Reassessing the topic of oil sanctions in the Second Italo-Abyssinian War, 1935 - 1936

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1. Introduction

The story of the League of Nations is one of failure. Having been founded in the wake of the First World War at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, the League was intended to function as a tool to ensure collective security (Jackson & O'Malley, 2018, p. 7). It neither reached its goal of widespread disarmament nor to keep peace, as the Second World War would prove (Eloranta, 2011, p. 27). Tightly associated with the failed British attempt to appease both Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini through land acknowledgments, the League of Nations is almost unanimously viewed as a failed experiment.

No different is the contemporary analysis of the League's actions – or lack thereof – during the Second Italo-Abyssinian War 1935 – 1936. The traditional telling of the conflict's story is that Benito Mussolini invaded Abyssinia in October 1935, knowing that this could lead to serious consequences since both Italy and Abyssinia were member states of the League of Nations, and attacking a fellow member was strictly forbidden. The 16th article of the League's Covenant reads (United Nations, 1919, pp. 7, 9):

> Should any Member of the League resort to war in disregard of its covenant … it shall ipso facto be deemed to have committed an act of war against all other Members of the League, which hereby undertake immediately to subject it to the severance of all trade or financial relations … between their nationals and the nationals of the covenant-breaking State. … It shall be the duty of the Council in such case to recommend to the several Governments concerned what effective military, naval or air force the Members of the League shall severally contribute to the armed forces to be used to protect the covenants of the League.

However, despite these warnings of grave consequences, the League of Nations' reaction is generally considered insufficient. Aram Mattioli writes that although the League reacted uncharacteristically quickly in declaring Italy the aggressor and imposing sanctions, they lacked the necessary effectiveness to stop Italy's conquest. Despite Emperor Haile Selassie's

desperate pleas, the League failed to stand up for its covenants (2005, pp. 125 – 130). Due to the limited efficacy of the sanctions, Abyssinia was ultimately defeated.

A controversially discussed topic is the League's decision not to include oil in the list of sanctions. Instead, the League imposed sanctions on arms, certain goods such as horses, rubber, and tin, a prohibition of loans, and an embargo on imports from Italy (Strang, 2008, p. 211). Mussolini would later admit in a personal conversation with Hitler that had such an embargo come to life, the Italian war efforts would have been halted within eight days (Mattioli, 2005, pp. 125 – 130). As much as this comment might seem like a smoking gun to definitively answer the question if sanctions on oil would have ended the war, I advise caution as evidence of contemporary research tends to argue against it and the seriousness of the comment remains unknown as well.[1]

Regardless of whether oil sanctions would have succeeded in ending the war, authors such as Mattioli see the failure to impose them as a distinct example of the League of Nations' failure. However, in this thesis, I argue that the role of the League of Nations is much more nuanced than previous analyses of the Second Italo-Abyssinian War would suggest. This paper's goal is to answer the question: *Why did the League of Nations decide not to impose oil sanctions on Italy?* By doing so I aim to challenge the traditional notion that the literature presents of interpreting the Leagues' actions in a rather one-dimensional manner. The gap in the research mainly lies in the lack of contextualisation of the League of Nations. The common explanation that the League did not impose sanctions on oil because of their fear of war often fails to acknowledge the framework the League provided and the actors' roles. This leads to a failure of distinction between a state acting on its own as opposed to a state's representative of the League of Nations.

The most common example of this can be found while discussing the role of Great Britain in the conflict: Britain's regional interests had multiple origins. For example, on one hand, Britain's economy depended largely on its control over the Suez Canal and opposed any action that would affect it. On the other hand, they enjoyed a high standing in the hierarchy of the League of Nations and were expected to represent the League's interests in their actions. The

[1] For a detailed analysis of whether or not an embargo on oil would have stopped the Italian war efforts consult Ristuccia's essay: *The 1935 Sanctions against Italy: Would coal and oil have made a difference?* and Strang's essay: *The worst of all worlds: Oil sanctions and Italy's invasion of Abyssinia, 1935 – 1936*.

wrongful equalisation of British interests with the League's interests adds to the common evaluation of the League of Nations' actions being an inherent failure and crucially leaves out British interests outside of the League of Nations. Therefore, I aim to provide a more conclusive and nuanced analysis of the process behind the League's decision not to impose sanctions on Italy.

2. Literature Review

The history of Italian colonialism is much less discussed in comparison to British or French colonialism. Jasper Chalcraft explains this by criticising Italy's failure to engage in critical discourse about its past (2018, p. 3):

> Italian memory institutions have an amnesiac quality. There are no museums specifically dedicated to Italian colonialism, apart from Ragusa's *Museo Civico l'Italia in Africa* which is largely a display of military costumes, and there is no attempt to systematically reinterpret those places in Italy that are directly linked to the country's colonial past, places like the contested monument in *Piazza del Cinquecento* originally outside Rome's Termini station dedicated to the five hundred fallen white Italian soldiers from the battle of Dogali in 1887.

The lack of general awareness became apparent when in 2012 the town of Affile erected a mausoleum for Rodolfo Graziani, a convicted Nazi collaborator infamous for his brutality in Africa which earned him the nickname the butcher of Fezzan[2] (Chalcraft, 2018, p. 4).[3] This is by no means an isolated instance, as the tomb of the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini is accessible to the public and unsurprisingly turned into a place of worship for neo-fascists (Panico, 2020, p. 51). The Soviet Union was careful to prevent such an outcome when its army captured the Führerbunker the day after Hitler's suicide (Kershaw, 2014, p. 185). Chalcraft explains that the absence of state-funded efforts resulted in Italy's limited interest and knowledge of its past (2018, p. 17). This had a massive influence on the research conducted in Italy or more precisely the lack thereof. Labanca explains that complete silence surrounding the topic led to only a small number of scholars engaging critically with the history of Italian

[2] Fezzan was one of the three regions that is known today as Libya.

[3] After international backlash the mayor – Ercole Viri – and two other council members who were responsible for the monument's construction were sentenced to jail, but their conviction ultimately got overturned. The monument is still in place and Viri successfully ran for re-election in 2018 (Witkowski, 2023, pp. 22 – 23).

colonialism (taken from Witkowski, 2023, p. 10). The first one to publish his findings about the atrocities committed by the Italian army was the historian Angelo Del Boca who did so in 1965. He recounts that his work led to him becoming the target of a harassment campaign from important figures within the government, military, and the public who saw his work as a betrayal of Italy (taken from Witkowski, 2023, p. 10). The risk of becoming a public enemy is why most sources are either more contemporary or not of Italian origin. The majority of the literature on the Italian involvement in Africa either focuses entirely on World War II or gets reduced to being a path to the explanation as to why the League of Nations failed to prevent World War II. The question of why the League decided not to impose oil sanctions tends to be overshadowed by the speculative question of whether oil sanctions would have succeeded in halting Italy's efforts in Abyssinia. Therefore, the majority of research conducted on the potential oil sanctions treats the decision-making process as an introduction to establishing if the sanctions would have been successful. What becomes apparent are the varying levels of depth dedicated to establishing the reasons that led to the decision not to impose such sanctions.

Aram Mattioli offers a conclusive summary of Italy's colonial enterprises in Abyssinia in his 2005 book *Experimentierfelder der Gewalt: Der Abessinienkrieg und seine internationale Bedeutung 1935 – 1941*. He firmly condemned the League's reaction to the Italian aggression and named one of his chapters about the League's efforts accordingly: *The failure of the League of Nations*. He argues that although the League was well-informed about the details of the conflict and there were no different interpretations when it came to establishing guilt, their reaction during the war was plagued by disinterest and unwillingness to help Abyssinia properly. According to Mattioli, the League's intentions were never to protect Abyssinia, but to prevent the war from spreading into other parts of the world – mainly Europe. Therefore, he argues, oil sanctions or anything surpassing the initially mentioned sanctions were never considered. Further, he accuses the League of needlessly prolonging the decision-making process until the Italians would eventually win the war. As mentioned in the introduction, he strongly argues that the oil sanctions would have led to Italy having to stop its efforts – citing the infamous conversation between Hitler and Mussolini. He ends his evaluation of the League's role by claiming that because of the League's weak approach in the matter, Mussolini and Hitler felt encouraged to act more ruthlessly, which led to the Second World War (2005, pp. 125 – 130). While Mattioli's book offers a remarkably detailed account of the Second Italo-Abyssinian War, his summary of the League's actions falls short due to its simplicity and lack of the necessary nuance. Especially, his failure to separate the League of Nations, Britain, and

France, leads to a trivial recount of events – feeding into the traditional view that this paper aims to circumvent. This becomes especially apparent when he accuses the League of unnecessarily slowing down processes without acknowledging that this delay was purposely caused by France and Britain to seek a peaceful solution outside of the League's forum (Baer, 1973, p. 172). His attempt to explain the League's decision not to impose oil sanctions lacks substance and a more detailed analysis of the decision-making process.

Cristiano Ristuccia's essay *The 1935 Sanctions against Italy: Would coal and oil have made a difference?* discusses the question mentioned above of whether sanctions on oil could have succeeded. The strength of his essay lies in its approach to working with data about Italy's import and consumption of oil at the time – premiering said research for this case. Ristuccia concludes that Italy had indeed been vulnerable to oil sanctions, however, the League of Nations alone could not have succeeded in preventing the necessary oil from reaching Italy. The reason for that was the non-membership of major oil suppliers such as Venezuela and more importantly, the United States in the League of Nations. Because of their non-membership, their voluntary cooperation would have been needed to ensure a successful embargo. Ristuccia assumes that had the League decided to impose sanctions, the US would have agreed to keep their exports to such a level that would not have been sufficient in keeping the Italian War machine alive and thus concludes that an oil embargo would have succeeded (2000, pp. 85 – 87, 107). However, this conclusion is based on the highly questionable assumption that the US would have cooperated at a smaller scale, which is a flawed assumption due to the US government's lack of legal authority over American oil corporations (Strang, 2008, p. 212). Whilst his conclusion might be flawed by his lack of consideration of the League's inability to prevent Italy from accessing the oil market, his article nevertheless offers a more nuanced view of the League's shortcomings by arguing that the ambiguous policy of France and Britain hindered the effectiveness of the League's work (2000, pp. 85 – 86). Despite valuable results stemming from his research, Ristuccia's essay only slightly touches on the subject of why sanctions on oil were not imposed.

George Baer's 1973 essay titled *Sanctions and Security: The League of Nations and The Italian-Ethiopian War, 1935 – 1936* takes it upon itself to provide a more insightful analysis of the League of Nations and its actions during the Second Italo-Abyssinian War. Baer aims to investigate how the process of imposing sanctions on Italy influenced the prospect of collective security for the other members of the League of Nations. He argues that the collective action

of the League proved fruitful for half a year, but was doomed to fail. Baer explains that the reason for that was the different reasons the member states participated in the collective action. He raises the very important point that the Covenant did not allow the League to enforce collective action. The League's power was very limited as it merely provided a forum where members could discuss potential collective action. Crucially, he underlines that these discussions happened in the context of member states having different internal and external interests as opposed to a unilateral supranational organisation acting in a more unified manner as Mattioli, for example, argues. However, evidence from the archives of the British government and the League of Nations disproves these concerns. Nevertheless, Baer offers a valuable analysis of the League of Nations and its members. Where Baer's essay excels most is his portrayal of the multitude of factors influencing the League's most powerful members France and Britain. He correctly identifies the stark contrast between their actions within the forum of the League and what had occurred in the respective governments – such as the effect the British general election had on processes (1973, pp. 165 – 168, 177 – 179). However, I disagree with Baer's claim that Italian African expansion plans did not pose a threat to any of the major powers (1973, p. 166). Both France and Britain had long established a physical presence in the Horn of Africa and a long history of processes surrounding economic claims which included Italy and the Abyssinian government.

Most likely the most nuanced explanation of whether the League imposed oil sanctions would have stopped Italy's invasion of Abyssinia and the process that led up to the League deciding not to impose them, is found in Bruce Strang's 2008 essay *"The Worst of all Worlds: Oil sanctions and Italy's Invasion of Abyssinia, 1935 – 1936*. Strang acknowledges the latter two works and convincingly discusses their shortcomings – highlighting the lack of analysis when it comes to properly understanding the League and its limitations. He argues that had the League imposed sanctions, they would not have been able to prevent Italy from accessing the oil it needed to continue the war against Abyssinia. Strang acknowledges that Italy had indeed been utterly vulnerable to oil sanctions and that the League was aware of that, but explains that the main reason why no sanctions on oil were imposed was the lack of control over the oil market from the League's members. While Italy did import large amounts of oil from the two League member states, the Soviet Union and Romania, they had only agreed to halt said relations if the trade partners that were not part of the League would agree to follow suit. However, correspondence from the British Foreign Office disproves this claim. Strang then picks up the argument made by Baer that the political limitations of the US government buried

that avenue. Thus, the actors involved realised that the necessary conditions for the sanctions to be successful were impossible to meet because of the League's limitations to impose and enforce meaningful sanctions (2008, pp. 211 – 212, 216 – 217, 227 – 229). Strang does a remarkable job summarising the decision-making process of the League – focusing mostly on the events shaping Britain's stance as he correctly identifies Britain as the leading decision-maker. His analysis of the competing British interests that complicated committing to a definitive approach is much richer in detail compared to the other works mentioned. He essentially paints the picture of Britain being torn between the expectations the League's members and the public had toward them and Britain's fear of escalating the conflict that was only enhanced once they became convinced that imposing oil sanctions had little to no chance of preventing Italy from continuing their assault on Abyssinia. Additionally, the cooperation between the British and French governments was essential for any actions against Italy to work. Strang demonstrates that complications arose because of ambiguity and the general mistrust both governments had toward each other (2008, pp. 212 – 214, 216). Strang's analysis, similar to Baer's, does not pay sufficient attention to the regional interests of Britain and France, an avenue that adds significant insight into explaining both countries' motivations. Additionally, Strang's account of British and French tensions does not properly expand on the importance of the Stresa Front. Nonetheless, this work remains perhaps the strongest attempt at an explanation of the League's decision not to impose oil sanctions on Italy.

3. Geographical and historical background

3.1 Origins and Motives of Italian colonialism

Alberto Sbacci explains that Italian colonialism had two goals: on one hand, Italy wanted to become a great European Power, and on the other hand, Italy aimed to establish a steady supply of the necessary resources that it imported at a great cost. The colonial project thus functioned as a step towards self-sufficiency through exploitation (1977, pp. 504 – 505). Apart from import-dependent depleting funds, Italy faced problems of overpopulation resulting in mass unemployment, poverty, and migration. Many Italians would seek opportunities in other countries after becoming disillusioned by the lack thereof in their home country. Between 1861 and 1976 over 26 million Italians would pursue their luck elsewhere (Del Boca & Venturini, 2005, p. 303). To halt the loss of skilled workers, the government aimed to create attractive destinations in Africa where the previously unemployed could become landowners (Sbacci, 1977, pp. 505 – 506). At the turn of the century, Italy was a largely rural country with an urbanisation rate of just 28.1 percent, which was significantly lower than the average European rate at the time which was 37.9 percent (Malanima & Zamagni, 2010, p. 8) (Bairoch, 1988, p. 216). The large number of agricultural workers was ideal to cultivate colonies with a focus on farming (Sbacci, 1977, p. 505). Simply put, Italy tried to solve its domestic problems abroad to achieve its goal of reaching the status of a Great European Power.

3.2 Italian Interests in the Horn of Africa

The Horn of Africa is the name given to the area consisting of the four countries of Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia – occasionally including Sudan (Abbink, 2003, p. 407). Italy's first venture in the Horn of Africa preceded the opening of the Suez Canal. In the 1860s a monk named Giuseppe Sapeto travelled to Eritrea on a secular mission. He immediately recognised the potential the area had for trade due to its proximity to Italy and the near completion of the Suez Canal. Only due to Sapeto's relentless efforts would Italy eventually acquire the Bay of Assab in modern-day Eritrea. This event marked Italy's first territorial claim in Africa (Finaldi, 2017, pp. 18 – 19, 24). Finaldi further explains that Italy was eager to play a part in the infamous *1884 Berlin Conference* where delegates of the European governments met to carve up the African continent (2017, p. 91). Italy had previously attempted to establish control over Tunisia in 1879, but ultimately lost out to France (Meens, 2015, p. 41). Giampaolo Novati describes Italy in 1890 as "the last of the big powers or the first of the smaller ones" (2008, p. 42).

Italy's attempts to establish a successful colonial empire mirrored Novati's words as the lack of capital and knowledge of the countries regularly plagued them. This led to disappointing results in Somalia and Eritrea (Tripodi, 1999, pp. 26 – 28). Despite the lack of success, Italy's next goal would be to occupy the only territory left unclaimed by any European Power in the region: the Abyssinian Empire. Abyssinia was the only African country able to withstand European colonialism and has thus been viewed as more developed than the rest of the continent (Clapham, 2006, p. 138). This perception led to the inclusion of Abyssinian Emperor Menelik II when it came to defining the borders of Somaliland (Clifford, 1936, p. 290). Menelik initiated numerous modernisation projects and his approach to handling diplomatic matters displayed a great understanding of the colonial rivalries in the area (Clapham, 2006, p. 140).

From their territories in Eritrea, Italian soldiers marched into the Abyssinian Highlands. To further prevent conflicts, representatives of Italy and Abyssinia met at the negotiating table in 1889, to sign the *Treaty of Wuchale* (Muhumed & Siraj, 2017, p. 62). The treaty's purpose was to make peace between the two countries and to strengthen trade relations (University of Parma, 1889). Trouble arose during the translation of Article 17 where in the Amharic[4] version the possibility of external relations was granted to Abyssinia whereas in the Italian version, the wording stated that all external relations had to go through the Italian government, leaving Abyssinia with considerably less autonomy and effectively establishing an Italian protectorate over the East African country (Khan et al., 2023, p. 362). Later Menelik – firmly under the impression that the Italian involvement in Abyssinia's affairs was optional – reached out to Britain, Germany, and France to secure free access to arms. By doing so he violated the Treaty of Wuchale as it was interpreted by the Italians. According to their understanding, Menelik would have had to go through them to communicate such requests. When the European states sided with Italy's view of the matter Menelik declared the treaty invalid (Finaldi, 2017, p. 100). This event also exposed the limits of Abyssinia's international recognition, as despite its modernity it could not achieve the same status as a European country. With no resolution in sight, both parties started preparing for battle (Dilebo, 1976, p. 231). The Italians, certain of their victory, were unaware that they were highly outnumbered and were facing a well-organised army. After a series of Abyssinian victories, the final battle would happen in Adwa, located on the border between Eritrea and Abyssinia, in 1896. There, the Italians suffered a humiliating and crushing defeat, losing nearly 6,000 men. Having suffered high losses and not

[4] The language spoken in Abyssinia/present-day Ethiopia.

wanting to further exhaust his army, Menelik chose not to pursue the Italians and let them retreat into Eritrea. By doing so, he wanted to prevent an Italian "crusade" on Abyssinia (Finaldi, 2017, pp. 119 – 120, 132 – 133).

3.3 Libya, the paradise across the sea

After the defeat in Abyssinia, Italy concentrated on modern-day Libya which at the time was divided into the three territories named, *Cyrenaica*, *Fezzan*, and *Tripolitania*. Italy's claim to the territories dates to the Berlin Conference (Paoletti, 2010, p. 108). Instead of a European Power, the Ottoman Empire held control over them since 1551 (Kologlu, 2008, p. 275). With the Ottomans unwilling to concede, Italy went to war in 1911 (Childs, 1990, p. 49) (Kologlu, 2008, p. 281). The operation almost ended in a disaster for the Italians, but ultimately the Ottomans were forced to sign the *Treaty of Ouchy*[5] in 1912 as their forces got spread too thin because of troubles arising in the Balkans (Kologlu, 2008, p. 281). The treaty handed possession of the Libyan territories over to the Italians, but that would not end the dispute over the area as the population reacted with hostility towards the Italians. The resulting guerrilla warfare would pose massive problems for the Italians (Di Casola, 1993, p. 69). When the First World War broke out, Italy could not afford to station large numbers of troops in Libya, and the remainder got pushed back from the previously captured positions to the coastal regions until they ultimately lost control over the territories completely (Mattioli, 2005, pp. 35 – 40).

Once Mussolini came to power in 1922, he declared the recapture of Libya as a major objective. Like Abyssinia, Eritrea, and Somalia, Libya was seen as a territory for Italian farmers to settle down and secure Italy's supply of valuable materials. Mussolini argued that Italy's vast population and lack of resources deserved to compensate for this deficit (Mattioli, 2005, 35 – 40). With Libya's landscape almost completely consisting of desert, it was far from being the agricultural oasis Mussolini had wished for – once again proving the Italian lack of knowledge. Nevertheless, Italy went to war in Libya for a second time in 1923, determined to achieve a decisive victory (Gooch, 2005, p. 1008). To achieve victory in 1932, the Italian army committed countless war crimes, reaching a genocidal scale (Mattioli, 2005, pp. 41 – 54). This achieved little towards Italy's goal to establish an agricultural colony due to the ill-suited landscape. Therefore, Mussolini was keen on acquiring more territories, with Abyssinia as his next goal.

[5] Not to be mistaken with the Treaty of Lausanne that was signed in the same region of Switzerland in 1923.

3.4 British and French Interests in the Horn of Africa

The importance of the Horn of Africa changed drastically with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 (Fletcher, 1958, p. 556). No longer did European ships have to go around the Cape of Good Hope to reach the Indian Ocean – instead it was accessible through the Red Sea (Remnek, 1990, p. 6). Valeska Huber writes that the construction of the Suez Canal essentially transformed the Mediterranean Sea into a colonial sea as it became a central trade route. The Canal was built, and its transit was organised, by the French-controlled Suez Canal Company (2012, pp. 141, 145). Kimberly Bell writes that both France and Britain aimed to gain control over Egypt before the canal's construction. This resulted in hostile Anglo-French relations in Egypt that were enhanced once the Suez Canal Company received permission to build the canal. Britain greatly feared French control of the valuable trade route and did everything in its power to oppose its construction (1965, pp. 121 – 123). Part of the reason for Britain's opposition was partially due to their control of the Cape Route (Martin, 1970, p. 347). They feared that the sudden circumvention of the Cape Route would result in massive losses of revenue. Because of the Ottoman Empire's control of the region, Britain would relentlessly attempt to persuade the Ottomans to prevent the project, but to no avail – the Canal opened in 1869 (Bell, 1965, p. 133) However, Britain impeded French control in 1875 when the British government bought the necessary shares to establish control over the company. Once Britain invaded Egypt in 1882, tensions ensued as other countries feared over their access to the Suez Canal. These tensions were resolved at the 1888 *Constantinople Conference*, which resulted in an agreement for open access to all nations in both war and peace time (Huber, 2012, pp. 141, 145). To the South of the Horn, Britain annexed the territory of East Africa – consisting of modern-day Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda – between 1885 and 1895 (Gjersø, 2015, p. 831). In 1898, Britain fought a successful campaign against Sudan to incorporate it into its colonial empire and completely encircled the Horn of Africa (Sharkey, 2003, p. 6).

Egypt had invaded territories in modern-day Somalia, but after Britain's occupation, they would retreat from their positions. After Britain, France, and Italy made individual territorial claims, Somaliland was divided between the three (Clifford, 1936, p. 289 – 290) (Millman, 2013, p. 18). As demonstrated, Britain had strategically established colonies along the Suez Canal and thus relied on the canal being open at all times. To achieve this, Anglo-French relations suffered considerably, and a similar situation would later ensue in Abyssinia.

The economic importance of the Suez Canal for Britain is impossible to understate. Britain's economy depended on the exchange of goods from their colonies and the Suez Canal was vital for their passage to India. For ships traveling from Liverpool to Mumbai, the route through the Mediterranean shortened their journey by roughly 40 percent. In the 1930s, every second ship passing through the canal was British (Mountjoy, 1958, p. 156). 35 percent of all traffic heading north through the canal were exports heading to Britain from India (Morewood, 2016, p. 14). Therefore, any obstruction of this route would have significant consequences for Britain which was at the time the world's leading shipping nation and second largest exporting nation. With memories of World War I still vividly present and the collapse of world trade resulting from the Great Depression in the 1930s, it was not the time to take economic risks (Richardson, 1969, p. 6). Thus, Britain's alarm bells rang when Italy made it clear that it aimed to occupy Abyssinia as they were aware of the consequences this could bring. The League of Nations archive shows that there were indeed demands raised to refuse access to the Suez Canal for Italian weapon shipments (United Nations Archives, 1935). The Suez Canal Company declared that the canal would remain open in case of war between Italy and Abyssinia (League of Nations Library, 1935). However, the idea of closing the canal to prevent Italy from completing its operation in Abyssinia remained. A secret letter from the Admiral of the British fleet, Ernle Chatfield, to the Cabinet Secretary, Maurice Hankey, from May 1936 reveals serious concerns about these demands. In the letter that got forwarded to the Secretary of State, Anthony Eden, Chatfield writes (The National Archives of the UK, 1936, pp. 140 – 142):

> … it is to our basic Imperial Interests that the Canal should always remain open and free, and one of our main planks of Imperial strategy rests on our intention to keep the Canal open by force rather than to allow any Power, for its own purpose, whatever it may be, to close it.

Because the British economy relied on the Suez Canal, and the important route it represented for Italy, any explanation of the British approach to the Second Italo-Abyssinian War must acknowledge the role the Suez Canal played. This also applies to the understanding of the Anglo-French relationship, as the British takeover of the Suez Canal greatly displeased the French.

3.5 Abyssinian Railways

Abyssinia had continued its transition towards modernity since the Italian retreat from its territories. Working together with European advisors, Menelik had started construction of a railway line from the coast to Addis Ababa (Clapham, 2006, p. 140). The process of its construction curiously mirrored the construction of the Suez Canal. Edward Keefer explains that the French-owned Imperial Railway Company of Abyssinia held a railway monopoly in the country since 1897. France aimed to construct the route through French-Somaliland which would circumvent British and Italian harbours. Similar to their approach during the construction of the Suez Canal, Britain attempted to hijack control over the project, but France had learned since and prevented this (1981, p. 365). Both Britain and Italy feared the potentially severe economic impact of the planned French railway. Britain successfully attempted to convince Menelik that growing French influence in the country would have negative consequences for Abyssinia. As a result, Menelik prohibited further construction of the railway and forced France to negotiate with Britain and Italy (Keefer, 1981, pp. 366, 368 – 369). In the resulting 1906 *Tripartite Treaty*, it was agreed that all three nations would be represented on the board of the company in addition to the dismantling of the French monopoly. Further, the Abyssinian succession was a topic of discussion, as Menelik's death was impending (Bekele, 1985, 63 – 64). With all attendants aware of the economic consequences of war in the region, they promised to stay neutral during potential internal changes in Abyssinia once Menelik passed (University of Parma, 1906). The signing of the treaty eliminated British and Italian concerns and smoothened relations between the signees (Keefer, 1981, p. 365). This process however further revealed the European perception of Abyssinia. While its modernity was deemed remarkable for an African country, it remained an African country.

4. The Second Italo-Abyssinian War

In 1923, Abyssinia joined the League of Nations after a series of quarrels between Britain, France, and Italy, who all sought to increase their influence over the region (Iadarola, 1975, pp. 601, 620 – 621). The League was to function as a tool for collective security and a forum of conciliation and compromise (United Nations, n.d.). Martyn Housden explains that the first real test of the League's ability to keep peace came in 1931 when Japanese soldiers provoked a border crisis with China in the region of Manchuria. Again, both countries were members of the League of Nations and China brought up the conflict in the League to invoke Article 11 which said that any war or threat of war concerned all members of the League. The League was cautious to act due to Britain's favouring of Japan over China. The role of the Great Powers in the League and their relations with other countries would slow down processes and could impact the willingness of the League to act or even agree on what party was to be declared the aggressor (Housden, 2012, pp. 38, 98 – 99, 100 – 101).

In the ranks of the League of Nations, Abyssinia was a small country. That meant that they were represented at the General Assembly, but did not have a permanent seat at the Council. The permanent seats in the Council were reserved for the victorious Great Powers of the First World War: Britain, France, Italy, and Japan. The temporary members served three years and were elected by the General Assembly (United Nations, n.d.). After Japan left the League in 1933 the Soviet Union took its place as a permanent member of the Council (Presidential Library, n.d.). The dominion of the Council surrounded all questions concerning collective action, and the idea behind having a small Council was that the Great Powers could act swiftly. Decisions had to be made unanimously, as the League was not supposed to breach national sovereignty (United Nations, n.d.). Even if smaller states would not hold the same power, League membership was desirable, as they could benefit from the collective security league membership promised (Rappard, 1934, p. 563).

To properly understand the League, it is essential not to overestimate its power. Baer summarises the League as follows (1973, pp. 165 – 166):

> … one should approach the League of Nations as an association of states drawn together by common acceptance of the Covenant of the League. Acceptance was by treaty, so the League had some features of an alliance. But beyond the matter of honor … nothing in the Covenant made action by these states automatic or collective. The Covenant provided no way to enforce collective action … What the League provided operationally was a structure wherein commonly shared purposes might be translated into common action.

The lack of power to enforce collective action made it so the states' interests must have aligned with the proposed avenue or states could decide not to follow the League's recommendation. Therefore, understanding Britain's and France's interests is key to explaining the League's decision not to impose sanctions on oil, as they held the most power in the League. As a result of the limited efficacy of the League, issues concerning their scale would be handled in state-to-state diplomacy, rather than be brought up in front of the League.

Despite our knowledge of the limitations of the League, the circumstances of the second Italian incursion into Abyssinia were entirely different from their first one. Attacking a fellow member of the League still entailed the risk of collective action. Mussolini was aware of the hierarchy within the League and was convinced that Britain would stay out of the conflict if Italy managed not to interfere with their interests in the region – not believing Britain would take substantial risks for Abyssinia (Davidson, 2014, p. 6).

The eventual Abyssinian Emperor Haile Selassie was not oblivious to the Italian ambitions and was keen on resolving the brewing conflict at the negotiating table instead of the battlefield. Although his reign would only start two years later, he represented Abyssinia during talks with Italy in 1928 which concluded in the signing of a treaty of friendship. It stated that the two states would remain friendly for 20 years, but once again different interpretations of an article would cause problems (Stern, 1936, p. 202). Article 5 of the treaty stated (taken from Spencer, 1937, p. 618):

> The two Governments undertake to submit to a procedure of conciliation *or* of arbitration the questions which may arise between them, and which they may not be able to decide by normal process of diplomacy, without having recourse to force of arms.

John Spencer explains that in the Italian's understanding direct negotiations between the two governments would have priority over the process of arbitration – aiming to keep the League of Nations out of the picture. Meanwhile, in the Abyssinian view if disagreements would arise neither conciliation nor arbitration would have priority. But because they thought that conciliation would most likely prove to be fruitless, the immediate seeking of arbitration was preferable in Abyssinia's eyes (1937, p. 618). The obvious candidate for the arbitration process was the League of Nations, which they would call upon to moderate upcoming conflicts in hope of support as Selassie did not believe in the treaty's ability to ensure peace.

Despite negotiations, Italy's war preparations began in the summer of 1934. They were met with moderate protests from Britain. However, they were at first appeased by Italian promises that the increased armament was solemnly intended to defend existing Italian territories. When in February of the next year general mobilisation was declared, alarm bells rang in London. Italy was informed that Italian aggressions in Abyssinia would result in British involvement in the matter (Davidson, 2014, pp. 6 – 7). Mussolini tested the waters in December of 1934, when Italian troops engaged in a battle with Abyssinian soldiers over a territory the Italians claimed to be part of Italian Somaliland – named the *Walwal Incident*. According to Lupold, a party of the Anglo-Abyssinian Border Commission arrived at Walwal, an area laying "a good fifty miles" within Abyssinian territory, but that claim was disputed by the Italians who were eager to provoke a conflict (1970, p. 214). The British government was keen on keeping the League out of this conflict as they were aware of the League's inability to resolve such matters and therefore acted as arbitrators instead. These negotiations lasted until September 1935, but ultimately bore no fruit (Davidson, 2014, p. 6).

Thus, on October 3rd, 1935, Italian troops marched into Abyssinia (Labanca, 2010, p. 196). Having learned from their previous failures, the Italians entered Abyssinia with an army consisting of approximately 200'000 soldiers. The Abyssinian Emperor Haile Selassie was keen on presenting irrefutable evidence that Italy was the sole aggressor in this conflict and not to give Italy the chance to blame Abyssinia for the invasion. Therefore, he ordered his troops

to leave a 30-kilometer buffer zone between the border of Abyssinia and Italian-controlled Eritrea (Labanca, 2010, p. 196). The brutality that Italy displayed in Libya was replicated and even increased during the conquest of Abyssinia. Richard Pankhurst writes that soon after the invasion of Abyssinia started, the Abyssinian Minister of Foreign Affairs reached out to the League of Nations and provided indisputable evidence of Italian war crimes in Abyssinia. This series of atrocities that continued after the war's conclusion, included the widespread usage of mustard gas, the bombing of Red Cross hospitals and ambulances, and the execution of prisoners to only name a few. Officially, however, the League of Nations did not take notice of any Italian wrongdoing (1999, pp. 83 – 84). The Italian brutality and pure numerical strength ultimately overpowered the Abyssinian forces. The emperor Haile Selassie would flee Addis Ababa before the Italians reached the capital, to speak in front of the League of Nations in Geneva. Meanwhile, Benito Mussolini declared victory in Abyssinia after just over half a year of fighting.

5. Sanctioning Italy

5.1 Early British Processes

Initially, the League of Nations acted remarkably fast by condemning Italy's aggressions and imposing the first sanctions two weeks after the invasion began – with both Britain's and France's support (Strang, 2008, p. 211). Additionally, Britain and the League of Nations had put considerable effort into establishing the chances of success of sanctions on oil as they commissioned a committee of experts to advise the League about further actions. Exploring the economic reality of a possible embargo broadens the focus from states to corporations and private actors. Despite the general understanding of the importance of Britain's role, I argue that its complexity generally does not get adequately discussed. More precisely, the different streams of influence within the British government shaped the British approach to Italy's war against Abyssinia. The decision-making process was complicated by frequent changes of personnel in the Foreign Secretary during 1935 as the position would be held by John Simon, Samuel Hoare, and ultimately by Anthony Eden (Government of the United Kingdom, n.d.). The change of personnel was on one hand due to the change of government after the General Elections and on the other hand, due to resignation which I will get more into later. In addition to the change of personnel, the British government was conflicted in its interests and under massive public pressure. The newly elected government had made use of the British public's support of the League of Nations to gain votes and was thus operating under the expectations of protecting the League from Italy's aggressions.

Most of the evidence about Britain's position comes from protocols of cabinet meetings – almost always attended amongst others by the three men introduced. From the meeting on December 2nd, 1935, we can conclude that concerns regarding an Italian declaration of war were sincere. Nicknamed "the mad dog act", the attendants agreed that an Italian attack on Britain in the Mediterranean came close to a suicide mission. However, concerns were raised about gaps within the imperial defense, therefore, military cooperation with France was deemed essential to ensure that British deficiencies could be compensated in the case of war. The protocol states that the attendants felt very positive about the chances of France's cooperation, but expected that war would result in serious losses (The National Archives of the UK, 1935, pp. 331, 334 – 339, 342). The details of this meeting prove that the British government was confident in its position in the Mediterranean and that it would come out

victorious in a potential war against Italy. This assessment would not change as the protocol of a cabinet meeting in February 1936, shows that the British government deemed a loss against Italy impossible (The National Archives of the UK, 1936, p. 120). However, Britain and France both preferred to find a solution through negotiations. From a collection of international newspaper articles gathered for the Secretary of the League of Nations in 1936 we know of the public's frustration and incomprehension with Britain's hesitance. Because of the Italian army's struggles in Abyssinia, suspicions were raised that the reason for Britain's reluctance was because of its interest in the oil trade and not because of the fear of a possible war against Italy (United Nations Archive, 1936, p. 4). The protocol of the cabinet meeting in December 1935 shows that the government was aware of these accusations because of their control of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company and felt the public pressure resulting in the protocol stating (National Archives of the UK, 1935, pp. 337 – 338):

> On no count should we adopt a negative attitude … or give any appearance of refusing our part in genuine collective action, provided that action was not going to be futile. Having taken the line we have, and having fought the Election on it, incidentally, any other course of action would … be disastrous and indefensible.

Therefore, the government decided to join in an embargo on exports of oil, under the condition that all other members that produced oil would do too.

5.2 Italian Oil Suppliers

In 1935, Italy imported 93.2 percent of the oil it consumed. This number would rise the next year to 94.9 percent (Ristuccia, 2000, p. 90). To make League sanctions on oil as ineffective as possible, Italy adjusted its oil imports before the war, as displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Total Italian Import of oil products

Country	**Italian Oil Imports (in thousands of metric tons)**		
	Jan. – Sept. 1935	**Oct. – Dec. 1935**[6]	**Jan. – Dec. 1935**
France	10.7	17.1	27.8
Romania	706.3	389.6	1095.9
USSR	199.7	128.9	328.6
Netherlands Indies	20.2	0	20.2
Iran[7]	187.3	39.0	226.3
Columbia	45.3	0	45.3
Netherlands Antilles	169.9	112.7	282.6
United States	95.3	157.1	252.4
Venezuela	15.9	0[8]	15.9
Others	62.1	37.6	99.7
Total	1522.7	882.0	2406.7

Note. From "The Worst of all Worlds: Oil Sanctions and Italy's Invasion of Abyssinia, 1935 – 1936" B. Strang, 2008, *Diplomacy and Statecraft, 19*(2), p. 215. Copyright 2008 by the Taylor & Francis Group.

Italy strategically chose suppliers outside of the League's sphere of influence, with important suppliers being the United States and Venezuela. However, their major supplier was Romania, a member of the League, and could theoretically be expected to fall in line with sanctions (United Nations, n.d.). That meant if the League decided to recommend an oil embargo and all its members decided to follow suit, Italy would have to solemnly depend on Columbia, the United States, and Venezuela to supply them with oil – which would complicate matters

[6] Due to the unavailability of Italian statistics those numbers are estimated from tankers in Italian ports and therefore cannot be completely accurate (taken from Strang, 2008, p. 215).

[7] Iran's oil reserves were controlled by the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) or Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) respectively, which was owned by the British government – thus complying with a potential embargo (Sanders, 2019, p. 926).

[8] Because Italy refined Venezuelan oil in the Netherlands Antilles, the increase in the Netherlands Antilles from October to December represents the additional Italian purchases of Venezuelan oil (taken from Strang, 2008, p. 215).

additionally by the increased shipping distance. However, this does not account for the League's lack of power to enforce the sanctions it recommended. Additionally, smuggling was a topic that concerned the League. An example can be found in a report sent to the League of Nations by a Swiss whistle-blower who reported the smuggling of goldfish to France via Switzerland. As goldfish fell under the goods sanctioned, it led the League to believe that smuggling by private companies would not be limited to fish – adding to the sense that sanctions could be circumvented (United Nations Archive, 1936).

Romania and the Soviet Union combined close to 70% of Italy's oil imports and thus their attitude was crucial to a potential embargo's success (Strang, 2008, p. 216). The Soviet Union had been an advocate for the importance of the League of Nations due to its collective security benefits. But Italy represented an important market to them, and the Soviets were unwilling to sacrifice this revenue without a guarantee that sanctions would be successful. Lowell Tillett writes that a rivalry between Romania and the Soviet Union ensued partially because of their shared interests in Italy. Having been their main supplier of oil until 1933 the Soviets begrudgingly had to watch as the Romanians gradually took over their position. Thus, both countries were cautious to impose sanctions, fearing the other would use the opportunity to take over this lucrative market (Tillett, 1956, pp. 11, 13). I disagree with this assessment of Romania's and the Soviet Union's position as evidence proves their willingness to cooperate. From the British cabinet meeting in December 1935, we see that the USSR and Romania had confirmed this in writing to the League. Additionally, a telegram from Anthony Eden in January of 1936 to the Foreign Office reveals that the Romanian representative of the League of Nations, Nicolae Titulescu, was more concerned about the possible consequences of the League's failure to react to Italy's aggression than his country's trade. In the confidential telegram, Eden writes that Titulescu was "anxious to endorse the early imposition of an oil sanction" (The National Archives of the UK, 1936). In a telegram from March 1936, Eden reported that the Soviet representative Vladimir Potemkin had reported to him that Britain could expect full cooperation if Britain decided to support sanctions (The National Archives of the UK, 1936). Therefore, I find the concerns towards the attitude of the two countries baseless.

Venezuela was quick to announce its noncompliance which would not have been much of a problem if America had announced its involvement: Strang explains that Venezuela's oil exports were de facto controlled by Anglo-Dutch and American companies that acquired them from corrupt statesmen meaning that the companies could have been prevented from supplying

Italy by the respective governments (2008, p. 216) (Dodge, 1976, p. 65). The biggest problem however was that the American President Theodore Roosevelt did not possess the legal power to prevent American companies from engaging in trade relations with Italy (Strang, 2008, pp. 216 – 217). Thomas Breslin explains that the foreign markets proved to be most profitable for British, Dutch, and American oil companies; hence, the competition was fierce. Compliance with an embargo made little sense considering Italy's market was lucrative. However, Breslin offers an interesting example where oil companies deliberately went in another direction: During the previously mentioned Japanese aggressions in Manchuria, he writes that American and Anglo-Dutch oil companies decided to impose an unofficial embargo on Japan before any change of American policy on the matter. Breslin classifies this action as "low-level economic warfare" that due to its non-governmental character came without the possibility of humiliation for America and was thus encouraged by the US (1975, p. 41 – 42). Given the proximity time-wise to the Second Italo-Abyssinian War and the crucial involvement of the United States, this act is particularly interesting to the question of how US companies would have reacted. However, the sanctions were based on the preexisting conflict between the American and Anglo-Dutch oilmen with the Japanese government; this did not apply to the Second Italo-Abyssinian War (Breslin, 1975, p. 41). Although, there had been slight queries between the companies and Italy, because of Italy's opposition to the corporation's economic warfare in Japan. Breslin explains that there had been discussions between diplomats and the oil companies if cooperation between them could result in forcing countries that do not produce oil themselves into compliance with their embargo. The companies argued that this would not be possible in the case of Italy because of their access to oil from Romania (1975, p. 47). However, we have established that Romania and the Soviet Union were happy to comply with the League's sanctions. Both the British government and the Committee of the League of Nations were aware of the problem the American oil market posed as the quantity of oil available for export greatly exceeded Italy's estimated demand (United Nations Archive, 1936). British records show that the Government was aware that no cooperation could be expected from the American government (The National Archives of the UK, 1936).

5.3 From the Stresa Front to the Hoare-Laval Plan

One particular influence within the British government that was not subjected to the changes was the Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Robert Vansittart. Vansittart's stance was heavily influenced by his pro-French attitude and hatred of Germany (Goldman,

1980, pp. 248 – 249). He was one of the architects of the Stresa Front which was formed in April 1935. The British and French Prime Ministers met with Benito Mussolini in the Italian town of Stresa to discuss the formation of an alliance between the three countries to contain the rising threat Hitler's Germany posed (Talalay, 1978, p. 12).[9] The reason for the meeting was the reveal of Germany's Air Force which breached the terms of *The Treaty of Versailles* with its massive rearmament efforts (Roi, 1995, pp. 65 – 66) The conference was largely overshadowed by the looming issue of the Abyssinia Dispute. During the negotiations, neither party decided to bring up the topic directly (Davidson, 2014, p. 7). Britain and France were aware of Italy's importance in this allegiance due to their geographical position and the power a united front against Germany would hold (Roi, 1995, pp. 67 – 68). Additionally, both feared that the alienation of Italy could result in an alliance between Germany and Italy. Vansittart was very keen not to damage the Stresa Front and advised Simon accordingly (taken from Roi, 1995, pp. 67 – 68):

> We should endeavour to dissuade Italy from going the full length … because she (Britain) ought to have her hands free for graver matters in Europe; secondly because of the further, and perhaps deadly, blow that this must deal the League; and, therefore, thirdly on account of the consequent reaction of a large section of public opinion here, just at a period when we want and need, all of us, the most complete confidence and collaboration … (this course of action) must be done in the quietest, most friendly way.

In short, Vansittart argued that Britain and France should do everything in their power to convince Italy to resolve the Abyssinian Dispute peacefully to save both the League of Nations and the Stresa Front. However, he heavily opposed any measures that could lead to Italy's alienation from the alliance because he feared that this would result in a possible cooperation between Germany and Italy (Roi, 1995, p. 70). Britain's attempts to prevent conflict with Italy were not due to their fear of the Italian army, but due to their fear of their loss of control. Therefore, Britain and France put tireless efforts into negotiations with Italy. They resorted to state-to-state diplomacy, as negotiations in this matter, with the aggressor, would ruin the already damaged belief in the League's ability to ensure peace. However, this does not mean

[9] At that time Italy had not yet entered an alliance with Germany. Italy's stance was heavily influenced by its proximity to Austria which they had defended in 1934 against a German intervention in the ensuing uprising after the assassination of the Austrian Chancellor (Roi, 1995, pp. 65 – 66).

the British government did not value the League of Nations. The protocols from cabinet meetings undeniably prove British support for sanctions against Italy and their high estimation of the League's importance. The problem was that Britain relied on Italy too much to act more aggressively. Therefore, Britain was forced to attempt to fulfil both the role of the protector of the League's Covenant and to ensure the continuation of the Stresa Front: "It was urged, therefore, that we should make clear that it was not the dispute between Italy and Abyssinia that especially interested us, but rather the dispute between the League and an aggressor" (The National Archives of the UK, 1935, p. 345).

After their numerous attempts to persuade Italy to abandon their invasion failed, and the League committee tasked to explore the economic reality of oil sanctions was showing signs that a decision would arrive soon, the French and British Foreign Secretaries Pierre Laval and Samuel Hoare would meet to try to repair the Stresa Front – postponing the League's work on oil sanctions (Roi, 1995, p. 79). The resulting agreement would become known as the *Hoare-Laval Plan*. Hoare and Laval attempted to convince Mussolini to stop the invasion in exchange for massive land concessions – exceeding the territories Italy had already captured. Its composition proved mainly one thing: Britain's and France's immense sense of urgency. A decision on oil sanctions was imminent and it was feared that its imposition would kill the Stresa Front. Thus, the Hoare-Laval Plan was an attempt to save the League and the Stresa Front. Robertson concludes that, especially to Hoare, the main issue in the Italo-Abyssinian dispute was Italy's approach and timing. Evidence of this can be found in a conversation he had with the High Commissioners of the Dominions in the summer of 1935 (taken from Robertson, 1975, p. 440):

> If Signor Mussolini would only go slow and proceed by the road of economic concessions and similar securities, he would get all that he could want in a comparatively short time.

Due to the increasing problems, the Italian army was facing, the general feeling was that Mussolini would accept the terms of the Hoare-Laval Plan as it would give Mussolini "more than he had, but less than he could take" (Braddick, 1962, p. 358). However, on the 9th of December 1935, the day France and Britain had intended to present Italy with its offer, the French press published detailed information about the plan to carve up Abyssinia behind its back and Britain's press followed suit (Robertson, 1975, p. 445). Both Britain's and France's populations supported the League of Nations vehemently and felt betrayed by their

government's willingness to reward the aggressor, Italy ,instead of defending Abyssinia and the League. In Britain's case, the disappointment was especially grave as the public felt lied to by the government that championed the League and its importance during the campaign heading towards the general elections in November. Hoare would ultimately take the blame for it and resign. However, I suggest a more nuanced interpretation of the Hoare-Laval Plan and the League itself. As established, the League of Nations was constructed as a forum for conciliation and compromise, which is what Britain and France attempted. Although the negotiations happened outside of the League's grounds and were organized clumsily, I argue that they had happened well within the League's framework. The Great Powers were trying to compromise to minimise Abyssinia's losses and had they been successful, the League would have succeeded in its purpose. I believe that the idea that the League of Nations was constructed to be able to prevent any conflict is highly misleading and further suggest that the League's role in the Abyssinia Dispute should be more viewed as a negotiating table for the Great Powers to coordinate common interests under the pretense of a more democratic assembly. Consequently, I argue that the League of Nations had more similarities to the 1884 Berlin Conference than the traditional interpretation of the League of a democratic framework to ensure collective security. The League was founded to establish collective security and maintain control for the Great Powers. For smaller member states that meant that they had to be ready to pay for this security in the form of potential territorial losses. For Britain and France, this meant that they could resolve disputes peacefully via territorial concessions that resulted in no personal losses. Additionally, Germany's and Japan's withdrawal from the League meant that Italy's membership was even more crucial in keeping the League intact.

Hoare's successor Anthony Eden shared the views on Britain's need to negotiate with Italy. Eden's reports to the Foreign Office provide us with valuable information about the attitude of the British government. The contents of his correspondence were declared very classified and not intended for the public. A telegram from Eden to the Foreign Office about his talk with the Italian delegate, Baron Aloisi, reveals that Eden greatly regretted Italy's decision to ignore the diplomatic compromise of land concessions (The National Archives of the UK, 1936). From a report of his conversation with Baron Aloisi dated January 1936, we can read that the initial sanctions had indeed increased the difficulties of Italian warfare (The National Archives of the UK, 1936). In a telegram from April of the same year, Eden expresses Aloisi's and his views that the Anglo-Italian relations were in dire need of improvement and further expressed regret of the Prime Minister's public negative remarks about Italy – emphasising that this was not

representative of Britain's attitude towards Italy (The National Archives of the UK, 1936). Eden's desire for these improvements was seemingly mirrored by Mussolini who wanted to reconstitute the Stresa Front as soon as possible, as his reports of a conversation with the Italian Ambassador Grandi from May 1936 exemplify (The National Archives of the UK, 1936). Eden's efforts to strengthen Anglo-Italian relations were not universally appreciated as a telegram from a member of the House of Commons shows who called for Italy to be expelled from the League in May 1936 (The National Archives of the UK, 1936, pp. 8, 15)

6. Saving the League, the Stresa Front, and the Baldwin government

Consequently, due to the disastrous outcome of the Hoare-Laval Plan, the topic of oil sanctions remained on the table. Strang argues that in the wake of the Hoare-Laval Plan, the topic of oil sanctions became a symbol of the League's ability to ensure collective security (2008, p. 226). In February 1936, the committee of experts presented its findings that the sanctions would not be effective because of the lack of cooperation by the US. This meant that Italy would have been able to buy oil from the US and Venezuela, which more than covered its needs. Nevertheless, in the cabinet meeting where the report was discussed, it was decided to keep pushing for oil sanctions. Prime Minister Baldwin argued that his position and that of the government were entirely dependent on the decision on oil sanctions. He stated that a refusal to impose sanctions on oil would have a devastating effect on everyone's political career as the British public was strongly in favour of the League of Nations (The National Archives of the UK, 1936, pp. 174, 181). The decision had therefore become entirely about saving grace and trying to fix the damage the Hoare-Laval Plan caused. The most adamant opponent of the proposed sanctions was Walter Runciman, the President of the Board of Trade. He expressed his dissent during a cabinet meeting (National Archives of the UK, 1936):

> Up to now the principal burden of sanctions had fallen upon this country which was more affected than any other member of the League of Nations owing to its vast trade. The figures for no country's sacrifice could compare with ours. The coal export trade from this country to Italy had completely disappeared, and by next week 30'000 miners would be unemployed. Debts due from Italy to this country were being held up and private firms were heavily hit. Italian-British firms of long standing were being broken up, and many people were cutting their losses and drawing out. The business community of this country was bearing the brunt of the sanctions. We had to aim at such a position that whenever peace was signed between Italy and Abyssinia we should be strong enough to recover our Italian trade and nothing should be done to jeopardise that.

Runciman constantly complained to the other attendants during cabinet meetings about the serious losses sustained, but at this stage, the government was busy with damage control.

Therefore, it was decided that Eden should advocate for the earliest possible application of oil sanctions at the League of Nations. Additionally, the government was keen on keeping a low profile in the process and ordered Eden to act discreetly. Further action was to be discussed in March of 1936. From that meeting, we learn that France had become fearful that sanctions on oil would result in Italy leaving the League, ending the Stresa Front, and approaching the Germans for cooperation. Therefore, Britain could not count on France's support when it came to imposing sanctions anymore (The National Archives of the UK, 1936, pp. 228 – 229). This, in combination with the increasing news of Italian advancements further complicated Britain's position, as their fear of the collapse of the Stresa Front had become more realistic. Additionally, Runciman presented figures of British losses due to sanctions and the demands for compensation that were getting louder (The National Archives of the UK, 1936, p. 272). By March, the focus of the government had almost completely shifted to establishing the chances of an Italo-German alliance due to the German advancement into the Rhineland. Additionally, concerns were raised about Britain's military ability to protect its interests in Egypt and at home. The cabinet meeting on March 16th entails the first proposal to withdraw soldiers from the Mediterranean if no sanctions on oil were imposed (The National Archives of the UK, 1936, p. 319). By March 19th the British government had abandoned their call for oil sanctions and was discussing the withdrawal of sanctions in exchange for a truce between Italy and Abyssinia – knowing that once the sanctions were lifted, they could not be imposed again, and Mussolini could continue his war after a short truce. Therefore, a withdrawal without guarantees was not an option. By now, the British government was convinced that France's cooperation in imposing oil sanctions was impossible, and as a result, Anglo-French relations began to worsen (The National Archives of the UK, 1936, pp. 368 – 369). By late March, the subject of the Italo-Abyssinian dispute had lost almost all its importance and had become a minor topic. The arrival of an Abyssinian delegation in April of 1936, once again brought up the topic of the Suez Canal, as its closure was regarded as the only meaningful measure, but was not considered. The Italian victory had become a reality, killing the chances of conciliation that Britain had still hoped for (The National Archives of the UK, 1936, pp. 430 – 432). By May 4th the cabinet found itself discussing the consequences of the collective security aspect of the League of Nations. For the first time, it was suggested to advocate against sanctions and for the withdrawal of the existing ones domestically, but remain discreet at the League of Nations. Once again Runciman urged the cabinet to drop the sanctions because of the economic penalties the British public suffered from (The National Archives of the UK, pp. 94 – 95). Serious discussions about withdrawing the sanctions were the topic of the cabinet meetings on

May 27th and 29th. The cabinet was facing a dilemma. They estimated that sanctions on oil could hurt the already vulnerable Italian economy so they would be forced to negotiate terms by September. However, they feared that if they kept the sanctions in place or even imposed new ones, Italy would leave the League, further weakening the League's prestige. If the sanctions were lifted, this would emphasise the failure of the League, but could result in Italy remaining in the League and Anglo-Italian relations improving (The National Archives of the UK, 1936, pp. 212 – 213). Ultimately, the League's sanctions were lifted on July 4th, 1936. Britain's attempts to persuade Mussolini to negotiate were fruitless, as Italy had already occupied the territory.

7. Conclusion

In the 1930s, Britain's economy was becoming increasingly dependent on the Suez Canal. The canal provided an essential passage to its colonies in East Africa and the Indian Ocean. The route that opened in 1869 was significantly faster than the old passage around the Cape of Good Hope. To establish control over the canal, Britain fought a diplomatic and economic war against France, which would strain their relationship and increase the distrust between the governments. Because of the League's construction, heavy expectations were laid on Britain's and France's shoulders to act as the de facto defenders of the League and to ensure that the collective security approach worked. However, the First World War made both Britain and France anxious to avoid conflict at all costs. Therefore, both countries set out to sign various treaties, ensuring cooperation in the case of war. The most important one in this context is the formation of the Stresa Front in April 1935, the Anglo-French-Italian alliance against Germany. All three were extremely alarmed by the news of Hitler's rearmament. The significant part of the Stresa Front in the eyes of Britain and France was the prevention of a possible German-Italian alliance. France's attitude was heavily influenced by that as it shared borders with the two countries. Further complications of the matter were caused by the public as both the British and the French public supported the League wholeheartedly and expected their governments to act accordingly. This became especially apparent in the case of the new British government that was elected in November of 1935, as it won the election partially due to its proclaimed support of the League. British and French animosity was a constant companion of the affair, as both were inherently suspicious of each other, but were utterly dependent on cooperation.

From the archives of the British government, we learned that its support of the League was indeed genuine, as its importance was emphasised on numerous occasions. However, my main argument lies in the contextualisation of the League. I argue that the League's purpose remains largely misunderstood. Evidence from various British correspondences shows that France and especially Britain were effectively managing the League to ensure their security and Italy played a vital role in that. This led to Britain and France having to attempt to save both the League and the Stresa Front. Perhaps the most damning piece of evidence is found in this passage from the British cabinet meeting on December 2nd, 1935, at the time of the negotiations between Hoare and Laval (The National Archives of the UK, 1935, p. 345): "It was urged, therefore, that we should make clear that it was not the dispute between Italy and Abyssinia

that especially interested us, but rather the dispute between the League and an aggressor." Britain and France had communicated their willingness to compromise by sacrificing large parts of Abyssinian territories numerous times, but negotiations before the war broke down because the Italian demands were deemed too high. The war put enormous pressure on Britain and France to stop the Italian campaign. Therefore, Britain and France were ready to support sanctions on oil to force Italy to negotiate and an announcement of further sanctions was imminent in December of 1935. However, because of the difficulties the Italian army faced in December of 1935, Italy signalled its willingness to compromise, thus the Hoare-Laval Plan came together, which delayed the League's decision on oil sanctions in favour of negotiations between Britain, France, and Italy. This nearly worked, as the general feeling was that Mussolini would have accepted the terms of the Hoare-Laval Plan, but leakage to the press collapsed that plan as Britain's and France's intentions painted an ugly picture of the League. Due to the negative public reaction further attempts to negotiate with Italy had to be postponed and Britain's government had to intensify its attempts to support sanctions on oil. Oil sanctions had been demoted from a negotiation tactic with the presumed power to force a compromise, to a mere symbol of support for the League. By that time, it had become clear that oil sanctions would not succeed in halting Italy's war efforts. Nevertheless, the League and Britain believed that oil sanctions would lead to a price hike, and due to Italy's vulnerable economic state, it was estimated that by September of 1936, Mussolini would have no choice, but to negotiate. By the time Britain and France attempted to continue negotiations with Italy in early 1936, the military situation in Abyssinia had changed dramatically. Italy had little to gain from halting their invasion as they had become convinced of the inevitability of their eventual victory. Therefore, Britain and France lost all the leverage they had in December. The final nail in the coffin came in March 1936 when Hitler marched into the Rhineland. Ultimately, this would bury the topic of sanctions as a possible Italo-German alliance was greatly feared by both Britain and France – ending their pursuit of retaining power over Europe. After Japan and Germany, Italy announced their withdrawal from the League of Nations in December of 1937 (United Nations Archive, 1937). This marked the definitive ending of Anglo-French control over Europe and British hopes of saving both the Stresa Front and the League of Nations. It was time for Italy to sit at the table of the Great Powers.

Ultimately, my posed research question has two answers, applied to two different stages of the conflict – December 1935, and February 1936. In December, 1935, sanctions on oil were not imposed because the avenue of finding a solution via compromise seemed possible. Therefore,

the League's decision was delayed by Britain and France, and the news from the Hoare-Laval Plan caused disruption. In February, 1936, the steady Italian military success meant that Mussolini had nothing to gain from negotiations which minimised British and French leverage. Additionally, with Germany's imposing aggression, France depended heavily on the Stresa Front. Therefore, France was not willing to impose sanctions as it would threaten said alliance. Additionally, Britain, France, and the League were aware that sanctions would not end Italy's war. Therefore, the sanctions were ultimately lifted in favour of the Stresa Front, which regrettably, was already beyond repair.

The tragedy of the story lies in the role of Abyssinia. Desperate for assistance, Emperor Haile Selassie delivered a speech to the League of Nations in May of 1936, pleading for help. He criticised that the sanctions were not enough and accused the League of abandoning him and his country (1936, p. 20):

> I have heard it asserted that the inadequate sanctions already applied have not achieved their object. At no time, and under no circumstances could sanctions that were intentionally inadequate, intentionally badly applied, stop an aggressor. This is not a case of the impossibility of stopping an aggressor but the refusal to stop an aggressor.

His pleas fell on deaf ears.

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