



Department of Political Science:
International Relations

From the Mussolini-Laval Agreements to the Ethiopian War

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INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of 1935, the relationships between Italy and France were in a phase of apparent distention, after years marked by reciprocal diffidence, colonial tensions, and diplomatic ambiguities. In a Europe deeply affected by the consequences of the Great War and by the crisis of the League of Nations security system, Rome and Paris found themselves converging on an agreement that would raise controversial judgements by historiography and contemporaries.

The Mussolini-Laval agreement signed at Palazzo Venezia on 7th January 1935, represents one of the most emblematic episodes of European diplomacy between the two wars: a combination of *realpolitik*, imperial ambitions, and strategic concerns, destined to produce immediate effects, but also to reveal all the contradictions of the international policy of the time.

On the Italian side, the agreement was devised as a fundamental step to guarantee liberty of action in East Africa, in view of the planned aggression to Ethiopia, as Renzo De Felice underlines stating that “plainly and unequivocally Laval, in Rome, gave Mussolini full freedom of action”.¹

In other words, Italy was looking for an implied French favour, the so called “*désistement*”, in exchange of concessions on European dossiers, such as the Austrian issue, which was more widely linked to the fear of the rise of Nazi Germany.

For France, represented at the time by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Pierre Laval, the containment of the German threat was especially at stake. As Peter Jackson observes, “the short-lived military arrangement with Italy was useful mainly because it placed France in a strong position from which to embark upon talks with the Germans”². In this sense the agreement was the results of a temporary strategic convergency in which each side was trying to obtain the most from their different objectives:

¹ Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce. Gli anni del consenso 1929-1936* (Torino: Einaudi, 1974), p. 531

² Peter Jackson, *France, and the Nazi Menace: Intelligence and Policy Making, 1933–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 155.

on one hand the Italian imperialism, on the other the European balance according to the French point of view.

This research aims at reconstructing in depth the negotiating dynamics that led to the signing of the Mussolini–Laval agreements on January 7, 1935, analyzing the expectations of the parties involved and the immediate consequences within the context of the growing international crisis of the 1930s. Particular attention will be given to the preparation for the Ethiopian campaign, not as a central topic, but as a direct consequence of the diplomatic understanding with France.

In this perspective, the objective is to understand the political and strategic logic that guided Fascist Italy's actions in the period preceding the conflict, seeking to analyze in detail how the Italian strategy, and in particular that of Mussolini himself, followed a path that was already almost entirely defined, in which each piece had to be put in its place in order to exploit the fragile balance of the time. In this context, the Duce did not operate in an improvised or merely reactive manner, but moved within a plan that, while maintaining margins of flexibility, was oriented in the long term towards imperial expansion in East Africa. Mussolini's skill laid in his ability to transform an uncertain international context, marked by the crisis of the Versailles system, German rearmament, and the difficulties of the League of Nations, into a political opportunity to establish Italy as a leading power.

It is precisely in this plan that the Mussolini-Laval agreements represent a real turning point in fascist foreign policy towards Ethiopia. They represented not only an important milestone in bilateral relations between Italy and France, but above all the moment when Italy obtained the essential diplomatic security that allowed it to move from the preparatory phase to the concrete planning of the war. If until then the conquest project had still seemed hypothetical or risky, after January 7, 1935, it appeared to Mussolini to be fully achievable.

This work aims at demonstrating that, as will be highlighted later by specific documents, France's *désistement* on Ethiopia, although not explicit, was decisive and fundamental to Italy's plans for colonial conquest. France's neutrality, or rather its choice not to compromise its agreements with

Rome in order to maintain a solid front against Germany, was the political prerequisite without which Mussolini would have found it difficult to accelerate the pace of military mobilization. In other words, the weight of the agreement was measured not only in the official clauses signed at Palazzo Venezia, but above all in the strategic implications it had in guaranteeing Italy the freedom of action necessary to undertake the Ethiopian adventure without fear of immediate isolation in Europe.

The present study will focus mainly on the period between September 1934 and April 1935, a crucial phase during which Italian-French relations reached their peak in terms of negotiation intensity and when the agreements were actually drafted and finally signed.

Nevertheless, the research also, in a shorter section, wants to reconstruct in a systematic and comprehensive manner the final months leading up to the start of the Italian-Ethiopian war in October 1935. This reconstruction is essential not only to provide a coherent picture of diplomatic developments, but above all to clarify how the Mussolini-Laval agreements directly and indirectly influenced the developments that immediately followed. Analyzing this final phase means interconnecting the January agreement with the subsequent radicalization of fascist foreign policy, offering an overview that allows us to assess the real impact of those agreements on the European and colonial geopolitical level of that time.

In this sense, the work will also take into account Italian-French-British relations, observing how they changed significantly after January 1935, highlighting how, while the agreement with France had freed Mussolini's hands in Africa, the question of relations with London remained open, as London was the power that more than any other could have hindered Italian ambitions.

The period immediately preceding the war, characterized by intense Italian military mobilization and a growing hardening of international diplomacy, thus represents the inevitable outcome of a political and strategic process that began with the January agreements. In this context, the war started in October 1935 against Ethiopia appears to be the result not of a sudden or isolated decision, but of the evolution of a process in which diplomacy and military force were constantly intertwined, making

the Mussolini-Laval agreements a crucial step in understanding both fascist foreign policy and the crisis of the international order in the 1930s.

Starting from this timeframe, the political and diplomatic dynamics that led to the signing of the agreement will be reconstructed, closely examining the key steps, strategies adopted, and the respective priorities of the two powers. The investigation will capture the evolution of the bilateral relationship and the way it became intertwined with European tensions and Italian colonial ambitions. The methodology combines the use of authoritative secondary sources from both Italian and international historiography with the analysis of primary sources, particularly the Italian diplomatic documents contained in the Seventh Series, Volume XVI, which allow for a precise examination of the negotiating phases, confidential talks, and diplomatic instructions exchanged between Rome, Paris, and their respective consular offices.

This approach, based mainly on Italian diplomatic documents, allows for a very organic and comprehensive analysis of the subject, as it makes it possible to reconstruct almost day-by-day negotiations, which are essentials for maintaining a high level of detail throughout the whole work, necessary to really explain the birth, cause, and outcomes of the agreements.

The work will therefore be structured according to both chronological and thematic criteria: the first chapter will analyze the strategic premises, the gradual rapprochement between Italy and France, and how, in the months preceding the agreement, every aspect was meticulously defined. In addition, the first chapter will include a section dedicated specifically to the Italian policy towards Ethiopia, which will examine the main “incidents” between Italian and Ethiopian troops, with particular regard to the incident happened in Ual-Ual.

This apparent digression from the intense negotiations of the period is fundamental in that it highlights very well the pragmatic Italian strategy, aimed at increasing tension in the African country, already in the months prior to the agreement, and specifically in the same period in which negotiations between Rome and Paris were intensifying.

The second chapter will focus on the agreement itself, its genesis and political significance. Most of the preparatory meetings between Italian and French officials, meant to define every aspect of the agreements in detail, will be analyzed in depth. Following this line of inquiry, the text of the agreements themselves will be carefully examined with the purpose of highlighting the scope and meaning of each clause. Moreover, particular emphasis will be placed on analyzing the secret text of the agreements, drafted in the form of private letters and private meetings, which can be fully defined as the French *désistement* on the Ethiopian question: the true centerpiece of the agreements and a decisive turning point for Mussolini's colonial policy.

Finally, the third chapter will examine the immediate consequences of the agreements and the reactions of the major European powers, with particular emphasis on Britain. This section will also devote special attention to the colonial front and to the evolution of the Italian stance toward the Ethiopian campaign. In this perspective, the political and military outcomes of the agreements will be analyzed in depth, in order to reconstruct the final phase of escalation that led to the war. The objective is to underline both the complexity of the international situation at the time and the way in which Mussolini was able to exploit it to his advantage for reaching his colonial objective.

Overall, the overarching goal is to contribute to the already vast bibliography on the Ethiopian War and, more broadly, on Mussolini's foreign policy but from a different point of view. This will be done by placing the Mussolini–Laval agreements at the center of the analysis, offering a critical interpretation within the broader framework of European geopolitical balances, highlighting the connection between colonial policy and continental diplomacy in the first half of the 1930s, and underlining their central role in the multifaceted process that led Fascist Italy to declare war on Ethiopia on October 3, 1935.

Chapter I

**THE BACKGROUND OF THE AGREEMENTS: THE ITALIAN-FRENCH
RAPPROCHEMENT IN THE EUROPEAN AND COLONIAL CONTEXT**

1.1) Between initial mistrust and strategic convergence: the first steps towards the Agreements

Between 1931 and 1934, the relationship between Italy and France after a decade marked by suspicions and tensions, knew a new period of progressive distension, favoured by internal transformations in the two countries and by changes in the international framework. The rapprochement was not linear nor based on real political affinities, but on strategic needs of the time and on the perception of common threats in particular those related to the rise of Nazi Germany and to the lack of power that was occurring in Central-East Europe.

Up to the end of the Twenties, the fascist foreign policy had been imprinted on a strong diffidence towards France, accused of wanting to keep its hegemony in Europe and in the Mediterranean. The tensions had been reflected in numerous minor crises: from the Tripolitania and Tunisia issues, up to the French role in the Balkans and the Danubian region.

However, since 1931, with the worsening of the world economic crisis and the increasing political instability of Germany, Italy also started to reconsider its own priorities.

The turning point took place in the July 1932, when Mussolini directly appointed himself at the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, taking the place of Dino Grandi. This passage of roles was due to an increasing dissatisfaction for the work of the previous Minister, considered too bound to the League of Nations and inclined to a foreign policy inspired more by cooperative reasons than to the achievement of powerful objectives. Mussolini himself claimed that Grandi, “had done everything wrong, in three years everything: he had let himself be caught by the L.o.N., he had promoted a pacifist and corporate policy, he had taken Italy out from rigid track of a selfish and realistic policy.”³

³ Giovanni Buccianti, *Verso gli accordi Mussolini-Laval: il riavvicinamento italo-francese fra il 1931 e il 1934* (Milano: Giuffrè, 1984), 77

With the replacement of Grandi, Mussolini brought about a change in the Italian foreign policy. The Head of the Government intended to redirect the foreign policy on a more fascist base, aimed to regain autonomous room for manoeuvre and at freeing Italy from the apparent multilateral paralysis. His priorities included, a more diplomatic aggressiveness, the defense of imperial interests and a more marked projection of the regime reputation at an international level.

The direct management of the international matters, let Mussolini introduce without hesitation the rules of a more realistic foreign policy, pursuing at the same time a policy of power.⁴

This change gave way also to meaningful adjustments in the diplomatic sector with the appointment of Fulvio Suvich, as undersecretary of Foreign Affairs and of Pompeo Aloisi as Chief of the Cabinet of the Ministry, two figures that will have a key role in the following three years for the development of negotiations with France that will lead to the agreements of January 1935.

It is just in this moment that Mussolini started to develop one of the main points of his foreign policy in the relationship between Italy and the other great powers that is the one of the *peso determinante*. This approach saw Italy as the ultimate mediator capable of navigating among the different problems and issues which remained especially among France, Germany, and Britain so that he was able to obtain satisfying advantages at the same time without exposing too much in any directions.⁵

In this context, also considering the crisis of L.o.N., Mussolini started to enhance his desires to revenge the Italian prestige towards noncompliance of the allies to the London agreement of 1915 and the missing colonial compensation for Italy. As De Felice remarks, Mussolini had already understood that “it would have been much less difficult if, instead at the expenses of the colonial French Empire, the compensation to Italy had been at the expense of someone else, especially if at the proper time it would have been possible to give all the operation a reason”.⁶

⁴ Buccianti, *Verso gli accordi Mussolini-Laval*, 81,82

⁵ R. De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce. Gli anni del consenso*, p. 412

⁶ G. Buccianti, *Verso gli accordi Mussolini-Laval*, p. 83. R. De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce. Gli anni del consenso*, p. 415

In the framework of the Italian strategy for Ethiopia, France adopted a central role as a potential favourite interlocutor. Starting from 1932, Rome and Paris had explorative meetings that, even if didn't bring immediate results, they let emerge a French willingness not to hinder the Italian aspirations in the horn of Africa. The hypothesis that Paris could offer a "*dèsistement*" to Ethiopia, maybe accompanied by guarantees on French economic interests, became an integral part of the diplomatic direction followed by Mussolini. The Italian policy thus aimed at keeping the dialogue open, promoting the credit that Italy thought to have towards France for the obligations of the article 13 of the London Agreements that hadn't been fulfilled.⁷

At the same time, the development of an independent strategy towards Ethiopia was getting stronger, based on the claim of violations of the Italian-Abyssinian treaty of 1928 and on a resumption of the peripheral policy, intended as an indirect form of pressure. The collaboration with France, thus, wasn't excluded but remained dependent on the possibility that the negotiations produced concrete results: in case that hadn't happened, alternative solutions had to be considered. The French option, even if it was interlocutory, was anyway an essential part of the diplomatic strategy introduced in those years to consolidate the Italian colonial claims.⁸

A new boost to the Italian-French relationships occurred at the end of 1932 and when French Prime Minister Edouard Herriot, publicly admitted for the first time in the after-war France the injustices suffered by Italy after the Great War. This opening, otherwise, then casual, was the consequence of a progressive evolution in the French approach to fascism, by now felt as a consolidated regime and favoured by the establishment of a new ruling class more inclined to a realistic approach in the bilateral relationships. Harriot reaffirmed these statements even in Paris, asserting the need to bring the Italian-French relationships back to a more "reasonable" ground and recognizing that France had been morally unfair towards Italy.⁹

⁷ G. Bucciante, *Verso gli accordi Mussolini-Laval*, p. 85

⁸ G. Bucciante, *Verso gli accordi Mussolini-Laval*, p. 86. R. De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce. Gli anni del consenso*, p. 416

⁹ G. Bucciante, *Verso gli accordi Mussolini-Laval*, p. 99

These statements provoked opposite reactions: on one hand they were interpreted as a turning point, on the other hand as simple congressional formulas with no operational content.

Italy kept a more cautious line: the fascist government didn't receive these openings enthusiastically, not to compromise its own negotiable position and to avoid appearing dependent on the French action. The aim of Rome was to obtain concrete results, especially on the issues still open like the one regarding Tunisia or the recognition of the colonial claims in East Africa and the Italian diplomacy was cautious in order to prevent a failure of the negotiations could damage the prestige of the regime. This period of uncertainty came abruptly to an end, in November 1932, the fall of Herriot, put an end to this time of distention, leaving however opened the channels for a possible more structured rapprochement.¹⁰

Despite at the beginning Herriot's fall seemed to compromise the Italian-French dialogue, the appointment of Joseph Paul-Boncour as Prime Minister and, especially his choice of sending Henri de Jouvenel, as French Ambassador in Rome opened new possibilities. De Jouvenel was an expert political figure in favour of the rapprochement between France and Italy and was given a wide and operative mandate intended to overcome the tensions and consolidate a permanent agreement between the two countries. His nomination, explicitly supported by Paul-Boncour, was intended as a real sign of the French willingness to revive the bilateral dialogue even on the colonial issue.¹¹

Meanwhile, Italy, despite officially maintaining a cautious approach, firmly resumed its peripheral policy in Ethiopia, aimed at mining the cohesion of the Abyssinian empire, while waiting for better international conditions for a direct action. Mussolini, who had already received military plans by General De Bono, was giving precise instructions to the Italian representatives in Addis Ababa: keeping an apparent friendliness in the official relationship but pursuing a destabilizing strategy. In this context the assumption that France could offer a "*désistement*" on Ethiopia in exchange of

¹⁰ G. Buccianti, *Verso gli accordi Mussolini-Laval*, pp. 100-111

¹¹ G. Buccianti, *Verso gli accordi Mussolini-Laval*, pp. 114,115

guarantees on other matters, like Tunisia or the Djibouti area, emerged with increasing evidence, though always an implicit and conditional form.¹²

In January 1933, new signs of opening on the French side contributed to revitalize the climate of dialogue with Italy, in particular, senator Berenger, publicly acknowledged that the injustices suffered by Italy went back to the peace treaty and were not to ascribe to the fascist regime. Berenger's intervention, to which also De Jouvenel was present, was seen in Rome as a further step towards a possible general agreement on the European and colonial issues.

This perspective raised however a strong concern in Ethiopia: the government of Addis Ababa immediately appointed an influential representative in Paris, with the aim of reinforcing the bilateral ties and offering France political, economic, and symbolical advantages in exchange of an international support against the Italian aims.¹³

The fear that Ethiopia could be the political price for the French Italian rapprochement was clear even in the diplomatic sphere. In this context, De Jouvenel received a clear message by Mussolini: the frequent French statements of good willingness had to become precise proposals. The French Ambassador, aware of the importance of the moment, moved very cautiously, at the beginning facing secondary matters like the Tunisian issue, well knowing that the final aim couldn't ignore an agreement on the Ethiopic dossier. It was clear that the mission assigned by Paul-Boncour didn't aim at a simple temporary distention but at the construction of a "permanent" agreement where also France would take on concrete commitments.¹⁴

During the talks with De Jouvenel, Mussolini, made the line of his own strategy clear: on one side promoting a multilateral agreement with the main European powers, in which Italy would assume the role of mediator; on the other side consolidating a bilateral agreement with France to solve the still open colonial matters.

¹² G. Bucciante, *Verso gli accordi Mussolini-Laval*, pp. 121-124

¹³ G. Bucciante, *Verso gli accordi Mussolini-Laval*, pp. 125,126

¹⁴ G. Bucciante, *Verso gli accordi Mussolini-Laval*, pp. 130,131

Also, the French seemed willingly to make a deal: De Jouvenel sent to the Italian government the proposal of opening an articulate negotiation on various matters that included those directly connected to the reciprocal interests.¹⁵

The climate between Rome and Paris was slowly getting better. The Four-Power Pact promoted by Mussolini and initialed in June 1933 was devised as collaborating project among Italy, France, United Kingdom, and Germany designed to guarantee European stability. Besides its short political life, the deal had a symbolic importance crucial for the Italian-French relationships: indeed, it represented the international acknowledgement of the role of Italy as a reliable and prestigious interlocutor in the European system. In this view Mussolini believed that the new climate created around the deal could favour the resolution of the pending issues with France.¹⁶

The idea of a possible agreement on the Ethiopic issue was taking form as the natural outcome of partially shared interests. However, a key element was still missing: a compensation that could convince France to accept, at least silently, the Italian aspirations in the African Horn. In this sense, the Tunisian issue came back to the center of the debate.

“The friction between France and Italy in Tunisia was, in fact, long-standing. No part of Africa is closer to Italy than Tunisia, and thousands of Italians had emigrated to that side of the Mediterranean, where they formed the largest group of Europeans.

In 1868, Italy and the Bey of Tunis signed an agreement granting judicial rights and civil guarantees to Italian citizens residing there. In 1881, France, encouraged by Bismarck, imposed a protectorate on the country and, although Italy did not recognize the new arrangement as valid, France agreed to respect the privileges granted to Italian residents in 1868. Then, in 1896, taking advantage of Italy's unfavourable diplomatic position after Adwa, France forced the Bey to repudiate the 1868 agreement. Immediate Italian protests led to a compromise: Italy recognized the French protectorate over Tunisia,

¹⁵ G. Buccianti, *Verso gli accordi Mussolini-Laval*, pp. 133-135

¹⁶ G. Buccianti, *Verso gli accordi Mussolini-Laval*, pp. 141-143

and France established the conventions of September 1896, which essentially confirmed the guarantees granted by the Bey. Under the conventions, Italians retained the right to preserve and transmit their nationality, to have their own schools with instruction in Italian, and several other privileges. But tension remained: French restrictions gradually limited Italian freedoms and, in September 1918, in the wake of the changes brought about by the Great war, France denounced two of the three conventions relating to the economic and commercial privileges of Italian residents. This provoked Italy's anger, even though France later agreed to renew the agreements every three months pending a final settlement. From that moment on, Italians considered their compatriots in Tunisia to be part of "unredeemed Italy". Since Tunisia was only a protectorate and not a French colonial possession, Italy never gave up claiming full Italian citizenship for its compatriots on the other side of the Mediterranean.

But their legal position continued to be governed by the quarterly renewal of the agreements, and the situation was exacerbated by laws that automatically granted French citizenship to anyone born in a French protectorate, and by the excessive nationalistic demands of fascist Italy in support of the rights of its compatriots across the Strait of Sicily. France became increasingly suspicious of Italians in Tunisia, as their growing population, which exceeded that of the French by about 30,000 people, could seriously threaten its rule.”¹⁷

In the Italian diplomacy the idea that Tunisia and Ethiopia were two sides of the same coin started to grow, and each concession or guarantees obtained on one of the two fronts could have an effect on the other. Inside this approach, Mussolini's declarations to André De Chambrun, who meanwhile had taken the place of De Jouvenel as French Ambassador in Rome, confirmed the connection between the ratification of the Four-Power Pact and the possible solution of colonial controversies.¹⁸

¹⁷ George W. Baer, *La guerra italo-etioptica e la crisi dell'equilibrio europeo* (Bari: Laterza, 1970), pp. 84,85

¹⁸ G. Buccianti, *Verso gli accordi Mussolini-Laval*, pp. 148-152

In the course of 1934, the French diplomatic action went on following the lines of a progressive opening and improvement of the relationships that had developed in the previous months.

De Chambrun's objective was from the start that of consolidating the agreement with Rome, as publicly stated at a Gala at Palazzo Farnese at the beginning of the year. His willingness to proceed on the road of rapprochement was confirmed also in the talks with Mussolini and in the negotiations, besides the Ambassador actively worked in the French political circles to overcome the resistances and obtain a wider consensus on the Italian positions. Also, the French government, even if marked by constant changes in leadership, didn't seem keen on interrupting the path of dialogues. The Foreign Minister Louis Barthou confirmed in the senate the validity of the Four-Power Pact and the willingness to continue the negotiations with Italy. The favourable directions to the agreement seemed thus common, although problematic issues like the colonial ones remained on the table.

Mussolini, on his part, started to make his ambitions clear: in a speech held in March 1934, he stated that Asia and Africa represented the historical horizons of Italian expansion. Without making any direct reference to military conquer, the message was unequivocal: Italy claimed the right of enlarging its economic, political and cultural influence refusing of accepting the limits imposed by the "satisfied" powers.¹⁹

Together with the intensification of an expansionist rhetoric, Italy reinforced its military power in East Africa and resumed the organization of the peripheral policy in Ethiopia, while keeping officially a cautious attitude. However, every new Italian initiative in the region heightened the concern of the Ethiopia government which watched with growing apprehension the increasing closeness between Rome and Paris.

The French internal political instability, marked by a new government crisis didn't prevent Barthou and De Chambrun the intention of proceeding with negotiations with Italy. At the same time, yet France seemed want to reinforce its position in Ethiopia taking advantages from the willingness of

¹⁹ G. Buccianti, *Verso gli accordi Mussolini-Laval*, pp. 162-164

the government of Addis Ababa to give concessions in the economic and technical field, with the clear objective of consolidating its influence in the case of future negotiations with Rome.

This parallel strategy, in fact, enabled France to arrive at a possible agreement with greater room for maneuver. The idea of being in a turning point was confirmed also by the intensification of the signals of détente both in the diplomatic and mediatic field.

Nevertheless, in Italy impatience towards the French delay in responding to the taken commitments was growing. Mussolini went on repeating that symbolic gesture would not be enough any longer, hoping for concrete actions to be taken.²⁰

Towards the middle of 1934, in Rome it started to be sensed that the time was almost right for an acceleration towards the Ethiopic objective. The discussions inside the fascist government reflected a favourable approach to direct action even if it was clear the necessity of assuring the greatest margin of diplomatic freedom possible. In this context the negotiations with Paris remained an essential part: the French approval or at least the indifference represented for Mussolini a necessary condition to start the colonial venture without excessive risks on the international level.

In the summer of 1934, while the distance between Mussolini and German Nazism was getting bigger, Rome intensified its diplomatic efforts toward Paris in the belief that a bilateral agreement could produce those concrete results on the colonial level. In this context, the visit of the French Foreign Affairs Minister, Barthou, scheduled for the autumn was taking on a crucial importance. While the French emphasized their unwillingness to give key territories like Djibouti, in private they let some possibilities open on their disinterest for Ethiopia, on condition that some strategic interest in the region were respected. On the Italian side a flexible negotiating line was defined regarding the territorial demands, but it remained firm on the main political objective.²¹

²⁰ G. Buccianti, *Verso gli accordi Mussolini-Laval*, pp. 165-167. R. De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce. Gli anni del consenso*, pp. 507-512

²¹ G. Buccianti, *Verso gli accordi Mussolini-Laval*, pp. 179-184

The negotiations were well underway. In Geneva Aloisi underlined the necessity of preparing the diplomatic ground in view of the meeting. In Rome, Mussolini repeated that Barthou's visit would have been useful only if oriented to achieve concrete results. Even in France, the press, and diplomats in the main European capitals unknowledge that the rapprochement with Italy was growing and that the solution to the colonial dossier represented the key to consolidate a lasting agreement.

Mussolini's public rhetoric, culminating in an important speech in Milan, reflected this position: a cooperation with France was hoped for, but not at the price of giving up the "legitimate" national aspirations.

Meanwhile, increasingly concerned signals were coming from Addis Ababa: Ethiopian diplomacy multiplied its requests for guarantees from Paris, but the French responses remained evasive.²²

In those months preceding the meeting, Italy had succeeded in putting on the table all the open issues. From Tunisia to Libya, up to Ethiopia, presenting its claims as the natural evolution of a political and historical credit gained since 1915.

France, though keeping its own direct influence on some strategic points, seemed more and more inclined to accept a compromise solution that allowed Italy to act in East Africa, without affecting the essential French interests.

In the general framework of the French Italian rapprochement, in the period before the signing of the Mussolini-Laval agreement, the issue of the Austrian independence also emerged as one of the major points of convergence between both foreign policies, itself becoming a base for dialogue and rapprochement and intertwining with the colonial matters.

After Hitler's rise to the Chancellery of the Reich in January 1933, in fact, both powers shared the strategic need to contain German ambitions, although from different points of view.

²² G. Buccianti, *Verso gli accordi Mussolini-Laval*, pp. 206-210

According to Mussolini, Austria represented a key element to avoid a German encirclement in the alpine sector and to defend the Danubian balance whereas according to France Austrian independence was much more important, this opinion had been supported also by Mussolini himself as early as 1925, since it was necessary to the maintenance of the European status quo and to deny a Nazi expansion in continental Europe. In this sense Italy became more and more a decisive partner despite the persistent mistrust, in the effort of counter Hitlerian revisionism.²³

When the crisis burst out on the 25 of July 1934 with the failure of Nazi putsch in Vienna and the assassination of the Chancellor Dolfuss, Italy immediately reacted by sending troops to Brenner as a concrete sign of its own determination. The episode had a crucial impact on the diplomatic European opinion, “the Vienna putsch of 25th of July and the following consequences on the problems raised by the Italian intervention made the choice of searching a global agreement with France that solved in a permanent way the Austrian issue inevitable²⁴. In Paris the Italian intervention was seen as a sign of willingness of the fascist regime to assume a central role in the defense of the Versailles system, contributing to reinforce the idea of a more structured collaboration.

The French approach towards Rome gradually changed: from a cautious initial position there emerged an awareness that Italy’s involvement had become essential to counterbalance German expansion in central Europe. The diplomatic openings increased, creating a favourable climate to the bilateral dialogue, and furtherly reinforcing the negotiating framework in which the colonial dealings were already present, including among them the Ethiopic dossier. The problem of Austrian independence in fact played a fundamental role in the rapprochement within Italy and France so that, as Lefebvre underlines “if it hadn’t been for the Austrian issue the Italian-French agreement would have never been signed”²⁵.

²³ Francesco Lefebvre D’Ovidio, *Il problema austro-tedesco e la crisi della politica estera italiana*, (Il Maestrale: Firenze, 1999) pp. 4-6

²⁴ F. Lefebvre D’Ovidio, *Il problema austro-tedesco*, p. 19

²⁵ F. Lefebvre D’Ovidio, *Il problema austro-tedesco*, p. 20

In this context of growing instability “in the months following the 25th of July it became more and more clear, on one hand that the danger of the Anschluss, inevitable consequences of a political Nazification of the country was more relevant than ever, and on the other hand that a new solution to guarantee Austrian independence had to be found: a solution that granted an efficient intervention in case of new threats of interference from abroad and that at the same time didn’t give the only responsibility to Italy and created a proper international agreement to that intervention. A solution of this type was obviously to be found only in a French Italian agreement aimed at containing the German revanchism”.²⁶

In this way, the Austrian matter contributed to push Rome and Paris to a wider convergence, reinforcing the dialogue on European matters and conferring more urgency and political legitimacy to the ongoing negotiations. The defense of Austria was not only a show of force, but also an occasion for Italy to present itself as a guardian of the European order, some way following the policy of the “*peso determinante*” introduced by Mussolini and establish itself as an essential partner in the system of the Western powers.

It was in this context that the colonial negotiation and in particular the “Ethiopian option” gained more energy, assuming the lines of a strategic counterpart to be negotiated in the wider framework of continental security.

On the Italian side, in fact the direction taken by Mussolini was clear, the final aim of the negotiation was Ethiopia. All the preparatory work made by fascist diplomacy, the bilateral contacts, requests submitted, even in instrumental form on the territory of French Somalia or on the Tunisian issue had as final objective that of obtaining a silent French endorsement on the Italian expansion in the African horn. In the point of view of Mussolini and of the fascist leaders Ethiopia was not only a colonial objective: it represented the missing piece to achieve the imperial vision of the regime.

²⁶ F. Lefebvre D’Ovidio, *Il problema austro-tedesco*, p. 18

The French perspective was on the other side different, which was shaped by an essentially defensive logic. For Paris, the core of the threat was represented by Germany. The failed Nazi coup in Vienna in July 1934 and the subsequent assassination of Chancellor Dollfuss had raised alarms about the concrete possibility of an annexation of Austria, perceived as a prelude to a new European disorder. Facing this scenario, worsened also by the large German rearmament and by the German claims of the Saar region, the French priority became that of consolidating a system of containment of the third Reich. In this picture, Italy appeared as a potential ally to rapidly gain, avoiding that Rome drifted to the Berlin side. More than encouraging new colonial ambition, the French diplomacy had in mind to deescalate the European risks, searching in the collaboration with Rome, an instrument to reinforce the western front against the German threats. In this view, the French disengagement on Ethiopia, which translated into increasingly evident, though never entirely explicit overtures, was not the result of a colonial design, but rather of a strategic calculation: sacrificing a marginal interest in Africa to secure a favourable position in the heart of Europe. France wasn't willing to give Italy formal concessions on key lands like Djibouti but was more flexible towards the possibility of progressively retiring from Ethiopia, provided that its more important economical and symbolical interests were granted. Ethiopia was seen by Pierre Laval, leading the Foreign Ministry after the assassination of Barthou, and by other Quai d'Orsay members as a manageable issue of negotiation, a territory of compensation that could have satisfied Italy, allowing France to focus on the defense of the continental order²⁷.

The final agreement signed the 7th of January 1935 between Mussolini and Laval, represented the climax of this long and articulated negotiation, powered by more and more urgent needs on both sides, in which Rome aspired to obtain precise colonial space of action while Paris was trying to obtain general political guarantees to face a risk felt as vital: the renaissance of the German power.

²⁷ R. De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce. Gli anni del consenso*, pp. 521-533

1.2) From the Marseille attack to the resumption of the dialogue: the basis of the negotiation

Despite the unexpected assassination of Louis Barthou in Marseilles on October 9, 1934, an event that threatened to undermine the long diplomatic work that had begun, negotiations between Italy and France did not come to a substantial halt. The death of the Minister, who was killed along with King Alexander of Yugoslavia by a Croatian extremist, initially provoked a moment of uncertainty. However, from the hours following the crime, the attitude of the two diplomacies was one of continuity. On the Italian side, Suvich and Aloisi communicated to Ambassador De Chambrun their willingness to proceed toward an understanding, albeit in a discreet and confidential form, as the delicacy of the moment dictated. Mussolini, for his part, did not intend to give up on the agreement, while in Paris, despite the government reshuffle, the line of continuing negotiations was held firm. The handover of the leadership of the Quai d'Orsay to Pierre Laval marked an acceleration in the negotiation process. An unscrupulous figure with remarkable political pragmatism, Laval appeared even more willing than Barthou to conclude a bilateral understanding with Rome. His preference for direct agreements between States, which were easier to control and maneuver, created a favourable context for the Italian strategy, which aimed to obtain colonial concessions in exchange for guarantees on the European order. It is no coincidence that Laval himself, already in the past, had evoked Ethiopia as a possible object of compensation. Now, with the military and diplomatic situation being radicalized, and with Italy increasingly determined to act in the Horn of Africa, the scope for obtaining the so-called French *désistement* seemed to be widening.²⁸

Within this framework, the formal resumption of contacts was immediate. On October 17, The Italian Ambassador in France, Alessandro Pignatti, was received by French Prime Minister Gaston

²⁸ Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce. Gli anni del consenso 1929-1936* (Torino: Einaudi, 1974), p. 519; Giovanni Bucciante, *Verso gli accordi Mussolini-Laval: il riavvicinamento italo-francese fra il 1931 e il 1934* (Milano: Giuffrè, 1984), pp. 211, 212

Doumergue, who reiterated his conviction that only a stable understanding between France, Italy and Yugoslavia could guarantee European peace. Although he did not comment directly on Italian demands, Doumergue was open to dialogue, suggesting caution and diplomatic skill. At the same time, Laval informed through his aides that he wished to continue on the path outlined by Barthou but asked for a postponement of his own visit to Rome to consolidate some points still under discussion. The request was not read by Rome as a dilatory gesture, but as an attempt to strengthen the basis of the agreement.²⁹

However, the first technical talks revealed major disagreements. The Quai d'Orsay secretary-general, Léger, considered the Italian request to prolong the status quo in Tunisia unacceptable unless accompanied by a clause removing any Italian claim at the end of the period. Even sharper was the opposition to questions on Djibouti: Léger rejected any possibility of territorial concessions, arguing that reducing the colony's hinterland would jeopardize its economic survival. Instead, he proposed offsets in southeastern Libya, an area that Italy did not consider strategic. Pignatti, responding firmly, rejected the idea that a few kilometers of desert could be a satisfactory answer to Italian ambitions, suggesting that, under those conditions, the agreement would be impossible.³⁰

Despite these frictions, the dialogue did not stop. Laval, informed of Italian reservations, reiterated the importance of the understanding, and said he was ready to deepen the negotiating dossiers in the following days. In this context, the Italian position became more rigid, in an attempt to get the French to unbalance themselves and show how much they were really willing to concede.

Behind the diplomatic skirmish, the stakes were thus becoming increasingly clear: for Rome, freedom of action in Ethiopia; for Paris, the possibility of consolidating an anti-fascism Western axis in an anti-German function, but without sacrificing symbols of French colonial prestige.³¹

²⁹ Pignatti a Mussolini, 17 ottobre 1934, in: Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *Documenti Diplomatici Italiani*, Settima Serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 64, Roma, Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato

³⁰ Pignatti a Mussolini, 19 ottobre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 70

³¹ Pignatti a Mussolini, 20 ottobre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 74

As the Franco-Italian negotiations continued in late October and early November 1934, the picture of negotiating priorities and difficulties became clearer. The climate, though marked by mutual caution, remained positive, as evidenced by Laval's continued commitment to pursue the negotiations initiated by Barthou. The French press contributed to favourable expectations toward the understanding, while signs of growing disquiet came from Addis Ababa. Minister Luigi Orazio Vinci reported Ethiopian bewilderment at the prospect of an agreement between Italy and France, which was perceived as a direct threat: Barthou's death, seen as the elimination of an adversary of Abyssinia, had raised hopes soon dashed by news of the continuity of the French policy line and the announcement of Laval's trip to Rome.³²

At the same time, in the League of Nations, Alberto Theodoli di Sambuci, chairman of the Permanent Commission on Colonial Mandates, was awaiting instructions on a possible intervention with the French delegates, according to Mussolini's instructions. This attitude of cautious waiting was also shared by Suvich, who in the meantime oversaw containing journalistic speculation: the undersecretary officially denied any reference to Abyssinia in the ongoing negotiations, specifying that the negotiations concerned only Italian claims in Tunisia and the colonial compensations provided for in the London Pact.³³

Diplomatic conversations continued in Paris in an articulate but slow manner. Pignatti reported that Laval was completing the reconstruction of the dossiers left incomplete by Barthou and confirmed the French Minister's willingness to address bilateral issues first, postponing discussion of major continental issues to a later stage. The trip to Rome, initially scheduled for November, was further postponed due to national mourning and Geneva commitments.

However, despite the postponement, Laval hinted at his personal desire to travel to Italy before the end of the year. This hesitation, interpreted by Pignatti as a tactical game, confirmed the importance

³² Vinci a Mussolini, 21 ottobre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 81, G. Bucciatti, *Verso gli accordi Mussolini-Laval*, pp. 217-221

³³ Theodoli a Suvich, 23 ottobre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 84

he attached to the Roman mission and his intention to present himself with a well-defined negotiating position.

On a concrete level, the greatest difficulties remained related to the Tunisian issue and the overlap between Italian claims and French colonial interests. The Italian position remained firm in demanding substantial commitments and not mere formal acknowledgements; at the same time, the Ambassador noted the risk that the willingness shown up to that point could be read as weakness, necessitating greater firmness in subsequent talks. In the background, meanwhile, disruptive maneuvers from the Balkan area were making themselves felt, Yugoslavia, while maintaining conciliatory language at the Quai d'Orsay, was acting ambiguously, attempting to sabotage the understanding through the press and advancing reservations about the Italian position in Hungary, which was increasingly clearly identified with the German orbit.³⁴

In November 1934, negotiations between Italy and France took on a more complex tone, suspended between the desire to reach an understanding and the reemergence of mutual fears and mistrust. In Paris, Ambassador Pignatti caught a stiffening of the French position during talks with Senator Bérenger, chairman of the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee. The latter, now visibly aligned with the prudent line of the Quai d'Orsay, stressed the impossibility of discussing the cession of the Djibouti railroad, admitting only possible economic concessions on the technical-financial level. Even sharper was the position on Tunisia: for the French, any agreement would have to include a clause leading to the final settlement of the issue after a predetermined transition period. This was clearly a condition perceived in Rome as a heavy and unrealistic constraint.³⁵

Behind this stiffening, Pignatti sensed Léger's growing influence and Yugoslavia's active role in trying to curb the evolution of the Franco-Italian dialogue.

³⁴ Pignatti a Mussolini, 25 ottobre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 91; Pignatti a Mussolini, 26 ottobre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 92; Preziosi a Mussolini, 31 ottobre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 101; Suvich a Dampierre, 3 novembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 107; Aloisi a Mussolini 5 novembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 108

³⁵ Pignatti a Mussolini, 10 novembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 130

"Given the substantial continuity of the Serbian leadership, there were no particular changes in Italian-Yugoslav relations, which were certainly good even before the attack in Marseille and continued to be so in the months that followed. The assassination of King Alexander undoubtedly exacerbated the controversy between the two countries, but on closer inspection, it did not greatly aggravate the already decidedly cold attitude that Yugoslavia had adopted during 1934, characterized by a mixture of disillusionment, suspicion, and concern about Italy's political maneuvers in the Danube region and its rapprochement with France to the exclusion of Serbian interests. In light of this, Yugoslav public opinion and government circles considered the government in Rome, if not the actual instigator of the regicide, given the lack of evidence, certainly its moral accomplice, for the help and support given to Croatian terrorists in those years. Therefore, all the foreign policy actions of the Serbian leaders after the events in Marseille, with obvious repercussions on domestic policy, were reduced to an attempt to bring the issues of murder and international terrorism before the Council of the League of Nations, where Italy and Hungary, the executor of the plans devised by Rome, could be called to account."³⁶

The suspicion, not unfounded, was that Belgrade was acting to postpone Laval's visit, fearing that a separate understanding might weaken its own strategic weight. In turn, Léger hinted that, on the European level, the most critical element remained the normalization of relations between Italy and Yugoslavia, urging Rome to ensure that nothing in the negotiations could undermine Yugoslav territorial unity or give rise to actions by Croatian refugees. Paris, while declaring itself "external" to the bilateral dialogue, was aiming to bind Italy to prudent behavior towards its Balkan neighbor.³⁷

Meanwhile, a possible new horizon was also opening on the multilateral front: in talks with the Austrian Minister Berger Waldenegg, Suvich put forward the hypothesis of transforming formal declarations on Austrian independence into a genuine guaranteed pact. The proposal included not only a commitment to defend Vienna's sovereignty, but also to prevent, within the signatory states,

³⁶ Massimo Bucarelli, *Mussolini e la Jugoslavia (1922-1939)*, (Bari: B.A Graphis, 2006) p. 300

³⁷ Pignatti a Mussolini, 16 novembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 149

the activity of groups that could destabilize the Austrian domestic order. The idea was to involve France and Germany, possibly also Britain, in an arrangement that could strengthen the Italian position as guarantor of the Danube balance.³⁸

The decisive phase of the negotiations began on November 15, when the French summarized in writing their position on the various issues hitherto discussed and transmitted it to Rome.

Five days later, on November 20, the new Prime Minister Pierre-Étienne Flandin received the Italian Ambassador in Paris and confirmed to him his government's willingness to reach an agreement. At the same time, in Rome Mussolini received De Chambrun and discussed with him the French proposals of 5 days earlier. The points on the table were manifold and revealed the French intent to conduct the negotiation on a technical and circumscribed level, but without renouncing setting precise limits on certain strategic knots. Although there is no transcript of the meeting between Mussolini and the French Ambassador, a conversation between Pignatti and Secretary General Léger on November 21, recorded in a detailed memo, provides an overview of the positions taken by Paris and Rome's preliminary reactions³⁹. Regarding German rearmament, France demanded guarantees: that Italy would have to commit to preliminary talks if the issue returned to the international table. In addition, Paris demanded recognition of its own armament superiority over Germany, as a counterbalance to Germany's greater industrial potential. On both points, the Italian position was one of prudent readiness, avoiding binding commitments but leaving the channel of dialogue open.

On the Austrian front, the French proposal for a multilateral guarantee of Vienna's independence was welcomed by Mussolini, provided it also involved the neighboring states on an equal footing. The hypothesis, which had already been raised by Italy, was aimed at consolidating a European alliance in an anti-annexationist key, although the concrete terms of the arrangement and Germany's role in the proposed framework remained to be clarified.

³⁸ Suvich a Waldenegg, 18 novembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 161

³⁹ R. De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce. Gli anni del consenso*, 521

More problematic appeared to be relations with Yugoslavia. Paris hoped for an improvement that could lead to a possible signing of a friendship agreement.

Mussolini, while not openly opposing it, expressed the need to wait for more favourable political conditions, signaling, among other things, his intention to confine the Croats in Italy to the island of Lipari, a gesture that suggested both firmness and tactical readiness.

As for Libya, the agreement seemed attainable. Rome agreed in principle to the proposed border adjustment in the south of the territory but reserved the right to submit the issue for consideration by its own technicians.

On Tunisia, the crux of the colonial dispute, ambiguities remained. While De Chambrun had not been clear in reporting Mussolini's response, Paris continued to demand that, at the end of a transitional period, the Italian "mortgage" be cancelled. Rome, on the other hand, tended to subordinate any concessions on North Africa to tangible advantages in other chessboards.

Relative to the Somali Coast, the French proposed an increase in Italian representation on the board of the Djibouti-Addis Ababa railway and a transfer of shares. However, the territorial adjustment offered was described as too vague, not being "visible on paper" as requested by Mussolini. More relevant appeared, finally, the Ethiopian issue: Paris hinted at a possible disengagement in the region, offering economic freedom of maneuver to Italy in its zone of influence. Rome would even advance the hypothesis of troop transit on the railway line, thus marking a first concrete sign of operational will.⁴⁰

In the following days, the confrontation between the Italian and French diplomacies increasingly focused on the knot represented by Yugoslavia, which had become one of the main obstacles to the final normalization of relations. Statements collected by Pignatti revealed the growing difficulty of the French government in containing the restlessness of Belgrade, whose aggressive attitudes toward

⁴⁰ Pignatti a Mussolini, 20 novembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 166,168; Colloquio tra Pignatti e Lérger 21 novembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 171

Hungary threatened to destabilize the entire Central-Danubian balance. However, thanks to pressure from France and England, which were particularly careful not to embarrass Italy, whose contribution was considered necessary to contain German revisionist pressure, the Belgrade government limited itself to accusing only the Hungarian authorities of complicity. On November 22, Yugoslavia presented a memorandum to the Secretary-General of the League of Nations, requesting an investigation into the Budapest government's connivance with the activities of Croatian terrorists believed to be responsible for the attack in Marseille.⁴¹

This initiative, although presented as an action for collective security, concealed an attempt to isolate Budapest and strengthen Belgrade's Balkan position. Both Flandin and Léger admitted, with a certain fatalism, that France was unable to block such a motion for fear that any frustration might push public opinion and the Yugoslav government toward an alliance with Germany, thus jeopardizing the very existence of the Little Entente. In Rome, however, the Quai d'Orsay line was observed with growing distrust, especially when Italy was asked for a symbolic gesture, public or diplomatic, in favour of the Italo-Yugoslav détente: a request deemed unjustified considering the offers already made after Mussolini's Milan speech and the reassurances given on Croatian and Austrian issues.

Within this framework, even the possibility of setting a date for Laval's visit to Rome remained contingent on the evolution of the Yugoslav question. Flandin himself recognized the risk of forcing the issue and hoped that the meeting could take place in between the November and the January sessions of the League of Nations. Meanwhile the Quai D'Orsay tried to mediate between the parts: the Yugoslav government, just passing through Paris, reiterated their readiness to seek an understanding with Rome, despite the diplomatic action taken in Geneva. Léger, informing Pignatti, expressed a certain optimism about the entire course of the Italian-French negotiations and confirmed that the idea of rapprochement between the two countries was shared at a deep level by the entire political establishment in Paris.⁴²

⁴¹ M. Bucarelli, *Mussolini e la Jugoslavia*, p. 300

⁴² Pignatti a Mussolini, 22 novembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 177; Pignatti a Mussolini, novembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 183

Despite the increasingly tense situation in the Danube area, dialogues for a Franco-Italian understanding in the colonial sphere continued, trying to find a compromise to the open issues.

Indeed, from previous meetings and diplomatic exchanges it was now clear that the French were fully aware of Italian wishes, evidenced by a November 24 conversation in which Ambassador De Chambrun explained to Suvich the official position of the French government regarding the main issues under negotiation after he himself had reported back to Paris on his previous meeting with Mussolini. On disarmament, the desirability of continuing a preparatory exchange of views between the two governments was stated, with a view to a subsequent direct confrontation between Mussolini and Laval. Regarding Italo-Yugoslav relations, De Chambrun stressed that Paris did not intend to take an active mediating role but trusted that the prospect of an understanding with Italy could foster, at least indirectly, a *détente* between Rome and Belgrade, given the difficulty that Balkan tension represented for French policy.

Finally, about Austria, there was a desire to go a step further than the generic statements already made in Geneva, reinforcing a concrete commitment to protect Austrian independence.

Turning then to the details of the French proposals on colonial issues, De Chambrun communicated Paris's willingness to extend the existing agreements on Tunisia for ten years, thus accepting the Italian proposal, but asking that, at the end of the decade, a gradual reduction of Italian influence be initiated, to be completed within a generation. With regard to Libya, France accepted the Italian proposal in principle, proposing some adjustments that, while slightly reducing the extension toward Sudan, would compensate with an extension into Tibesti, totaling about 240,000 sq. km. of additional territory. The focal point, however, was the offers on Somalia, to which the Abyssinian topic was closely linked: in addition to a modest border modification at the expense of French Somalia, Paris again declared itself ready to grant Italy a share in the operation of the Djibouti-Addis Ababa railway, as well as to limit its Abyssinian interests to an economic corridor along the railway line. This was, in essence, a tacit recognition of Italian ambitions in the region, the confidentiality of which was

insisted upon by the French to avoid controversy both in French society itself and internationally. This further underscored the effective extent of French consent to Italian economic expansion in Abyssinia.⁴³

In the following days, the dialogue between Suvich and De Chambrun intensified, touching in particular on the dossiers on Austria and disarmament. On November 27, the French Ambassador expressed the Paris position that, in the event of a unilateral declaration by Germany about the forfeiture of the Treaty of Versailles, Italy and France would have to consult to define a common response. Moreover, should Berlin be willing to negotiate, France demanded a margin of superiority in armaments, justified by Germany's greater industrial capacity. Suvich said he was open to the principle of dialogue if treaty changes were made in an agreed form and not as a result of unilateral breaches.

On the Austrian side, Paris insisted on the importance of involving the Little Entente in guaranteeing Vienna's independence and proposed a joint declaration to be communicated to the League of Nations as well. Rome, while agreeing with the need for an effective response to possible threats, expressed reservations about mechanisms that could compromise its freedom of action. Instead, Suvich advanced the hypothesis of support for Austria based on bilateral agreements and economic preferences, thus avoiding subordinating the Italian initiative to multilateral constraints and complex Balkan balances.

On the colonial front, the discussion, continued the 29th, focused on the borders of Libya and Italian demands in French Somalia. Suvich insisted on the need to obtain direct rail access, entirely on Italian territory, from the Somali coast to the Ethiopian borders, even hypothesizing forms of co-management of the Ethiopian section. The French proposal of a symbolic adjustment and the transfer of a stake in the railroad was not considered sufficient by Rome, which demanded more substantial guarantees in line with its strategic ambitions in the area.

⁴³ G. Buccianti, *Verso gli accordi Mussolini-Laval*, pp. 224,225; Appunto di Suvich, 24 novembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 188

In closing, De Chambrun returned to the Austrian question with a confidential memorandum, in which he excluded Germany from any multilateral guarantees, but suggested a joint Franco-Italian declaration to be kept confidential. Suvich reserved his response, however, stressing the need not to compromise Italian autonomy of action.⁴⁴

In particular, it is evident from this series of talks that for the French colonial issues, although important in their own way, were far more marginal and limited to the discussion of small details and portions of territories with regard to their main goal of creating a kind of system of containment of Nazi Germany that was to go hand in hand with both securing Austrian independence and trying to restrict the Third Reich from any violation of the Treaty of Versailles and consequent expansion.

By the time we reached the beginning of December, it was clear that both sides were determinedly aiming to conclude the agreement. The negotiations between Suvich and De Chambrun, while animated by an apparently close confrontation, represented a tactical maneuver, aimed at maximizing their respective advantages without questioning an outcome that, politically, appeared already defined. As Renzo De Felice has observed, the understanding had become "indispensable" for both Mussolini and Laval, making residual differences little more than tools of negotiating pressure. The positions expressed publicly or during the talks were thus intended to create room for maneuver, with concessions used as a "bargaining chip" to demonstrate openness and flexibility.⁴⁵

This dynamic also emerges clearly in a December 1st communication from the French Ambassador to Laval, in which he emphasized that while continuing to press for more advantageous terms, the Italian government was sincerely intent on finalizing the agreement. This assessment was also reflected in the French domestic political context: during the November 30 parliamentary debate on

⁴⁴ Colloquio tra Suvich e De Chambrun, 27 novembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 199; De Chambrun a Suvich, 27 novembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 200; Colloquio tra Suvich e De Chambrun, 28 novembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 209; Colloquio tra Suvich e De Chambrun, 29 novembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 214

⁴⁵ G. Buccianti, *Verso gli accordi Mussolini-Laval*, p. 228; R. De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce. Gli anni del consenso*, p. 222

foreign policy, Laval resolutely affirmed the importance of a rapprochement with Italy. In parallel, the conversation between Suvich and De Chambrun on the same December 1st highlighted how the focus of the negotiations had now shifted to Ethiopia.

Although the prospect of tacit French assent to the colonial enterprise in Abyssinia was a crucial element for Rome to successfully close the understanding, substantial disagreements nevertheless remained, particularly regarding French concessions in Africa.

The talks directly addressed the focal point of the colonial game. French offers on Somalia, a modest border adjustment and a limited stake in the Djibouti railway, were judged by Rome to be wholly unsatisfactory. According to Suvich, the only real relevant opening consisted in the French declaration of disinterest in Abyssinia, limited, however, to the economic dimension and the management of the railroad. But in the absence of more substantial concessions on Somalia, even this opening appeared weak, especially when compared with the Italian renunciation of further territorial advances toward Chad.

The instructions transmitted from Paris and reported by De Chambrun were described by Suvich as "petty-minded," accusing the French of distorting the approach to the negotiations.

In Italy's view, in fact, the entire negotiation was meant to liquidate Article 13 of the Treaty of London, which gave Italy a right to compensation for the advantages acquired by France in postwar Africa. Instead, according to Italian diplomacy, Rome found itself having to give up established positions, such as in Tunisia, to obtain only partial adjustments in Libya and to receive no concrete concessions in Somalia, while there were even demands for a revision of the Italian position on Morocco and Syria.

In the face of this criticism, De Chambrun staunchly defended the French attitude. He recalled Paris's willingness to prolong the Tunisian status quo for a decade, accompanied by a long transitional phase, and claimed territorial concessions in Libya as significant. As for Somalia, he remarked that strategic security needs, particularly related to Djibouti and Tagiura Bay, prevented any major cessions. However, the Ambassador did not fail to emphasize that the central issue remained Abyssinia: the

signal of French disengagement, though limited, was in his view a clear political indicator, interpretable as an implicit green light to Italian expansion.

Finally, De Chambrun solicited from Suvich a concrete proposal on greater Italian involvement in the management of the Djibouti railway. Suvich, while acknowledging that the positions remained distant, reserved the right to return to the subject soon. The negotiations, though amid persistent disagreements, were now moving within well-defined boundaries, with an understanding increasingly within reach.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Colloquio tra Suvich e De Chambrun, 1 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 225

1.3) The prelude to the Ethiopian campaign: staged incidents and planned escalation

Parallel to the unfolding of diplomatic negotiations with France, the situation on the Ethiopian front was progressively worsening. Although the negotiations with the government in Paris, especially after the installation of Laval at the Quai d'Orsay, had marked a turnaround favourable to Italian aspiration in the Horn of Africa, the government in Rome, and in particular Mussolini, did not simply wait passively for the fulfillment of this diplomatic breakthrough.

On the contrary, it was during this negotiating phase that a political and military strategy aimed at progressively increasing pressure on the Abyssinian empire took shape.

Over the course of months preceding the Mussolini-Laval agreements, the Italian authorities began to encourage the raising of the level of tension through a series of planned maneuvers that made armed escalation increasingly likely.

In spite of British caution and French uncertainties, Mussolini already appeared determined to reach a military confrontation with Addis Ababa in the near future. The systematic creation of frictions and border incidents with Abyssinian troops was not a side effect of Italian policy, but rather a deliberate means of accelerating the precipitation of the situation and building, if necessary, a useful pretext to legitimize a future armed intervention.

On the other hand, the Ethiopian government was fully aware of the gradual deterioration of relations with Italy. Trying to avoid confrontation, Addis Ababa tried to mobilize the tools offered by multilateral diplomacy, resorting to the League of Nations, but it also maintained direct contacts with some European capitals in an attempt to achieve diplomatic rebalancing. Such efforts, while showing a clear desire to avert war, were bound to clash with the reality of Italy's massive military mobilization in neighboring colonies, which portended the now imminent opening of a large-scale conflict.

This intensification cannot be viewed separately from the parallel diplomatic action with France, since it was precisely through the consolidation of contacts with Laval that Rome sought to build a

political and diplomatic framework within which to make any armed initiative acceptable, if not legitimate.

In this context, an important moment in the escalation of tensions with Ethiopia was represented by the incident in early November 1934 in Gondar, which saw Italy react firmly to what was immediately described as a "very serious attack" on its consular staff. On November 11, the Minister in Addis Ababa, Vinci, under direct instructions from Mussolini, went to the Ethiopian Foreign Ministry to lodge a harsh formal protest. The Italian demands, spelled out in a peremptory manner, included the arrest and dismissal of the local police chief and the officers involved, the punishment of any accomplices, the payment of compensation to the victims and, above all, the submission of an official apology by the imperial government "in the forms established by international norms."

Vinci strongly opposed the Ethiopian representative's attempt to dilute the scope of the event by discussing its alleged motives and reaffirmed that "this was not the case for discussion": the seriousness of the incident left no room for interpretation but demanded immediate reparation.

In a context in which Italian diplomacy was trying to assert a position of strength, Vinci said he was ready to confirm Italy's position in writing once he had received clarifications from Gondar, also insisting on an audience with the emperor.⁴⁷

At the same time, warning signals were coming from Rome about the situation in the border territories. The Ministry of Colonies De Bono, reporting a detailed telegram from the governor of Eritrea, pointed out the adoption by the local Ethiopian command of a series of hostile measures towards Italian personnel and interests. There was talk of customs restrictions, import blockades, restrictions on the consul's movements, as well as a possible isolation of the Italian consulate in retaliation. The impression from the reports was that the local leaders, even in their ambiguity, now regarded armed confrontation as an inevitable prospect.

⁴⁷ Vinci a Mussolini, 11 novembre 1934, in: Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *Documenti Diplomatici Italiani*, Settima Serie, vol. XVI, doc. n.133, Roma, Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato

Meanwhile, on November 15, Vinci was summoned by the Ethiopian Foreign Minister to receive a formal response. The government in Addis Ababa expressed its regrets, declaring the complete extraneousness of both the executive and the local authorities to the events. However, while announcing the arrest and dismissal of those responsible, the payment of compensation and the dispatch of a senior official to the scene for a joint investigation, Ethiopian positions still appeared vague, especially on the most sensitive issue: an official apology. The Ethiopians, initially reluctant, agreed only at a later stage to present them, but without clarifying the terms.⁴⁸

It was only as a result of renewed pressure that on November 16 Vinci was able to announce Ethiopia's acceptance of all Italian demands. The apology would be made formally by a representative of the imperial government, who would go to the Italian consulate accompanied by an armed escort to render honors to the flag.⁴⁹ Meanwhile on November 18, Mussolini himself approved the arrangements agreed upon by Vinci, leaving the latter free to determine the amount of the indemnity according to local custom, thus closing the matter.

The Gondar episode, although limited and formally resolved on the diplomatic level, thus assumed a far wider value than its concrete scope might suggest. It was employed by Rome as a test case for Abyssinian responsiveness and international willingness to tolerate escalation.

At the same time, it highlighted how Italy was now bent on exploiting every useful opportunity to strengthen its position and legitimize, at least on the narrative level, a future military intervention. The incident was transformed from a consular crisis into a functional stage of a much broader strategy, where war appeared less and less an eventuality and more and more a decision already made.

In this case too, the swiftness and firmness of Italy's response were aimed at reinforcing its image as a determined and controlling power, useful not only for intimidating Addis Ababa, but also for strengthening its position at the negotiating table with Paris.

⁴⁸ Vinci a Mussolini, 15 novembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 142

⁴⁹ Vinci a Mussolini, 16 novembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 150

In the days immediately following the resolution of the Gondar incident, the attention of Italian colonial authorities focused on the Somali-Ethiopian sector, where increasingly obvious signs pointed to a gradual deterioration of the border situation. On November 23, 1934, the Governor of Somalia, General Rava, informed the commander of colonial troops, General Carnevali, that the Italian post at Uardere appeared to be surrounded by hundreds of armed men, presumably Abyssinians and local irregulars. Communications received by Lieutenant Musti and Commissar Maltese described a condition of heavy pressure, to which the Italian command reacted with the immediate mobilization of air and armored assets. The dispatch of the squadron of airplanes and a column of armored cars, under the coordination of Captain Cimmaruta, was not only in response to defensive needs, but also constituted an act of muscular demonstration and calibrated deterrence.⁵⁰

This military maneuver on the ground was intertwined with an equally significant diplomatic dynamic. A few days later, on November 29, Suvich informed the Italian representations in London and Addis Ababa of a new incident in the Ual-Ual and Uardere area. Without any prior notice to the Italian authorities, a delegation composed of British and Ethiopian commissars had appeared in the area garrisoned by Italian forces, accompanied by a substantial Ethiopian armed contingent. The Italian commander, Captain Cimmaruta, was handed a letter accusing Italy of forcibly obstructing the free movement of the commission. Rome reacted firmly, stressing the provocative and unilateral nature of the initiative, especially in view of the fact that the Ual-Ual area, although not the subject of official delimitation, fell under Italian influence according to existing international agreements, and that the presence of armed bands made any uncoordinated incursion unacceptable.^{51 52}

The Italian government returned the British accusations to sender, categorically denying the suggestion that Italian planes had threatened the delegation. At the same time, it reaffirmed the principle that any grazing or watering rights in the disputed area should be discussed directly with Italy, not between Britain and Ethiopia. The official position, communicated by Italian Ambassador

⁵⁰ Rava a Carnevali, 23 novembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 182

⁵¹ Suvich a Grandi e Vinci, 29 novembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 211

⁵² Nicola Labanca, 2002, *Oltremare, storia dell'espansione coloniale italiana*. Bologna: Il Mulino p. 190

to London Dino Grandi to the Foreign Office on December 4, was aimed at downplaying the episode, attributing its responsibility to arbitrary initiatives by British Colonel Clifford, whose behaviour was described as "equivocal and inappropriate," partly because of his choice to appear jointly with an Ethiopian commissioner. The Foreign Office, while maintaining caution, distanced itself from its officer's conduct, acknowledging that his statements did not reflect the British government line.⁵³

These developments, while not yet leading to irreversible escalation, clearly signaled the tightening of the political-military situation with Ethiopia. The gradual overlap between ground operations, territorial claims and diplomatic reactions showed how blurred the line between provocation and open conflict was now.

In this framework already saturated with tensions and suspicions, the incident that would take place a few days later in Ual-Ual took the form of the inevitable culmination of an escalation that was already underway. Although it did not yet mark the official start of the war, it represented a decisive step: a moment when it became evident that the Italo-Ethiopian crisis was turning into something deeper and more structural.

“On December 5, 1934, after fifteen days of tension in Ual-Ual, with its 359 wells more than 400 km from Mogadishu and about 150 km into Ethiopian territory, the first shots were fired: a battle ensued, resulting in between one hundred and three hundred Ethiopian deaths and twenty-one on the Italian side (but all Somalis). It was the secondary and intricate incident that Rome was looking for” and represented the most acute moment of Italian-Ethiopian tensions up to that time, marking a clear break in the already fragile regional balance.⁵⁴

The Ual-Ual incident was also an opportunity to further open up the diplomatic front, because although the Italian decision and initial plans had been made earlier, after Ual-Ual the Fascist aspirations were laid out on the tables of the main chancelleries.⁵⁵

⁵³ Grandi a Mussolini, 4 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 236

⁵⁴ N. Labanca, *Oltremare, storia dell'espansione coloniale italiana*, p.190

⁵⁵ Nicola Labanca, 2015. *La guerra d'Etiopia 1935-1941*. Bologna: Il Mulino, p. 40

On the evening of December 6, Somalia's governor, General Rava, informed the Ministry of Colonies with the utmost urgency of the outcome of the armed clash that had occurred the previous day between Italian forces and Ethiopian troops.⁵⁶

On the diplomatic level, the *chargé d'affaires* in Addis Ababa, Mombelli, was immediately summoned by the Ethiopian Foreign Minister, who, on behalf of the Emperor, expressed concern about an incident that could have jeopardized Italian-Ethiopian relations. The version provided by the Abyssinian side radically overturned the Italian narrative: Italy was accused of obstructing, with an attitude described as "aggressive," the free movement of the Anglo-Ethiopian commission charged with studying grazing rights in the Ogaden. Italian aerial overflights, believed to be intimidating, were mentioned, as well as the construction of a fort and the presence of war material in the Ual-Ual area. The Ethiopian government proposed a mutual removal of troops and appealed for bilateral cooperation to prevent the incident from escalating further.⁵⁷

The Italian response, however, was firm and unhesitating. Mussolini instructed Mombelli to lodge "the most vigorous protests" over the attack Italy had suffered, claiming the right to self-defense and announcing the demand for "ample apologies and complete reparations" to be specified later on.⁵⁸

Mombelli, in a second interview with the Ethiopian Foreign Ministry, underscored the seriousness of the attack, pointing out that the imperial government had been informed of the Italian presence in the area months before, on the occasion of repeated reports about the activities of armed regulars in the pay of a known Somali outlaw with ties to the Ethiopian command. He also recalled that since the previous April and July, Minister Vinci had warned the government in Addis Ababa that the situation in Ual-Ual was in danger of escalating, and that any responsibility for any incidents would fall to Ethiopia.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Rava a De Bono, 6 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 249

⁵⁷ Mombelli a Mussolini, 6 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 250

⁵⁸ Mussolini a Mombelli, 6 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 251

⁵⁹ Mombelli a Mussolini, 7 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 253

The Ual-Ual incident, while seemingly localized and circumscribed, triggered a systematic diplomatic reaction on the Italian side, aimed at framing the episode not as a border misunderstanding, but as a deliberate aggression on the Ethiopian side.

In the days immediately following the clash, Mussolini ordered Mombelli to submit a formal note decisively rejecting any attempt by Addis Ababa to shift responsibility for the incident onto Italy. Rome insisted on reaffirming the legitimacy of the Italian presence in Ual-Ual, stating that the Italian garrison had been attacked without provocation, and only later responded to defend itself. Captain Cimmaruta's behaviour was then defended as fully in accordance with law, both because of the content of his communications with the Anglo-Ethiopian commission and because of the defensive measures taken, including the aerial overflights, described as merely precautionary.⁶⁰

Contextually, Mussolini precisely dictated the conditions Rome intended to demand as reparations for the incident: an official apology to Ual-Ual by a high Ethiopian representative, military honours to the Italian flag, payment of compensation, punishment of those responsible for the attack. This was a list of demands designed not only to obtain formal compensation, but to further strengthen the legitimacy of the Italian position before international opinion.

Despite official intransigence, De Bono suggested a tactically more flexible attitude in terms of diplomatic communication. Indeed, in a confidential conversation with Mussolini, he proposed not to exclude *a priori* the possibility of reopening dialogue on the Somali-Ethiopian border demarcation, should Addis Ababa revive the issue. Accepting confrontation, albeit without substantial concessions, would have allowed Italy to appear moderate, while maintaining the power to maneuver and control over the pace of negotiations.⁶¹

When the Ethiopian government, in an attempt to gain time and remove the issue from the bilateral dynamic, proposed recourse to the international arbitration provided for in Article 5 of the 1928 Italian-Ethiopian treaty, Rome responded with a sharp refusal. Mussolini ordered the proposal to be

⁶⁰ Mussolini a Mombelli, 8 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 258

⁶¹ De Bono al Ministero degli Esteri, 9 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 265

rejected, arguing that the evidence of the facts spoke for itself: this had been a unilateral aggression and there was nothing to discuss in arbitration. Italy thus confirmed its adamant demand for an apology and reparations, refusing any shift in the confrontation to the international legal level.⁶²

Additionally, an internal memo from the Director General of Political Affairs, Buti, clearly illustrated the legal background of the Italian position. According to the interpretation of the government in Rome, the Ual-Ual and Uardere wells undoubtedly fell within the borders of Italian Somalia, based on both the 1908 Italian-Ethiopian Convention and the 1897 Nerazzini-Menelik agreements. Italian garrisons had been there for at least five years and never before had Addis Ababa challenged their legitimacy. The fact that local tribes had long been under Italian sovereignty was invoked as further confirmation of the validity of the territorial claim. Within this framework, Addis Ababa's attitude was branded not only as aggressive, but also as historically and diplomatically unfounded.⁶³

The totality of Italian reactions to the Ual-Ual incident reveals how Rome had already adopted a line that went beyond mere diplomatic self-defense. The detailed formulation of reparation demands, the rejection of arbitration and the recourse to a legal-historical reading of territorial claims demonstrated not only a desire to consolidate its position, but also to turn the incident into a useful precedent to justify a broader response if necessary. In this sense, the incident was not only a crisis to be managed, but also a political opportunity to be capitalized on, embedded in a strategy that continued to unfold in parallel with the European diplomatic plan.

According to Labanca, in fact: “at that time, once again, Italy was not physically prepared for war. However, much had been planned, and reviewing that planning, in addition to suggesting that the Ual-Ual incident did not happen by chance, helps to understand the decision-making process behind the war in Ethiopia and, more generally, fascist colonial policy, with the Duce playing a prominent personal role among the military, diplomats, and colonialists.”⁶⁴

⁶² Mussolini a Mombelli, 11 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 272

⁶³ Buti a Suvich, 13 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 286

⁶⁴ N. Labanca, *Oltremare, storia dell'espansione coloniale italiana*, p.190

In the days following the Italian rejection of the arbitration requested by Ethiopia, Addis Ababa's position remained stubbornly negative, signaling the absence of any real willingness to accommodate Italian demands for apologies and reparations. As Mombelli reported on December 17, Ethiopian stiffening suggested, even on the basis of increasingly frequent signals, British involvement or at least indirect support. Indeed, the attitude of the Abyssinian government was distinguished by an unusual discipline and consistency, uncommon in Ethiopian administrative practice, so much so that the use of well-organized external councils was suspected. At the same time, ongoing military measures in the Ogaden, such as the nightly and discreet dispatch of arms, ammunition, and personnel, indicated a silent but significant strengthening of Ethiopian arrangements along the border.⁶⁵

In parallel, on the diplomatic level signals of only partial openness were coming from the Ethiopian side. In a confidential conversation with the Emperor's secretary Taddese, Dr. Borra, which was an Italian doctor working in Addis Ababa who also performed informal political and diplomatic liaison duties for the Italian embassy, heard a conciliatory message that, while reiterating the Abyssinian version of events, proposed the possibility of an amicable solution, leveraging the supposedly good personal relations between the rulers of the two countries.⁶⁶ However, from the Italian point of view, these signals were interpreted as delaying tactics. Meanwhile, Italian authorities, from Addis Ababa to Nairobi, continued closely monitor British behavior in Ethiopia, which was considered to be at odds with the officially neutral line of the London government.⁶⁷ In an analysis addressed to Rome, Mombelli finally stressed how the precautions taken by the government in Addis Ababa, from the conciliatory tone on the surface to the actual mobilization in Ogaden, also required Italy to maintain a vigilant but sober military posture. Avoiding excessive or overly visible reactions, according to Mombelli, was essential in order not to further alter the already delicate balance of the situation on the ground.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Mombelli a Mussolini, 17 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 301

⁶⁶ Mombelli a Mussolini, 17 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 302

⁶⁷ Suvich a Turcato, 17 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 304

⁶⁸ Mombelli a Vinci, 18 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 308

While the Italian government kept its demands for apologies and reparations firm, it simultaneously intensified its diplomatic maneuvers to isolate its Ethiopian counterpart and consolidate its negotiating front. Suvich instructed Mombelli to activate, in parallel with the official communication to the Ethiopian government, also an informal channel through Dr.

Borra, who was to go on a pretext to the Emperor's secretary to convey, unofficially but transparently, the Italian point of view. Borra was entrusted with a calibrated message: Italy would not deviate from its version of the facts, believing the December 5 aggression to be a unilateral Ethiopian responsibility, attributable as much to peripheral agents as to the central government, which was guilty of covering for them without verifying their reports. Rome showed itself willing to negotiate on the modalities of reparation, but not on the very principle of obtaining formal satisfaction. At the same time, it was remarked that Italy sought neither provocation nor war, and was indeed ready, once the Ual-Ual affair was over, to resume work on the boundary.⁶⁹

The official note that Mussolini transmitted in parallel to the Ethiopian government went in the same direction. It disputed the Abyssinian version point by point, reaffirming the historical legitimacy of the Italian presence in Ual-Ual. The communication closed with an invitation to the government in Addis Ababa to abide by the treaties, fulfilling Italian demands as a condition for a resumption of dialogue on the border, which had been suspended for years precisely because of Ethiopian defaults.⁷⁰ At the same time, the same directives were conveyed confidentially to the Italian Ambassadors in London and Paris, so that they could clarify to their respective chancelleries that Italy maintained a moderate but firm attitude and was intent on defending its right with determination.⁷¹

Precisely in this context, the meeting between Mombelli and the British Ambassador in Addis Ababa, Sir Sidney Barton, took on particular significance. The British diplomat, while insisting on the personal nature of his remarks, hinted that the deterioration of the situation was viewed with growing concern in London. Barton reaffirmed the principle of Anglo-Italian collaboration for peace and

⁶⁹ Suvich a Mombelli, 23 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 328

⁷⁰ Mussolini a Mombelli, 23 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 329

⁷¹ Mussolini a Grandi e Pignatti, 24 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 331

suggested that a diplomatic solution to the incident could come through a two-pronged approach: on the one hand, formal Ethiopian recognition of the Ual-Ual episode; on the other, an Italian commitment to reopen the border demarcation process. Barton seemed to believe that only by offering a broader negotiating framework could Addis Ababa be persuaded to accept the Italian request without losing face. Mombelli, while avoiding making explicit commitments, merely listened, stating once again that the resolution of the incident constituted, for Rome, the precondition for any further development.⁷²

Against this backdrop, while Italy continued to insist on its version of events and solicit formal apologies from Ethiopia, the crisis also gradually shifted to the multilateral level. On December 25, Pignatti, informed the Quai d'Orsay of the Ethiopian government's recent complaint to the League of Nations about an alleged Italian advance into the Ogaden. The Italian diplomat decisively denied any basis for this accusation, attributing it to a prearranged maneuver by Addis Ababa to justify, before the international community, a possible military action. The French, while showing willingness, hinted that Paris would take a position only after coordination with London, thus emphasizing the desire to maintain a common front among the European powers that were signatories to the Tripartite Agreement of 1906.⁷³

At the same time, in London the *chargé d'affaires* Vitetti carried on the same line, reaffirming to the Foreign Office that the Ethiopian communication to Geneva represented an artificial construction, probably aimed at preparing an offensive already in the planning stage. It was stressed that Italy had acted with restraint in the face of the aggression suffered but was determined to obtain full satisfaction. Also, Vitetti insisted that Italy was not pursuing any aggressive objective, but that the Ual-Ual episode should receive a just reparation to avoid the risk of Ethiopian Ras (high-ranking military and political leaders and often regional governors with extensive autonomous powers) violence being legitimized or encouraged. While reassuring the British willingness to maintain a

⁷² Mombelli a Mussolini, 24 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 332

⁷³ Pignatti a Mussolini, 25 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 335

cooperative line with Italy, Robert Vansittart, permanent-undersecretary at the Foreign Office, firmly denied any British involvement in supporting Addis Ababa. However, as Vitetti himself observed, this unified political line also had to translate into concrete action that would help defuse the increasingly widespread perception of tacit British support for Ethiopian positions, thus fueling a dangerous climate for the entire colonial balance in the region.^{74 75}

Mussolini, for his part, personally intervened to reiterate to both Italian embassies that the Ethiopian denunciation was not only unfounded but risked masking a military escalation already underway by the Ras. He instructed Italian representatives in Paris and London to make it firmly clear that Italy had neither moved troops nor intended to adopt any aggressive policy, but that the incendiary atmosphere required immediate calming intervention by the European powers before the situation degenerated irreversibly.^{76 77}

In the days between December 1934 and the new year, the Italian-Ethiopian crisis seemed to have reached a potential, but at the same time fragile and uncertain, turning point. Mussolini, through a new communication to Mombelli, firmly confirmed the essential points of the Italian position: no advance had taken place in Ethiopian territory; the territories in question, such as Afdub, had belonged to Italian Somalia for years; and Italian air flights, far from offensive, were necessary to monitor the movements of the growing Ethiopian forces in the Ual-Ual and Uardere area. This reaffirmed the previously expressed principle: Italy's readiness to resume border demarcation work could only materialize after receiving the apology and reparations demanded from Addis Ababa.⁷⁸

Meanwhile, from Addis Ababa, Mombelli reported new contradictory signals. On the one hand, dialogue continued with Sidney Barton, who acknowledged the Emperor's internal difficulties in dealing with the more radical Ras and suggested how good Italian preparation in Somalia would be

⁷⁴ Suvich a Vitetti, 28 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 345

⁷⁵ Vitetti a Mussolini, 28 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 348

⁷⁶ Vitetti a Mussolini, 26 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 336

⁷⁷ Mussolini Pignatti e Vitetti, 26 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 337

⁷⁸ Mussolini a Mombelli, 29 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 351

sufficient to avoid nasty surprises. On the other hand, Dr. Borra managed to meet with the Emperor's secretary Taddese, who was initially favourable to a diplomatic solution and even tacitly hinted that Ethiopian troops were responsible for the Ual-Ual incident. However, the subsequent hardening of the Ethiopian position, perhaps due to internal pressures, again signaled the decision-making instability of the Abyssinian leadership.⁷⁹

This ambiguity was also reflected in relations with the British government. Vitetti, from London, reported that the Foreign Office had been informed by the British Ambassador in Ababa of the Emperor's apparently more conciliatory intentions: Addis Ababa said it was willing to pay the amount requested by Italy as a trust deposit with the League of Nations, pending an investigation to determine responsibility for the incident. But a few hours later, this opening was contradicted by a new statement from the same Emperor that an alleged Italian attack on Gherlogubi made it impossible to maintain the previous offer. Payment would be possible only on the condition that Italy surrender Ual-Ual to an international commission.

Vitetti decisively rejected this assumption, calling it "ridiculous" and a sign of the growing weakness of the Ethiopian leadership, unable to sustain a path of honourable compromise.⁸⁰

Indeed, in this context, in the early days of January 1935, the situation on the diplomatic front remained stuck in a phase of apparent openness followed immediately by new rigidities, reflecting the uncertainty and internal pressure to which the Ethiopian government was subjected. In a second conversation with Dr. Borra, Taddese returned to evoking the possibility of a solution, confidentially revealing that the Negus had personally written to the King of Italy and Mussolini, expressing regret for what had happened and declaring himself opposed to a break in bilateral relations. However, notes later read to Borra indicated a far more rigid official position: Ethiopia lamented the loss of livestock, lives, and territory, and refused to accept Italian demands without first ascertaining responsibility for the incident through arbitration. Taddese stressed that a public humiliation, such as an apology, would

⁷⁹ Mombelli a Mussolini, 29 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 352, 353

⁸⁰ Vitetti a Mussolini, 31 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n.3 60, 361

be untenable for the Emperor and the people, whose thirst for revenge could not be ignored in the name of reasoned diplomacy.⁸¹

In the continuation of the conversation, the Ethiopian official remarked that only arbitration, even simple and entrusted to a neutral figure residing in Addis Ababa, could offer an honorable way out, capable of making the people accept an otherwise unpopular decision. His attitude was decidedly firmer than in the previous colloquy, suggesting direct intervention by the Emperor or other higher echelons of power. While deploring the anti-Italian propaganda and showing some willingness to continue the dialogue, Taddese declared Borra's proposals useless unless accompanied by recognition of the principle of arbitration. Mombelli, assessing the changed tone and clear intransigence, prudently decided to suspend any further conversation on that line for the time being, though without excluding its future resumption.⁸²

In parallel, the personal relationship between Mombelli and Barton offered further food for thought. Barton reported repeated contacts with the Emperor and forwarded Ethiopian proposals to London for a possible solution, but he attributed the recent stiffening to the news, of doubtful veracity, of a new confrontation at Gherlogubi. Although he asserted that Ethiopia would never take the initiative of an attack, he also emphasized Abyssinian fear of an extension of Italian occupation. Even more relevant, however, was the confidential passage in which Barton openly expressed the divergence between British and Italian views on the Ual-Ual incident: for London, it was not acceptable for either side to unilaterally impose its own version. Mombelli could not help but observe how much the British positions, in form and content, mirrored those expressed almost simultaneously by Ethiopian representatives, suggesting diplomatic coordination that in fact hindered the Italian line and made its implementation more difficult.⁸³

On January 3 in a new confidential meeting with Dr. Borra, the Emperor's secretary, showed a markedly more conciliatory attitude than in previous interlocutions. After reporting that he had

⁸¹ Mombelli a Mussolini, 2 gennaio 1935, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 369

⁸² Mombelli a Mussolini, 2 gennaio 1935, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 370

⁸³ Mombelli a Mussolini, 2 gennaio 1935, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 371

personally forwarded notes of previous conversations to the Negus, Taddese announced the Abyssinian government's intention to formulate concrete proposals for a possible solution to the Ual-Ual incident. Although he did not immediately go into the merits, he hinted at a more favourable orientation towards seeking an understanding, acknowledging that the Italian demands did not appear, at least in his own right, to be excessive or unfair.

Particularly significant was the passage, strictly confidential, in which Taddese admitted that even the British Ambassador in Addis Ababa would have suggested that the indemnity demanded by Italy be paid immediately, assuming deposit with a third party as happened in the precedent of the Corfu crisis. There was also no lack of an attempt to discuss the size of the sum, questioning the number of Italian losses, with an approach that showed how, even in a framework of apparent willingness to dialogue, the Ethiopians continued to move according to logics of prudent political calculation in order to avoid a further escalation of the situation.

However, the new willingness shown by Taddese was interpreted by Mombelli with extreme caution. It did not appear as the result of a real political breakthrough, but rather as the expression of a wait-and-see tactic, aimed at gaining time and maintaining margins of maneuver in a context of increasing international pressure.⁸⁴

Faced with this possible opening, in the same days in which the agreements with Laval were finalized, Rome therefore decided not to close the door to dialogue, but neither to relax its position: any further development would be evaluated with the utmost attention, in the knowledge that the solution to the dispute still remained uncertain. The confrontation, in fact, both diplomatic and strategic, was far from over and set to continue in the months that followed, although once Italy obtained the French *désistement* its position changed drastically.

The Ual-Ual episode, although destined to have further developments and repercussions in the international debate, also in the L.O.N, is considered here in its function as one of the culminating

⁸⁴ Mombelli a Mussolini, 2 gennaio 1935, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 379

moments of the pre-war crisis and as a point of convergence between local tensions and European diplomatic dynamics specifically in the period previously and during the signing of the French Italian agreements. Its subsequent evolution, although significant, is beyond the scope of this work, which focuses on the role played by the intertwining of Italian pressure and relations with France in creating a context favourable to Rome's initiative.

In this scenario the war moved by Italy against Ethiopia in October 1935 will be further analyzed in the framework of the outcomes derived by the signing of the Mussolini-Laval agreements.

This phase, marked by a progressive hardening of positions and intensification of tensions, represents a crucial step in the process that transformed the Ethiopian question from a local dispute into an international crisis. Italy, while maintaining a diplomatic *façade*, was now showing a growing determination to pursue its objectives in the Horn of Africa, buoyed by the conviction that the margins for action on the European scene were widening. Ethiopia, for its part, was trying to resist diplomatically by avoiding escalation, but the asymmetry of the forces on the ground and the difficulty in mobilizing solid support from the major powers made any attempt at balancing increasingly difficult. In this context, Britain's role was ambiguously delineated: officially faithful to a line of neutrality, in fact it often appeared closer to Ethiopian positions, at least operationally and rhetorically, generating suspicion in Rome of implicit support that risked altering the balance of the confrontation.

If the British attitude appeared uncertain and sometimes contradictory, far more definite was the channel opened with France. The beginning of an understanding with Paris, progressively consolidated around the figure of Laval, represented for Mussolini the hinge on which to leverage to transform a potentially explosive crisis into an opportunity for legitimate expansion.

In fact, the distinctive element of the Italian strategy was not so much the desire to avoid war as to prepare for it so that, when the time came, it would not encounter united international opposition. In this sense, dialogue with France was at the heart of Italian diplomatic action:

Rome was working to ensure that, the moment the inevitable confrontation with Ethiopia resulted in open war, European reactions would be, if not supportive, at least tolerant. This required careful calibration of diplomatic timing and messaging, especially towards France, whose acquiescence to Italian aims in Africa, sealed in the January agreements, was not a mere backdrop, but the political center of Rome's entire strategy.

The multiplication of incidents along the frontier, such as those at Gondar and Ual-Ual, the Italian military reinforcement in the colonies and diplomatic maneuvers aimed at overturning the Abyssinian narrative at the League of Nations, were not isolated episodes, but part of a broader and more coherent strategy. In Rome, the interaction between ministries, embassies and colonial commands showed a growing synchronicity, though not without internal tensions, that urged a unified course of action and firmer control over the actions of agents on the ground.

Italian foreign policy now appeared to be guided by a logic whereby diplomacy was not an instrument of conflict prevention but a functional lever for its preparation. What Rome was seeking, and in part obtained, was a political rather than a legal cover, a tacit consent, or at least an absence of active opposition, from the European powers.

Ultimately, the management of the crisis in the months leading up to the Mussolini-Laval agreements cannot be understood except as part of a larger strategic design, in which war against Ethiopia was now considered not only probable, but useful and necessary. Italy worked on several levels: it intimidated Ethiopia, probed Britain's reaction and actively sought an understanding with France that would serve as a retrospective legitimization of its actions. This intertwining of pressures, negotiations and provocations thus marks the real turning point: a moment when the crisis ceases to be contingent and becomes a structural premise for war.

Chapter II

**FROM DIALOGUE TO UNDERSTANDING: THE GENESIS AND SIGNING OF THE
MUSSOLINI – LAVAL AGREEMENTS**

2.1) Toward the Entente: the possible compromise between diverging strategies

Interest in concluding and Ethiopia were thus two irreplaceable hinges on which Italian policy now rested regarding Italian-French rapprochement. But it does not seem far-fetched to say that the first factor, interest in concluding, was determined by the second, and more precisely by the certainty that the government in Rome had, that it could rest from France the *placet* for an expansion into Ethiopia. A note from Suvich dated December 3 had the flavor of a true confession or, rather, an admission confirming that the propitious and perhaps irreproducible moment to obtain from the French the clearance for Ethiopia was then.⁸⁵

In the paper, Suvich lucidly articulated the outstanding knots. On the colonial level, the Somali issue remained deadlocked: France, invoking strategic-military reasons, refused to cede significant portions of its colony. Faced with this closure, Suvich identified three possible alternatives: demand additional compensation in southern Libya, break off negotiations, or attempt to gain symbolic or logistical advantages in Somalia, even without actual territorial acquisitions. The second hypothesis, breaking off negotiations, was discarded while recognizing that the French offers appeared modest compared to Italian expectations. However, the overall assessment suggested that a more favourable opportunity for sealing a useful understanding to strengthen Italian freedom of action in Europe and Africa would not arise soon.

On this basis, Suvich made operational proposals: to obtain in Somalia a visible border rectification, the use of a port in Tagiura Bay, a rail link with the Djibouti-Addis Ababa line, and, above all, guarantees on the military use of the infrastructure in case of conflict, or, at the very least, a ban on France's logistical facilitation of Abyssinia. In parallel, there was a demand for a more substantial Italian participation in the management of the railway, through a significant shareholding and weighty

⁸⁵ Giovanni Bucciatti, *Verso gli accordi Mussolini-Laval: il riavvicinamento italo-francese fra il 1931 e il 1934* (Milano: Giuffrè, 1984), p. 229

representation on the board of directors. It was clear that Rome aimed to secure direct influence over the only strategic logistical axis in Ethiopian territory.

In the same memo, Suvich considered other crucial dossiers, such as the Tunisian question, still open on the educational and professional level, and the issue of Austrian security. In particular, on guarantees for Vienna, he reasoned about the possibility of a multilateral agreement involving Italy, France, England and, hopefully, Germany, together with the Little Entente. Enhanced protection of Austrian independence was seen as essential to curb the Reich's expansionist ambitions.

The whole picture outlined by Suvich confirmed how by now the agreement with France was perceived not only as opportune, but as indispensable to ensure the political and strategic conditions that Italy believed necessary to proceed with the Ethiopian enterprise.⁸⁶

Precisely in this context, in a December 5 conversation with Ambassador Pignatti, Mussolini clearly confirmed the Italian government's now-defined line on all the central issues in the negotiations with France. The Ethiopian question once again emerged as the crucial element, but the Head of Government also attached great importance to a modest territorial cession in Somalia, interpreting it as a political signal of progressive French disinterest in Abyssinia.

Although Pignatti suggested insisting on more significant concessions, Mussolini was confident that Paris would slightly improve its offer. What really mattered, however, was the implicit recognition, through the French limitation to the railroad area, of greater Italian freedom of action. This approach confirmed what had already emerged in earlier talks: Italy regarded French disengagement in Ethiopia as an essential, if not formalized, condition for proceeding with the understanding. Italy's position on schools in Tunisia and disarmament also reflected a strategy aimed at not giving in on issues considered symbolically important, while maintaining a general willingness to negotiate.

At the same time, on the Austrian issue, Mussolini endorsed the idea of a rapid consultation mechanism between Italy and France, possibly extendable to Germany, England and members of the

⁸⁶ Appunto di Suvich, 3 dicembre 1934, in: Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *Documenti Diplomatici Italiani*, Settima Serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 230, Roma, Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato

Little Entente, while on disarmament he reaffirmed the principle of equality between the powers, calling for Italy to also obtain a margin of superiority over Germany, on a par with France. In the final analysis, Mussolini's intervention testified to how Rome was trying to close the negotiations firmly and timely, aiming to consolidate a position of strength on the European and colonial level before any Franco-German opening could alter the favourable balance.⁸⁷

Just as France was stalling on final answers, Rome was moving decisively to consolidate its positions, translating what had emerged in earlier talks into structured proposals. Also on December 5, during a new meeting with De Chambrun, Suvich formalized, albeit confidentially and not yet binding, a series of notes that now clearly reflected the definitive orientation of the Italian government. It was an articulated package that gave substance to the points already anticipated in the talks of the previous days and aimed at closing the understanding on a basis compatible with the primary objective: to obtain from Paris a tacit green light on Ethiopia,

Suvich's proposed lines touched on all the main dossiers: in Tunisia there was a ten-year extension of the 1896 agreement, with maintenance of the status quo and a gradual deferred evolution of the legal and cultural situation of the Italians; in Libya the French proposal for rectification of the southern borders was accepted in principle, with some technical modifications for surveillance needs. But the real heart of the proposals concerned Somalia:

Suvich insisted on a tangible cession, proposing either access to the sea with an associated railroad trunk from Tagiura Bay or an autonomous zone in the port of Djibouti, as well as broader Italian participation in railroad management. In parallel, an explicit declaration of French political disinterest in Abyssinia was demanded, confirming that expansion into Ethiopia was no longer just an option, but the focus of Italy's entire foreign policy.

On Austria and disarmament, Rome's position was also being consolidated: an Italian-French understanding for the defense of Austrian independence, to be kept preferably bilateral and discreet,

⁸⁷ Colloquio tra Mussolini e Pignatti, 5 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 244

and a mutual recognition with Paris of a greater armed margin than Germany, without, however, affecting the principle of legal equality. Finally, on the Balkan node, Rome held firm to its line: no unilateral gesture toward Yugoslavia, but a readiness to consider a future direct agreement only under changed conditions.⁸⁸

At the same time, however, while the details for concluding the agreement were being worked out in Rome, signs of tension were coming from Geneva that threatened to undermine the painstakingly constructed balance. In a dispatch dated December 6, Aloisi reported that Laval had insisted in every interview that any agreement with Italy should be conditional on the involvement of the Little Entente. This position, according to Aloisi, reflected a strategic shift in France's diplomatic agenda: the defection of Poland and the ongoing rapprochement between Germany and Yugoslavia had brought back to the Quai d'Orsay's focus the need to reinforce the axis with East Central Europe, particularly with Belgrade, Prague and Bucharest. As a result, the entire framework of Franco-Italian negotiations was now in danger of losing coherence, as the bilateral approach based on the resolution of specific dossiers, such as colonial concessions, seemed destined to succumb before the new centrality of the "Danube question," particularly the Austrian one.

In light of this development, Aloisi proposed radically altering the approach to the negotiations, focusing on a multilateral arrangement centered on safeguarding Austrian independence. Such an agreement, according to his proposal, should have involved only Austria's neighboring states: Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia and, of course, Italy, excluding France as a direct signatory but not as an external supporter. The benefits would have been many: strengthening Austria, reintegrating Hungary into the European diplomatic system, weakening the compactness of the Little Entente, and above all containing the threat posed by a France-Balkans bloc that risked isolating Italy

⁸⁸ Colloquio tra Suvich e De Chambrun, 5 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 245

in its traditional spheres of influence. In addition, this solution could have set a useful precedent for defusing future claims of joint action by the Little Entente.⁸⁹

Mussolini's reply, sent the following day, however, clarified the limits within which this strategy could be developed. He recognized the centrality of the Austrian problem but rejected the idea of making it the exclusive focus of ongoing negotiations. He restated that any multilateral pact on Danube security would meet with firm opposition from Hungary, which made any opening conditional on prior political satisfaction on the part of the Little Entente, a condition that did not occur at the moment. On the other hand, the discussion on Austria was different: Mussolini recalled how Ambassador De Chambrun had repeatedly suggested an international agreement comprising the major European powers, including Germany, to guarantee the internal stability of the signatories, starting with Vienna. However, Rome emphasized that any multilateral initiative would have to be preceded by a bilateral understanding with France, to be kept secret, clearly defining the common interest in safeguarding Austria. Only on that basis could the "possibility" of a subsequent international act be "examined. The possible participation of the Little Entente remained ruled out, at least for the time being, both to avoid humiliating Vienna with guarantees from lesser powers and not to compromise Italy's autonomy of action. With this, Mussolini reaffirmed the priority of a direct agreement with Paris, holding firm to the line of strategic independence from Balkan and international pressures.⁹⁰

This change of course on the French side reflected a reality that was now evident: for the government in Paris, issues related to colonial compensation, and by extension, the Abyssinian game, were of secondary importance within the entire negotiating process. Although the negotiations on the African side took place with intensity and produced obvious friction, they were perceived by Paris as tools of exchange, useful in consolidating a broader understanding, but not as independent strategic ends. The primary objective of French diplomacy was actually centered on Eastern Europe: to contain the

⁸⁹ Aloisi a Mussolini, 6 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 247

⁹⁰ Mussolini ad Aloisi, 7 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 255

expansion of German influence in the Balkans and the Danube Basin, and to preserve the regional balance through the strengthening of the Little Entente and the stabilization of Austria.

From this perspective, Austrian independence was not just a principle to be defended, but a key piece in preventing Berlin from finding a way to the southeast. France thus saw collaboration with Italy not so much as a means of resolving bilateral disputes but as an opportunity to widen the anti-German containment network, bringing Rome within a shared system of regional guarantees.

At this stage of the negotiations, it becomes apparent that although the understanding was now substantially outlined and strongly desired by both sides, French pressure regarding Yugoslavia and the Little Entente threatened to frustrate the diplomatic efforts made up to that point.

On the French side, in fact, an attempt was made to give the agreement as general a character as possible, so as to resolve all the controversial or at any rate open questions (including that of the mandates), and above all to obtain the inclusion of the Little Entente or, at least, of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia among the countries guaranteeing Austrian independence and thus to arrive by this route at an arrangement both of the particular Italian-Yugoslav relations and of the general Franco-Italian relations concerning the Danubian sector. On the other hand, on the Italian side, however, an attempt was made to oppose this prospect, since it, if accepted, would, have reduced Rome's autonomy of maneuver in the Balkan-Danubian sector and entailed the practical abandonment of the positions acquired in Hungary and also, would have made it difficult to reopen at a later date the wider-ranging colonial negotiations with Paris. Hence the unwillingness to close definitively the Tunisian question and the unwillingness to accept the French approach to the Syrian question and, above all, the opposition to associating the Little Entente with the guarantee to Austria and making the Danube question the practically central point of the negotiations. The Italian documentation clearly shows what Rome's position was and especially that of Mussolini himself.⁹¹

⁹¹ Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce. Gli anni del consenso 1929-1936* (Torino: Einaudi, 1974), pp. 521,522

Indeed, the conversation between Laval and Aloisi on December 11 confirmed how much by now the French insistence on the integration of the Little Entente and the clarification of Italian-Yugoslav relations had become a decisive political node. Rome, while trying to keep the negotiating channel open, refused to tie the signing of the agreement to specific commitments to Belgrade or to a collective guarantee of Austrian independence that would also involve the Balkan powers. Italy sought to safeguard the autonomy of its strategic and colonial positions, preventing the understanding from slipping into a multilateral system capable of harnessing its freedom of action. For this reason, too, Laval postponed discussion of Tunisia and Somalia until his return to Paris, hinting that any further concessions would depend on Italian willingness to converge on the three central issues he had raised.⁹²

At the same time, in a note drafted the same day by Suvich on a meeting he had with De Chambrun, the Italian diplomat outlined to the French Ambassador the remarks contained in a personal note from Mussolini, reiterating the Italian line on the three fundamental points that were hindering the conclusion of the understanding: the Habsburg question, relations with Yugoslavia and guarantees for Austrian independence. Suvich took note of French concerns about the need to reassure the eastern allies, but firmly rejected the idea of involving Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia in the mechanism to protect Austria. In Rome's view, such an arrangement would have damaged precisely Vienna's position, giving it a subordinate role and creating a dangerous precedent in which the smaller powers would gain disproportionate power of influence. For Italy, the principle to follow remained that of a guarantee limited to the major powers-France, England, Italy, possibly extendable to Germany, whose inclusion would have further bound Berlin to safeguard the Central European balance.

On the second node, the Yugoslav one, Suvich recalled Mussolini's intransigence toward any formal declaration in favour of Belgrade at that time. The tensions still open after the Marseilles attack and

⁹² Aloisi a Mussolini, 11 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 275

the diplomatic frictions connected with the expulsion of the Hungarians from Yugoslavia made impracticable a gesture that would be perceived as a unilateral concession.

Rome recalled that assurances had already been given about the absence of aggressive intentions and believed that these were sufficient at the present stage. Forcing a political declaration, according to Italy, would not only have been premature, but would also have jeopardized the possibility of a more balanced future development of relations with Belgrade.

Finally, Suvich proposed to De Chambrun an alternative solution to overcome the impasse: let France and Italy each maintain their ties with their respective areas of influence, France with the Little Entente, Italy with Austria and Hungary, without seeking a joint formalization that would stiffen positions. Rome did not object to Paris unilaterally reassuring its allies but demanded that a similar constraint not be imposed on Italy. The bilateral agreement, in this view, could have been a first step toward a new Danubian balance, but without undermining the spheres of autonomy painstakingly built by each side. De Chambrun took note of the proposal, but insisted how central the issue was to the French position, reserving the right to return to the subject once he received instructions from Laval.⁹³

In this context, in mid-December, France's negotiating position seemed to be hardening and the talks appeared to have reached a virtual deadlock. As emerged from a conversation with Secretary General Léger, Ambassador Pignatti noted a significant change in the attitude of the Quai d'Orsay, which now appeared less inclined to meet Italy's demands. Although Rome's latest proposal, which provided for a German guarantee of Austrian independence that the other states would take note of, was not considered entirely unacceptable, the signals coming from Paris indicated a growing reluctance to conclude the agreement quickly. In particular, Léger strongly remarked that the Italian-French agreement could not be separated from a parallel agreement with Yugoslavia, a position that Pignatti

⁹³ Colloquio tra Suvich e De Chambrun, 11 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 276

openly described as “unrealistic”. France also rejected the Italian proposal to postpone the Tunisian school issue until the ninth year and rejected the request for territorial expansion in French Somalia, showing a clear decline in willingness on all fronts.

Pignatti explained this new coldness with several concomitant factors. On the one hand, England's renewed protagonism on the continent and the international military occupation of the Saar had strengthened Paris' sense of security, reducing the urgency of reaching an agreement with Rome. On the other hand, external pressures were being felt more strongly: the Little Entente, the Balkan Entente, and Russia were working in synergy to push France towards a closed and binding system of alliances, while within the country itself a movement in favour of a direct agreement with Germany was gaining ground, supported both by pacifist circles and by military sectors linked to Yugoslavia. In this complex and rapidly evolving situation, Italy's position risked being marginalized once again, making it urgent to reevaluate the strategy to be adopted in order to conclude the agreement before the international scenario became less favourable.⁹⁴

At the same time, in a conversation on December 14, Suvich found himself once again firmly reiterating Italy's position in the face of increasingly insistent pressure from Paris. Ambassador De Chambrun reported that the French capital, partly under pressure from the Little Entente, continued to call for a multilateral approach to the Austrian question, a softening of relations with Yugoslavia, and even a possible general solution to the Danube problem. The possibility of a public declaration by Austria recognizing the international nature of the Habsburg question was also raised, a further element that would have contributed to transforming the negotiating framework into a multilateral and binding system.

Suvich, in line with the instructions already given by Mussolini and already set out in previous talks, categorically rejected this approach. He reaffirmed that Italy did not intend to be guided by the maneuvers of Czechoslovakia and Romania, who, in his opinion, were trying to exploit the Franco-

⁹⁴ Pignatti a Mussolini, 14 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 288

Italian negotiations to strengthen the position of the Little Entente and bend the agreement to their interests. The Italian line remained as previously outlined: not to subordinate the agreement with France to any form of Balkan mediation or collective guarantee on Austria involving secondary powers. Rome did not intend to compromise on principles it considered essential to preserving its strategic autonomy in the region.

Faced with this intransigence, De Chambrun, while acknowledging Italy's reasons, insisted on a minimal gesture that would help France reassure its eastern allies, who were concerned about a possible shift in the balance of power. He therefore presented, on a strictly personal basis, two modest proposals: to include in the agreement a clause leaving open the possibility of a broader agreement on the Danube basin in the future, based on the principle of non-interference, and to ensure that Laval's visit to Rome coincided with a tangible improvement in relations with Yugoslavia. Suvich, while agreeing to submit the ideas to the Head of Government, suggested that Rome would be unlikely to accept such conditions, remarking that the Italian position was not subject to substantial change.⁹⁵

Despite the persistent impression of deadlock, a few days later there was a new change in the French attitude towards the agreement with Rome, largely attributable to Laval's personal stance. This turnaround made it even more evident that France's negotiating strategy was not fully shared within the executive, the Quai d'Orsay and French institutions.

This can be seen from two separate meetings held on December 20 between the French Foreign Minister and Pignatti in Paris, in which Laval showed signs of a possible softening of the rigid positions he had maintained until then. While in the first meeting, which took place during a diplomatic breakfast, Laval hinted at less insistence on the link between the Italian-French agreement and an agreement with Yugoslavia, in the second meeting at the Quai d'Orsay, the French government's position became clearer. Pignatti took the opportunity to firmly reaffirm that Rome

⁹⁵ Colloquio tra Suvich e De Chambrun, 14 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 293

would never make the agreement with Paris conditional on the signing of a separate agreement with Belgrade. Laval, while maintaining a certain diplomatic rhetoric on the need for a Balkan *détente*, now seemed more focused on the Austrian question, which he himself described as the “most important.”

In particular, Laval hoped that Austrian independence would be guaranteed through an international mechanism under the aegis of the League of Nations, including the Little Entente, but also open to the participation of Germany and Hungary. However, he admitted that neither France nor England would be willing to react with force to a possible German coup, effectively recognizing the limits of the Tripartite agreement of September 27. In this context, the Minister also appeared more flexible on the Yugoslav front, suggesting that a simple declaration of intent by Mussolini, expressing his willingness to improve relations with Belgrade, might suffice as a political signal. He also expressed a keen desire to meet the Italian Head of Government in Rome as soon as possible, a sign of renewed interest in concluding the agreement.

According to Pignatti's analysis, Laval's change of tone indicated his gradual departure from the more rigid line of the Quai d'Orsay, which was strongly influenced by the Little Entente. This change seemed to reflect growing pressure from French public opinion and institutions, particularly the Senate, which were in favour of concluding the agreement with Italy. The visit to Rome therefore loomed as the decisive moment for defining a compromise that, while safeguarding French strategic needs, would respect the red lines decisively drawn by Mussolini and his entourage.

Laval's new attitude was an important signal: without renouncing the strategic objectives of French diplomacy, the Minister seemed to recognize the need for greater flexibility in order not to compromise the entire negotiation. His partial disengagement from the Quai d'Orsay line indicated that the agreement with Italy was now perceived as politically necessary, even at the cost of reducing the influence of the Little Entente. In essence, it was a realistic tactical adjustment aimed at saving

the agreement with Rome without completely abandoning French ambitions in Central and Eastern Europe.⁹⁶

Taking into account those further developments in the situation, the meeting between Suvich and De Chambrun on December 22 confirmed the slow but steady progress of the negotiations, which were now focused almost exclusively on the Austrian question, which had become the real crux of the agreement. The French Ambassador, referring to new instructions received from Paris, reiterated Laval's willingness to travel to Rome, but made the visit conditional on the resolution of the remaining difficulties in the negotiations. In this context, De Chambrun submitted to Suvich, on a personal basis and with reservations, a proposal for a diplomatic formula to break the deadlock in the negotiations. The central element was a joint Franco-Italian declaration reaffirming the need to safeguard Austria's independence and territorial integrity, accompanied by a commitment to bilateral consultations in the event of an external threat.

To complete the proposal, the attached text suggested the possibility of subsequently extending this commitment to a broader pact, open to signature by Austria's neighboring states and all powers interested in participating. In addition to guaranteeing Austrian autonomy, the basis of the agreement also included an obligation for each signatory to prevent activities or propaganda hostile to Viennese independence on its territory. Although not yet a definitive solution, the formula suggested by De Chambrun appeared significantly closer to the Italian position: it avoided any explicit mention of the Little Entente, left room for the conditional inclusion of other actors in the future, and preserved the primacy of the bilateral channel between Rome and Paris⁹⁷.

This opening marked the end of a phase of negotiations characterized by deep tensions but also by a gradual convergence on key elements, which now paved the way for Laval's visit and the formalization of the agreement.

⁹⁶ Pignatti a Mussolini, 20 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 313

⁹⁷ Colloquio tra Suvich e De Chambrun, 22 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 323

The documentation clearly shows how, up to this point, negotiations between Italy and France, despite alternating phases and moments of intense tension, followed a gradual process of convergence. The dialogue focused not only on colonial issues, which were considered central to Rome and the subject of intense negotiations, but above all on the broader European political architecture, in particular the stability of the Danube system and the containment of German expansionism, which was essential for France. It is in this context that the growing importance of the Austrian question should be understood it became the focal point around which attempts were made to build a balance between the respective strategic priorities, with France committed to strengthening ties with the Little Entente and Italy determined to preserve its autonomy of action in Hungary and the Balkans.

The progressive centrality of the Viennese question reflected both shared concerns about a possible Anschluss and the difficulty of reconciling opposing views on the instruments and actors to be involved in guaranteeing Austrian independence. Italy firmly opposed the direct involvement of the Little Entente, considering it humiliating for Vienna and dangerous for its own regional interests. France, on the contrary, repeatedly attempted to link the agreement with Rome to a normalization of Italian-Yugoslav relations and a form of inclusion of its eastern allies. However, thanks in part to the personal mediation of Laval, who was more flexible and pragmatic than other sectors of the Quai d'Orsay, a compromise formula was finally reached, capable of preserving the primacy of the Franco-Italian bilateral channel, leaving the way open, but not binding, for a possible multilateral enlargement.

Ultimately, this phase of the negotiations shows that the agreement between Rome and Paris was not the result of a linear strategy, but rather the outcome of a difficult confrontation between competing logics. As already noted, on the one hand there was Italy's desire to obtain, discreetly, tacit consent to expansion into Ethiopia, which had almost already been approved by the French, and on the other, France's intention to link this "concession" to a broader collective security agreement. The overcoming of differences over Austria and the Little Entente thus marked not only a step forward in the negotiations, but also a delicate balance between two different visions of the European order,

which found common ground in the compromise reached to proceed towards the signing of the agreement.

2.2) Mutual necessities and calculated compromises: negotiating the Franco-Italian Agreement

To understand how the preliminary agreement and Laval's trip to Rome came about, it is necessary to understand how indispensable the agreement was to both Mussolini and Laval himself.

For Mussolini the agreement was absolutely necessary, since without it he would not have been able to initiate his Ethiopian policy and since, on the other hand, the Duce was well aware that the favourable circumstances for carrying out such a policy would not last long, since as soon as Germany had at its disposal an armed force worthy of the name, the European situation would deteriorate irreparably and for Italy there would no longer be any possibility of diverting its attentions and forces from it. Hence Mussolini's willingness to compromise and make concessions to France on a whole range of issues and, ultimately, to run the risk of not accomplishing all that was achievable in order to obtain from Paris the assent in principle to his Ethiopian programs.

By no means, however, should it be believed that for Laval the agreement with Italy was any less necessary and unavoidable. Apart from the fact, already symptomatic in itself, that it is known that Laval, having concluded the agreement, boasted to his government that he had paid less than he had been authorized to grant Mussolini, it is in fact undoubtedly true that Laval had very good reasons for also wanting to conclude the negotiations positively at all costs. As Foreign Minister, he wanted to conclude them because, in the face of Austrian affairs, news of the secret rearmament initiated by Hitler, and the threat that Germany might undermine the French system in Europe, France politically and psychologically needed to feel that Italy was close and an ally, especially since, in many respects, the agreement with Italy could serve Paris to overcome in part at least British reluctance to engage on the continent.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce. Gli anni del consenso 1929-1936* (Torino: Einaudi, 1974), pp. 522,523

In this sense, Laval's policy was not a sudden innovation, but rather the continuation of the strategic orientation traced by his predecessor Louis Barthou. In fact, in 1934, Barthou had established a foreign policy based on strengthening collective security in the East, with the aim of building a multilateral containment system around Germany. Intended to pursue that plan, he relaunched the idea of an "Eastern Locarno Pact" which would have included the USSR, Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the Baltic States, with mutual guarantees of non-aggression and assistance in the event of an attack. Above all, he also decisively opened the door to a rapprochement with the USSR, not only through Soviet admission to the League of Nations, but also by envisaging, if necessary, a bilateral Franco-Soviet agreement in case the regional project with Germany and Poland would have failed.

British mistrust of too close involvement with the USSR and, on the other hand, the refusals of Berlin and Warsaw quickly made it clear that a possible eastern pact would encounter obstacles that would be difficult to overcome; hence the acceleration towards the Soviet Union entry into the League of Nations, in September 1934, was intended as an intermediate step in a broader security architecture. Upon Barthou's death, Laval took up the general approach, but chose a different and more immediate path: while the alliance with Moscow remained a possible instrument to be cultivated to limit Hitler, due to the difficulties that arose from it, it was the understanding with Italy that became the cornerstone of French strategy against Germany. In this sense, the agreement of January 7, 1935, with Mussolini represented not a break, but an adapted continuation of the line already traced by Barthou: to create a cordon sanitaire around the Reich but now securing Rome's support. This further highlights how, despite the change in strategy, France's main objective was to limit in any way possible the German resurgence, which posed an enormous threat to the transalpine country.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *La décadence* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1979), pp. 104-112

In this context, when under Christmas, despite the slow and gradual rapprochement of the previous days, the differences again appeared to be such as to raise fears of a negative outcome of the negotiations, Mussolini's attitude proved particularly indicative. On the one hand, he showed himself willing to accept, at least in principle, the *désistement* formula proposed by Laval for the Ethiopian question; on the other hand, he alternated this willingness with statements in a threateningly allusive tone. This dual register, open on the diplomatic level but unyielding in the defense of his own priorities, confirmed the precise intention of the Head of the Government to reach the conclusion of the agreement quickly and according to conditions considered essential to Italian interests.

Not otherwise can be interpreted the account compiled by Suvich, who was present at the meeting, of a conversation Mussolini and De Chambrun had, on December 27, concerning the state of negotiations.¹⁰⁰

The conversation in fact offers a clear reflection of the phase of adjustment and compromise to which the Italian-French negotiations were heading. The central issue then was the Austrian question, on which Laval had drawn up a new proposal in the hope of aligning the respective positions of Rome and Paris. The French diplomat underscored the effort made by his government, and in particular by Laval himself, to meet Italian demands, for example by waiving the initial request for a gesture of *détente* towards Yugoslavia, which was one of the most problematic conditions for Italy.

Mussolini, while showing willingness to negotiate, put forward some reservations: he asked for a time limit (of 5 or 10 years) to be placed on the guarantee on Austrian independence, to avoid crystallizing a condition of indefinite dependence, and he also suggested eliminating any reference to the League of Nations, which might have offered Germany an alibi to evade the agreement. To this last request, De Chambrun responded by proposing a compromise: the reference to the L.o.N could be kept in the secret agreement, but it did not have to appear in the public *communiqué*. Other issues concerned the structure of the pact itself: Mussolini suggested avoiding multilateral memberships that

¹⁰⁰ R. De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce. Gli anni del consenso*, p. 523

were not strictly necessary, merely defining the agreement as "plurilateral" rather than "international," while Suvich put forward the idea of including Poland in addition to Romania, in order to strengthen the coherence and balance of the diplomatic compact around Austria.

However, beyond the Austrian question, which was the formal framework of the negotiations, the centrality that the colonial game held for Rome emerged particularly clearly in the final part of the meeting. De Chambrun admitted that Paris was well aware of the difficulties connected with Ethiopia, aggravated by the recent accident and the question of the railroad (the Djibouti-Addis Ababa line), for which the shares in French hands would not be sufficient to change the statutes of the concessionary company. On this point, although cautiously, the Ambassador hinted that Laval was personally dealing with the dossier and that a decision was expected shortly from the French Council of Ministers.

Mussolini, for his part, strongly insisted that French concessions concerning Somalia and Eritrea were not marginal elements but constituted the backbone of the agreement. He reiterated how France, already in possession of a vast colonial empire, could afford a gesture of openness toward Italy, which, on the contrary, found itself surrounded, lacking real room for expansion and with only one potential way out: Abyssinia. If even that last possibility was closed, Mussolini asserted in a veiledly threatening tone, Italy could "spoil the party, at least with its restlessness." It was a clear reminder of the instability that Rome could cause in the absence of concrete *quid pro quo*.

With this in mind, the Head of Government urged the precise demarcation of the French zone of commercial influence along the railroad, demanding that Paris disregard the rest of Ethiopian territory completely. The Ambassador assured that he would forward these recommendations to Laval as a matter of urgency, thus confirming that what was most at stake for Mussolini was now East Africa, and that the finalization of the agreement ultimately depended on the guarantees that France would be willing to offer on that front.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Colloquio tra Mussolini e De Chambrun, 27 Dicembre 1934, in: Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *Documenti Diplomatici Italiani*, Settima Serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 341, Roma, Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato

In this light, the proposals for French Somalia clearly had the same purpose as the initial demand for the cession of the entire colony except Djibouti, namely, to allow, on the one hand, penetration into Ethiopia and, on the other, to commit France to an act that would give concrete content to its disinterest in Ethiopia itself. The new proposals, however, did not create interruption of territorial continuity between French Somalia and Ethiopia and therefore did not allow control in case of conflict of the flow of supplies to Addis Ababa, which was one of the objectives of the original Italian request. This drawback was, evidently, to be remedied but only in part by Italian participation in the Djibouti-Addis Ababa railway. The reduced cession now demanded, therefore, had more than anything else the symbolic value of denoting the French intention to disintermediate Ethiopia and thus to consecrate an Italian right to expansion in this direction.¹⁰² On the other hand, there was precisely a fear in France of giving this meaning to the agreement through overt acts, especially after the recent Italian-Ethiopian incidents near the border between Abyssinia and Italian Somalia (at Ual-Ual).

Indeed, Laval wrote to De Chambrun that the general situation created by these incidents had cast suspicion on the Italian-French negotiations in both French and Ethiopian public opinion, so that it was impossible to arrive at the territorial cession demanded by the Italians in the region, and that similar reasons made it doubtful to conclude a protocol defining the area of French economic interest in Ethiopia since such an undertaking, in the light of the Italian-Ethiopian incidents would take on "the character of a partition treaty" and would place France in an embarrassing position the day an Italian-Ethiopian dispute was debated at the League of Nations.¹⁰³

The following day, December 28, the negotiations moved to a more technical and urgent level, with a new meeting between Suvich and De Chambrun, in which the Ambassador formally presented the French drafts and urged an immediate response from Rome.

The French diplomat communicated Laval's growing impatience, determined to travel to Rome as soon as possible, and openly admitted that some of the proposals drafted in Paris were questionable,

¹⁰² Francesco Lefebvre D'Ovidio, 1984. *L'intesa italo-francese del 1935 nella politica estera di Mussolini*. Roma: Tip. Aurelia, p. 453

¹⁰³ F. Lefebvre D'Ovidio, *L'intesa italo-francese*, p.457

the result more of ministerial bureaucracy than of true political alignment, and urged Rome to provide comments and corrections shortly.

The central issue remained the colonial question. France, according to De Chambrun's reports, was under pressure from the Ethiopian government, whose representative in Paris had threatened retaliation against the Franco-Ethiopian railway concession if a stake in the Djibouti-Addis Ababa line was given to Italy. On this point, as well as on the formula for French *désistement* in Ethiopia, Laval preferred to reserve direct negotiations with Mussolini during his visit, avoiding written commitments that might generate international embarrassment.

Suvich, for his part, was skeptical of the general thrust of the French texts: he rejected the idea that a visit to Rome could be talked about in the absence of substantial progress, deeming the concessions he had received on Tunisia, Libya and especially Somalia wholly unsatisfactory. The Italian proposal for a trading port in Tagiura Bay or a free zone in Djibouti had received no response, and even the already scaled-down request for a territorial cession in French Somalia did not appear to have been. As for Ethiopia, Suvich firmly reiterated that Italian participation in the management of the railway and French disinterestedness, except for the delimitation of a circumscribed area of economic interest around the railway line, were indispensable conditions. In this context, he also responded to the French objection that Italian concessions would prompt Addis Ababa to claim the same treatment: according to Rome, Ethiopia could not be equated with a Western power, and its membership in the League of Nations did not erase the "backward" and "primitive" character of its order, still based on slavery.

The guiding principle of the arrangement, Suvich asserted, had to remain clear: France, already rich in colonial possessions, was disinterested in Ethiopia, leaving the field clear for Italian expansion. De Chambrun adhered to this basic approach, but Suvich insisted on the need to translate it into concrete acts before Laval arrived in Rome.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Colloquio tra Suvich e De Chambrun, 28 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 349

The best proof that this was Mussolini's real and main objective is further shown by the fact that, as soon as he was sure that the agreement would be made and that Laval would give him a free hand in Ethiopia, on December 30, even before Laval came to Rome and the agreement was perfected, he practically gave the go-ahead for the concrete preparation of military operations in East Africa.¹⁰⁵

In a highly secret document titled "Directives and Plan of Action to Resolve the Italo-Abyssinian Question," the Head of the Government clearly defined the transformation of the conflict with Ethiopia from a diplomatic problem to a "historical" problem, resolvable only by force. According to his analysis, the increasing centralization of power by the Negus and the work of internal unification, aided also by European missions, were making the Ethiopian Empire progressively more efficient, including militarily. The modernization of the Abyssinian army, in terms of armament and organization, while still incomplete, was proceeding at an alarming pace and, if unabated, would reduce the Italian chances of success. Hence the belief that time was working against Italy, and that it was necessary to act as quickly as possible as soon as the armed forces were ready.

The stated goal was ambitious: the destruction of the Ethiopian armed forces and the total conquest of the country. This was not a punitive expedition, but an imperial enterprise. Mussolini argued that like the other powers, Italy now had an opportunity to act, taking advantage of the fact that Europe, at least in the two-year period 1935-36, would presumably remain quiet. Indeed, the Duce showed confidence that impending agreements with France would deter Berlin from initiatives on Austria, and that Yugoslavia, weakened by internal crisis, would not pose a threat. Germany, still in the process of rearmament and preoccupied with internal problems, was also in no condition to initiate a conflict, while Poland seemed to be moving away from German influence. Everything pointed to a favourable period for Italian expansion outside Europe, according to Mussolini.

¹⁰⁵ R. De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce. Gli anni del consenso*, p. 523

Operationally, the directives were extremely detailed: the use of at least 100,000 metropolitan soldiers was planned, to be flanked by 60,000 indigenous Ascari, the concentration of 250 planes and 150 tanks in Eritrea (plus more in Somalia), absolute superiority in artillery and the use of gas, and a large supply of ammunition. The attack was to start in October 1935, once the recalls and training of the Ascari were completed. Rapid action was hoped for, without even the need to officially declare war, presenting it as a defensive response to Ethiopian provocations. The success of the operation, according to Mussolini, would force a *fait accompli* before serious diplomatic objections were raised. At the same time, the plan called for internal political action in Ethiopia, aimed at fomenting divisions among the Ras and weakening the Negus's home front. On the Italian domestic front, Mussolini was also confident: among the Fascist masses, he argued, the idea of war was now accepted, while hesitations remained only in conservative circles lacking real influence. The Ethiopian knot, he concluded, had to be solved quickly, before it tightened beyond measure: Italy had to seize the historic opportunity to impose itself as a colonial power before it was too late.¹⁰⁶

As Angelo Del Boca points out in his analysis, "reading this document, whose directives everyone will follow for the entire duration of the war, invites us to make a few observations: 1) with the memorandum of December 30, 1934, Mussolini assumed full political responsibility for the enterprise and also for having specified in detail its final objectives, methods of combat, the quantity of resources required, and the type of destructive instruments. He, more than anyone else, must therefore be held responsible for the systematic use of gas; 2) The decision to transform the small colonial war predicted by De Bono into what would later be described as the greatest colonial enterprise of all time reveals Mussolini's intentions to involve the entire country in the conflict and to use the swiftness of a mechanized war to promote the image of a modern, efficient, and unbeatable regime. 3) The timing of the attack on Ethiopia may seem opportune because Germany was not yet strong enough to annex Austria and reach the Brenner Pass, and France was about to re-establish relations with Italy with an

¹⁰⁶ Direttive di Mussolini, 30 dicembre 1934, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 358

agreement that also had military implications. 4) Although it is true that Ethiopia was becoming a centralized and politically more compact state, its rearmament and military efficiency were, at the end of 1934, negligible and in any case did not constitute a danger to Eritrea and Somalia. The exaggeration of this danger only served Mussolini's need to make a conflict that had been secretly prepared over a decade appear urgent and inevitable; 5) in the document, the Duce makes no mention of the economic, demographic, and social arguments that would later be used to justify the aggression. This lack of motivation can be explained by the fact that, in reality, Mussolini did not believe any of these arguments. He based his claims on Ethiopia on purely imperialistic grounds: Ethiopia does not yet have a European master; therefore, it must be occupied before someone else does.¹⁰⁷

This explicit declaration of intent unequivocally confirms, as already analyzed in the previous chapter, how much the Italian strategy towards Ethiopia, and in particular the one conceived directly by Mussolini, was already fully defined, not only on the political level, but also in operational and temporal terms, months before the actual start of hostilities. The conflict, far from being a spur-of-the-moment reaction to local contingencies, had been planned as a deliberate, calibrated and functional intervention in a larger expansionist design.

The preparation of the ground for war, as it is clear from the document of December 30, was along two lines: on the one hand, the systematic internal destabilization of the Abyssinian Empire, through the accentuation of rivalries between the Ras and the exploitation of border tensions, useful in creating a climate of growing instability; on the other, the careful construction of a favourable international diplomatic scenario, centered mainly on the search for an understanding with France.

Within this framework, the war was not only planned, but considered necessary, and had to be waged at the most opportune time, that is, in a time window in which Europe appeared sufficiently stable and disinterested. The choice of 1935 as the crucial year thus reflected a precise strategic assessment, supported by detailed planning on all fronts: military, political and diplomatic.

¹⁰⁷ Angelo Del Boca, *La conquista dell'Impero: L'Italia in Etiopia (1936)*, vol. 2 di *Gli italiani in Africa Orientale* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1979), p. 258

Against this backdrop in the days immediately preceding Laval's official visit to Rome, diplomatic documentation testifies to a significant acceleration in the contacts between the two capitals, with the stated goal of reaching at least a preliminary definition of the main negotiating knots. In particular, two elements emerge clearly from the reports exchanged in the first days of January: on the one hand, the growing pressure exerted by Laval to reach the signing of a broad and formalized agreement; on the other, the Italian desire to consolidate its positions ahead of the Roman talks, aiming to obtain concrete concessions in the colonial sphere.

In fact, on January 1, Pignatti reported that, according to Laval's own statement, the French Minister was willing to go to Rome even in the absence of a final agreement on colonial issues, provided that there was agreement on the minutes (*procès-verbal*) concerning Austria. However, in the course of the day, Laval himself modified his position, more insistently expressing his desire to be able to "signing in Rome established colonial agreements" and explicitly emphasizing his willingness to return from Rome "*avec des papiers signés*" This change in tone underscored the urgency for both governments not to limit themselves to a generic declaration of intent but to move towards at least a partial formalization of the understandings under discussion.¹⁰⁸

At the same time, on January 2, Suvich received from Ambassador De Chambrun a new text concerning the chapter on rearmament, which would become part of the negotiating package under discussion.

The document reaffirmed the principle, already expressed in the December 11, 1931 declaration, of equal rights in armaments, but also stated that no power, including Germany, could unilaterally alter its obligations in this regard. The two governments thus undertook to concert in the event that Berlin decided to escape the existing constraints, and should circumstances permit, to cooperate actively

¹⁰⁸ Pignatti a Mussolini, 1 gennaio 1935, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 364

with a view to a future international arms limitation convention, mutually guaranteeing each other favourable terms with respect to Germany.¹⁰⁹

To supplement this picture, Suvich then transmitted to Pignatti, on the night of January 3, an official summary-drafted by the French Ambassador in Rome and already communicated to the Quai d'Orsay on the evening of December 31 on the overall status of the negotiations. The document was a timely summary of the points of convergence and the reservations still to be overcome.

As for the Austrian minutes (*procès-verbal*), a consensus in principle on the French project was confirmed, with two points still outstanding: on the one hand, the Italian proposal to include Poland; on the other, the reservations raised by Austria and taken up by Rome about the advisability of extending consultations to additional states during the intermediate phase of the agreement's application. On the general consultative pact and the question of disarmament, a substantial understanding between the two delegations was confirmed.

Colonial offsets constituted the most sensitive core of the negotiations. Italy had accepted, in principle, the French proposal for the delineation of the border between Italian Libya and adjacent French territories, as shown on the map delivered by the French embassy but demanded that certain locations considered strategic for the surveillance of the border remain under Italian control.

Similarly, there was agreement in principle on a territorial cession between French Somalia and Eritrea, although Italy judged the size of the ceded portion to be insufficient.

On the Tunisian dossier, there was agreement on the elimination of the Italian mortgage within a set time frame, keeping the 1896 conventions in force for ten years, with a subsequent gradual transformation whose timetable remained to be defined. The same principle applied to other regulatory aspects arising from these conventions, such as educational and cultural matters.

¹⁰⁹ Appunto di Suvich, 2 gennaio 1935, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 373

With regard to East Africa, Rome found the *désistement* formula worked out by Laval acceptable, at least on a preliminary basis, recognizing its diplomatic prudence, but declared the need to review its contents during the planned direct meeting with Mussolini.

Finally, regarding control of the Djibouti-Addis Ababa railway line, Paris had obtained the French group's consent to the sale of 2,000 shares to Italian investors. However, Rome was asking for more effort in this direction, aware of the symbolic and strategic importance of access to the concessionary company. This seemingly technical point actually reflected the Italian attempt to gain concrete positions in the Abyssinian infrastructural fabric, thus strengthening the material preconditions for future political penetration.¹¹⁰

Meanwhile, as the final details of the agreement with France were being refined, the attention of Italian diplomacy focused on the need to inform the other major European powers, particularly Germany, of the now imminent arrangement. The concern of Berlin, already sensitive to Austrian dynamics, was handled with some caution by the Italian side, which wanted to avoid the possibility that the agreement with France could be interpreted as a hostile or exclusionary initiative. In a note dated January 3, Suvich reported a conversation with De Chambrun in which it was agreed that parallel communication to Berlin by both governments was appropriate. The respective Ambassadors to Germany, François-Poncet, on the French side, and Cerruti, for Italy, would thus inform the German authorities of the content of the project concerning Austria and the Danube area, reassuring them of the consultative and cooperative nature of the arrangement.

The Italian line, as emerges from the circular telegram sent on January 3 to the Ambassadors in Berlin, Moscow, Warsaw, Washington and London, was clear: to present Laval's visit as a decisive step in the consolidation of a shared European policy, in which colonial issues were intertwined with questions of security and stability on the continent. The message intended for Berlin particularly

¹¹⁰ Suvich a Pignatti, 3 gennaio 1935, gennaio 1935, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 380

emphasized the relevance of German accession to the pact on Austria as a possible prelude to broader cooperation among the great powers, also on the issue of disarmament. In Warsaw and Moscow, on the other hand, the role of Poland as state interested in Danube balances was highlighted, motivating the Italian proposal to include it in the process.¹¹¹

Further details came from Berlin through Ambassador Cerruti, who, in absence of the German Minister of Foreign Affairs, Von Neurath, relayed the message to official Koepke. The latter, while unable to provide an official reply, recognized the appropriateness and timeliness of the Italian initiative, appreciating its intent not to create *fait accompli*. However, from the telegram of the German Ambassador to Italy, Hassell, a summary of which was read, there also emerged a certain nervousness on the German side, linked to the fear that Germany might be faced with an already defined understanding, compromising its freedom of action.

Cerruti reassured that the negotiations were still open-ended, stressing that the document would be officially shared in the following hours. The overall impression, however, was that Berlin, while cautious, might view the content of the minutes (*procès-verbal*) favourably, as long as it did not openly undermine its policy of defending Austrian independence. Here again, Italian diplomatic action was aimed at building around the understanding with Paris a network of consensus or, at the very least, non-opposition, which was essential to ensure its political viability.¹¹²

On January 4, Cerruti announced that he, together with his French colleague François-Poncet, had officially handed to the State Secretary at the German Foreign Office, Von Bülow, the text of the draft minutes (*procès-verbal*), emphasizing their confidential nature. The German secretary of state, while unable to express a final opinion in the absence of Chancellor Hitler and Minister Von Neurath, manifested an initial favourable judgment, calling the document "very interesting" and hinting that any evaluations might also depend on developments on the Eastern Pact front. Some caution emerged

¹¹¹ Appunto di Suvich, 3 gennaio 1935, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 375; Suvich a Cerruti, Attolico, Bastianini, Rosso, Vitetti, 3 gennaio 1935, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n.376; Suvich a Colonna, 3 gennaio 1935, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 377

¹¹² Cerruti a Mussolini, 3 gennaio 1935, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 378

in relation to the reference to the League of Nations, given the German disengagement from that body, but Cerruti reassured it was a customary formula, with no binding implications. The same Ambassador then reiterated that the step taken by Italy and France was part of the logic of the collaboration initiated with the Four Powers Pact, aimed at broader European stabilization.

Ultimately, the conversation returned the impression that the Italian-French step, while greeted with the usual German caution, had been interpreted as a distensive signal and potentially a harbinger of further negotiating developments.¹¹³

¹¹³ Cerruti a Mussolini, 4 gennaio 1935, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 385

2.3) *The formal accord reached: the Mussolini – Laval Agreements*

Within this now well delineated negotiating framework, the time finally appeared ripe for the arrival of the French Foreign Minister in Rome on the evening of January 4 in preparation for official talks scheduled for the following days. Although some colonial issues, particularly relating to Tunisia and Somalia, still remained formally open, it was clear that, on the eve of the meeting, Mussolini had essentially achieved his main objective: to obtain from Paris an assent, albeit not officially declared, to Italian policy in Ethiopia. The much sought after French *désistement*, that is, a political and strategic disengagement with Abyssinia, had in practice been acquired, and Laval himself was fully aware of this. Indeed, it is not wrong to state how deep down Laval knew, even though France would later try to deny any direct involvement, that granting Italy room for maneuver in East Africa was, in effect, tantamount to giving Mussolini a tacit green light for military intervention in Ethiopia, without, however, openly assuming responsibility for formal support.

It can be said without ambiguity that, during his stay in Rome, Laval gave Mussolini *carte blanche*, in fact recognizing him the widest possible freedom of action, although, on the one hand, he wanted to protect himself by not issuing any clear commitment to that effect and, on the other hand, it is quite likely that he really advised the Duce to use as light a hand as possible. In fact, the Italian diplomatic record clearly shows that Laval had been thinking for years about "hijacking" Italy in Ethiopia and that all the negotiations that preceded and accompanied the Rome agreements were made to revolve on the Italian side around *désistement*; so that it is absurd to think that a politician of Laval's stature and unscrupulousness could equivocate or have illusions of any other kind.¹¹⁴

The text of the *désistement* drawn up on the same January 4 between the Italians and the French in preparation for the Mussolini-Laval talks contained in the series of Italian counterproposals, is

¹¹⁴ Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce. Gli anni del consenso 1929-1936* (Torino: Einaudi, 1974), p. 531

emblematic of this. Indeed, it is clear from it without a shadow of a doubt that the French and therefore Laval knew and, in principle, accepted the Italian point of view.¹¹⁵

Within the framework of the Italian counterproposals, Rome's negotiating approach was clearly outlined, aiming to formalize an understanding on all outstanding issues, including colonial ones. The public part of the document addressed the Tunisian issue, proposing a 10-year extension of the 1896 conventions and a gradual transition on the issue of citizenship and Italian schools. However, it was the classified section on French *désistement* in Ethiopia that was the focus of Italian strategy.

In this secret section, Rome and Paris explicitly recognized the complementary nature of their respective interests in East Africa: Italy in the area of Eritrea and Somalia, France in the Somali Coast and, in particular, in the railway infrastructure between Djibouti and Addis Ababa. The document established, in a cautious but unequivocal formula, that France recognized Italy's pre-eminent position over the entire Ethiopian territory, a statement of extraordinary significance that went far beyond a simple political disengagement. The only exception was French economic interests related to the exploitation of the railway line, which were safeguarded through a bilateral commitment: Paris would not seek political advantage in Ethiopia, and Rome undertook to protect French interests on the railway in all eventualities.

This carefully calibrated formula was, in effect, a green light for Italian expansion, confirming that Laval was well aware of the political significance of the understanding. The language used avoided sensational statements but made it clear that France was renouncing all claims in Ethiopia, implicitly recognizing Italy's right to act freely in the region, as long as French economic prerogatives were respected.

The text also reaffirmed that the above provisions were not intended to nullify pre-existing treaties and agreements, but only to clarify and specify their scope in light of the new understandings. It was

¹¹⁵ R. De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce. Gli anni del consenso*, p. 532

thus a substantial updating of the colonial balances between Italy and France, in which Rome obtained an underlying political consensus, albeit kept secret, to its African enterprise.

Alongside this nodal part, the document also included an account of the remaining differences regarding Libya, French Somalia and the management of the railroad. Regarding Libya, Italy requested that the route proposed by the French be modified to include some strategic centers, considered essential for controlling the territory. The request was based on security reasons, highlighted by both the Ministry of Colonies and Badoglio's opinion that the absence of garrisons would make the area unmanageable and vulnerable to raiders.

On Somalia, Italian criticism focused on the fact that the French proposal for territorial cession lacked strategic value, as it did not expand the border with Ethiopia. They stressed the need to include an area reaching at least as far as Lake Gum to ensure useful logistical access. In addition, Rome rejected the French idea of demilitarizing the ceded territories, deeming such a condition unjustified.

Finally, on the issue of the Djibouti-Addis Ababa railroad, France had given willingness to the transfer of 2,000 shares, but Italy insisted on a larger shareholding, such as to ensure real influence on the board of directors and steering committees. This seemingly technical point was actually closely related to the *désistement*: ensuring an Italian presence in the railroad meant obtaining an instrument of pressure and logistical control that was crucial in view of the now imminent conflict in Ethiopia.¹¹⁶

At this point, the shared goal of the two diplomacies was no longer the definition of the basic political principles, already mostly accepted by both sides, but rather the identification of a legal-diplomatic formula that would make it possible to formalize the understanding without provoking negative reactions either domestically or internationally. The talks about to open in Rome were thus intended to build a formal and presentable framework around a substantive convergence that had already taken place: for Italy, freedom of action in Ethiopia; for France, the strengthening of a European safety net that would limit Germany's ambitions and consolidate the axis with Rome.

¹¹⁶ Controproposte italiane, 4 gennaio 1935, in: Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *Documenti Diplomatici Italiani*, Settima Serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 386, Roma, Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato

Laval, as noted, arrived in Rome on January 4, in the evening; with him was, among others, the secretary general of the Quai d'Orsay, Léger.

The various points of the agreements that he was to finalize with Mussolini had been defined in the course of an almost frenzied succession of meetings (even at night), which from December 27 to the time of the start of the talks between the two politicians, had involved mainly Suvich and Buti on the Italian side and De Chambrun on the French side.

Mussolini and Laval had two official conversations (of which there are accounts compiled by Suvich, who participated in both as well as De Chambrun), but despite the interest of both sides in concluding, these two talks, still did not lead to a final agreement.¹¹⁷

The first official talks between Mussolini and Laval took place on the morning of January 5, from 10 to 11:45 a.m. The meeting opened in a cordial atmosphere: Laval expressed his satisfaction at finally being in Rome, stressing that this visit represented the concretization of a long-standing desire and the crowning achievement of his policy of rapprochement with Italy. Mussolini, for his part, expressed confidence that the confrontation would produce useful results for both countries.

Laval first addressed international political issues, pointing to Germany as the main factor of instability in Europe. In particular, he emphasized the importance of the upcoming plebiscite in the Saar, scheduled for the 13th of January, saying that he had treated the issue objectively while taking French interests into account. He recounted that he had already reached an understanding with the German Ambassador regarding the plebiscite, saying that the issue was virtually settled.

Mussolini shared Laval's analysis, reiterating that the decisive factor would be the extent of the consensus expressed by the voters. Both agreed that once the Saar issue was concluded, German attention would most likely shift to Austria. In this regard, the Duce argued for a guarantee pact for

¹¹⁷ R. De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce. Gli anni del consenso*, p. 524

Vienna, to be limited, however, to a period of ten years, so as to prevent Austria from perceiving itself as indefinitely dependent on outside powers.

Laval responded by expounding his own general idea: lasting pacts, even twenty-five years, that would give future generations a prospect of stability. However, he admitted the validity of the Italian point of view and said he was willing to accept the proposed time limit.

Turning to the subject of German rearmament, Laval recognized that France's passive attitude could no longer hold, and that the issue was becoming more urgent every day. Mussolini shared the analysis and gave a detailed assessment of the state of German armament, saying that Germany was already equipping itself not only with defensive but also offensive means. In his view, the only way to stop rearmament on such a scale would be to physically destroy it with a war, a solution, however, that no one advocated. Mussolini then suggested an alternative strategy: to recognize German rearmament, provided that guarantees were obtained, such as Germany's rejoining the League of Nations and the recognition of a margin of military superiority for the other powers. Laval agreed, although he was aware of the difficulties he would face at home because of public opinion and media.

However, Laval said also that he was willing to force the situation a little in order to reach a reasonable solution, remarking: "it won't happen on its own, but it will happen." Suvich noted how although he did not know Hitler personally, Laval described him as a "great German", albeit one obsessed with certain ideas, some more acceptable than others, and convinced of his own historical mission. Nonetheless, Laval believed that a dialogue with Hitler might eventually be possible, with the aim of building some form of cooperation. Mussolini, for his part, viewed Germany's potential accession to the non-Intervention Pact on Austria as a possible first step toward reestablishing contact with Berlin. Suvich intervened, noting that, in implementing the non-Interference Pact, it would be appropriate to give Germany special treatment, lest it feel that it should be equated with lesser states. Laval agreed and suggested that it should be invited to join first, also for symbolic reasons.

The talks then shifted to the bilateral level. Suvich and Mussolini remarked the points still open in the negotiations: Tunisia, Libya, Somalia and especially Ethiopia. Suvich explained the Italian point

of view on citizenship and education in Tunisia, calling for the maintenance of the principle that all those born in the decade after 1935 should remain Italian. Laval, while favourable in principle, expressed misgivings about the excessive length of the transition. For Libya, Italy asked for minor changes to the boundary line in Tibesti, including locations useful for surveillance. Laval declared that he could not change the line approved by the Council of Ministers, arguing that already two population centers were being ceded.

On Somalia, Suvich called what the French offered "very little," but Laval retorted that these were still significant concessions, not offset by any *quid pro quo*. Suvich disputed, arguing that these concessions served to settle a "credit" accrued by Italy since the end of the war. He reaffirmed that France, on the strength of its mandate over Togo and Cameroon and other acquisitions, had already largely benefited from the postwar environment, unlike Italy which was excluded from several scenarios.

Mussolini brought attention back to the point that was essential to him: obtaining freedom of action in Ethiopia, that is, French *désistement*. Laval agreed wholeheartedly to the principle, although he sought a diplomatic formula that could also be "presentable" in case of future disclosure. Suvich replied that they were already working on drafting such a formula, which would be presented the following day.

In closing, Laval mentioned the Yugoslav question, but postponed it to the second meeting, and mentioned the project of a multilateral Mediterranean Pact. Mussolini was skeptical, asking for clarification as to its real usefulness and the participants involved. Laval admitted that he had no particular reason to press the issue. The two leaders thus decided to adjourn the conversation to the following day, at 10 a.m.¹¹⁸

In the second meeting, held on the morning of January 6, Mussolini and Laval dealt mainly with the sensitive issue of relations with Yugoslavia and the regional implications of the agreement being

¹¹⁸ Colloquio tra Mussolini e Laval, 5 gennaio 1935, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 391

finalized. The French Minister, reporting on conversations he had had with representatives of the Little Entente, conveyed a number of demands and reservations that had emerged on the part of Prague and Belgrade. In particular, Czechoslovak President Benes, through Laval, wished to assure that the internal agreements of the Little Entente were not directed against Italy, but asked for clarification about the possible existence of military arrangements between Rome and Budapest, even soliciting a written statement on the matter.

Mussolini, while refusing to issue formal attestations, categorically denied the existence of offensive alliances, specifying that there were no understandings directed against any countries.

More articulate and peremptory were the remarks coming from Belgrade. Laval reported that Yugoslavia, suspicious of the Italian attitude, continued to perceive an attempt at encirclement and demanded closer consultation on the Austrian question, ruling out the possibility that Italy could unilaterally intervene in Vienna in the event of a crisis. Added to this were rather explicit demands: political compensation for the Marseilles attack, an end to support for Croatian terrorists in Italy, a strict investigation in Hungary and the possibility of extending the protocols signed in Rome in March 1934 between Italy, Austria, and Hungary (a political and economic agreement aimed at containing German expansionism and stabilizing the Danube region) to other Danube countries.

Mussolini, struck by the ultimative tone of the Yugoslav demands, clearly expressed his irritation, reaffirming that a rapprochement with Belgrade would be possible only under favourable conditions and with a change in the Yugoslav attitude, especially with regard to irredentist propaganda. He also stated that any prosecution of those responsible for the Marseilles attack depended on the consistency of the evidence, which France itself would have to provide. Regarding the extension of the Rome Protocols, both Mussolini and Suvich claimed the bilateral and non-replicable nature of those agreements.

In the concluding part of the talks, the two Ministers returned to express the urgency of defining the final details in order to reach a rapid signature. Mussolini again emphasized the strategic value of the French *désistement* in Abyssinia, true keystone of the whole agreement, to which Laval reconfirmed

his readiness, making it clear that, excluding economic interests on the Djibouti railroad, France would not hinder Italian penetration into Ethiopia.¹¹⁹

Parallel to these two talks, a very dense series of contacts between the two delegations was taking place, seeking a definition of the various issues and documents into which the agreement was to be translated. Indeed, it turns out that on January 6, both in the morning and in the afternoon, many points were still in dispute. In fact, it wasn't until the night that the final agreement was reached: after a dinner, offered by Laval at Palazzo Farnese, Mussolini and his host secluded themselves and resolved *tête à tête* the issues still suspended. The next day the agreement was signed, and on January 8 Laval departed for Paris amid great demonstrations of mutual friendship.¹²⁰

With the agreements signed in Rome on January 7, 1935 by Benito Mussolini and Pierre Laval, a long phase of friction and ambiguity in Italian-French relations formally ended, reshaping the scenario of diplomatic collaboration basing on the convergence of interests in Europe and Africa. The agreements consisted of eight main documents, some of them public, others confidential or secret, and covered both the colonial dispute and European strategic issues, particularly the Austrian problem and that of German rearmament.

The first document, a General Declaration, enshrined the willingness of the two governments to strengthen the friendship between the two nations, stating that all previous disputes had been settled, particularly those related to Article 13 of the 1915 London Pact. The parties also pledged to resolve any future disputes through diplomatic channels, or the instruments provided by the League of Nations and international law. The declaration not only symbolically ended the postwar historical dispute, but also provided a cooperative framework for subsequent understandings.

This was followed by a minutes (*procès-verbal*), focusing on the situation in Austria and Danube Europe. France and Italy reaffirmed the principle of non-interference and respect for territorial

¹¹⁹ Colloquio tra Mussolini e Laval, 6 gennaio 1935, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 399

¹²⁰ R. De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce. Gli anni del consenso*, p. 527

integrity, proposing a multilateral convention between Germany, Austria, Italy, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia, also open to Poland, Romania, and France. Pending the signing of this convention, Rome and Paris undertook to consult with each other and with Vienna in the event of a threat to Austrian independence, thus keeping the way open for intervention in an anti-Anschluss function. This document, although expressed in cooperative terms, configured a clear delimitation of Germany's space for action, strengthening the Mediterranean-central bloc around Italy.

The third act, a Confidential Protocol, addressed the issue of German rearmament. The parties reiterated that no power could unilaterally evade its treaty obligations on armament, and pledged to concert their positions should Germany proceed to do so. In addition, they aimed to jointly influence any future general disarmament convention so that the levels envisaged would reflect a position of comparative advantage for Italy and France over Berlin. This document, too, therefore, while maintaining a technical and collaborative guise, was clearly geared toward containing the rise of Hitler's Germany.

On the other hand, the fourth and fifth acts of the agreements, divided in seven different articles, systematically addressed the colonial dispute between Rome and Paris, representing a crucial step in Italy's attempt to obtain concrete recognition for its African ambitions. At the heart of the "Treaty on the Regulation of Mutual Interests in Africa" were three main issues: the definition of Libya's southern border with the neighbouring French colonies; the revision of the border between Eritrea and French Somalia; and Italian recognition of sovereignty over certain strategic territories near the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb.

Firstly, article 2 established a new border between Italian Libya and the French territories of West Africa and Equatorial Africa, starting from the terminal point of Tummo to the intersection between the 24th meridian east of Greenwich and the 18°45' parallel north. The route, described with great topographical precision, involved the use of natural geographical points (high grounds, wadis, and relief features) to define a line which, although a French concession, left strategic sections, such as

the Fezzan–Bardai caravan route, in French territory. It was clear that Paris aimed to preserve a certain control over cross-border mobility, avoiding excessive Italian penetration towards the south.

Article 3 also provided for the appointment of special commissioners by both governments to carry out the final demarcation on the ground, starting from the theoretical route defined in the previous article. These commissioners would also have the task of drawing up common regulations for the management of the border area, particularly with regard to the local police, access to water resources, and the use of pastures by indigenous populations, emphasizing that the day-to-day management of that region was a sensitive issue of sovereignty and public order.

The next Articles (Articles 4–6) focused on the border between Italian Eritrea and the French Somali Coast. In particular, Article 4 provided for the revision of the border established by the Protocols of Rome of January 24, 1900, and July 10, 1901, replacing it with a new straight line running from Der Eloua (on Bab-el-Mandeb) to Oued Welma, just downstream from the point called Daadato. In this case too, the redefinition of the territory, although limited in extent, had significant strategic implications, as it strengthened Italian control over a strip of territory close to one of the world's most important maritime routes.

Article 5 replicated the mechanism provided for Libya: the concrete delimitation of the border would be entrusted to technical commissioners from both countries, who would also be responsible for proposing common rules for the management of security and economic activities along the border. The aim was to avoid conflicts between the Italian and French colonial authorities and to regulate the use of natural resources by local populations.

Article 6, on the other hand, established an important political recognition: France formally recognized Italian sovereignty over the island of Doumeirah and the adjacent islets, located at the entrance to the Red Sea, near the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. This recognition was particularly significant because Doumeirah, although small in size, had considerable strategic value for the control of international maritime traffic through the strait and therefore represented a significant piece in the Italian imperial project in East Africa.

To complete this section, entitled in the fifth part of the document, a secret protocol annexed to the treaty, formally committed Italy not to alter the strategic layout of this coastal area. In particular, Rome undertook not to change the existing situation with regard to fortifications and military installations, both along the Eritrean coastline covered by Article 4 and on the islands and islets recognized by Article 6. This commitment was clearly intended to reassure France and, indirectly, the United Kingdom, that access to the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, essential for British and French imperial communications, would not be threatened by Italian militarization of the coastal stretch. Finally, on the sixth act, the two governments, agreed on the following basis for settling the Tunisian question. First, it was agreed that the conventions and annexed documents then in force would be maintained without modification until March 28, 1945. Only from that date would a gradual return to common law begin, marking the beginning of the transition to full subjection to the French legal regime. With regard to citizenship, the new convention would have provided that all children of Italians born in Tunisia up to March 28, 1945 would remain Italian citizens. Those born between March 28, 1945, and March 27, 1965, would also be considered Italian, but would have had the option of opting for French citizenship within one year of reaching the age of majority. This option could also have been exercised earlier, from the age of 16, with the consent of legal guardians.

After March 28, 1965, however, all those born to Italian parents in Tunisia would have been subject to the French nationality legislation in force in Tunisian territory.

As for the royal Italian schools in Tunisia, the convention would have allowed them to be maintained until March 28, 1955. After that date, they would be transformed into private institutions, subject to French school laws. However, it was specified that this legislation could in no way worsen the conditions of the Italian schools compared to the legislation in force at the time of signing. In addition, the necessary administrative authorizations to allow the continuation of school activities even after their transformation would be issued in a timely manner, to avoid interruptions in the operation of the institutions. In addition, all Italians who, prior to March 28, 1945, had been duly authorized to practice a liberal profession in Tunisia, such as that of lawyer, doctor, pharmacist, midwife, or architect, would

retain the right to continue to exercise that activity for the duration of their lives, regardless of future legislative changes.¹²¹

Italy, therefore, with this system was definitively giving up its mortgage on Tunisia, effectively accepting the French approach to the negotiations.

However, despite Italy's modest territorial acquisitions, it was clear that it was the French "disengagement" in Ethiopia the real counterpart offered by Laval.

This disengagement, formalized in the exchange of confidential letters between the two leaders which consist of the seventh and eighth parts of the agreements, stipulated that France would not seek any political or territorial advantage in Ethiopia outside of economic interests related to the Djibouti-Addis Ababa railway, Italy, in turn, pledged to respect those interests.

Although drafted in negative and technically ambiguous terms, the text implied a French consent to Italian freedom of action in the entire Ethiopian territory, as shown by the fact that Mussolini regarded this passage as the essential guarantee for proceeding with his imperial offensive.

There can be no doubt that the disinterest shown by France in almost the entire Ethiopian territory had a much deeper meaning than a mere economic recognition in favour of Italy.

Indeed, it was unthinkable that Rome would abandon its historic mortgage on Tunisia, based on solid legal arguments, in addition to the claims made under Article 13 of the London Pact, as well as the claims on the Libyan hinterland and the entire French Somalia, unless in exchange for a substantial political concession. And on the Italian side it was made unequivocally clear that this *quid pro quo* was to take the form precisely of freedom of action in Ethiopia.¹²²

Although the text of the exchange of letters did not explicitly mention a French *désistement* in Abyssinia, it entailed a redefinition, in favour of Italy, of the respective areas of political influence on the basis of the clauses in the Tripartite Treaty of 1906, an agreement between France, Great Britain

¹²¹ Testo accordi Italo-Francesi, 7 gennaio 1935, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 403

¹²² F. Lefebvre D'Ovidio F., *L'intesa italo-francese*, p. 461

and Italy aimed at guaranteeing the independence and territorial integrity of Ethiopia, while establishing a division into zones of political and economic influence in the event that such integrity could no longer be maintained.

The negative wording chosen for the declaration allowed France not to be fully compromised in the event that its contents were made public, or an Italo-Ethiopian dispute was opened at the League of Nations, so that, as pointed out earlier, it would not come across as a full-fledged partition treaty even in light of recent tensions between Italy and Ethiopia. However, that very wording, far from limiting Italian interests to the economic sphere alone, left room for a much broader political understanding. So, although France through this formula sought to limit its responsibilities in the event of an Italo-Ethiopian conflict, in light of the instructions sent by Laval to De Chambrun, of the talks with Mussolini and of all the diplomatic work carried out in the preceding months, it is clear that the French authorities had in fact fully understood, and in essence accepted, that Italy would attempt to alter the Ethiopian status quo, as it was already attempting to do, thus activating the mechanism for dividing spheres of influence outlined in the agreements and consequently having a pretext for war.¹²³

Overall, the understanding reached between Italy and France in the early days of 1935 represented the point of convergence between two political agendas strongly conditioned by the European and colonial context. If for Mussolini the top priority was to obtain substantial freedom of action in Ethiopia, with a view to an imperialist expansion already planned in detail, for Laval the urgency was to secure Italy's support in an anti-German function, especially in light of growing tensions over Austria and German rearmament. Both leaders understood that an agreement was not only desirable but imperative and were therefore willing to negotiate intensively to reach an understanding that would safeguard the strategic interests of their respective nations.

¹²³ F. Lefebvre D'Ovidio F., *L'intesa italo-francese*, p. 463

Within this framework, the French disengagement in Ethiopia, formally disguised as a prudent demarcation of economic interests along the Djibouti-Addis Ababa railway, assumed decisive political value. The so-called *désistement*, though drafted in ambiguous and indirect terms, was understood by Rome as an implicit authorization to proceed towards armed intervention, and by Paris as an acceptable sacrifice to avert Italy's rapprochement with Germany. Diplomatic documents and internal instructions, however, leave little doubt that France was fully aware of the direction Italy was taking, and that this concession was seen as the price to be paid to strengthen the Mediterranean front. In this tacit exchange of priorities, Ethiopia for Italy, German revival for France, a new season in bilateral relations was emerging, based on a logic of parallel compensations rather than on a genuine strategic alliance. The compromise was made possible by a common desire to avoid irreversible ruptures in the European system and to buy time with respect to international uncertainties. However, the deliberately opaque nature of the *désistement* and the absence of an explicit commitment on the French side left open margins of ambiguity that would weigh, in no small measure, in the subsequent international dispute provoked by the Ethiopian campaign.

Chapter III

**FROM DIPLOMACY TO WAR: THE OUTCOMES OF THE AGREEMENTS AND THE
PATH TO THE CONFLICT**

3.1) Post-Agreements strategy: controlled management ahead of military action

The signing of the Italian-French agreements on January 7, 1935, marked for Italy the entry into a new phase of its expansionist strategy, characterized by a decisive acceleration toward the implementation of military intervention in Ethiopia. If in the previous months Rome had focused its efforts on building a favourable diplomatic framework, culminating in the French *désistement*, attention now shifted to the operational level. Contextually, in the period immediately following the signing, Italy faced reactions, from other European powers, particularly Great Britain.

In this context, the Italian government began with increasing determination the preparation for war, planned for the fall of 1935. One of Rome's first objectives was to prevent the Ual-Ual incident, from being discussed in the Council of the League of Nations. The Italian strategy aimed to keep the issue confined to the bilateral or at most the tripartite level (with France and England), preventing it from taking on an international dimension that could have slowed or hindered military action. In essence, Italian diplomacy strove to prevent the internationalization of the crisis, considering any attempt at collective resolution a potential obstacle to the realization of the primary objective: the conquest of Ethiopia.

This attitude, aimed at containing the issue within controllable margins, was an integral part of the broader Italian strategy, based on timing: Mussolini was aware that the favourable conditions, on the European and colonial levels, would not last long. Therefore, it was necessary to act quickly, consolidating on the ground what had been achieved on the diplomatic level, before geopolitical changes or international pressures made the colonial enterprise unfeasible.

It is crucial at this point to emphasize two fundamental aspects of the Italian strategic vision at a time when, immediately after the signing of the Rome Accords, the government was beginning to translate its African campaign into concrete acts. First, it should be made clear that at Palazzo Chigi, where the decision was conceived, matured and directed, the entire ruling group, Mussolini in the lead,

embarked on the Ethiopian enterprise with the profound conviction that neither France nor even Britain would offer any real resistance to Italian action. Motivating this confidence was the realization that both governments were too interested in maintaining the European balance and cooperation with Italy to seriously jeopardize relations with Rome.

On the other hand, it was precisely in those political circles that the primacy of Italian interest in Ethiopia had long been recognized, more or less explicitly: repeated diplomatic signals suggested that future Italian expansion was considered not only possible, but to some extent inevitable.

At the same time, however, the conviction of the need to maintain coordination with the two European powers was also strong: Rome did not intend to act in isolation, but rather to build its African offensive as part of a broader understanding. Even when, in the course of 1935, the situation spiraled out of control at first and the crisis degenerated into a heated political and media clash with Britain, and to a lesser extent with France, these two convictions remained firmly rooted in the Italian strategic line. While the first conviction fueled the so-called "calculated risk" on which Mussolini based his decision to proceed toward war anyway, even at the cost of violating international law and defying the League of Nations, the second conviction was never entirely abandoned: to avoid definitive ruptures with London and Paris.

This explains why, despite the tensions, Italy avoided irreversible moves, such as leaving the League of Nations, which would have closed any future room for maneuver.¹²⁴

Secondly, it is equally relevant to note how, even after the completion of the conquest of the Empire, when it was now clear that the whole affair had developed in a far more conflictual and unpredictable way than had been anticipated, within Italian diplomacy, both among career officials and, to some extent, among Fascist exponents, the idea continued to prevail that the break with London was not irreversible. Even Mussolini, albeit amid fluctuations, ambiguities and sudden subjective outbursts, seemed convinced that it was still possible to mend fences with Britain and, in perspective, with

¹²⁴ Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce. Gli anni del consenso 1929-1936* (Torino: Einaudi, 1974), p. 601

France as well. Of course, the Popular Front government in Paris hindered a rapprochement at the moment, but there was confidence that France would eventually follow the British line. In this view, Italy had not yet made a definitive field choice: it remained poised between a possible alignment with London as an anti-German function and Mussolini's ambition to assume a decisive role in future European balances, acting as an arbiter among the great powers. In this sense, the Ethiopian War, although it profoundly altered the context, was not seen by Italy, and in particular by Mussolini, as a point of no return, but as a passage that, if skillfully managed, could have strengthened Italy's international position, allowing it to relaunch its relations from a position of strength.¹²⁵

Against this backdrop were the reactions of the major European powers to the agreement just concluded between Rome and Paris. Particularly significant were the British ones, since the United Kingdom was the only country to be made aware of the clauses concerning the disarmament protocol and after some time also of the exchange of confidential letters concerning Ethiopia. The neutrality assumed by France on the Abyssinian question, in fact, constituted an essential element for Mussolini and could find a real counterbalance only in the attitude of London, on which the Italian room for maneuver depended to a large extent. At the same time, the reactions coming from Nazi Germany, although not directly related to the colonial enterprise, were also of strategic importance, since the containment of German power represented one of the implicit but fundamental objectives of the Italo-French understanding.

With regard to the British position, it is important to note that, as Quartararo points out in his analysis, London was not taken by surprise but "had been well aware of Italy's intentions for some time. If a frank discussion was not sought, either then or later, this was for a number of reasons. Perhaps the British hoped that expansion into Ethiopia would be limited to tolerable levels on the initiative of the French, but this is unlikely, because it was well known that the price of the agreement between Rome

¹²⁵ R. De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce. Gli anni del consenso*, p. 602

and Paris would be the preservation of Austria's independence, in which France was much more interested than Great Britain, as opposed to the end of Ethiopian independence. However, London may have harbored this hope, which was reinforced by a report from, the British Ambassador in Italy, Drummond on January 8, which stated that while Laval and Mussolini appeared happy with the agreement that had just been signed, their respective colonial experts and diplomatic corps were clearly dissatisfied. Nevertheless, although between October 1934 and January 1935 London chose to ignore Italy's plans for Ethiopia, immediately after the Ual-Ual incident the Foreign Office took care to reassure the Negus that he enjoyed the unconditional support of the United Kingdom. In reality, London intended to maintain *de facto* control over Ethiopia but remained passive in the face of Italian preparations for reasons of international order.

In addition to the Austrian question, there was another issue of primary importance, the resolution of which required Italian mediation: that of the Saar. This problem had a profound effect on the British attitude and on London's long silence on the Abyssinian affair. Furthermore, although there had long been frictions between Italy and Great Britain in the Red Sea, Malta, the Middle East, and Ethiopia itself, it should be noted that the "Ethiopian scam" only became an international problem after the League of Nations became involved. Before then, like all other Mediterranean issues, Ethiopia remained confined to the background of Italian-British relations.

Finally, it should be borne in mind that one of the fundamental principles of the Foreign Office was to resolve issues one at a time, in order of importance. First, therefore, there was the question of the Saar. Then came compulsory conscription in Germany and the resurgence of the Austrian problem, which subsequently required the Stresa front. It was inevitable that the Ethiopian question would be last on this scale of priorities."¹²⁶

¹²⁶ Rosaria Quartararo, *Roma tra Londra e Berlino. La politica estera fascista dal 1930 al 1940*. (Roma: Jouvence, 2001), pp.126,127

In light of this, the document drafted by Buti on January 8, 1935, represents a crucial step in the delicate phase of political and diplomatic management that followed the signing of the Rome Accords. It precisely defined the communication strategy to be adopted with respect to the various contents of the Italo-French understanding, distinguishing what could be publicly disclosed from what had to remain confidential or even secret. The guiding criterion was the protection of the political effectiveness of the agreement and, above all, the safeguarding of the Italian position in the European framework, avoiding that the full publication of the protocols could provoke undesirable reactions from outside powers, primarily the United Kingdom and Germany.

In detail, it was decided that the general declaration and texts concerning the settlement of the African borders, including the agreements on Libya, Eritrea and Tunisia, could be made public without difficulty. In contrast, the annexed protocol concerning free passage in the Bab El-Mandeb Strait and, even more, the secret letters on the French *désistement* in Ethiopia and on Italian participation in the Djibouti-Addis Ababa railway were to remain strictly confidential.

For the latter, however, an attenuated formula was agreed upon to be communicated to the press and other governments, which referred in general terms to the intention to strengthen economic cooperation between the two countries and the development of relations in their respective and neighbouring territories.

Special attention was paid to the disarmament protocol, which touched on a central issue in the European strategic balance: the rearmament of Germany. This was a sensitive document, sanctioning the understanding between Italy and France that it was impossible for any power whose armed regime had been defined by treaties to unilaterally release itself from these obligations. In this regard, it was agreed to communicate it in full and in strict confidence only to the British government, stressing its confidentiality and asking that its contents be kept protected. To the remaining governments, on the other hand, as well as to the press, a concise and generic version would be provided: the principle of equal rights, the condemnation of unilateral arms violations, and the commitment of Rome and Paris to consult each other in the event of such eventualities would be reiterated. Where necessary, the

understanding could have been presented as a simple verbal agreement, thus avoiding excessive exposure on a potentially explosive issue.¹²⁷

This set-up shows how Italian diplomacy, in full coordination with French diplomacy, had devised a multilevel "direction" of communication: public, confidential and secret. Each channel was calibrated according to the target audience and the interests to be protected. The main objective was to consolidate the advantages gained in Rome, primarily the French green light on Ethiopia, without provoking negative reactions that could have compromised Italy's already advanced military preparations.

In parallel, signs of irritation were coming from Berlin. Italian Ambassador Cerruti informed Mussolini that the German Foreign Minister, Von Neurath, while maintaining an officially cautious attitude, had expressed concern that Germany might be facing a *fait accompli*. The sticking point concerned in particular the so-called "pact for Austria," that is, the commitment of France and Italy to protect the independence of the Danubian state. The tension was aggravated by some differences in the texts communicated separately by the Italian and French Ambassadors, particularly over Austria's role in future consultations and the possible involvement of the Little Entente. Cerruti, together with his colleague François-Poncet, therefore suggested that a final, agreed version of the minutes be sent to Berlin to show that negotiations were still ongoing and that nothing had been imposed on Germany unilaterally. The goal was to gain time and contain the German reaction, especially in view of the plebiscite in the Saar.¹²⁸

Meanwhile, Suvich completed the picture with a series of detailed instructions addressed to all Italian diplomatic representations. The minutes on Austria and Central Danube Europe were to be transmitted confidentially to European governments, emphasizing the cooperative nature of the agreement and, where provided, urging adherence to the principles of the proposed multilateral convention. Similarly, a double line of communication was also prepared for the disarmament

¹²⁷ Buti a Suvich, 8 gennaio 1935, in: Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *Documenti Diplomatici Italiani*, Settima Serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 413, Roma, Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato

¹²⁸ Cerruti a Mussolini, 11 gennaio 1935, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 431

protocol: full and confidential transmission only to the British government, simplified and de-emphasized formula for all others, with the possibility of presenting it as an informal understanding. Taken together, these documents offer clear evidence of the thoroughness with which the phase immediately following the Rome agreements was handled. Italy, aware of what was at stake and of the international implications of the concessions obtained, sought to preserve the solidity of the understanding with France, while reassuring Britain and keeping open a channel of dialogue with Germany. At a stage when preparations for military intervention in Ethiopia were entering the thick of the action, differentiated management of communication was an essential tool for maintaining the delicate European diplomatic balance.¹²⁹

Within the framework of the communication strategy initiated in the aftermath of the signing of the Rome Accords, a further decisive step was the Italian government's intention to inform Britain confidentially about the exchange of secret letters that had taken place between Mussolini and Laval regarding Ethiopia on January 7, the real centerpiece of the agreements.

This initiative, formalized in the January 25, 1935, with telegrams addressed to the Ambassadors in Paris and London, was intended to guard against possible British reactions, in the knowledge that Britain's position would be decisive for future Italian moves in the Horn of Africa.

Mussolini, while aware of the delicacy of the operation, believed it was appropriate that it was Italy, and not France, that first communicated the content of the secret understanding, enhancing its direct connection with the Tripartite Agreement of 1906. This legal-constitutional reference allowed the agreement to be presented as a mere technical application of an already existing understanding, rather than as a unilateral partition initiative. The message was clear: Italy was not violating any international balance, but was moving within an established legal framework, respecting the interests of the other powers, France and Britain above all.

¹²⁹ Suvich agli ambasciatori, 11 gennaio 1935, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n.432,433

Specifically, the exchange of letters defined, on the basis of the 1906 Treaty and ancillary agreements, the limits within which France would restrict its interests in Ethiopia, recognizing Italy a wide margin of action. In fact, France declared that it would not pursue any interests in Ethiopia other than those of an economic nature, mainly related to rail traffic along the Djibouti-Addis Ababa line, within a geographically delimited area. Contextually, the Italian government undertook to respect these interests and the rights already acquired by French citizens or *protégés* in those areas.¹³⁰

The communication of these elements to the British government, which Mussolini wanted to take place through Ambassador Grandi in London, was to be presented as a gesture of transparency and cooperation. The purpose was twofold: to reassure London that the agreement did not violate British interests in East Africa and at the same time to probe its real intentions with respect to a possible Italian offensive in Ethiopia. Indeed, Mussolini considered it essential to prepare the diplomatic ground in advance so that future Italian action would be received, if not with approval, at least with some tolerance.

Confidentially, in an important document also dated January 25, Mussolini confided to Grandi Italy's real goal: the final resolution of the "Ethiopian question," which could take place through the establishment of direct rule or in more flexible ways, depending on developments. Military preparation was already underway, with the goal of being operational by autumn. Outwardly, however, Rome intended to maintain a peaceful and cooperative language: the intention to strengthen economic penetration and to develop, in compliance with the 1928 Italian-Ethiopian treaty, forms of cooperation for the progress of the region, was stressed.

Mussolini then suggested that a balanced narrative be presented to British Foreign Minister Simon: Italy wished to act peacefully but found itself hindered by an increasingly closed and hostile Abyssinian government, as evidenced by the numerous episodes of tension, from the attack on the Italian consulate in Gondar to the Ual-Ual incident. Should these hostile attitudes continue, Rome

¹³⁰ Mussolini a Pignatti, 25 gennaio 1935, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 490

would consider taking more forceful measures to protect its interests and contribute to the stabilization of the region, also in line with British interests.

Through this diplomatic maneuver, Italy aimed to lay the groundwork for tacit consent or at least benevolent abstention on the British side, seeking to forestall any condemnatory or restraining initiative that might jeopardize imminent armed intervention. At the same time, the centrality of tripartite collaboration and the common interest in East African stability were reaffirmed in both London and Paris, keeping alive the pretense of diplomatic coherence even in view of an aggression now planned in detail.¹³¹

Confirming this climate of cooperation, on the 26th, the Italian Ambassador in Paris, Pignatti, conveyed to Mussolini, Laval's full assent for the R. Embassy in London to proceed with the confidential communication to Minister Simon about the exchange of letters on Ethiopia. Laval declared himself in favour of the Italian proposal and, indeed, spontaneously added that, during his next talks in London, he would reiterate the spirit of the Rome Agreements, seeking to foster a positive British understanding of Italian aspirations in Abyssinia. Pignatti also added that, from the words of Laval himself, it had seemed evident that the latter had already informally anticipated to Simon the general content of the secret understanding and had also tried to steer its attitude in a favourable direction to Italy. Even on the British side, therefore, an attempt was being made, at least to the extent possible, to create a climate of diplomatic readiness, useful in facilitating the fulfillment of Rome's imperial strategy.¹³²

Talks between Grandi and Simon concerning the Italian-French pact began on January 29, 1935, in London. In these conversations, as indicated in the telegram sent by the Ambassador himself to Mussolini on January 30, he formally conveyed to the British government the contents of the secret

¹³¹ Mussolini a Grandi, 25 gennaio 1935, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 492

¹³² Pignatti a Mussolini 26 gennaio 1935, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 494

Italian-French understanding on Ethiopia, on the direct instructions of the Head of the Government, and with the prior assent of France.

Simon carefully received the communication, stating that he had already been informed in Geneva by Laval, who had even shown him the delimitation of the French zone of interest on a map. Despite this, the British exponent reserved further study after the Foreign Office had examined the document but hinted at the possibility of new talks on the subject. At this preliminary stage, Grandi reiterated Italy's willingness to maintain a dialogue with London in order to achieve full harmonization of British and Italian interests in Ethiopia, emphasizing the need for trilateral cooperation between Rome, Paris and London.¹³³

However, as reported by Quartararo in her work, it appears that before this formal communication and even before Laval informed the British, Grandi had already spoken to Simon “verbally” and “in secret” on this subject before his trip to Geneva on the 25th, giving him a detailed account of the Italian-French agreements thus defining it as a convergent action. In those conversations, Grandi reported to the British what the Duce had told him earlier that day about the situation in Ethiopia and the Italian position and with regards to the French and, especially, British interests.¹³⁴

This passage demonstrates once again Mussolini's dual strategy. On the one hand, he still aimed to present his expansionist ambitions in Ethiopia as “peaceful” and “mainly economic,” to England, while on the other hand, the armed option, which had already begun to develop through extensive preparations, was an extremely concrete solution, if not the preferred one.

In the subsequent report dated February 1, Grandi offered an overall assessment of the British attitude, clearly outlining the concerns raised during the meetings. The Italian Ambassador reported how, while Simon and Vansittart showed interest and willingness to explore Italian proposals in an interlocutory manner, there was no lack of signs of distrust, especially with respect to Italy's real

¹³³ Grandi a Mussolini, 30 gennaio 1935, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 510

¹³⁴ R. Quartararo, *Roma tra Londra e Berlino*, pp. 147,148

intentions in Ethiopia. In particular, Simon expressed some disquiet from the outset about the political scope of the Franco-Italian understanding and its possible developments, going so far as to raise the issue of the transit of war materiel bound for Ethiopia through British Somalia.

Although this was still a hypothetical request from private firms, Simon emphasized that if the conditions of the 1930 Anglo-Italian treaty, on colonial and commercial matters in the region, were met, the British government could not legally oppose it.

Grandi, firmly, replied that such an attitude, while justified legally, was unacceptable politically and morally, as it was contrary to the spirit of cooperation among the great European powers. He emphasized how Italy, while acting within its international commitments, was firmly intent on defending its vital interests in Africa, which were threatened by the hostile policy of the Abyssinian government.

In talks with Vansittart, Grandi broadened the discourse, recalling how in the past Italy had repeatedly facilitated British requests in areas of common strategic interest, such as the Persian Gulf and Afghanistan, by interpreting treaty obligations with elasticity. He reiterated that a collaboration between Italy and Britain on Ethiopia could not be limited to the mechanical application of legal clauses, but required political coordination inspired by common goals of stabilizing the area and countering the xenophobic and bellicose drift of the Addis Ababa regime.

Grandi observed how, beyond the official formulas, there was palpable concern in British circles that Italian policy in East Africa might take more radical contours than stated, and that the understanding with France might be a prelude to a unilateral action of conquest against Ethiopia. Although London did not formally express any opposition, it clearly transpired that it intended to keep a close watch on developments in order to safeguard both the regional balance and Ethiopia's formal independence, two elements that the British government still considered central to its African policy.

In light of all this, the impression that emerges from Grandi's reports is twofold: on the one hand, there was some openness to dialogue on the British side, at least on the tactical level; on the other hand, substantial doubts remained about the compatibility between Italian ambitions and British

interests. London appeared intent on using the time gained to observe Italian moves and assess whether Rome's proposed cooperation could really contribute to a concerted management of the Ethiopian crisis or whether, on the contrary, it would lead to a dangerous destabilization of the region.¹³⁵

To complete the diplomatic picture that emerged in the weeks following the Mussolini-Laval agreements, a further significant piece was provided by the lengthy report also sent by Grandi himself on February 4, 1935. In it, the Ambassador, having already reported by telegraph on his conversations with Simon and Vansittart, communicated in detail the atmosphere and the deeper, even psychological, implications of the London meetings. Grandi signaled the growing British conviction that Italian ambitions in Ethiopia went far beyond what was officially declared by Rome, an impression reinforced also by the French initiative to anticipate in Geneva, through Laval, the contents of the secret understanding on their respective spheres of influence. In his view, precisely to counter these perceptions, it would have been useful to provide the British with the text of the exchange of letters in full, showing openness and transparency in order to "put to sleep" any mistrust, avoiding London's turning to Paris to obtain a copy.¹³⁶

The account also highlighted Laval's enthusiasm for the meeting with Mussolini, impressed by both the Duce's personal conduct and the spirit of the fascist regime observed during his stay in Rome. In parallel, Grandi analyzed the dynamics associated with a proposed Mutual Air Assistance Pact, which originated from a French initiative and was later reformulated as a multilateral agreement between the powers signatory to the Treaty of Locarno. In this context, the problem of Italy's position arose forcefully: although not directly interested in the geographical scope of "Western Europe," Rome could not be excluded from a European security system in which it now played a central role. The British interlocutors, realizing the political risks of a possible Italian exclusion, were open to the hypothesis of a bilateral Italo-British clause complementary to the general pact.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Grandi a Mussolini, 1 febbraio 1935, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 523

¹³⁶ Grandi a Mussolini, 4 febbraio 1935, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 536

¹³⁷ Grandi a Mussolini, 4 febbraio 1935, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n. 345

The proposed Mutual Air Assistance Pact, indeed, although not directly related to the Italian strategy for Ethiopia, highlights how, even as a result of the understanding with France, Italy had acquired a more prominent role in the European chessboard. While remaining a second-tier player compared to France, England and Germany, Rome was now seen as a power to be accountable to and involved in major diplomatic developments and ongoing multilateral initiatives.

Overall, diplomatic correspondence from the early months of 1935 clearly shows Italian activism in defining its room for maneuver, both in Europe and in the Horn of Africa. The understanding with France had been the starting point for a broader strategy based on seeking benevolent neutrality, if not outright complicity, from the great powers toward the colonial project in Ethiopia. But just as Rome was moving on the terrain of multilevel diplomacy to consolidate its achievements, the first cracks began to appear in the fragile balance built between European capitals. With the emergence of latent tensions, mutual suspicions and divergent strategic visions, the end of the negotiating phase and the beginning of the openly confrontational phase, which would lead to the outbreak of the Ethiopian War in the fall of that year, was rapidly approaching.

As it is clear from the intense diplomatic activity carried out by Italy in the weeks immediately following the signing of the Mussolini-Laval agreements, the attempt of the fascist government to consolidate and direct its international relations toward the ultimate goal of the conquest of Ethiopia emerges unequivocally. Documentation from that period shows how the understanding reached with France had in fact represented a political green light for Italian colonial action; with French *désistement* now guaranteed, the last real obstacle standing in the way of the African enterprise remained the attitude of the British government, the authentic needle in the balance in the Abyssinian question.

It is precisely in this perspective that the constant and accurate channel of communication maintained by Rome with London should be read. Italian diplomacy, while formally having already planned the armed intervention, took care to inform the British government almost completely and transparently

about the contents of the agreement with France, almost as if England were called upon to assume the role of "external arbiter," whose tacit assent could have legitimized the entire operation.

This strategy reveals one of the fundamental constants of Fascist foreign policy at this juncture: the parallel management of two levels of action, one diplomatic and one operational. On the one hand, once French neutrality had been obtained, the aim was to get from London at least benevolent disinterest, or at any rate to avert a hostile reaction from the Foreign Office; on the other hand, military organization on the ground continued unabated, with the aim of being able to start war operations by the fall of 1935, according to the timetable set by Mussolini.

The Ethiopian war, as it has been pointed out, had in fact already been decided months earlier: the diplomatic activities that took place in the early months of 1935 were therefore not aimed at avoiding the conflict, but rather at containing its possible repercussions at the international level. In particular, dialogue with London was aimed at avoiding excessive internationalization of the crisis, which could have led to official condemnation by the League of Nations and, consequently, the adoption of economic and political sanctions harmful to Italy.

In this sense, Italian foreign policy was moving on a particularly delicate ridge: while determined to implement military intervention, it sought to do so while maintaining at least a semblance of international legality and, above all, without provoking an Anglo-French alliance that might actively obstruct the enterprise. The apparent willingness to cooperate and the conciliatory language adopted toward the United Kingdom were thus functional to a broader strategy aimed at diplomatically neutralizing any possible opposition before the start of hostilities.

3.2) The beginning of the operational phase: planning and preparations for the war in Ethiopia

Beyond the lengthy diplomatic preparation that preceded the Mussolini-Laval agreements, their content, both explicit and secret, and the intense work that followed the signing to prepare the ground for military intervention, the agreements themselves represent a crucial juncture in Fascist Italy's Ethiopian campaign. They marked, in fact, not only the end of the preparatory phase on the international level, but also the concrete start of operational planning and mobilization in the field.

The clearest evidence of this transition can be found in a previously analyzed document, dated December 30, 1934, containing confidential directives issued by Mussolini to the Chief of the General Staff, Pietro Badoglio, and his aides. It outlined a veritable "plan of action to resolve the Italo-Abyssinian question," which assumes fundamental value not only because of its strategic and military nature, but above all because it represents the moment when Italian foreign policy made a definitive turn: from diplomacy to war.

As De Felice has observed: "that operational plan, conceived in a systematic way and with a very precise timeline, was elaborated starting from the assumption, by now acquired, of French neutrality, which freed Italy's hands on the colonial front. It was therefore from this moment that the Ethiopian adventure was no longer just a political option or a hypothetical scenario, but became a goal to be achieved with method, discipline and resources already in the mobilization phase.

In fact, from reading these directives it is possible to derive certain concepts that strictly speaking should be considered reflecting Mussolini's point of view and, therefore, such as to explain the reasons for his sudden decision to burn time and to consider therefore overcome the obstacles that four to five months earlier had led him to think that an action in Ethiopia was at that time "supremely" harmful and dangerous and needed a couple of years of preparation.

This change of course must be sought in the conviction that Mussolini had matured that only at that moment could none of the great powers prevent him from expanding into Ethiopia and that from their

behaviour in the face of his initiative, he would be able to form a clear idea for the future of their real attitude, not only toward Italy but also toward Fascism.

The primary reason for the decision taken by Mussolini with the directives of December 30, 1934 (at the very moment, that is, when he was sure that the agreement with France would be formally concluded after a few days) must be found in the conviction of the Duce: a) that with the Franco-Italian agreement that relationship of forces (real but above all political, that France was undoubtedly militarily stronger than Germany, but could not for a whole series of subjective and objective reasons assert its strength) was finally being realized in Europe and that would make Italy's role decisive, especially in function of France's security; b) that at that time, given the disproportion of the real forces existing in Europe, Italy could limit itself to exerting its decisive weight in political terms, that is, without having to commit itself fully even in terms of military presence on the old continent; c) that this favourable dual reality was, however, destined to change as German rearmament (which had already begun) became a reality; d) that if Italy wanted to expand into Ethiopia that was the only possible time, since Germany was not strong enough to take advantage of Italy's military commitment in Africa, not even to threaten Italy's positions in Austria and Hungary, and France and England could not prevent it, because, they were convinced that they could not do without Italian friendship and alliance against Germany; e) that, in spite of this conviction, both France and England would never have spontaneously acquiesced in a substantial strengthening of Italy, either because it was objectively contrary to their interests or because it would have created for their governments multiple and varied difficulties, domestic, international and principled; f) that, this being the case, there was no other way for Italy but to force the hand of Paris and London, forcing them to submit to a unilateral Italian initiative, without, on the other hand, harming their direct interests in Ethiopia and, on the contrary, explicitly guaranteeing them, so as to involve France and Britain as much as possible in the whole operation and demonstrate to them at the same time Rome's willingness to make it the test of common friendship and solidarity.

At the state of the record, it is impossible to say with certainty whether in deciding on the action in Ethiopia Mussolini took into consideration the possibility that Paris and especially London would react to the attempt to force their hand as they later did. Although various elements lead one to believe that he did not expect such a harsh reaction, it is, however, difficult to believe that Mussolini thought that his initiative would be cashed in by England without flinching. For too vivid in him was the belief that politics and international relations were based solely on considerations of strength, expediency and prestige. And, on the other hand, his *modus operandi* in the early months of '35 (especially with respect to England but also with respect to France) shows a desire not to lay his cards clearly on the table and to buy time, which leads one to believe that he was thinking concretely about the possibility of a negative reaction from London at least. That said, it is nevertheless highly probable that he was at first under the illusion that the realism of the British and the good offices of Laval, to whose policy Italian friendship was indispensable and which, indeed, clearly tended to turn it into a real alliance, would, if not exactly pave the way, certainly avoid him having to face too great difficulties, perhaps even resorting to arms, by helping him find a formula which, subject to their interests, would assure Italy effective direct and indirect control over Ethiopia, without having to formally oust the Negus government (i.e., a formula along the lines of those which had assured France possession of Morocco and England control of Egypt). Which is not, however, to exclude a priori the possibility that from the outset he did not foresee even the worst-case scenario and even then did not consider everything from the standpoint of what we have called the "calculated risk" of a very serious crisis with London and perhaps with Paris, which, by the way, he did not believe could have reached its extreme consequences given the reality of the European situation. What in any case is certain is that he must have believed that at that moment the best thing for him was to flaunt confidence and decisiveness and leave the choice of further moves to others, limiting himself for his part to exploiting the Ual-Ual incident, both to sound out the intentions of the British and the French and to prepare Italian public

opinion for the eventuality of the future conflict and to overcome the resistance and fears that his African policy aroused at the top of the regime itself." ¹³⁸

In light of these considerations, it is evident how the agreements signed in Rome on January 7, 1935, even before they were made official, had already produced a decisive impact on the evolution of Italian foreign policy, marking a decisive turning point toward the war in Ethiopia. The understanding with France, in particular, constituted the political prerequisite necessary to trigger the transition from the diplomatic phase to the concrete planning of intervention. Within this framework, the entire system of directives, communications and diplomatic maneuvers developed by Rome in the following months should be understood as an integral part of a strategy that, from the outset, aimed at making Italian colonial expansion in the Horn of Africa irreversible.

Confirming this strategic approach, two documents from January 1935, one dated January 9 and unsigned but attributable in good probability to Emilio De Bono, the other dated January 21, coming from De Bono himself (the High Commissioner for East Africa) and presumably directed to Badoglio, offer a particularly revealing picture of the state of Italy's military preparations and political orientation in the months immediately following.

The first text, written within days of the signing of the Rome Accords, describes the situation on the Somali-Ethiopian front following the Ual-Ual incident. According to the report, the government in Addis Ababa had reacted by initiating a partial mobilization that was not limited to Harrar province, which directly bordered the site of the incident, but also extended to Sidamo, Borana and Arussi provinces, effectively reinforcing the entire border strip with Italian Somalia. Telegrams from Mogadishu signaled the arrival near the border of substantial military contingents, accompanied by the clearing of the civilian population in the areas of concentration.

¹³⁸ Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce. Gli anni del consenso 1929-1936* (Torino: Einaudi, 1974), pp. 613-616

On the Italian side, the response was already underway: a gradual mobilization of border troops was being carried out, destined to intensify with the arrival, expected within a few weeks, of mechanical and armored vehicles, tanks left by sea at the end of December, along with other war materials.

However, the document highlighted a crucial element: under the conditions of early 1935, Italy could cope without undue concern with limited Ethiopian action, as long as it was contained within a force of about ten thousand men; but true operational superiority would not be achieved until the autumn, once the logistical and infrastructural upgrading work in Eritrea and Somalia was completed.

This awareness led to a specific recommendation: buy time at any cost. The goal was to reach at least the month of June, coinciding with the beginning of the rainy season, which would impose an obligatory pause on military operations, allowing preparations to be completed without pressure for an offensive to be launched in October. To achieve this, it was suggested that the dispute with Addis Ababa be kept within a strictly bilateral framework, or, at most, limited to negotiations with France and England, preventing the issue from landing at the League of Nations, where it would immediately take on an international character unfavourable to Rome. In this logic, it was proposed to insist with the Ethiopians on the need to proceed with the demarcation of the Somali-Ethiopian border, formally envisaged since 1908 but never implemented, subordinating it, however, to the resolution of the Ual-Ual incident according to the Italian position. Such a maneuver, in addition to gaining precious months, would have kept the initiative in Rome's hands, preventing sudden moves by the adversary.¹³⁹

The second document, dated January 21, 1935, confirms, and further develops this approach. De Bono, who had just arrived in Asmara, stressed the absolute necessity of being "left quiet until next autumn" to prevent an early Ethiopian action from catching the Italian forces at a still logistically vulnerable stage. In the meantime, he observed, it was imperative to avoid any gesture that might exacerbate the political climate, suggesting that Italy was not seeking confrontation, while in fact work continued at a "geometrically progressive and accelerated" pace on military buildup.

¹³⁹ Presumibilmente De Bono a Mussolini, 9 gennaio 1935, in: Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *Documenti Diplomatici Italiani*, Settima Serie, vol. XVI, doc. n.425, Roma, Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato

De Bono's words clearly reveal the two-pronged strategy adopted by Rome: on the one hand, an official image of restraint and readiness for dialogue, useful for not alarming either the Ethiopian counterpart or the European powers; on the other hand, a constant acceleration of logistical and operational preparations, accompanied by a request for funds and freedom of action in spending on works and supplies. The priority was to complete the infrastructure and supply lines needed to support an expeditionary corps of exceptional size for East Africa, avoiding waste of resources but without bureaucratic hindrances that could slow down the program.¹⁴⁰

In this framework of gradual acceleration toward armed intervention, another long and detailed report sent again by De Bono on February 5, 1935, in which he provided Mussolini with an updated analysis of the political and military situation along the Eritrean and Somali borders, is especially important. Particularly significant was the assessment of possible enemy conduct: although he did not rule out limited actions or coups by local leaders, the High Commissioner considered a large-scale Ethiopian offensive unlikely before July. In any case, he was confident that once the planned deployment was completed Italy would be able to deal confidently with any adversary initiative.

More uncertain appeared to be the situation in Somalia, where a new clash of patrols had occurred in late January. De Bono believed it was possible that Ethiopian threats in this sector were aimed at diverting forces from the Eritrean front, something that had to be avoided at all costs. To this end, he insisted on the need to maintain an apparently conciliatory attitude in Geneva, so that Addis Ababa would be blamed for any possible rupture, gaining valuable time to complete preparations.

Domestically, the High Commissioner was relatively calm about the loyalty of the local populations, while acknowledging the presence of potentially hostile elements, such as some unhappy leaders and sectors of the Coptic clergy. Opposing propaganda, aided by the actions of missionaries and foreign agents, was also being firmly monitored and suppressed.

¹⁴⁰ De Bono presumibilmente a Badoglio, 21 gennaio 1935, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n.477

In the final part of the report, De Bono addressed logistical and organizational issues: he recommended avoiding too rapid dispatch of troops without adequate preparation of reception facilities, pointed out the limits of local resources and the need for a regular flow of materials through Massawa, and defended the goodness of the fortified positions already prepared, rejecting the criticism of some officers who had come on inspection missions. Finally, he stressed the importance of granting full decision-making autonomy to those who, like himself, had direct responsibility for operations in the theatre. The report closed with a tone of confidence in the success of the enterprise, anchored in the certainty of being able to count, by the autumn, on a fully operational war machine and a logistical apparatus capable of sustaining a large-scale offensive.¹⁴¹

Subsequent correspondence confirms how, beginning in early 1935, military preparations for the Ethiopian campaign had by then taken on imposing dimensions and a clearly offensive thrust. In a letter dated March 8, 1935, Mussolini responded to De Bono by unambiguously outlining the extent of the forces and means he intended to concentrate in East Africa with a view to the attack planned for late September or late October.

While the Duce declared himself satisfied with the progress made in the training of indigenous formations and guaranteed full support in supplies ("you will always be sent more than you ask for"), he also set precise and ambitious quantitative objectives: 300,000 men in total, about one-third of them colonial troops between Eritrea and Somalia, flanked by 300-500 airplanes and 300 fast tanks. A war apparatus of this magnitude, Mussolini argued, was indispensable to impart to operations the "energetic rhythm" deemed necessary to ensure not only initial success but also the ability to exploit victory to the full.

The scale of mobilization envisioned in Rome went far beyond the demands put forward by De Bono. As against the three divisions requested for the fall, Mussolini announced the dispatch of ten divisions, five of regulars from the army and five made up of volunteer formations of the Militia, the

¹⁴¹ De Bono a Mussolini, 5 febbraio 1935, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n.551

latter carefully selected to give, also on a symbolic and propagandistic level, proof of popular support for the enterprise. In the Head of Government's vision, the challenge was no longer just military, but logistical: housing, feeding, moving and fighting a force of this size in a difficult theatre of operations required meticulous planning. Therefore, he pointed De Bono to the two priority issues that needed to be resolved in the seven months available before the attack: water supply and building the road infrastructure needed to support the advance. The experience of Adua in 1896 was evoked as a warning: "for a few thousand men who were not there we lost Adua: I will never make this mistake. I want to sin by excess, never by defect."¹⁴²

This last dispatch from Mussolini shows his firm determination to succeed where liberal Italy had failed, whose political class, for better or worse, had to answer for its actions to Parliament and public opinion, something that was not necessary for the Duce, who in thirteen years of regime had eliminated every means of control and every form of dissent. But that's not all. It is also important to note that he would not be satisfied with 300,000 men. Before the end of the conflict, the fear that the disaster of Adwa in 1896 might be repeated would prompt him to increase the number of soldiers in East Africa, including both nationals and natives, to over 400,000.¹⁴³

These documents, read in parallel with the December 30, 1934, directives, show unequivocally how, within weeks of the Mussolini-Laval agreements, the Italian political-military machine was already fully oriented toward the Ethiopian war. The time factor emerges as the decisive strategic variable: every diplomatic initiative, every tactical move along the border and every logistical choice were subordinate to the goal of arriving in the fall of 1935 with forces ready, concentrated means and an international context that could no longer block the operation.

¹⁴² Mussolini a De Bono, 8 marzo 1935, in: *D.D.I.*, VII serie, vol. XVI, doc. n.707

¹⁴³ Angelo Del Boca, *La conquista dell'Impero: L'Italia in Etiopia* (1936), vol. 2 di *Gli italiani in Africa Orientale* (Roma-Bari: Laterza,1979), p. 265

3.3) The crisis of the tripartite axis: France, Great Britain and the outbreak of the war

If the January agreements with France marked the transition from the diplomatic to the operational phase of the Ethiopian campaign, the question of the relationship with London remained open, which was the main unknown of the entire operation. The "free hand" granted by Laval by no means implied similar British consent, and it was well understood in Rome that England would never look favourably on either an expansion or even a full occupation of Ethiopia. Despite this, the possibility of reaching an understanding with London, even at the price of territorial concessions, was not ruled out in the early months of 1935, although the ideal goal remained the creation of an Italian protectorate over the entire country, accompanied by ample economic guarantees to protect British interests.

A memo drafted by Suvich, significantly titled *Diplomatic Preparation with regard to Great Britain* and dating back to January 1935, clearly illuminates the prevailing orientation at Palazzo Chigi. A twofold awareness emerges from it: on the one hand, that the establishment of an "Italian empire" close to the Cairo-Cape Town strategic axis and along the routes to India could not but raise serious concerns in London; on the other hand, that there were historical, political, and economic arguments that Italy could make to try to overcome British resistance at least in part. Suvich listed these elements punctually: the sense of inferiority left to Italy by the postwar colonial partition; the need for outlets for demographic and imperial expansion; the precedent of the Ucciali Pact; the admission, already in the past, of the possibility of a partition of Ethiopia between the powers; and the serious internal inadequacies of the Abyssinian state, from the existence of slavery to the lack of effective organization and centralized control over local leaders.

Beyond these arguments, the memo recognized two central difficulties. The first concerned the League of Nations: even without direct intervention, Britain could have used the Geneva terrain to obstruct Italian action, leveraging the mechanism of conciliations, commissions of inquiry and international relations, which would have ended up bridling any freedom of action. Hence the

strategic dilemma: either to formally keep the operation within the bounds of the Geneva rules, trying to appear aggrieved and to respect at least in appearance the Briand- Kellogg Pact (an international agreement, signed in 1928, by which the signatory states formally renounced war as an instrument of national policy, committing themselves to resolve disputes exclusively by peaceful means), or to ignore the international legal framework altogether, accepting the risk of an exit from the organization with all the consequences of the case. A third scenario, that of expelling Ethiopia from the Society for its structural and moral shortcomings, was considered hardly feasible. In any case, the most desirable solution remained the conclusion of a clear agreement with both France and Britain that would allow Italy to present its initiative as compatible with international stability.

The second difficulty concerned Britain's direct interests in Ethiopia, enshrined in a series of treaties, particularly the Tripartite of 1906, which recognized specific zones of influence and territorial rights to London in the event of the breakup of the Ethiopian Empire. With this in mind, an Italian occupation would have inevitably reopened the issue: the British could have either limited themselves to a verbal protest, then leaving room for negotiations on a *fait accompli*, or reacted decisively, even going so far as to militarily occupy areas considered to be theirs, such as the Nile Basin and Lake Tana, where troop movements from Sudan were already being recorded. The memo thus provided for two possible lines of negotiation with London. The first, preferred by Rome, was to obtain recognition of an exclusive Italian occupation of Ethiopia, on the condition of guaranteeing the British extensive economic compensation. The second, considered less favourable but not to be ruled out, was to agree on a partition of the country, minimizing Britain's portion. Although considered suboptimal, the latter option might have been necessary to facilitate the undertaking and reduce the risks of a hostile British reaction.

In this framework, the dual and ambivalent nature of Fascist foreign policy in early 1935 is well captured: on the one hand, the goal of an exclusive conquest that would project Italy to the rank of great colonial power; on the other hand, the willingness to consider compromises and negotiated solutions with London so as not to permanently compromise the operation. It was a policy of imperial

expansion, but still hinged within the limits of a diplomatic realism that, at least until the spring of 1935, by no means excluded agreements or partitions in order to neutralize British opposition.¹⁴⁴

While Suvich's note provides an extremely clear picture of the arguments and tactics with which Italian diplomacy intended to address the issue with London, it remains silent on a deeper knot: why, given the premises, it was really thought possible not only to negotiate but even to reach an agreement with Britain. Contributing to filling this gap is Mussolini's matured conviction that Britain could not decisively oppose Italian plans. Unable to obtain prior concessions from London similar to those wrested from France, Rome nevertheless believed that it could "force her hand," counting on a simple political calculation: the British government would never compromise the Anglo-French-Italian axis in Europe for the defense of a peripheral interest such as Ethiopia.

The strategy outlined in Rome thus moved on several complementary levels. First, to confront London with the inevitability of Italian plans, inducing it to accept the reality of the facts. Second, to exploit French good offices with the British government: for Paris, in fact, the agreement with Rome was of even greater importance than for London, and it was natural that it should act as an intermediary. Finally, make the British understand that, once satisfied in Ethiopia, Italy would make no further colonial claims, thus creating the conditions for a broader understanding that would embrace both the European set-up (confirmation of cooperation against Germany) and the Mediterranean.

For this design to succeed, however, it was essential to provide a show of strength. That is, it was necessary to prove that nothing could prevent Italy from achieving its Ethiopian goals. Hence the need for a rapid military buildup, aimed at preparing the ground for armed intervention as soon as weather conditions permitted. Added to this was the possibility of creating border incidents that could provide, at least formally, justification for the conflict. At the same time, on the diplomatic level,

¹⁴⁴ Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce. Gli anni del consenso 1929-1936* (Torino: Einaudi, 1974), pp. 643-646

efforts were being made to buy time, avoiding openly uncovering the cards with London about Italy's real ambitions, and instead leaving it to the British to move to propose possible compromise formulas. The Ual-Ual incident offered, in this sense, an ideal basis: a dispute that could be used both as a wartime pretext and as a negotiating ground.

One essential point must be made clear: throughout the Ethiopian crisis, for the great powers Ethiopia was never regarded as a political entity with interests and rights of its own, but only as a pawn to be moved in the European and colonial chessboard. No real concern was addressed to the fate of the country or the wishes of the Negus: the Ethiopian problem was constantly handled by the diplomacies as a tool to pursue their own objectives.

In this perspective one can also understand the caution shown by Rome in the early months of 1935. The decision to begin "laying the cards on the table" with London matured only at the end of April, by which time military preparations were in full view. Not coincidentally, it was at that time that Dino Grandi first hinted, in early May, at the idea of a territorial conjunction between Eritrea and Somalia: a sign that Italy, strong in the consolidation of its military position, now felt able to make more concrete demands.¹⁴⁵

These facts clearly show how Mussolini, convinced that England, faced with a resolute attitude, would not be able to oppose his plans for expansion, preferred not to discover himself first, leaving to London the initiative to formulate a proposal for the settlement of the Ethiopian question. In this way he counted on being in a position of strength, possibly being able to raise the issue upward, whereas if he had been the one to propose a solution, England would certainly have sought to impose downward conditions. This strategy was as much about the mutual interests established by the Tripartite Agreement of 1906 as it was about the concrete ways in which a solution could be implemented.

¹⁴⁵ R. De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce. Gli anni del consenso*, pp. 646-648

When Mussolini then decided to move, he did so essentially for tactical reasons: on the one hand, to prevent the thought of an Italian bluff, on the other hand, to prevent the excessive speed of the arbitration procedure initiated in Geneva from producing a dangerous mismatch between the time of diplomacy and that of military preparation. In parallel, he hastened to make clear to British Ambassador Drummond that for Italy the Ethiopian question had to be resolved "by any means" in order to obtain the necessary freedom of maneuver in Europe.

The same positions were also reiterated in public, in speeches made by Mussolini in the Chamber of Deputies and Senate. A little more than two months after Hitler's decision on March 16, 1935, to denounce unilaterally the clauses of the Treaty of Versailles relating to disarmament, and about a month after the Stresa conference, convened to reaffirm the common Anglo-French-Italian policy in the face of German rearmament, these public statements had a twofold objective: on the one hand, to confirm Italy's fidelity to the bonds of friendship and European agreements with Paris and London; on the other, to emphasize that precisely in light of the new international situation, brought about by Hitler's initiative, Rome considered the resolution of the Ethiopian question to be all the more urgent and unavoidable for its own benefit.¹⁴⁶

Meanwhile, on the multilateral level, Mussolini made every effort to present Italy not as an aggressor state, but as a power provoked by the Ual-Ual incident and a victim of aggression by a country described as backward, barbaric and slave-owning. The strategy pursued in Rome was consistently to prevent the Italo-Ethiopian question from being formally placed on the agenda of the League of Nations. Therefore, on several occasions: on December 9, 1934, on January 18, on March 13, on May 25, again in mid-August and even on October 16, when the conflict had already begun, Italy undertook to prevent the League Council from being called upon to express an opinion on the dispute.

¹⁴⁶ R. De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce. Gli anni del consenso*, pp. 648,649

The reasons for this line were obvious: Mussolini feared that Italy would be publicly put in the dock and isolated diplomatically, but above all he feared that the League might go so far as to impose sanctions, provided for in the Covenant, capable of curbing or even blocking military action.

Paradoxically, it was precisely this desire to avoid League intervention that ended up influencing the very timing of war preparations, forcing Rome to calibrate its moves between diplomacy and military operations.¹⁴⁷

This was the background to what was called the "double line" of British policy toward Italy: on the one hand, to seek a direct compromise with Mussolini that would allow the Ethiopian question to be resolved without compromising Anglo-Italian friendship; on the other hand, to defend the principle of collective security and preserve the authority of the League of Nations. This was an extremely difficult strategy to sustain under normal circumstances and one that became almost impossible in the European political climate of those months: British public opinion was becoming increasingly opposed to any yielding to Italy's aggressive policy and Germany was ready to unscrupulously exploit every opportunity to strengthen its position. On the Italian side, by contrast, Mussolini, strengthened precisely by the ambiguity of the London attitude, clamorously intensified his commitment to Ethiopia, to the point that, even if he had wanted to, his own political prestige would have prevented him from turning back.

In light of this policy line, two decisive aspects are better understood: on one side, because when faced with the Negus' request to refer the Ual-Ual incident to Geneva, London, with the support of Paris and the Secretary General of the League of Nations, Joseph Avenol, worked to avert such an outcome, advocating the path of bilateral negotiations and arbitration on the basis of the 1928 Italo-Ethiopian treaty and persuading Addis Ababa to agree; on the other, because when John Simon, the British Foreign Secretary, apparently intervened in Ethiopia's favour, he did so only out of tactical necessity. Italian obstructionism, in fact, risked blocking the arbitration procedure altogether,

¹⁴⁷ Nicola Labanca, 2015. *La guerra d'Etiopia 1935-1941*. Bologna: Il Mulino, p. 42

prompting the Negus to reintroduce the issue directly to the League, a prospect the Foreign Office wanted to avoid at all costs, since it would have made it impossible to reconcile a compromise with Rome with the claim to defend the principle of collective security.

The British attitude during the Stresa conference (April 11-14, 1935) is also explained in this light. Strictly speaking, that summit would have been the ideal forum to deal thoroughly with the Ethiopian question: the top foreign policy officials of the three countries involved were present there; MacDonald, Simon and Vansittart for Britain, Laval, Flandin and Leger for France, and Mussolini, Suvich and Aloisi for Italy; and, since the conference had been convened to discuss a common position against Germany after Hitler's unilateral denunciation of the Treaty of Versailles, the Ethiopian subject could have been dealt with without undue fuss. Indeed, experts specific to the African question had been included in the Italian and British delegations, a sign that the possibility of discussing it had been anticipated. However, wait-and-see prevailed at Stresa: the British waited for Mussolini to raise the issue, while the Italians expected London to do so. And when the Duce indirectly attempted to provoke a stand during the approval of the joint declaration, the British delegation was careful not to take up the invitation.

At Stresa, as already noted, the French were most interested in reaffirming the solidity of the tripartite front. To openly raise the Ethiopian question would have meant risking cracking the understanding with London and, above all, pushing Laval even closer to Mussolini, thus leaving Italy feeling that it had isolated Britain. For this reason, silence prevailed: better to avoid a direct confrontation and to aim, rather, at gradually tying Rome to French policy. Moreover, an open confrontation with Mussolini could hardly have remained secret and, in any case, would have made it much more difficult for the British government to maintain the wait-and-see tactic, based on postponement and the search for an extra-Geneva solution to the dispute.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ R. De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce. Gli anni del consenso*, pp. 659,660

It is in this perspective that, in order to assess the British attitude and the reactions it aroused in Mussolini, more than the Stresa episode it is necessary to look at the May talks: those in Rome between Mussolini and Ambassador Drummond and those in Geneva between Aloisi, Eden, Laval and Avenol. Four central elements emerged clearly from this series of meetings: first, the irrevocability of Mussolini's decision to resolve the Ethiopian question, although the contours of the "solution" remained deliberately vague and open to various possibilities. Second, the substantial French willingness to support Italy, though without severing ties with London. Third, the British choice not to grant any endorsement of Italian forceful action, even to the extent of openly condemning it, but accompanied by a willingness to avoid a head-on rupture with Mussolini and to seek, if possible, a path of compromise outside Geneva procedures. Finally, Mussolini's realization that although the difficulties were greater than expected, his basic conviction, namely that London could not block him completely, remained substantially confirmed.

The consequences of this phase were decisive. Mussolini progressively assumed an increasingly tough and uncompromising public attitude: in speeches in the House of Deputies and Senate, as well as in the increasingly aggressive press, he sought to show the world that he was not bluffing, to galvanize Italian public opinion and to prepare it not only for war against Ethiopia, but also for a possible confrontation with Great Britain and the League of Nations. At the same time, propaganda insisted on the legitimacy of Italy's "sacrosanct needs" for defense and expansion, as opposed to the stubborn British desire to deny the country the rank of a great European and Mediterranean power.

On the diplomatic plane, however, the Duce's behaviour remained more nuanced. While still hardly believing in a genuine agreement with London, Mussolini left a window of opportunity for the attempts of Italian diplomacy to work out compromise solutions, leveraging the contradictions of British policy, Laval's good offices and Avenol's concerns about the destabilizing effects that the Ethiopian crisis could have produced for the League of Nations and, more generally, for the European balance (especially in relation to Austria). In this way Mussolini gained some not minor advantages: gaining time with respect to military preparation, partially reassuring the diplomatic corps, and

showing the king and the regime's leadership that he had made every effort to avoid a break with London.¹⁴⁹

Another consequence of the Anglo-French-Italian talks in May was that Mussolini matured the decision to systematically reject all offers that London made in the months immediately following in an attempt to peacefully settle the crisis. In his view, indeed, these proposals were too reductive in relation to Italian ambitions and, above all, aimed at a quick closure of the Ethiopian question by restoring a situation of substantial British primacy, without taking into account the Duce's openness to a new relationship on an equal basis and without accommodating his demands for a broader understanding.

The first British initiative matured in mid-June and was entrusted to Anthony Eden, Minister for relations with the League of Nations, who arrived in Rome on June 23, 1935, after a brief stop in Paris during which he revealed nothing to the French about the offer he was about to make. Eden had two talks with Mussolini, on June 24 and 25, as well as meetings with Suvich and Aloisi. In the opening, he reiterated that the London government was "irrevocably committed" to the League and could not remain indifferent to developments that would undermine its authority. The proposal consisted of the cession to Ethiopia of Zeila and a corridor guaranteeing its outlet to the sea, in exchange for territorial and economic concessions in favour of Italy, including the possible transfer of Ogaden.

Mussolini's response was sharp and negative. Such a solution, he argued, would have strengthened Ethiopia by transforming it into a maritime country, able to procure arms more easily; it would not have solved the fundamental problem of the connection between Eritrea and Somalia; and, above all, it would have elevated England to the role of Addis Ababa's "protector and benefactor," leaving Italy in the position of eternal hated adversary. The only alternative for the Duce was one of two: a peaceful solution involving the direct annexation of non-Ethiopian regions to Italy, or war, with Ethiopia wiped

¹⁴⁹ R. De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce. Gli anni del consenso*, pp. 662-665

off the map. He also declared that he had carefully considered the international consequences, both in relation to the League of Nations and relations with London, but still could not accept the proposal. The British, for that matter, had no illusions: Eden himself, in his memoirs, admitted that a rejection was foreseeable. His mission seems to have had, rather than the purpose of obtaining immediate consent, that of probing Mussolini's real objectives. Not surprisingly, in the second interview on June 25, Eden obtained from the Italian Head of Government a precise indication of the areas he intended to annex and those he would eventually leave to the Negus, under a regime of control similar to that imposed by France and Britain in Morocco or Egypt. In the end, while reiterating that the Italian position was not shared by London, Eden left open the hope that "some new fact" might still allow for a peaceful solution.^{150 151}

To better understand the failure of these negotiations, beyond Mussolini's intentions, it is also important to highlight the mistakes made by England in preparing them. Suffice it to say that London decided to send Eden, already the target of violent attacks by the fascist press, without even consulting Addis Ababa and Paris. Furthermore, Drummond, in announcing Eden's visit to Suvich, made the imprudent mistake of hinting at more substantial concessions; and finally, on the eve of the meeting between Eden and Mussolini, the poor proposal was revealed in London due to an indiscretion, giving an idea of how the operation had been prepared and how doomed to failure it was.¹⁵²

The second British offer came in mid-August, as part of conversations in Paris between Eden, Laval and Aloisi, representatives of the signatory powers of the Tripartite of 1906. But in the meantime the situation had become more complicated: the "peace ballot" (a large opinion poll promoted in Britain by the League of Nations Union in 1934-1935, involving more than ten million citizens and intended to measure popular support for the League of Nations, disarmament and the use of economic sanctions against aggressor states) in Britain had strengthened public pressure for a tougher attitude toward

¹⁵⁰ Francesco Lefebvre d'Ovidio, 2001. *La questione etiopica nei negoziati italo-franco-britannici del 1935*. Le streghe, pp. 58,59

¹⁵¹ R. De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce. Gli anni del consenso*, pp. 668,669

¹⁵² A. Del Boca, *La conquista dell'Impero*, p. 277

aggressors, making London less inclined to make concessions. Mussolini, who had agreed to the negotiations mainly to gain time ahead of the crucial September session of the League of Nations, nevertheless came forward with an uncompromising position: the only acceptable peaceful solution, he remarked, was the granting to Italy of a mandate or protectorate over the whole of Ethiopia. This request, already transmitted by Grandi to Vansittart on July 10, formed the basis of the instructions given to Aloisi and made clear the extent of Italian ambitions.

In the face of this, the British offer, which included economic concessions in Ethiopia and the Ogaden, although supported by the French and Avenol, proved to Mussolini to be inadmissible: too limited, cumbersome, and uncertain in its implementation. At that point the break became inevitable. For the Duce, the diplomatic road was no longer a real ground for negotiation, but only a tactical tool to postpone the confrontation and bring the military preparations, now almost at an end, to an unimpeded conclusion.¹⁵³

The failure of the Paris talks of August 16-18 marked a point of no return: from that moment, no one could delude himself that it was possible to prevent Mussolini from following through on his war intentions as soon as seasonal conditions permitted. The negative conclusion of the tripartite talks officially sanctioned the end of that attempt, initiated by the Duce as early as January 1935, to define with London a negotiated settlement of the Ethiopian question. It is important to emphasize that, at least in their first intentions, Italian objectives did not necessarily presuppose a total annexation of Ethiopia, nor an inevitable armed conflict. Rather, Mussolini aimed at direct control of the most relevant peripheral regions (such as Harrar and Ogaden) and at a form of political domination over central Abyssinia, configurable as a protectorate, international mandate or other "disguised" solution, similar to those already adopted by France and England in Morocco and Egypt. However, Italian preparedness, on the political even before the diplomatic level, was insufficient to make such a

¹⁵³ R. De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce. Gli anni del consenso*, pp. 669-673

peaceful solution viable, while progressive military mobilization gradually made confrontation inevitable.

For its part, London, especially after Eden's mission to Rome in June, focused on securing French alignment. Eden exerted strong pressure on Laval, stressing how indispensable British support was against Germany and envisaging, if not, a possible London disengagement from Europe. Initially, Eden feared that France would never renounce its understanding with Mussolini; by the end of the mid-August talks, however, he was convinced that he had achieved the result: Laval, while reluctant for a crisis, appeared willing, if all compromise failed, to support a firm line in Geneva, even to the point of supporting possible economic sanctions against Italy.

This was the direction that guided British diplomacy in the following weeks, ahead of the session of the Council of the League of Nations scheduled for September 4. Indeed, a complex mechanism of commissions and committees was set in motion in Geneva, reflecting the British attempt to maintain a balance between condemnation in principle and the search for a workable compromise. On September 2, the Arbitration Committee, published its award on Ual-Ual, with a clever artifice that recognized Italian reasons without denying Ethiopian ones. A few days later, the Council established the "Committee of Five" (United Kingdom, France, Spain, Poland and Turkey), charged with formulating a proposal for conciliation. On September 18, this committee presented a draft "international assistance" to Ethiopia, in fact a form of collective mandate, which traced the ideas that had already emerged in Paris. Rome rejected the proposal on September 21, and on the 26th the "Committee of Thirteen" was created, charged with preparing a report under Article 15 of the Pact.

On the Franco-British side, Laval was in a very delicate position. Although he was aware that following the British line would mean breaking the understanding with Italy, he knew that, if forced to choose, France could not give up British support. However, he demanded specific guarantees from London in return: a solemn commitment to confront Germany in the event of new breaches in Europe, so as to compensate for the loss of the Italian alliance. This commitment, however, the British government was unwilling to grant it completely: both so as not to lose the possibility of pursuing the

policy of appeasement with Nazi Germany and because England would not be ready for a military confrontation any time soon. Lacking it, Laval preferred to maintain a balanced position, formally supporting the League of Nations line but not binding himself hand and foot to London.

This gave rise to the British government's "obligatory" strategy: publicly condemn any unilateral initiative by Rome and proclaim itself in defense of collective security, but, at the same time, support a last ditch attempt at conciliation in Geneva, as evidenced by both the "particular" award on Ual-Ual and the proposal of the Committee of Five. And, in parallel, prepare, if that attempt failed, for a line of exclusively economic sanctions, avoiding any measures of a military nature.

The secret understandings between Samuel Hoare, who succeeded Simon as head of the Foreign Office, and Laval on September 10-11 confirm this approach: both judged a war against Italy too dangerous for Europe and discarded hypotheses such as a naval blockade or the closure of the Suez Canal, limiting possible measures to economic measures. The fact that the substance of these agreements was communicated to Mussolini as early as the last days of September, not only by Laval but also by the British, shows how, in spite of public rethoric, the great powers did not really want to go as far as a head-on clash.^{154 155}

By now, however, the die was cast. Mussolini's decision, although at times in the preceding months he had hinted at a certain willingness to consider negotiated solutions, was final and no longer reversible. The entire architecture of Italian strategy had now been completed: at the military level, preparations had reached a stage where a major offensive was possible as early as the beginning of the autumn; at the diplomatic level, the last attempts at mediation, especially from the British side, had proved too limited, belated and incompatible with Rome's ambitions; and finally, at the domestic level, propaganda and mobilization had created a political and social climate that was inexorably pushing toward a showdown.

¹⁵⁴ F. Lefebvre, *La questione etiopica nei negoziati italo-franco-britannici del 1935* pp. 89-93

¹⁵⁵ R. De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce. Gli anni del consenso*, pp. 675-679

In this context, the prospect of a peaceful solution no longer had any concrete basis. The diplomatic overtures advanced by London were not only judged insufficient territorially and politically, but appeared, in the eyes of Mussolini, as an attempt to bring Italy back within the bounds of subordination to British leadership, something Mussolini was unwilling to accept. Consequently, war loomed not as one of the possible options, but as the only viable way to establish Italy as a great imperial power and to consolidate its international prestige.

Thus, while European chancelleries were still moving in the ambiguous terrain of negotiations and compromises, in Rome the decision had now been made. Every element, military, political, propaganda and diplomatic, converged toward the inevitability of confrontation. The last days of September were thus nothing more than a countdown: on October 3, 1935, with the attack on the Ethiopian frontiers, hostilities officially began, sanctioning the transformation of the long diplomatic and political preparation into open conflict.

In conclusion, the last phase of the Ethiopian crisis clearly highlighted all the contradictions that ran through the relations between Rome, London and Paris. France, although it had granted Mussolini a "free hand" with the January 1935 agreements, a turning point in Mussolini's strategy, was now caught between two conflicting demands: on the one hand, it did not want to lose its understanding with Italy, which was useful in containing German pressure on the continent; on the other hand, it could not afford to break its strategic alliance with Great Britain, on which its own security against possible aggression by the Reich depended. This ambiguity made Laval's line seesaw and, in fact, led him progressively closer to British positions, though without completely abandoning his attempt to mediate with Mussolini.

England, for its part, oscillated for months between two poles that were difficult to reconcile: defending the authority of the League of Nations, threatened by the Italian initiative, and at the same time preserving its friendship with Rome so as not to destabilize the European balance. The dual line followed by London, a direct compromise with Mussolini on the one hand, the appeal to collective principles on the other, proved unworkable. British public opinion, increasingly sensitive to the issues

of pacifism and the defense of international legality, pushed the government to stiffen its positions, while the threat of uncontrolled German rearmament imposed prudence in its choices. Hence the contradictory attitude that characterized British action: formal firmness, fear of substantial rupture. Mussolini was able to skillfully exploit these uncertainties, leveraging the ambiguities and hesitations of the European powers. He was persuaded that France, though reluctant, could not afford to sour the relationship with Italy, considered an indispensable ally in an anti-German function especially considering the January agreements. Similarly, he assessed that England, while formally opposed to Fascist aims, would never run the risk of open conflict to defend a distant country lacking direct strategic weight such as Ethiopia. On the strength of this conviction, Mussolini moved with increasing confidence, accelerating military preparations and maintaining on the diplomatic level an ambivalent line: on the one hand, he left open the space for negotiations and hypothetical compromises, while on the other he built step by step the conditions for armed action.

CONCLUSIONS

The Palazzo Venezia agreements of January 7, 1935 represent, as this research has highlighted, one of the turning points in fascist foreign policy in the 1930s and a central and essential element in understanding how the Ethiopian campaign began and its consequences.

In fact, they were not just bilateral agreements between Rome and Paris, but a strategic move that profoundly changed the European and colonial landscape, allowing Mussolini to turn what had until then been only a project into reality: the conquest of Ethiopia.

To fully understand the significance of these agreements, it is necessary to place them in the international context in which they developed. As has been pointed out, Europe in 1935 was an unstable continent, marked by a fragile political balance. It was undermined by the crisis of the Versailles system; challenged by Nazi Germany and its rearmament, by the difficulties of the League of Nations; and by the reemergence of imperial ambitions of various powers. In this context, both Italy and France were acting according to precise logic. Rome had long been pursuing expansion in East Africa but was aware that military action could isolate the country internationally. Paris, on the other hand, saw the threat from Germany growing at an alarming rate and knew that, without Italian cooperation, it would be difficult to contain Hitler's pressure on the continent, which was Paris' real priority at the time.

The agreement of January 7 was therefore born out of this temporary convergence of interests.

Mussolini sought diplomatic security in order to be able to launch his African venture and, although of lesser importance, to definitively close the issue of colonial compensation that had remained unresolved by the 1915 Treaty of London. Laval, and therefore France, on the other hand, needed an agreement with Italy to strengthen the anti-German front given the growing pressure from the Reich's ambitions, as he could not allow Rome to align itself with Berlin.

The formula identified at Palazzo Venezia succeeded in reconciling objectives that were apparently distinct but, in reality, complementary. In the public clauses of the agreements, Italy and France reaffirmed their willingness to cooperate at the European level to maintain the status quo, with particular attention to two sensitive issues: on the one hand, the preservation of Austria's independence, threatened by the prospect of a German Anschluss; on the other, the willingness to maintain intact the Versailles system, thus trying to limit the German rearmament. At the same time, the official clauses addressed an issue that had remained unresolved since the end of the First World War, namely mutual colonial claims: through an exchange of territorial concessions in Africa, an attempt was made to close a chapter of latent tensions that had repeatedly complicated relations between Rome and Paris since the end of the Great War.

However, as a comparative analysis clearly shows, also highlighted by the main authors of the matter, what Italy obtained in terms of explicit clauses was not sufficient in itself to justify an agreement of this scale. The territorial and economic advantages envisaged in the agreement were in fact limited in nature and could not apparently explain the concessions made to France on the European and colonial levels (such as giving up the aspirations over Tunisia).

For Italy and Mussolini, in fact, the real core of the agreement, what gave it decisive strategic value, laid in its part not publicly written, which was instead present in private letters, confidential talks, and informal exchanges, that constituted the so-called French *désistement* on Ethiopia.

In this context, deliberately left ambiguous and removed from legal formalization, Paris made it clear to Mussolini that it would not hinder Italian expansion into Abyssinia. For the Duce, this implicit guarantee was equivalent to a real political and diplomatic pass, transforming a project that had until then been uncertain and risky into a realistic and concretely achievable goal.

This research has sought to highlight how the *désistement* constituted a fundamental step for Mussolini's aspirations. It is worth remembering that, once the war had begun, the French and Laval himself used it to claim that part of the agreements only concerned a "free hand" in the economic

field. The *désistement* was never put in writing in a formal clause and its form remained open to various interpretations. However, as the work has highlighted: in the context, in the attitudes taken during the negotiations, and in French intentions, it was very clear that Paris would not oppose Italian expansion into Abyssinia and that Laval himself was aware of what he was conceding. For Mussolini, that formula was equivalent to a political and diplomatic green light, not merely an economic one. Until then, in fact, the Italian Head of Government himself had considered an operation in Ethiopia premature and risky, so much so that, as the documents show, he had planned at least two years of preparations. After January 7, however, his perception changed radically: with French neutrality assured, the time seemed ripe, and the colonial project could be transformed into a concrete plan.

Subsequent documents clearly demonstrate this. The directives of December 30, 1934, drawn up when Mussolini was sure of French neutrality but before the agreements had been signed, were confirmed and given new force after the agreement with France. Military mobilization in Eritrea and Somalia became progressive and systematic: an influx of troops, the dispatch of armored vehicles, the strengthening of logistical lines, and the construction of roads and infrastructure necessary to support an expeditionary force unprecedented for Italy. At the same time, internal propaganda began to present the Ethiopian campaign as an inevitable and legitimate objective, leveraging the rhetoric of a 'civilizing mission' and the need for revenge for the defeat suffered at Adwa in 1896.

France, for its part, accepted this approach without opposition. Laval was well aware that giving Mussolini a free hand meant risking the sacrifice of Ethiopian independence, but he considered it more important to secure Italian cooperation in Europe, especially in the face of the growing threat from Berlin. From this point of view, the political value of the agreement was enormous: Rome could feel itself an integral part of the European security system, and at the same time free to pursue its own colonial designs.

Nevertheless, the January agreements cannot be fully understood without a clear understanding of the position of the other main player, namely England. While France had given Mussolini what he wanted, London was not prepared to passively accept Italian expansion. British interests in East

Africa, linked to the Nile basin and the security of communication routes with India in the Red Sea, made complete disengagement impossible. Apart from a few attempts at negotiation, the positions remained distant: the British proposals, such as those presented by Eden in June 1935, appeared to Mussolini to be too limited and, above all, aimed at strengthening Addis Ababa rather than reducing its power. On the Italian side, the only solution considered acceptable was a protectorate or mandate over the whole of Ethiopia, a substantial dominion that London was not prepared to recognize.

This is why the Mussolini-Laval agreements must be read as a partial green light in the sense that they resolved the French problem but left the British one unresolved. For Mussolini, however, this was sufficient. The Head of Government was adept at exploiting the support, or at least the neutrality, of Paris to gain time for military preparation and thus overcome London's resistance. Mussolini pursued this path, knowing that England would not wage war to defend Ethiopia at the risk of undermining the European security system. The Duce's calculation was based on the conviction that, faced with decisive action and a *fait accompli*, Great Britain would prefer to seek a compromise rather than engage in direct conflict.

In this context, the Ual-Ual crisis and border disputes played an instrumental role. Italy used them as a pretext, on the one hand to present itself as a provoked power rather than an aggressor and to test the responsiveness and true strength of the Ethiopian army, and on the other to keep the dispute on a bilateral level, preventing the issue from being formally taken up by the League of Nations in order to avoid accusations and direct sanctions. Italian diplomacy worked tirelessly to gain time, as the primary objective was to reach the fall of 1935 with the entire military apparatus ready and the international situation still uncertain but not openly hostile.

Mussolini's decision, therefore, was not improvised. The agreements of January 7 provided the diplomatic basis; the following months were used to complete military preparations; propaganda built the necessary internal consensus. When, in the summer of 1935, negotiations with London finally failed and international pressure intensified, the decision had already been made, war would break out as soon as seasonal conditions allowed.

On October 3, 1935, with the attack on the Ethiopian borders, Italy moved from words to deeds. That day marked the beginning of a campaign that would have enormous consequences, not only for Ethiopia and Italy, but for the entire European balance of power. The Geneva crisis, the sanctions, and the gradual rapprochement between Rome and Berlin were all developments that stemmed largely from that choice. But the moment when this choice became possible can be traced back to the corridors of Palazzo Venezia, to those meetings between Mussolini and Laval that changed the landscape of European diplomacy.

The Mussolini-Laval agreements were therefore a decisive turning point: without them, the war in Ethiopia would hardly have been launched in the time and manner we know. With them, Mussolini obtained the necessary diplomatic security, strategic freedom of maneuver, and internal political consensus to carry out the enterprise. France, by accepting the *désistement*, sacrificed Ethiopia on the altar of European security; England, although opposed, was unable and unwilling to go so far as to stop Rome by force.

This episode clearly shows how colonialism and European diplomacy were deeply intertwined in the 1930s. The African adventure was not only the result of imperial aspirations, but also and above all the effect of a delicate game of balances, compromises, and political calculations. For this reason, the agreements of January 7, 1935, should be considered not a marginal episode, but the central moment that made war almost inevitable. The result that emerges is clear: the French *désistement*, although not explicitly written into the agreements, was the pillar on which Mussolini was able to build his colonial enterprise. From then on, the process developed almost unstoppably, culminating in the declaration of war and the outbreak of hostilities.

This work has sought to demonstrate this complex process by reconstructing, step by step, the negotiations, documents, and political choices that led to the Mussolini-Laval agreements and their consequences. In this process, the methodology adopted played a central role. The prevalent use of primary sources, in particular Italian diplomatic documents, has made it possible not only to follow

the sequence of events accurately, but also to grasp their internal logic. Telegrams, dispatches, confidential notes, and official correspondence have provided a direct insight into the diplomatic dynamics, highlighting the practicality with which the problems were addressed and the nuances of the Italian and French positions.

This line of inquiry was chosen to give priority to the analysis of contemporary evidence over the filter of subsequent interpretations. Historiographical texts were certainly a point of reference for framing the story, but the core of the argument always remained linked to the documents. This permitted to give the work a structure capable of following the development of the negotiations day by day, without losing sight of the big picture.

The decision to base the research on these materials made it possible to observe the concrete functioning of fascist diplomacy and to restore the real dimension, often made up of compromises, hesitations, and tactical maneuvers, which are difficult to discern from general summaries.

Finally, another important methodological aspect was to maintain a balance between the chronological and thematic dimensions. This has allowed to organize the chapters not only as a linear sequence of events, but also as a set of core areas of analysis: the strategic premises, the January 7 agreement with its clauses, the issue of French *désistement*, and finally the immediate consequences at the colonial and international levels. This structure has permitted to explore each issue in depth without losing sight of the overall picture, ensuring the coherence of the argument.

The decision to focus on the Mussolini-Laval agreements as the core of the thesis guided every step of the research. In this sense, even the months following the agreement, although not the focus of the work, were analyzed to show how they represented the natural continuation of what had been decided at Palazzo Venezia. In this way, the methodology adopted has produced not only a descriptive reconstruction, but a true interpretative key: relating the language of the documents, political intentions, and military developments to highlight how diplomacy and war were not two separate phases, but parts of the same plan.

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Ethiopia Map 1934, in Wikipedia Italia,

https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ethiopia_Map_1934_it.svg, licensed under Creative Commons CC BY-SA 3.0, accessed September 19, 2025

APPENDIX:

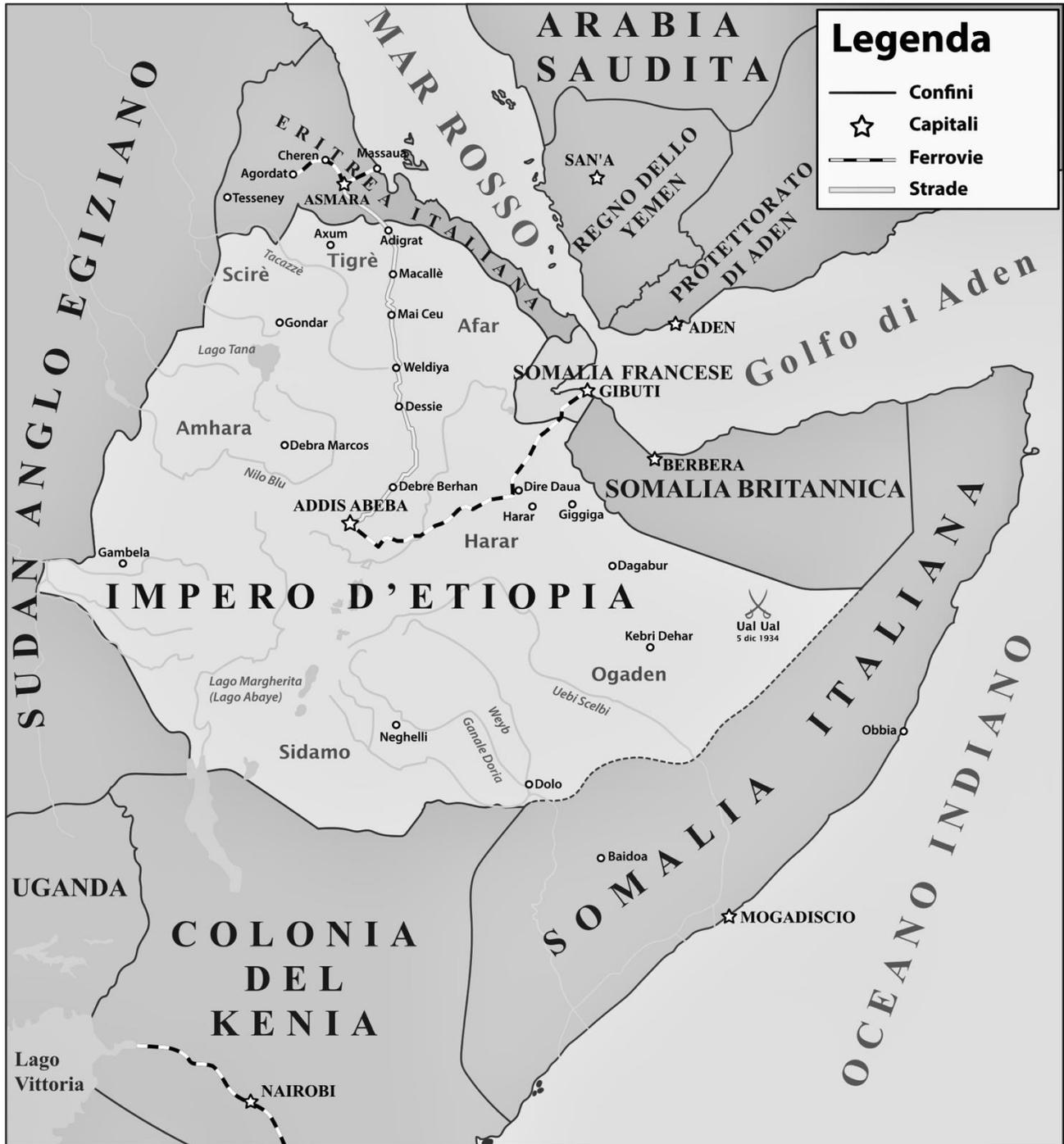


Figure 1: Map of Ethiopia in 1934, from Wikipedia Italia, licensed under Creative Commons CC BY-SA 3.0

ACCORDI ITALO-FRANCESI (2)

I

DECLARATION GENERALE

Roma, 7 gennaio 1935.

Le chef du gouvernement italien et le ministre des affaires étrangères de la république française:

Considérant que les Conventions en date de ce jour ont assuré le règlement des principales questions que les accords antérieurs laissent pendantes

entre eux, et notamment de toutes questions relatives à l'application de l'art. 13 de l'Accord de Londres du 26 Avril 1915:

Considérant que les questions litigieuses qui pourraient surgir à l'avenir entre leurs Gouvernements trouveront leur issue soit par la voie des pourparlers diplomatiques, soit par les procédures établies par le Pacte de la Société des Nations, le Statut de la Cour Permanente de Justice Internationale et l'Acte général d'Arbitrage:

Déclarent la détermination de leurs Gouvernements de développer l'amitié traditionnelle qui unit les deux Nations et de collaborer, dans un esprit de mutuelle confiance, au maintien de la paix générale.

En vue de cette collaboration, ils procéderont entre eux à toutes les consultations qu'exigeraient les circonstances.

Fait, en double exemplaire, à Rome, le 7 Janvier 1935.

MUSSOLINI

PIERRE LAVAL

II

PROCES VERBAL

Le chef du gouvernement italien et le ministre des affaires étrangères de la république française ont procédé à un examen approfondi de la situation existant en Europe Centrale et spécialement en Autriche. Ils ont reconnu la nécessité d'y développer les sentiments de confiance notamment par la réaffirmation de l'obligation qu'a tout Etat de respecter l'indépendance et l'intégrité territoriale des autres Etats. Fermement attachés pour leur part à l'observation de ce principe, ils sont tombés d'accord pour recommander aux Etats les plus intéressés la conclusion, dans le cadre de la Société des Nations, d'une convention comportant notamment l'engagement mutuel de ne pas s'immiscer dans leurs affaires intérieures respectives ainsi que l'engagement mutuel de ne susciter ni favoriser aucune agitation, propagande ou tentative d'intervention ayant pour but de porter atteinte par la force à l'intégrité territoriale, ou de transformer par la force le régime politique ou social d'un des Pays contractants. La faculté serait réservée aux contractants de conclure des accords particuliers en vue d'assurer, avec le concours du Conseil de la Société des Nations, l'application de ce principe.

Cette Convention, conclue initialement entre l'Allemagne, l'Autriche, l'Italie, la Hongrie, la Tchécoslovaquie et la Yougoslavie, sera ouverte à l'adhésion de la France, de la Pologne, et de la Roumanie, sans préjudice de l'adhésion que les contractants jugeront utile de provoquer de la part d'autres Puissances.

En attendant la conclusion d'une telle Convention et des accords particuliers qui en assureraient l'application et en raison de la nécessité de maintenir l'indépendance et l'intégrité de l'Autriche, ils sont convenus que, dès aujourd'hui et dans le cas où cette indépendance et cette intégrité seraient menacées, la France et l'Italie se consulteront entre elles et avec l'Autriche en vue des mesures à prendre. Cette consultation sera étendue par l'Italie et la France, afin

de s'assurer leur concours, aux Puissances qui se déclareraient disposées à participer à la convention ci-dessus envisagée et à contracter des engagements particuliers en vue d'en assurer l'application.

Fait en double exemplaire.

Rome, le 7 janvier 1935.

MUSSOLINI

PIERRE LAVAL

III

PROTOCOLE

Confidentiel.

Le Chef du Gouvernement Italien et le Ministre des Affaires Etrangères de la République Française se déclarent d'accord pour estimer que l'Allemagne, non plus qu'aucune autre Puissance dont le statut d'armement a été défini par traité, ne peut modifier par voie unilatérale ses obligations en matière d'armement, le principe de l'égalité des droits tel qu'il est défini par la Déclaration du 11 décembre 1932 demeurant par ailleurs intact. En conséquence les deux Gouvernements conviennent de procéder de la manière suivante:

Au cas où l'Allemagne voudrait se libérer unilatéralement du traité en se réservant une complète liberté d'armements, les deux Gouvernements, animés du désir de procéder d'un commun accord, se concerteront sur l'attitude à adopter.

Au cas où les circonstances permettraient une reprise des négociations internationales en vue de la conclusion d'une convention générale de limitation d'armements, les deux Gouvernements associeront leurs efforts pour que les chiffres de limitation qui seront inscrits dans la convention assurent aux deux Pays, par rapport à l'Allemagne, les avantages qui seraient justifiés pour chacun d'eux.

Fait en double exemplaire.

Rome, le 7 Janvier 1935.

MUSSOLINI

PIERRE LAVAL

IV

TRAITE ENTRE L'ITALIE ET LA FRANCE RELATIF AU REGLEMENT DE LEURS INTERETS EN AFRIQUE

Sa Majesté le Roi d'Italie et le Président de la République Française, désireux de développer en Afrique les relations d'amitié et de bon voisinage qui existent entre les deux Nations, et, pour ce faire, de régler d'une manière définitive les questions pendantes au sujet des Conventions du 28 Septembre 1896 relatives à la Tunisie et de l'Accord de Londres du 26 Avril 1915 et son article 13, ont désigné pour leurs Plénipotentiaires, savoir:

Sa Majesté le Roi d'Italie:

M. Benito Mussolini, Chef du Gouvernement, Ministre des Affaires Etrangères:

et

Le Président de la République Française:

M. Pierre Laval, Ministre des Affaires Etrangères, lesquels, après avoir reconnu leurs pleins pouvoirs en bonne et due forme, sont convenus des dispositions suivantes:

TITRE I.

Questions Tunisiennes.

Art. 1^{er}.

Les situations et les droits des Italiens et sujets coloniaux italiens en Tunisie et des Tunisiens en Italie seront réglés par une Convention spéciale, dont les bases sont fixées dans un Protocole spécial en date de ce jour, et que les Hautes Parties Contractantes s'engagent à négocier dans le plus bref délai possible, de telle manière qu'elle entre en vigueur à la même date que le présent Traité.

TITRE II

Frontière entre la Lybie et les Colonies Françaises limitrophes.

Art. 2.

La frontière séparant la Libye de l'Afrique Occidentale Française et de l'Afrique Equatoriale Française à l'est de Tummo, point terminal de la ligne fixée par l'accord de Paris du 12 Septembre 1919, sera déterminée ainsi qu'il suit:

— une ligne directe partant de Tummo et rejoignant l'Ehi Domar Doba;
— de l'Ehi Domar Doba, une ligne droite rejoignant l'extrémité nord-est de l'Ehi Dogologa;

— de l'Ehi Dogologa, une ligne droite rejoignant l'Enneri Turkou en un point situé en aval du confluent de celui-ci avec l'Enneri Guesso, de telle sorte que le tronçon Dogologa-Enneri Turkou de la piste caravanière du Fezzan vers Bardai reste en territoire français;

— de ce point, une ligne droite rejoignant le confluent de l'Enneri Bardague avec l'Enneri Momogoi ou Ofouni;

— de ce confluent, la ligne des hauteurs séparant l'Enneri Bardague de l'Enneri Momogoi ou Ofouni puis la ligne des crêtes jusqu'à l'Ehi Madou, de telle sorte que les affluents de droite de l'Enneri Bardague-Zoumeri, notamment les Enneri Odri, Tinaa Ouadame, Araye, Mecheur, Tirenno, Aguesju, Kayaga, Abeche restent en territoire français;

— de l'Ehi Madou une ligne droite rejoignant Yfbigue, à 10 kilomètres en amont de Yerbi-Ssouma;

— de ce point, une ligne droite rejoignant le point géodésique d'Aozi;
— de ce point, une ligne droite rejoignant l'intersection du 24^{ème} degré de longitude Est Greenwich et du 18^{ème} degré 45' de latitude nord.
Ce tracé est indiqué sur la carte n. I jointe au présent Traité.

Art. 3.

Des Commissaires spéciaux, délégués à cet effet par les deux Gouvernements, procéderont sur les lieux, d'après les données énoncées à l'article précédent, à une démarcation effective. Ils soumettront aux deux Gouvernements, en même temps que le résultat de leurs travaux, un projet d'accord sur les dispositions à prendre pour assurer d'une manière efficace la police dans la zone frontière et pour y régler l'utilisation des pâturages et des points d'eau par les populations indigènes.

TITRE III.

Frontière entre l'Erythrée et la Côte Française des Somalis.

Art. 4.

Le tracé suivant sera substitué à la délimitation établie entre l'Erythrée et la Côte Française des Somalis par les Protocoles de Rome en date de 24 Janvier 1900 et 10 Juillet 1901:

— de Der Eloua sur le détroit de Bab-El-Mandeb une ligne droite rejoignant l'Oued Welma immédiatement en aval de Daadato.

Ce tracé est indiqué sur la carte n. 2 jointe au présent Traité.

Art. 5.

Des Commissaires spéciaux, délégués à cet effet par les deux Gouvernements, procéderont sur les lieux, d'après les données énoncées à l'article précédent, à une démarcation effective. Ils soumettront aux deux Gouvernements, en même temps que le résultat de leurs travaux, un projet d'accord sur les dispositions à prendre pour assurer d'une manière efficace la police dans la zone frontière et pour y régler l'utilisation des pâturages et des points d'eau par les populations indigènes.

Art. 6.

La France reconnaît la souveraineté de l'Italie sur l'île Doumeirah et les îles sans nom adjacentes à cette île.

Art. 7.

Le présent Traité sera ratifié et les ratifications seront échangées à Rome dans le plus bref délai possible, Il entrera en vigueur le jour de l'échange des ratifications.

En foi de quoi les Plénipotentiaires susnommés ont signé le présent Traité, établi en double exemplaire, et y ont apposé leurs cachets.

Fait à Rome, le 7 Janvier 1935.

MUSSOLINI

PIERRE LAVAL

V

PROTOCOLE ANNEXE AU TRAITE ENTRE LA FRANCE ET L'ITALIE
RELATIF AU REGLEMENT DE LEURS INTERETS EN AFRIQUE

Confidentiel.

Le Gouvernement Italien, soucieux comme le Gouvernement Français d'assurer le libre passage du détroit de Bab-el-Mandeb, s'engage à maintenir dans l'état actuel, en ce qui concerne les fortifications et ouvrages stratégiques, la zone côtière du territoire visé à l'article 4 du Traité auquel le présent Protocole est annexé, ainsi que les îles et îlots visés à l'article 6 du dit traité.

Fait à Rome, en double exemplaire, le 7 Janvier 1935.

MUSSOLINI

PIERRE LAVAL

VI.

PROTOCOLE SPECIAL RELATIF AUX QUESTIONS TUNISIENNES

Les deux Gouvernements sont d'accord sur les bases suivantes:

1. — La Convention visée à l'article Ier du Traité relatif au règlement des intérêts de la France et de l'Italie en Afrique en date de ce jour, sera basée sur le maintien jusqu'au 28 Mars 1945 des conventions et documents annexes actuellement en vigueur. Le retour au droit commun, à partir du 28 Mars 1945, devra se faire progressivement.

2. — En ce qui concerne la nationalité, la dite Convention prévoira que les individus nés en Tunisie de parents italiens, avant le 28 Mars 1945 seront de nationalité italienne: les individus nés en Tunisie de parents italiens entre le 28 Mars 1945 et le 27 Mars 1965 seront de nationalité italienne mais pourront, dans l'année qui suivra leur majorité, réclamer la nationalité française; ils pourront, avec l'assistance de leur tuteurs légaux, réclamer cette nationalité dès l'âge de 16 ans: à partir du 28 Mars 1965, tous les individus nés en Tunisie de parents italiens seront soumis à la législation sur la nationalité française en Tunisie.

3. — En ce qui concerne les écoles royales italiennes en Tunisie, la Convention prévoira leur maintien jusqu'au 28 Mars 1955, date à laquelle elles deviendront des écoles privées soumises à la législation scolaire française en Tunisie. Il est entendu que la dite législation ne pourra pas dans l'avenir aggraver la situation des écoles privées italiennes telle qu'elle résulterait de l'application de la législation actuelle, et que les autorisations administratives pour la survivance des écoles royales après leur transformation seront accordées en temps voulu pour que leur activité ne souffre pas d'interruption.

4. — Les Italiens qui, antérieurement au 28 Mars 1945, auront été admis à exercer des professions libérales en Tunisie, notamment celles d'avocat, de médecin, de pharmacien, de sage-femme, d'architecte, seront assurés, quel que soit le régime établi par l'application du paragraphe 1er de pouvoir continuer leur vie durant à exercer ces professions.

Fait en double exemplaire.

Rome, le 7 Janvier 1935.

MUSSOLINI

PIERRE LAVAL

VII.

MUSSOLINI A LAVAL (1)

L. s.

Roma, 7 gennaio 1935.

Ho l'onore di accusare ricevuta a V.E. della lettera in data odierna, così redatta:

« J'ai l'honneur de faire à V.E. la communication suivante:

Après examen de la situation de l'Italie et de la France en Afrique Orientale, particulièrement en ce qui concerne les intérêts de l'Erythrée et de la Somalie italienne, d'une part, de la Côte Française des Somalis, d'autre part, et dans le désir de pratiquer la politique de collaboration amicale que les deux Gouvernements poursuivent au voisinage de leurs possessions africaines, le Gouvernement français déclare au Gouvernement italien que, dans l'application de l'arrangement du 13 décembre 1906 et de tous les accords cités à l'art. 1^{er} dudit arrangement, le Gouvernement français ne recherchera en Ethiopie la satisfaction d'autres intérêts que les intérêts économiques relatifs au trafic du chemin de fer Djibouti à Addis-Abeba dans la zone telle qu'elle est définie à l'annexe ci-jointe. Toutefois, le Gouvernement français ne renonce pas par là aux droits que ses ressortissants et protégés tiennent du Traité franco-éthiopien du 10 Janvier 1908, ni aux concessions qu'ils ont obtenues sur les parties du territoire éthiopien situées en dehors de la zone ci-dessus visée, non plus qu'au renouvellement desdites concessions.

Le Gouvernement français attacherait du prix à ce que le Gouvernement italien voulût bien Lui confirmer son accord sur ce qui précède et s'engageât à respecter, en ce qui le concerne, les droits et intérêts définis ci-dessus ».

Il Governo Italiano, confermando il proprio accordo su quanto precede, prende atto della dichiarazione fattagli dal Governo francese, circa l'applicazione dell'Accordo del 13 Dicembre 1906 e di tutti gli accordi citati all'Art. 1 di detto Accordo, e si impegna a rispettare gli interessi economici relativi al traffico della ferrovia Gibuti-Addis Abeba nella zona quale è definita nell'annesso qui unito; come pure i diritti dei cittadini, sudditi coloniali e protetti francesi, menzionati nella comunicazione di V.E.

VIII.
MUSSOLINI A LAVAL

L. s.

Roma, 7 gennaio 1935.

Ho l'onore di accusare ricevuta a V.E. della lettera in data odierna, così redatta:

« J'ai l'honneur de faire connaître à V.E. que le Gouvernement français, désireux de faciliter une collaboration plus étroite des intérêts français et italiens dans le chemin de fer de Djibouti à Addis Abeba, s'est assuré que le groupe français de la Compagnie concessionnaire de cette ligne cédera deux mille cinq cent (2500) actions à un groupe italien.

Dans le même esprit le Gouvernement français prêtera ses bons offices en vue d'élargir la représentation italienne dans les organismes directeurs de ladite Compagnie ».

Ho l'onore di prendere atto della cortese comunicazione dell'E. V.

Figure 2: Text of the Mussolini – Laval Agreements. Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Documenti Diplomatici Italiani, Serie VII, vol. XVI, Roma: Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato. Doc. n. 403

Désistement. (Segreto) (1).

Les Gouvernements Italien et Français,
après examen de la situation de l'Italie et de la France en Afrique Orientale, particulièrement en rapport aux intérêts de l'Erythrée et de la Somalie Italienne d'une part, de la Côte Française des Somalis de l'autre, et des Pays avoisinants,

désireux de pratiquer la politique de collaboration amicale qu'ils poursuivent au voisinage de leurs possessions africaines;

sont d'accord sur les dispositions suivantes:

1) - Le Gouvernement Français reconnaît, en ce qui le concerne, que, sous réserve des droits et intérêts qui appartiennent à la Grande Bretagne en vertu des Traités et Accords en vigueur, l'Italie a des intérêts prépondérants sur tout le territoire de l'Ethiopie, exception faite pour les intérêts économiques français relatifs à l'exploitation du Chemin de fer Djibouti-Addis Abeba.

2) - Le Gouvernement Français s'engage en conséquence vis à vis de l'Italie — même dans le cas de modifications du statu quo dans la région en question — à ne rechercher aucun avantage en Ethiopie autres que ceux d'ordre économique indiqués ci-dessus, et le Gouvernement Italien s'engage à son tour à garantir, dans toute éventualité, les intérêts économiques français relatifs à l'exploitation du Chemin de fer Djibouti-Addis Abeba.

3) - Les deux Gouvernements déclarent qu'en convenant les dispositions ci-dessus ils ont été animés du désir de préciser le contenu des accords et traités relatifs à la région en question, accords et traités qui restent confirmés dans toute leur validité.