



Why did Mussolini invade Abyssinia in October 1935?

Source skills

Source A

A speech Mussolini made to the Italian public the day before the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, October 1935.

It is not only our army that marches to its objective, 44 million Italians march with that army, all united and alert. Let others try to commit the blackest injustice, taking away Italy's place in the sun. When, in 1915, Italy united her fate with the Allies, how many promises were made? To fight the common victory Italy brought her supreme contribution of 670,000 dead, 480,000 disabled and more than one million wounded. When we went to the table of that odious peace they gave us only the crumbs of colonial booty.

First question, part a – 3 marks

What, according to Source A, were the reasons for the invasion of Abyssinia?

Second question – 4 marks

With reference to the origin, purpose and content of Source A, assess its values and limitations for historians studying the Italian invasion of Abyssinia.

Examiner's hint: Read the provenance of Source A again. In response to the second question, consider the values and limitations given below.

- Would you have found the same values and limitations?
- Which ones had you not thought of?
- Do you have any comments to add?

Values

- A value of the origin is that it is a speech made by the dictator of Italy himself, and Mussolini directed foreign policy. The author had planned and ordered for the invasion of Abyssinia.
- A value of the purpose is that it offers insight into how the invasion was presented at the time to the Italian public. As it is a speech, it will give the reasons that Mussolini used to justify the invasion.
- A value of the content is that it reveals what the Italian government believed to be the key reasons

Source B

Patricia Knight. *Mussolini and Fascism* (2003).

The invasion of Abyssinia was undertaken primarily to demonstrate Italy's great power status and, in doing so, avenge Adowa, the scene of the disastrous defeat of Italian troops in 1896. One of the more frustrating aspects of Versailles had been Italy's failure to acquire any new colonies and Mussolini now intended to recreate the glories of the Roman Empire and achieve a "place in the sun" to rival Britain and France. Further motives were the prospect of economic gains in the form of oil, coal and gold and of African recruits for the Italian army. Mussolini also thought of East Africa as a fertile area for Italian settlement, given the expected increase in population from the Battle for Births. Abyssinia was in any case the only remaining uncolonized African territory and seemed an easy target, given Italy's military superiority and its presence in neighbouring Eritrea and Somaliland.

for the invasion and what the Italian public would have related to at the time. It offers an insight into what Italians saw as important in October 1935.

Limitations

- Mussolini needed to justify his policies publicly and may not be representing the wider views held in Italy at the time.
- The date of the speech may be a limitation, as it is the day before the invasion and Mussolini needs to rally support. Indeed, as this is a speech, it is probably propaganda. Other motives for the invasion, such as to rally public support for his personal dictatorship, would not be revealed.
- The speech lacks hindsight as it was given on the eve of the invasion.
- The content focuses on the justifications, mainly historical, for Italian expansion. It presents a highly one-sided perspective of Italy's position and does not elaborate on the specific aims of Il Duce.

ATL Thinking skills

Refer back to the terms of the Treaty of London on page 87, and the gains Italy attained from the Paris Peace Settlement on page 90. In pairs or small groups, discuss the validity of Mussolini's claim that Italy had been given "only the crumbs of colonial booty" (Source A page 135).

ATL Communication skills

Draw a mind map that summarizes the reasons for Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia.

ATL Thinking skills

In pairs, discuss the following questions.

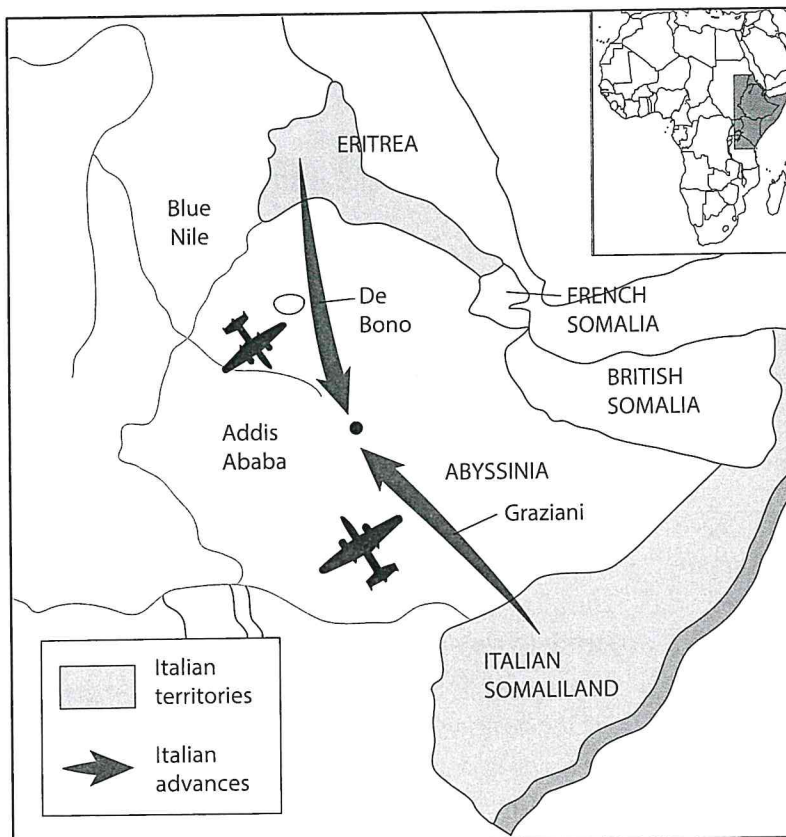
- 1 What key factors motivated the Italian invasion of Abyssinia according to Source B on page 135?
- 2 Attempt to find evidence from the sources and this chapter that support:
 - economic motives for the invasion
 - ideological motives for the invasion
 - changing diplomatic alignments in Europe as a factor in the invasion.

Mussolini's foreign policy objectives in invading Abyssinia, which had not yet been colonized, originated in the longer-term Italian nationalist ambitions to build an empire and to become a great imperial power like Britain and France. He also aspired to an empire akin to the classical Roman Empire, which had controlled large swathes of African territory.

The political reason for the invasion was to consolidate Mussolini's personality cult (*Il Duce*) and to rally support behind the regime. War for its own sake was also an element of the Fascist ideal, and this war would give Mussolini an easy victory as Abyssinia was not modernized. It would also be revenge for Italy's ignoble defeat to the Abyssinians in 1896. In addition, Mussolini would be able to bolster his own military forces by drawing on colonial troops. However, there were also economic reasons for conquering Abyssinia. Mussolini needed to

divert attention from the failings of the corporate state and the impact of the Great Depression. Abyssinia was targeted in order to gain territory for emigration and to provide an export market for Italian goods. Mussolini also hoped to find oil.

When Hitler announced German rearmament, Mussolini briefly hesitated in his invasion plans as he did not want to leave himself too exposed in Europe when he was at war in Africa. However, the Stresa Conference led him to think he had nothing to fear; the meetings had convinced him that Britain and France would not object strongly to an expansion of Italian control in the territory. Mussolini also wanted to demonstrate Italy's power to Germany. Nevertheless, Mussolini did not make his plans clear to Britain and France as he did not want to provoke them in an area where they, too, had colonial possessions (see map).



▲ Map of the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, 1935–36



The events – What happened?

As you see from the map on the previous page, Italy had already acquired colonial territory on the border of Abyssinia. The border itself lacked clarity, and this lack of clarity gave Mussolini the opportunity to manufacture an incident that would lead to war.

It was Italy that had backed Abyssinia's entry into the League of Nations in 1923 and (as you read on page 102) the two countries had signed a treaty of friendship in 1928. However, Italy drew up a plan to annex Abyssinia in 1929 and an invasion plan in 1932. Then, in December 1934, Italian forces clashed with Abyssinians at the disputed Wal Wal oasis, which resulted in the death of 30 Italians. Mussolini demanded an apology and considerable compensation; the Emperor of Abyssinia, Haile Selassie, requested an investigation by the League of Nations. However, Mussolini would not entertain the idea of a League investigation, and in a secret order instructed his forces to attain "total conquest" of Abyssinia. *Il Duce* made a huge commitment to the war, sending an army with support personnel totalling 500,000 to East Africa. The Abyssinians, without modern weapons, were soon in retreat.

In September 1935, the League resolved that neither side could be held responsible for the Wal Wal incident as the area had been disputed. On 3 October, Italy launched its full-scale invasion, and then on 6 October, Italian forces captured Adowa. This had historic importance to Italy as its forces had been defeated there in 1896. The League of Nations condemned Italy as the aggressor on 7 October and, four days later, the League of Nations' Assembly voted to impose sanctions. On the 18 November, these sanctions, although limited, were put into effect.

During the war, tensions between Italy and Britain reached crisis point in the Mediterranean, where Britain had two large naval bases. However, Britain and France wanted to retain good relations with Italy and to maintain the Stresa Front to contain Hitler's Germany. In December 1935, the British and French foreign ministers, Samuel Hoare and Pierre Laval respectively, drew up a secret pact which would offer Italy half of Abyssinia to bring about a swift resolution to the crisis. However, this plan was leaked to the press, and Britain and France were pressured by public opinion to withdraw the deal (see Chapter 2.6).

Italy continued its war and, on 6 April 1936, the Abyssinian army was defeated at Lake Ashangi. Italian forces finally took the capital, Addis Ababa, on 5 May 1936, and Emperor Haile Selassie fled to Britain. On 9 May, Abyssinia was formally annexed by Italy. It became part of Italian East Africa with Eritrea and Somaliland.

Mussolini had his great conquest. The war had the desired impact domestically, with a surge in nationalist sentiment that was further encouraged by the League's condemnation and economic sanctions. Even the Italian Queen Mother had supported the war effort, and participated in the call to fund the war by donating her gold wedding ring to the government.

ATL Communication skills



Go to www.youtube.com/watch?v=op-dD3oUMh0, or search for "The Abyssinia Crisis, 1935–6".

This clip from "The Road to War: Italy" shows the Italians' motives and actions in Abyssinia.

Class discussion

Why was the conquest of Abyssinia important to Mussolini? Consider the role of ideology as well as other factors such as economics and the impact of events outside Italy.

ATL Self-management skills

Summarize Mussolini's actions in Abyssinia on a detailed timeline. Place Mussolini's actions above the timeline. After reading Chapter 2.6, you can add the actions of Britain and France below the timeline.

ATL Thinking skills

Source A

R. Overy and A. Wheatcroft. *The Road to War: The Origins of World War II*, pages 220–21 (2009).

The threat of sanctions united public opinion behind Mussolini. There developed a strong anti-British sentiment. In cafes, zuppa inglese was re-christened *zuppa imperiale*. The war was popular at home. Women exchanged their gold wedding rings for iron substitutes to swell the national bullion reserves. The Queen was the first of 250,000 Roman women to offer her ring in a ceremony held at the War Memorial in Rome. A total of ten million were collected nationwide. When the war began to go Italy's way in February 1936, the new commander, Marshal Pietro Badoglio, became a national hero. But the victory was won only with a massive war effort, using all the modern weapons of war against Ethiopian tribesmen armed with rifles and spears. By May 1936 there were over 400,000 Italian and native troops in Ethiopia, and a war that was supposed to cost 1.5 to 2 billion lire in total ended by costing 1 billion lire every month. To speed up occupation the Italian air force used gas bombs on Ethiopian soldiers, both mustard gas and phosgene, a total of 1521 canisters, which killed and maimed an unknown number of soldiers and civilians. In May the whole of Ethiopia was annexed and on the 9th King Victor Emmanuel was declared Emperor. The King received the news, Mussolini recorded, with "tears in his eyes". The Pope presented the new Empress of Ethiopia

with a Golden Rose.

Mussolini now enjoyed a new role as conqueror and imperialist; his reputation in Italy reached its highest point.

Source B

Extracts from Mussolini's telegrams to a commander in Abyssinia, 1936–37.

5 June 1936

All rebels made prisoner are to be shot.

8 June 1936 [SECRET]

To finish off rebels as at Ancober use gas.

8 July 1936

I repeat my authorization to initiate and systematically conduct policy of terror and extermination against rebels and populations in complicity with them. Without the law of ten eyes for one we cannot heal this wound in good time.

21 February 1937

Agreed that male population of Goggetti over 18 years of age to be shot and village destroyed.

Questions

In pairs or as a class, discuss what the telegrams in Source B suggest about the nature of the Italian war in Abyssinia. In what ways do these telegrams support the points made by Richard Overy in Source A?

What were the results of the Abyssinian War?

Speech by Mussolini, May 1936

Italy has her empire at last; a Fascist empire because it bears the indestructible tokens of the will and of the power of the Roman lictors ... An empire of civilisation and humanity for all the populations of Abyssinia. That is the tradition of Rome, who, after victory, associated the peoples with their destiny.

— Lowe, C and Marzari, F. 1975.

The results of the Abyssinian War for Italy

By May 1936, Italy had won the war. Mussolini had succeeded in creating an Italian East African empire. The war had been won relatively quickly and had cost only 1,000 Italian casualties. Mussolini had demonstrated Italian military might and he had expanded the Italian empire. This was to be the peak of his foreign policy success. Giovanni Gentile, a Fascist philosopher, claimed: "*Mussolini ... has not just founded an empire in Ethiopia. He has made something more. He has created a new Italy*".



Nevertheless, the assault on Abyssinia had initiated a “Mediterranean scare” and the Naval Chief of Staff Admiral Domenico Cavagnari warned Mussolini against raising tension with Britain. Indeed, the Italian navy was incomplete due to unfinished building and modernization programmes and it could not take on the British Royal Navy. A naval war between Italy and France, and their ally Yugoslavia, was possible, but Cavagnari cautioned that a naval war with Britain would mean certain defeat.

In addition, although the League of Nations lifted sanctions in July, the Italian victory had come at a high economic price. The budget deficit had risen from 2.5 billion to 16 billion lire during the war, and there was the continued cost of maintaining 250,000 occupying troops. In October 1936, the lira was devalued by 40%, which hit the middle classes hard. Italian trade had to shift to Germany due to the sanctions imposed by the League.

The ferocity and atrocities perpetrated by Italian forces gave them a reputation for great brutality. Finally, for Italy, the war did not really end in 1936. The Italians were forced to fight a drawn-out guerrilla war in Abyssinia until it fell to the British in 1941.

The results of the war for collective security

The war had once again exposed the weakness of the League of Nations, which had been utterly ineffective in its response to Italian aggression. It also caused Italy to move away from good relations with Britain and France, and closer to Germany. Indeed, it is significant that, during the war, on 6 January 1936, Mussolini told the German ambassador that he no longer had objections to Austria becoming a German satellite. He stressed, however, that it must remain independent. Then, on 22 February 1936, Mussolini agreed to the German rearmament of the Rhineland; this meant Italy would no longer uphold its Locarno obligations. (See page 162 for further discussion of the impact of Mussolini’s actions on Germany.)

Source skills

Source A

An Italian poster from May 1936, “Italy finally has its Empire”.



Source B

A cartoon by David Low published in the UK newspaper, the *Evening Standard*, on 15 February 1935.



First question, part b – 2 marks for each source

What is the message of the artists in Sources A and B?

Second question – 4 marks

With reference to its origin, purpose and content, assess the values and limitations of Source B for historians studying the Italian war with Abyssinia.

ATL Thinking skills

- 1 Discuss, in pairs or small groups, the key differences in how Source A and B each get their 'message' across to the viewer. Which source is more effective in achieving this?
- 2 In what ways could the Abyssinian crisis be seen as a turning point in international relations?

Source skills

Fourth question – 9 marks

Here are some examples of the style of question you could expect for the Fourth question on a Paper 1 set on the Italian expansion in Abyssinia:

- a Using the sources and your own knowledge, examine the reasons for the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1936.
- b Using the sources and your own knowledge, discuss the results of the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1936.
- c Using the sources and your own knowledge, to what extent do you agree that "Mussolini's foreign policy was wholly successful up to 1936".