

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

"An old Abyssinian was shooting with the sight adjusted at more than a thousand metres. I said to the Dedjiajmatch [dejasmach] that the bullets might fall on the mountain and kill someone. He burst out laughing and said, "What does it matter if they do? There is nobody here but Shangalla [shankilla]"."

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

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

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

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

(Summary):

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

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

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

(i) The old Abyssinian State, consisting of the regions inhabited mainly by Abyssinian populations speaking kindred languages derived from Southern Arabic. But the old Abyssinian State

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

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

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

**(ii) The non-Abyssinian areas recently conquered by the arms of the Negus Menelik.-Beyond the confines of this nucleus of the Abyssinian State there were, until forty years ago, other native States, some of which have a long historical tradition of independence. Among the principal may be mentioned the Emirate of Harrar, which comprised the regions between the river Awash, the Webi Shebeli, and the south-eastern edge of the plateau, having the inhabitants of Ogaden as tributaries. The Emirate of Harrar is a Moslem State which was ruled for centuries by the dynasty of its Emirs, and was the cultural and religious centre of Islam in South-East Africa. The continuous relations maintained by the Emirate with the Arab countries of the Levant had brought that state up to a level of civilisation far superior to that of Abyssinia. We need only mention the fact that, even to-day, Harrar is the only town in the territory of the present Ethiopian State which is built of masonry and is not composed of huts hovels made of branches, apart from few buildings in Addis Ababa.**

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

