly argue in favour of this. Besides that a great amount of attention was given to this conflict in the newspapers. This shows that there was a huge interest within the Dutch society for this kind of information.

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<sup>124</sup> Abessinië 1, de leeuw van Juda, Africa Studie Centre Leiden.

<sup>125</sup> Abyssinia 3, Engelsen stemmen tegen Italië's erkenning, Africa Studie Centre Leiden.

<sup>126</sup> Abyssinia 2, XII, Africa Studie Centre Leiden.



## Conclusion

Concluding the three chapters, with the three different perspectives, an answer will be formulated to the main question. The main question was: What role did the Dutch Red Cross play in the Second Italo-Abyssinian War and what perceptions did the Dutch have of it? To answer this question, first of all the three chapters will be summarized. These consist of the context of the Second Italo-Abyssinian War, the role of the Dutch ambulance within this war and the Dutch perspective on this war. Together these three questions will form the answer to the main question.

In the 1930s the fascist regime of Benito Mussolini took root and had influence in all layers of society. One of Mussolini's main objectives was to conquer Italy's place under the sun and the target became Abyssinia. At first, the population was against this war for a couple of reasons. The economic circumstances were bad, they had already lost a war against Abyssinia and it might create a conflict with Great Britain. Nonetheless Mussolini moved towards his ultimate goal to create Italy's place under the sun. The first incident happened in December 1934 and was called the 'Walwal' crisis. As a result of this crisis Haile Selassie appealed at the League of Nations. With this appeal Selassie awakened Europe and the United States of America by showing the dangers of Fascism and Nazism. The move of Selassie is seen as a wise one, but also made Mussolini eager to save his prestige. The next months, a great amount of debates were held in Europe and the contradictions were sharpened. Meanwhile Mussolini was mobilizing his army to attack and moved across the border into Abyssinia on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October 1935. At first Haile Selassie ordered his troops to retreat, to show the world who was the true aggressor. After a couple of days the first fights began. The Italians were in advantage as they had the best equipment, the largest armies and most supplies. Nonetheless the Abyssinians had faith, because they had won before. The first couple of fights were small, but surprisingly ended in favour of the Abyssinians.

Many big battles were fought between the Ras of Selassie and the army commanders of Mussolini. The decisive factor in most of these battles proved to be the dominance of Italy's air force. The continuing bombing on the Abyssinians created a great amount of casualties and dropped their moral. On top of that, the use of poisonous gasses, which were prohibited after World War I, made the Italians dominant, cruel and in violation of international law at the same time. The ICRC had information which would testify against Italy, but the organisation wanted to refrain from politics and remain its neutral position. Many battles were fought and with this use of these poisonous gasses the Abyssinians were losing the majority of their men. Eventually after seven months of warfare Haile Selassie fled from the country to Great Britain and Italy took control of the capital Addis Abeba. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of May Mussolini announced his victory and his popularity in Italy became

immense.

In between these fierce and cruel skirmishes the Dutch Red Cross ambulance came to nurse the war casualties of the Abyssinians while the Italians rejected their offer. When the news spread, the interest of the Dutch society in such a mission turned out to be enormous. Many people were willing to join the mission and companies donated a great amount of supplies. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of December the nine selected members sailed after a farewell speech of Princess Juliana towards Abyssinia. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of December they arrived in Addis Abeba where the preparations for the mission started. The idea was to form a base hospital in Dessié with two outposts near the front. On the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of January two caravans with Nagadi's and their mules headed towards Dessié under the protection of the Sebanja's. These Nagadi's and Sebanaja's were difficult to deal with but with some local practices of making threats they nonetheless started to listen. In Dessié the ambulance settled in a French missionary and the work of nursing started rather quickly. They were also invited by the Emperor to dine with him and although the members felt quite some distance between them and the Emperor it was a special occasion. This distance started to change a couple of days later when the Emperor visited the hospital and offered a bull for his gratitude. On top of that the aid which the doctors gave to the dog of the emperor gave them respect and prestige. Afterwards the doctors were seen by some of the Abyssinians as 'miracle doctors'.

After some time the Emperor asked them to come along with him to Quoram to form the two outposts closer to the front. In February once again two caravans, which were both led by two Dutch members, fulfilled this wish and left for Quoram. For both caravans this journey turned out to be a disaster while one of them was robbed by the Shiefta's which led to Van Schelven being shot and the other had problems with dying mules. When they finally arrived at Quoram the result was a shortage of supplies and a lack of manpower. The bombings so close to the front were of great danger and therefore they had to set up their outpost in a cave for protection. The members of the expedition started to see the Italian airplanes as their enemies. At the end the outpost still managed to treat a great amount of casualties while Van Schelven started to travel towards the Netherlands. When the Abyssinians started to lose ground the Dutch had to retreat as well and on the 13<sup>th</sup> of April they left Dessié to travel to Addis Abeba and back to the Netherlands. The Dutch members of the Red Cross had worked under the toughest of circumstances and had done a remarkable job. The terrain was tough and distances were long, the population was uneducated and was led by xenophobia for whites, the climate and the diseases turned out to be a problem and the lack of respect of the Italians towards the Red Cross made their work very difficult. The Dutch members have been able to overcome the cultural differences of which they were so overwhelmed when they arrived. On the other side also the Abyssinians who were so often characterized as a xenophobe population also overcame this barrier.

At home in the Netherlands the mission was highly supported by the entire Dutch nation with its overseas territories. The newspapers themselves do not take a stand against Italy or Abyssinia, but by the facts they present the public opinion moved towards the Abyssinian side. First of all this high interest of the Dutch population can be seen in the great amount of news articles which were published about this topic. Besides this a huge flow of money towards the Red Cross organisation came from all corners of the Dutch empire came into being. Even the oversea areas like Curacao and Aruba did send a great amount of money in support of their African brothers. What is also worth mentioning is that in the 1930s racial stereotypes were still displayed in some newspapers on a daily basis. Therefore the fact that the Dutch population supported the Abyssinian cause in such great numbers is even more extraordinary. It can be argued that in the Netherlands the racial stereotypes became less important because of the huge fear for Fascism and Nazism. Lastly the newspapers also clarified that the Second Italo-Abyssinian War had a huge impact on the political situation in Europe while multiple threats could not be dealt with at the same time. The balance of power in Europe was shaking and what we see is most definitely, alongside with the Spanish Civil War, the build-up for World War II.

When we take these three chapters into account we can formulate an answer to the main question. First of all what role did the Dutch Red Cross play in the Second Italo-Abyssinian War? What needs to be taken into account is the fact that the view on this role is built on the perceptions of the members of the Dutch ambulance and is therefore perhaps not the overall feeling of for example the Abyssinian population. The Dutch members who went under the banner of the Red Cross basically came with a single goal which was giving aid to the war casualties from a neutral position. At first the xenophobe inhabitants were not very enthusiastic about these Dutch doctors while they were white foreigners with all sorts of different manners. Nonetheless when the actual nursing took place the local population started to see the skill and effectiveness of the nursing which made the Dutch doctors more welcome. Also the Emperor played an important role while he, who so often was seen as the most educated man of the country, was very much interested in the activities of the Dutch. The fact that he even spoke directly to the Dutch and trusted his dog to be nursed by them shows their good relationship. Furthermore because of all the experiences the Dutch had within this war they were unable to maintain their neutral vision and started to see the Italians as their cruel enemies. These thoughts must have had its influence on the public in the Netherlands as well. The feelings and thoughts were broadly announced in the newspapers. It must have strengthened and for some perhaps even created the feeling of the fear of Fascism and the overcoming or at least degradation of the racial stereotypes.

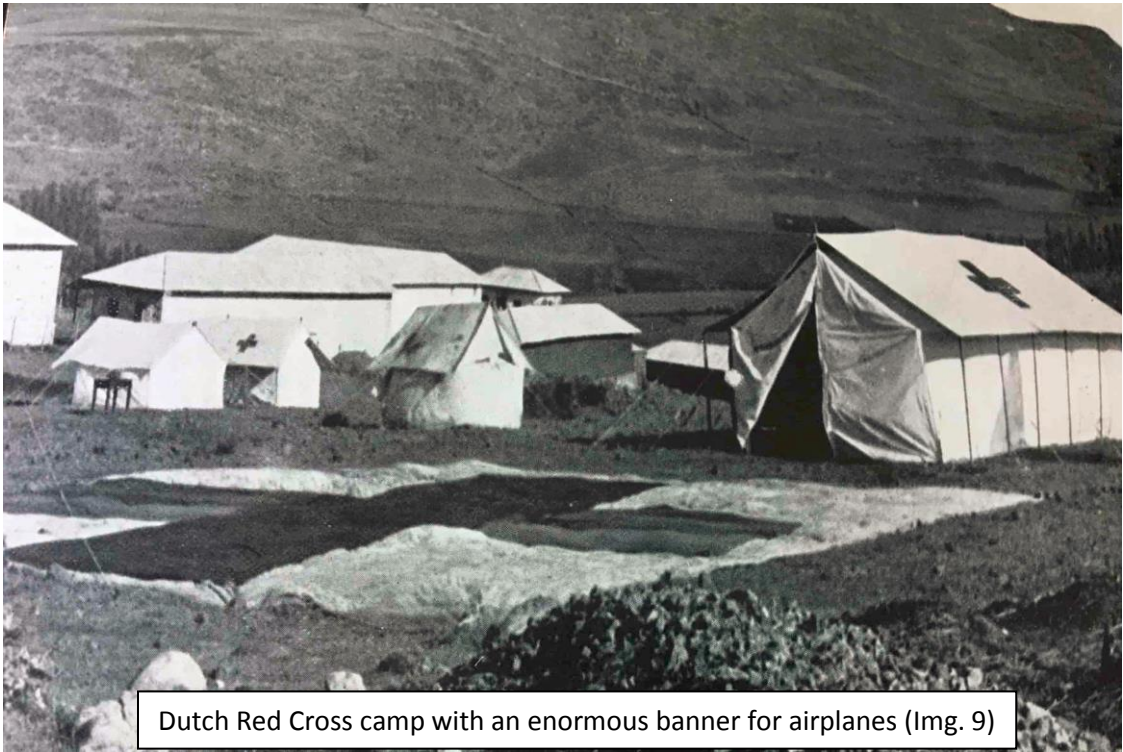
The second part of the question is what perceptions did the Dutch have of the war? In order to answer this question in a justified way we need to take the theoretical framework about

perceptions of the media into account. The Dutch showed a high degree of enthusiasm before the mission started and during the war the newspapers published articles frequently. What we can see in these newspapers is that the information is most often brought in a neutral way but is not two-sided or nuanced. The informative topics are basically about the cruel actions of the Italians and therefore the public opinion in the Netherlands moved towards that same view. All these articles tell about the cruel acts of the Italians which are contrary to the agreed treaties. This negative flow made the Dutch public opinion move towards the same tone and might have even increased the amount of donations which the Red Cross received. The individual opinions of the Dutch Red Cross members also moved towards an anti-Italian tone during the mission. This most definitely had its influence on how the newspaper viewed the Italians as well. Furthermore the great amount of articles which were written in the newspapers show that the Dutch society had interest in this news. It is clear that the Dutch society stood behind their nine Dutch Red Cross ambulance members and followed their work closely.

The huge impact of the Second Italo-Abyssinian War on European countries is barely studied before and definitely worth the research. For the Dutch society, who had been neutral in so many wars before, things started to change from this point. First of all we see that the racial stereotypes are less important than the fear for Fascism and Nazism. This means that we see within the Dutch society a shift from the typical Dutch neutral position towards choosing an actual side in a conflict. This shift in the Netherlands and in other western European countries must have had a direct influence on what happened after the Second Italo-Abyssinian War and eventually together with the Spanish Civil War resulted in World War II.

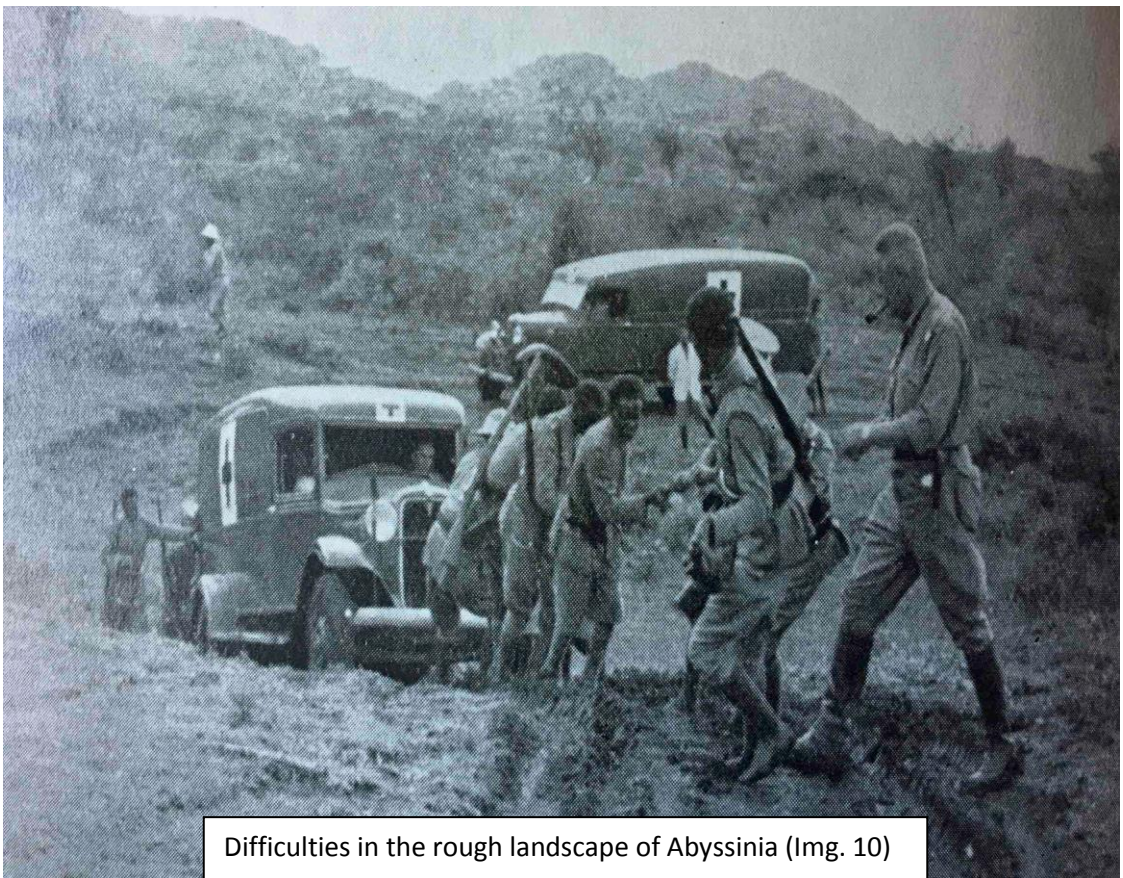
Additional images

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Dutch Red Cross camp with an enormous banner for airplanes (Img. 9)

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Difficulties in the rough landscape of Abyssinia (Img. 10)

<sup>127</sup> Winckel & Belmonte, *Roode kruis*, 109.

<sup>128</sup> Winckel & Belmonte, *Roode kruis*, 5.



Emperor Haile Selassie's visit to the Dutch Red Cross camp in Dessié (Img.11)



Abyssinians making Red Cross banners for the Dutch (Img.12)

<sup>129</sup> Winckel & Belmonte, *Roode kruis*, 48.

<sup>130</sup> Veeneklaas, *Doktoren op Marsch*, 124.



Dutch Red Cross members watching Italian airplanes from their safe caves (Img.13)



Dutch doctor wearing a gass mask in front of a cave (Img.14)

<sup>131</sup> Winckel & Belmonte, *Roode kruis*, 141.

<sup>132</sup> Winckel & Belmonte, *Roode kruis*, 144.

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