

THE CRUCIBLE OF COMBAT

Italian Soldiers' Perspectives on the Second Italo-Ethiopian War

As Italy's soldiers advanced into Ethiopia the initial excitement of the invasion soon gave way to anticlimax and horror. Having envisioned a campaign of valorous heroism many soldiers expressed shock and even sympathy when confronted with its naked brutality. As the war dragged on, however – and the Ethiopian defense grew ever more durable – these early trepidations would soon harden into increasing indignation. In this way the jubilation that met the Italians' occupation of Addis Ababa on May 5, 1936 was not purely an expression of imperialistic triumph, but a testament to the common sacrifice and emotional inurement that ultimately allowed Italy's soldiers to so deeply identify with the campaign.

By Ian Shank
Brown University



Commemorative Postcard: Naples - Departure of Soldiers for Italian East Africa

Source: Modena Per Gli Altri - Collezione Privata di Celso Braia

The order arrived at General De Bono's military headquarters in Asmara on September 27, 1935. It was short and unequivocal. "Attack at dawn on third," it read, "repeat third October."¹ The telegram was signed by the Duce himself.

De Bono was ready. Years of planning and preparation had led to this moment. Exercising his authority as Supreme Commander of Italian Forces in East Africa, the general summoned his officers to issue final instructions. They needed only his word of approval. By now Italian troops and

military matériel were all but completely mobilized. Asmara's "every street was jammed with troops, guns, and equipment for war," and "1,000,000 tons of stores and ammunition" had been shipped from Naples alone.² Italy, at last, was poised at the precipice of war. Now, from the inner chambers of Mussolini's fascist government in Rome to the arid plains of Italy's fledgling colonial capital, it was clear that the Italian gerarchi had finally waited long enough. The time for action had arrived.

Five days later the Second Italo-Ethiopian War was officially underway. At precisely 5 a.m. on October 3, 1935, more than 100,000 Italian soldiers surged across the muddy red waters of the Mareb River and advanced from Italian Eritrea into Ethiopia. They marched quickly, inexorably forward, flanked by tanks, artillery, and flights of Regia Aeronautica bombers that droned back and forth over the 60-kilometer front. They met no resistance. Aside from rifle rounds discharged in the cacophony of celebration that followed – as Italian soldiers sang, waved banners, and triumphantly trumpeted their invasion well into the night – “not another shot disturbed the utter tranquility of the first day of the war.”³

For the many Italians who took part in this first phase of the invasion, the Ethiopian campaign originally seemed to offer all of the glory and triumph of war with none of the expected hardship. In reality – as they would discover in due time – the Ethiopian forces of Emperor Haile Selassie had simply withdrawn deeper into the interior of the country, biding their time until the extension of Italy’s supply lines rendered its forces more vulnerable to attack. More than a genuine reflection of Italian military superiority, theirs was a temporary, artificial peace. But as Elvio Cardarelli, a 23-year-old conscript reared on the outskirts of Rome, strode confidently forward the day after the invasion, the ease of the Italian advance seemed only to confirm the indomitable essence of fascist militancy:

We learn that everything is proceeding well; so far only a mere skirmish where one rifleman was lightly wounded... meanwhile our soldiers resume the advance, moving forward with an absolute tranquility.⁴

Elsewhere early testimonies of the invasion were broadly similar. Having girded themselves for battle with the “famed Ethiopian warriors”⁵ who had overwhelmed the Italians forty years prior in the First Italo-Ethiopian War, most soldiers – much to their pleasant surprise – passed the early days and weeks of the campaign without even firing their weapons, advancing seamlessly from one Ethiopian town to the next in their seemingly unstoppable march towards Addis Ababa. At times, this relative serenity was so absolute that it seemed to lull many into a false sense of relaxation. “I find myself well in war,” commented one young corporal, exuding a placid complacency with his new surroundings, “You eat, you drink, you sleep, you work, and you are paid. What more do you want?”⁶

Within the broader spectacle of the invasion, perhaps the moment of greatest symbolic importance would come with the capture of the Ethiopian city of Aduwa on October 6, 1935 – again with no resistance from the city’s inhabitants.⁷ Situated roughly twenty miles from the Eritrean border, Aduwa was, at face value, little more than a dusty town on the outskirts of the Ethiopian Empire. Its infrastructure was limited when existent, and the city held no strategic importance for either the Italian or Ethiopian armies. Yet as a symbol of fascist Italy’s resurgence the significance of its capture was practically

unmatched. It was here, after all, that some 10,000 Italian soldiers had been killed, wounded, or captured in the final battle of the First Italo-Ethiopian War, in what one historian has called the “greatest military defeat incurred by any European nation at the hands of Africans in all of the nineteenth century.”⁸ By 1935 – almost four full decades after the surrender – the shame of Aduwa continued to linger perniciously in the Italian psyche. For many Italians, even those who had had no direct connection to the conflict, the “Aduwa Complex” was an enduring source of national humiliation; a constant reminder that Italy was in some way inferior to the rest of imperial Europe. At every moment of national hesitation “memories of the defeat would be recalled...as a sign that Italy might once again buckle under pressure.”⁹ Even Mussolini – who was only a child when news of Italy’s defeat at Aduwa reached the Italian public – recalled that “the figures of thousands dead and seventy-two cannon lost hammered in my head for years” afterwards.¹⁰

Accordingly, with the fall of Aduwa just three days into the Ethiopian campaign, many Italians were quick to claim a massive moral victory. On October 9, 1935 a “huge picture of Mussolini” was raised over the city gates, complemented by “enormous white [stone] letters – ‘M’ for Mussolini and ‘E’ for King Victor Emmanuel” – which were hastily constructed on “two distant mountains”¹¹ beyond the city. A few days later General De Bono himself rode triumphantly through the city on horseback, greeted – as he noted sardonically in his later memoirs – “amidst the cheers of the population who had been told they must applaud me.”¹²

Still, while his raucous reception by local Ethiopians was largely artificial, the spirit of Italy’s soldiers was definitively not. “Today we finally learned our official number of losses in the capture of Aduwa,” Cardarelli noted privately, not without some pride: “There were zero.”¹³ Moving beyond the numerical realities of the operation, one of Cardarelli’s comrades, Espedito Russo, was even more rapturous about the national catharsis of the city’s capture:

The fallen of 1896 are vindicated. Aduwa is ours. Today will be a memorable day for all of Italy. Everyone rejoices and perhaps a few other fascists [elsewhere] feel a certain pain in their soul. They, too, would have liked to find themselves sharing this sacred duty in the land where – many years ago – our forefathers fell as heroes. On 10-6-35 the Italian flag returns to wave over the city.¹⁴

For now – bathed in the comfortable elation of the campaign’s progress – it was easy to get lost in Italy’s seemingly effortless advance; to fundamentally misunderstand the war effort as a passive and bloodless imposition of force. But these perceptions would not last forever. By the early days of November 1935, the Ethiopian army had finally begun to harass Italy’s invading forces in earnest, launching a protracted campaign of guerrilla warfare along the northern front of the country. Though Italy’s soldiers still remained comparatively better armed and supplied throughout this period – usually



Commemorative Postcard: *The Italian “redemption” at Aduwa*
Source: *Modena Per Gli Altri* – Collezione Privata di Celso Braia

inflicting much heavier casualties than they ever sustained – these first glimpses of serious combat would seriously challenge many soldiers’ original calculus of the war effort. Certainly this was the case when soldiers found themselves embroiled in battle for the first time, but even a secondhand exposure to the brutality of these early skirmishes could be jarring. Indeed – not five days after celebrating the 13th anniversary of Italian fascism on October 28, 1935 – Cardarelli had already begun to assume a distinctly darker aura in his personal diary, as he scribbled privately in the wake of his first confrontation with the visceral and violent evidence of modern warfare. “The wounded – with their clothes soaked in blood, exhausted, and missing limbs – show no sign of life,” he noted somberly. “I distance myself, I cannot restrain myself any longer at the sight of this painful scene... distressing thoughts run through my head; a tempest of indescribable ideas. Once again: is this war..?!”¹⁵

Falling into a fitful slumber later that night, Cardarelli tried to shake the scenes of suffering from his memory. Alas, it was no use. Condemned to the recesses of his own imagination,

he tossed and turned – tormented by nightmares all night long – as he recalled with lingering dread the next morning: “Throughout the entire night the most horrible nightmares disrupted my sleep. There were horribly mutilated bodies that passed before my terrified eyes, one of which – with a severed head – staggered forward before falling into a torrent of blood, where human remains of every sort floated by, carried by the current.”¹⁶

Faced for the first time with the savage realities of the Ethiopian campaign, a number of soldiers were deeply and visibly disturbed by what they saw. As many of their fathers had no doubt realized over the course of the First World War pining for military glory in the abstract was one thing. Fully embracing the requisite violence needed to achieve it, however, was quite another. At least for those soldiers who had yet to directly engage with their Ethiopian adversaries, this sense of general horror was originally so all-enveloping that – in many cases – it often extended into a kind of oblique pity for their fallen foes. Well aware of the military asymmetry between themselves and the Ethiopian army, many soldiers could not help but note the tragic technical deficiencies of Ethiopia’s fighting force, particularly when they tried to make use of Italy’s more modern military implements. “This morning an indigenous soldier found an unexploded hand grenade,” one young recruit somberly noted, “inadvertently pulling the pin, he was killed instantly.”¹⁷ “In the afternoon, a group of natives found an unexploded projectile,” added one Giacomo Agnese in his own diary, recounting an almost identical episode, “handling it out of curiosity, they detonate it... not knowing the cause of the explosion.”¹⁸ As the campaign dragged on – and similar stories became increasingly well-known – these piteous scenes would only further reinforce the absurd power imbalance that continued to separate the two sides, as yet another Italian recruit expounded in one particularly telling anecdote:

“Italians kiss well, we kiss bad.” This phrase uttered by an Ethiopian might raise suspicions on the normality of his sexual activities. And yet many ex-enemies have repeated it to me. Explaining the uncertainty is easy. During an attack our infantry depart with a rifle in their left hand and a grenade in their right. To remove the firing pin from the grenade they have to strip the tab with their teeth, after which the grenade – once thrown – explodes. The Ethiopians have managed to capture several crates of grenades... grenades that they use against us... except that they forget to pull the pin, limiting themselves to “kissing them” (as they had seen us do to ours) with the result that the grenades remain unexploded and are immediately used by the Italians. These [the Italians] make explode by “kissing them well.”¹⁹

Beyond the limited technical know-how of many Ethiopians, a significant proportion of Italian soldiers were similarly underwhelmed by the haphazard discipline and appearance of the East African army confronting them. Here, evidence of their adversaries’ relative disarray not only confirmed many

Italians' feelings of military superiority, but – at least in the case of Elvio Cardarelli – forced them to contemplate whether these seemingly ragtag resistors should even be taken seriously at all. “There are some that are armed with modern rifles, some with older barrel-loading types... and then those that have only a scimitar, lance, dagger, or are completely unarmed,” Cardarelli puzzled privately. “Behind them are women laden like mules, carrying gold and cookware on their shoulders as well as weapons... are we to conclude that these are our enemies...?!²⁰

Similar questions would continue to trouble Cardarelli for weeks to come. And so long as he remained skeptical about the military prowess of the Ethiopians, it was not – as he increasingly intimated – an impossible leap for him to partially sympathize with their suffering. Admittedly, at least in Cardarelli's case, this general unease never amounted to either an outright condemnation of the war or warfare in general. But as he came upon the corpse of an Ethiopian boy less than a week later – shot dead in a panicked burst of Italian fire – it was obvious that the sight of such senseless, innocent bloodshed could not help but arouse his pity:

Friends of the dead arrive, expressing their pain with wails and writhing contortions... there is also a woman with a horrible wound on her face, and another on her neck; she is not yet dead, but guessing that she has only a few minutes to live, she gasps.²¹

On rare occasions, and most dramatically of all, this quiet agitation could even evolve into outright dissent. So it was, for example, in the case of 23-year-old Vasco Poggesi – a child of moderately left-wing parents from the small town of Reggello, Tuscany. Like the bulk of his comrades he had embarked from Italy in high spirits, waxing privately that “young people... have the spirit of adventure in their blood and want at this time to be heroes in the eyes of their fine comrades and of all the Nation.”²² For now, he was as starry-eyed as any of the hopeful young soldiers around him. But that would all change once the war got underway. Faced with the grating pretension of his superiors, and the brutal savagery of the campaign, it was not long before he found himself completely disillusioned with the shallow rationalizations of the Mussolini regime, as he soon ranted privately in one increasingly scathing diatribe after another:

Is our aim really to shine light where there is darkness, or is it rather to conquer a rich and fertile region? No, I do not consider our actions against Abyssinia justified... because an attempt is being made on this occasion to conceal behind a mask of humanity and civilization what in reality is an act of aggression against an enemy that has only its courage and its fury to oppose us... Am I a discordant note in what is – or is said to be – a concert of harmony and complete approval? Yes. I am not a sheep. My mind is not so blinkered as not to see good and evil. And what we are doing is evil.²³

Here, however, it is important to clarify just how remarkable Poggesi's dissent was in the broader context of the

campaign, not only for his clear appreciation of Italy's imperial lust but for his total disassociation with “the behavior of [his] nation.” Indeed, far from epitomizing a general and mounting discord among his comrades, Poggesi's vociferous indictment of the campaign was – in many ways – extraordinarily anomalous; a kind of enraged exception that proved an otherwise prevailing rule of “harmony... and approval.” At times this contrast had not always been so clear. Particularly at the outset of hostilities many soldiers clearly shared some of Poggesi's concerns. Most, like him, were horrified by the butchery of combat. Most, too, expressed some degree of awareness or concern for the piteous plight of their Ethiopian foes. But while Poggesi's original trepidations only became further ossified over time – as he beheld ever more grotesque testaments to the savagery of fascist militancy – those of his comrades usually did not, instead trending more in the direction of renewed purpose and passion. For this majority it had been easy, even natural, to lament seemingly innocent suffering. But so, too, was it easy to feel this horror gradually melt into righteous anger and resentment, as they increasingly began to endure suffering of their own.

As the war effort progressed, one particularly acute source of outrage was the belief that Italy's Western rivals were personally collaborating with the enemy on the battlefield, and even directly responsible for the increasing durability of the Ethiopian defense. Generally speaking this was a gross misrepresentation of reality, though the claim was not without some justification. Throughout the early 1920s and 30s – as Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie labored to integrate his country into the international sphere through its membership in the League of Nations – a number of independent “Europeans and Americans [had been] engaged by the Ethiopian government as advisors to various ministries.”²⁴ Later, when the war began in October 1935, it is clear that some stayed on of their own volition, though as independent actors rather than sanctioned emissaries of their respective governments. In the broader context of the seven-month campaign the participation of this handful of white military consultants would ultimately have a negligible influence on the Ethiopian defense. But in the eyes of the Italian soldiers who encountered them – or heard rumors of white faces among the enemy ranks – this outside interference was interpreted as yet another confirmation of Italy's inherent racial and military superiority. “If up until now the army of the Negus was a jumble of men with neither order nor discipline,” Cardarelli scribbled privately in the wake of one such encounter, “it seems certain that now a few white officials (Belgian, English, Norwegian) have provided these two principal elements – strength and resistance – behind the lines of every army.”

At times it is clear that these already exaggerated perceptions had a way of straying into outright fabrication. Suspecting a secret, conspiratorial proliferation of European officers, Giacomo Agnese privately floated the theory that “beyond dressing like Ethiopian soldiers,” many white officials actu-



Elvio Cardarelli journaling by lamplight at the front
Source: *Dove La Vita Si Nasconde Alla Morte: La Guerra D’Etiopia Raccontata Da Un Soldato Nel ‘Diario Del Mio Richiamo’*

ally “dyed their faces black... to better disguise themselves.”²⁵ Here, even among fellow volunteers, this was an extreme position. And yet although Agnese’s radical opinions did not seem to be widely accepted, his outrage at these officials’ “renunciation of their race”²⁶ was clearly very much shared, as Elvio Cardarelli elaborated in yet another battlefield evocation on the campaign’s racial overtones:

On the enemy side, among the black dead and wounded, a white official was found, fallen a few meters from the wall of the redoubt; a 46-year-old major spit in his face in a sign of extreme contempt. These renegades of their race should be treated no better: they do not merit that respect which is owed who are killed on the front lines – the carcass of this man has not fought for a flag, like all the heroic fallen, but for a master like a mule, and should be treated worse than this, because a mule does not have reason, does not have a soul; but a white man – yes.²⁷

For Cardarelli and others the presence of white officials on the battlefield did more than just solidify the increasing separation between fascist Italy and the rest of Western Europe: it clarified these soldiers’ sense of purpose. Faced, on the one hand, with the purportedly mercenary motivations and tactics of their European rivals – as well as the treacherous defection of countless conscripted Ascari – many Italians came to increasingly see theirs as the more virtuous campaign, in which the noble ideals of nationalism had been pitted against the basest forms of human depravity. For those soldiers originally horrified by the carnage of combat, this seeming moral disparity would provide an important rallying point. But per-

haps even more importantly – as Cardarelli had expounded privately several weeks prior to his encounter with the fallen white official – it also heightened the racial animus of the war effort, which had grown ever more pronounced with each new glimpse of the Ethiopians’ brutal guerilla tactics:

We had just marched several kilometers, when a terrifying scene presented itself before our horrified eyes... four stark naked [Italian] soldiers lie in a small clearing that shows traces of a struggle. The bodies are horrendously mutilated; they no longer resemble anything human. Their limbs are detached from their bodies – presenting evidence of deep stab wounds – while their faces have been completely disfigured by a dagger, so much so that pieces of bloody flesh are detached, hanging limply towards the ground. One of these four martyrs was completely cut in half... torn to pieces in a monstrous spectacle. I feel tears wet my eyes... all four were married, and one the father of six children.²⁸

Scarred by what he had just seen, Cardarelli resumed his march. Yet where he had once felt empty anguish at the sight of such butchery – and even, sometimes, an almost tentative sympathy for his fallen African foes – he now felt only a furious and righteous anger: “We resume our journey, with our hearts heavy and our spirits aching, along with a violent desire to avenge those poor mutilated bodies... it’s no longer the time for playing around, nor for using gentle and civil methods with these people...it has begun for us, the truly dangerous period of this colonial war.”²⁹

Given Cardarelli’s marked personal transformation – from reluctant recruit, to occasional critic, to, finally, a steely and single-minded soldier – it is worth devoting particular attention to his private testimonies. Yet he was hardly the only soldier to embrace a more militantly xenophobic appraisal of the war effort as time went on. In the case of Giacomo Agnese, for example, the first triumphant days of the invasion had elicited a similarly tentative degree of sympathy for the Italians’ indigenous adversaries. After noting that many of his fellow soldiers had begun to “enthusiastically raid”³⁰ the homes of surrendered Ethiopians – among other early wartime atrocities – he seemed to offer a tacit endorsement of the sanctions meted out by Italy’s high command. “The major speaks to the troops, admonishing the lack of discipline and the raids of yesterday,” Agnese recorded. “He says that strict action will be taken against those who would continue and informs us that one militant – from the 116th legion – will be shot. He had been surprised trying to force his desires, dagger in hand, on an indigenous girl.”³¹

At this point in the campaign Agnese’s perception of Ethiopia’s inhabitants was probably closer to a kind of imperious paternalism than outright racial hatred. Though not exactly comparable, for instance, he noted that Italy’s colonial conscripts – known as Ascari – “seemed physically childlike... nervous and almost delicate,” but ultimately concluded that they were also “incredibly honest” people.³² Similarly, in yet

another acknowledgement of Italy's rapacious advance, he later lamented the "indescribable damage... of the troops' looting," recording the piteous screams of several village women who "climbed on the roofs of their huts to make [their protests] heard."³³ For now, at least, Agnese was not wholly blind to the suffering that surrounded him, comfortable as he was in his inherent sense of racial superiority. But his flippant chauvinism would soon assume a significantly darker tone as the war effort became increasingly onerous. Once generally unsettled by the rampant plundering of his comrades, Agnese's entries began to focus more and more on his own nutritional deficiencies. "Four loaves were distributed [to the unit]," he scribbled bitterly on October 9, "which must suffice for two days."³⁴ By early November the situation had only worsened. "Our hardships and privations have reduced [one soldier] to a skeleton, all eyes and a beard... many remain without meat."³⁵ Within a few more days, he had had enough:

I assist in a wood gathering operation... forcing down the doors of the [village] houses between the protests of their inhabitants. One woman, screaming like a banshee, bares her sagging breasts before our eyes; perhaps she wants to tell me she is a mother, but I don't see any children and I expel her with a stick... suddenly mounted police arrive in the village and everyone sneaks off... the high commanders try to protect the local populations for political motivations, but the minor commanders are obliged to proceed as above, out of urgent need, and a more natural conception of war.³⁶

As had occurred in previous stages of Italy's mobilization there was a clear continuity between Agnese's outrage and his mounting physical hardship, though this time, by contrast, it was channeled externally rather than against Italy's own. To be sure there was still a degree of friction within the ranks, particularly between Italy's higher and lower ranking officers. But this relative tension was also coupled with a new solidarity in the face of an increasingly dangerous enemy, as well as a common assurance that – despite any discord that might still exist among Italy's soldiers – it was only the Ethiopians who directly threatened their survival. This clear distinction was hardly lost on Agnese and his comrades. "Yesterday, a soldier from the 114th... was captured and tortured by the natives," Agnese scribbled somberly, adding that another wounded soldier had "sang [the fascist anthem]" as he was being operated on that morning.³⁷ United in common danger the unit's sense of patriotism had never been stronger. And as Agnese passively recorded in the wake of another Ethiopian assault, now all too comfortable with the violent procedures of the campaign, "In the afternoon a firewood detail from the 144th legion, composed of four men, was assaulted: all killed. Out go our patrols, to set fire to all the villages in the vicinity."³⁸

Steeped in the heat of the war effort Agnese's original moral trepidations had all but evaporated. Yet the greatest traumas of the campaign had yet to come. Throughout December and January the Ethiopian counter-offensive would only contin-

ue to gather steam, exacting an ever more preoccupying toll on Italy's expeditionary units. In the eyes of the Mussolini regime – and its earliest historians of fascist colonialism – this was, bar none, the "black period" of the campaign.³⁹ Having replaced General De Bono in late November following the desultory stagnation of the Italian advance, Italy's newly appointed colonial commander, Pietro Badoglio, confronted a situation in which he had "not only failed to move an inch since replacing General De Bono, but... had actually allowed much of the territory taken by his predecessor to be torn from his grasp."⁴⁰ Desperate for reinforcements, Badoglio sent an urgent wire to Italy in December of 1935 asking for "two more divisions" before swiftly dispatching "two massive columns to halt the advance" of Ethiopian forces.⁴¹ The immediate results were mixed. As Italian colonial historian Angelo del Boca has observed, Italy's swift ensuing victories again proved "ephemeral... compelling the Italians to fall back as far as the entrenched camp of [Aduwa] in the north... and leaving their headquarters in Tembien in the hands of the [Ethiopians]" by the last days of December.⁴²

By now the campaign had assumed a distinctively desperate aura. The fall of Tembien, a mountainous outpost in northern Ethiopia, weighed particularly heavily on Badoglio, prompting the general to launch an ambitious offensive to reclaim the territory between January 20 and 24. Months later this would come to be known as the First Battle of Tembien, most notable to historians for having featured some of the fiercest fighting of the entire campaign. For now, however, it was simply the greatest onslaught Italy's soldiers had yet faced. Here, as had been the case throughout the campaign, the Italians remained vastly better armed than their African adversaries. But the Ethiopians had numbers on their side, having "succeeded in establishing themselves with 160,000 men on the heights overlooking the Italian positions."⁴³ With each new Ethiopian assault, the number of Italian casualties rose higher and higher. A decisive victory – one seemingly assured – was now increasingly uncertain. And in the testimony of one Italian journalist embedded in the soldiers' ranks, General Badoglio was clearly feeling the pressure. "Fully dressed...he sat on a stool in his tent beside the telephone. On the few occasions when it rang, he lifted the receiver and listened in silence, his face a mask of stone in the crude light of the acetylene lamp."⁴⁴

Badoglio was not the only Italian riven with a sense of anxious detachment. Separated as he was from the battlefields of Tembien, Cardarelli was but another of the many soldiers preoccupied with the desperate circumstances of his distant comrades, as he privately recorded just a few hours prior to Badoglio's stoic, bedtime brooding:

A motorcyclist arrives at our unit from the front... three of our divisions – the Gavinana, the March 23, and the April 21 – are completely engaged, while the October 28 is encircled. The [casualties] of the enemy vastly surpass our own; but the forces we are aligned against are superi-

or to ours... the motorcyclist adds that we are [outnumbered] 10 to 1.⁴⁵

For Cardarelli this breathless account was deeply unsettling. But for his distant comrade Giacomo Agnese, a minor official in the surrounded October 28 division, it was a matter of life and death. Three days prior, having dug in along the perimeter of an “advance fortification,” Agnese and his men were only just beginning “to surround the fortification with barbed wire”⁴⁶ in anticipation of the trials to come. Consumed by nervous anxiety, Agnese complained of “stomach

perately staving off wave after wave of the Ethiopian assault, a lone, familiar cry pierced the din of the battle:

At a quarter past noon Ferruccio is hit and slumps to the ground with a cry. We carry him a below and treat him: a bullet has entered under his right shoulder blade, with no exit wound. The wound seems serious, but we try to comfort him, telling him that it is nothing. He remains unconvinced, however, because he feels internal pain and his legs are paralyzed. [The medics] carry him immediately to the central fortification on a stretcher.⁵²

“Once generally uncertain about the allure of abstract military glory these soldiers were now fighting for something distinctly different: revenge, vindication, and survival.”

pains” that plagued him throughout a “terrible night” of restless slumber.⁴⁷ Fortunately he did not have to face these trials alone. Since Agnese’s arrival in East Africa one individual had continued to stick out in his almost fifty pages of diary entries as a recurrent source of comfort and companionship: a man by the name of Ferruccio. Having both grown up in the northwestern Italian city of Oneglia, the two had become fast friends. “Last night between drags of a cigarette I remained with my friend Ferruccio until nine,” Agnese had written contentedly towards the end of November, “chatting about mutual friends, his home and my home, the future.”⁴⁸ By Christmas time the two were practically inseparable. “I gifted Ferruccio a ski mask,” Agnese noted privately, “he received a cake completely reduced to crumbs: I eat a little bit of it with him, and then we eat a few other things.”⁴⁹ Separated from the comforts of home – in a foreign and hostile territory – the two depended on one another like brothers. But all that would change with the Battle of Tembien.

On January 21 – after another fitful night’s sleep – Agnese awoke to the sound of gunfire. “We fight on our left, intensely, for the entire morning,” he scribbled privately later that evening, “in the afternoon we are also attacked on our right side: the three machine guns... jam often.”⁵⁰ By nightfall the Italians’ had barely managed to hold their ground. Hours later, the morning would bring little respite:

The day begins with fighting a little bit everywhere, but above all on our left. We are surrounded. The mountain to our left that looks out over the valley – previously occupied by our Ascari – is now in the hands of the Ethiopians. A missing soldier from the third company, who comes to take refuge in our fortification, brings news of our grave losses. In the central fortification, the largest, where the infirmary is located, it is a parade of stretchers.⁵¹

Over the course of the day the Italian lines slowly dissolved into bedlam. As Agnese struggled to steel his resolve, des-

Throughout the next few days Agnese visits Ferruccio in the infirmary whenever he can. He is tentatively, hopefully, optimistic, but admits each time that Ferruccio “seems worsened.”⁵³ Before falling into a fitful sleep on January 22 – the eve of his third straight day of combat – Agnese writes “I try to encourage him but I almost feel ashamed... I leave him a few sugar cubes.”⁵⁴ The next evening his daily entry is even shorter. “Ferruccio speaks only in monosyllables,” he notes privately, “he continually asks for water but I do not succeed in procuring him any.”⁵⁵

By January 25 the First Battle of Tembien had finally been won. Yet it had come at an extraordinary cost for the Italians, claiming the lives of some “60 officers, 605 nationals, and 417 Ascari.”⁵⁶ “The dead from our battalion number 110,” Agnese recorded in quiet shock, “though they remained in enemy hands for only a short time they are completely naked and horribly mutilated... I try and identify a few, but I have to distance myself out of horror.”⁵⁷ Overwhelmed by the carnage of the battle, Agnese tried to put his feelings into words in a letter to his wife. But the most devastating news was still yet to come:

I had just mailed a letter to Lina to bring her up to speed about the tragedy of Ferruccio, when they came to inform me that my friend was dead. I run, run, followed by many comrades, and I find him close to a grave that has already been dug. I kiss him, and those who knew him kiss him as well, but the gravediggers are in a rush; there is much work to be done, we must bury him. When he is lowered into the hole, I jump down to lay a blanket under his head and over his face.⁵⁸

For Agnese, the loss of his friend would forever change the way that he understood the campaign. He was not alone in this regard. Confronted by the visceral brutality of the war; by personal suffering on a previously unimaginable scale; by an enemy that appeared ever more fearsome and nefarious with each new skirmish, most Italian soldiers only grew increasingly anesthetized to the plight of the Ethiopians as

the campaign progressed. For some, like Mussolini's son Vittorio, who "boasted of the effect of incendiary bombs on terrorized civilians," this numbness amounted to nothing more than a consistent, wanton sadism.⁵⁹ And yet for most – like Morlotti, Cardarelli, and Agnese – a clear transformation had gradually taken place. Once generally uncertain about the allure of abstract military glory these soldiers were now fighting for something distinctly different: revenge, vindication, and survival. War, as they had increasingly come to believe, was not for the merciful. And as Mussolini had cabled General Badoglio in the final days of January, theirs would be a victory "by any means necessary."⁶⁰

As time wore on – and especially in the latter half of the campaign – the use of one particularly insidious implement would come to define the regime's no-holds-barred militarism: poison gas (or 'insecticide' as General Badoglio euphemistically called it).⁶¹ Though it was not until 1996 that the Italian Ministry of Defense finally "admitted publicly that mustard gas and arsine had been used in Ethiopia,"⁶² it remains well documented that from December 1935 through March 1936 "around 1,000 heavy bombs filled with the chemicals were dropped on enemy positions [and] sprayed as a vapor from aircrafts,"⁶³ killing and poisoning thousands of combatants and non-combatants alike. Beyond targeting Ethiopian soldiers alone, historian Alberto Sbacchi has documented that "General Badoglio sprayed villages, herds, pastures, rivers, and lakes with [mustard gas]"⁶⁴ in efforts to systematically exterminate pockets of Ethiopia's civilian population, proudly cabling Mussolini in the wake of the First Battle of Tembien that "rumors circulate of terror from the use of gas."⁶⁵ In the testimony of one Ethiopian commander engaged at Tembien – a rarity within the historiography of Italian colonialism – these chemical attacks were not only a severe source of demoralization for the Ethiopians but arguably the single most important factor in turning the tide in favor of the Italians:

The bombing from the air had reached its height when suddenly a number of my warriors dropped their weapons, screamed with agony, rubbed their eyes with their knuckles, buckled at the knees and collapsed. An invisible rain of lethal gas was splashing down on my men... I dare not think of how many men I lost on [January 23] alone. The gas contaminated the fields and woods, and at least 2,000 animals died. Mules, cows, rams, and a host of wild creatures, maddened with pain, stampeded to the ravines and threw themselves into the depths below. On the next day, and the next and the next, the Italian planes again subjected my army to gas attacks. They dropped it on any spot where they detected the slightest movement.⁶⁶

Given Italy's official repudiation of "asphyxiating, poisonous, or other gases" at the Geneva Protocol of 1925, great efforts were made to conceal the use of chemical weapons from the Italian public. When in late 1935 a London press photographer published "several photographs of Ethiopians

whose bodies were covered with sores," Italy's ambassador to Britain, Dino Grandi, alleged that the purported mustard gas victims were actually "lepers," and that the entire controversy had merely been drummed up as a "contemptible trick [of] the anti-fascist press to discredit the Mussolini regime."⁶⁷ Chillingly, however, it is clear that these protestations were not intended for the ears of Italy's soldiers, most of whom were not only aware of the Italians' use of poison gas, but – by this point in the campaign – completely unperturbed by their gruesome effects. Staring wistfully after the aircraft that made their way back and forth across the static southern front, 23-year-old Guglielmo Morlotti referred to the pilots overhead as his "lucky friends,"⁶⁸ while Elvio Cardarelli – in an almost casual aside several days prior to the First Battle of Tembien – showed no compunction in acknowledging that "thousands of Ethiopian had [already] been decimated by launching gas bombs."⁶⁹ Shortly after "constructing a cross for Ferruccio,"⁷⁰ Giacomo Agnese offered perhaps the most desensitized entry of all. "Many good pieces of news circulate about the situation at the front," he recorded impassively, "our air force makes much use of yperite [mustard gas]."⁷¹

Faced with an adversary that had no anti-aircraft defenses to speak of, a number of historians have sought to explain how the majority of Italy's soldiers could have been so comfortable with the unspeakable aerial atrocities of the campaign. Some, like Angelo del Boca, have speculated that many acted out of thoughtless "discipline, emulation" and the sense that they were merely "eliminating 'barbarians' or 'sub-humans'."⁷² Others, meanwhile – like Christopher Duggan – have suggested "the willingness of so many soldiers to accept the rhetoric of the regime is partly explained by the fact that the war was very one-sided, with many of the enemy casualties being brought about from the relative safety of the air."⁷³ Yet neither of these explanations substantively acknowledges the degree to which this complicity was – in many cases – engineered through the crucible of combat; not as a passive inheritance of the Mussolini regime but as a direct consequence of their own personal engagement with the campaign. Understood in abstract terminology, the fiery oratory of Il Duce was no doubt a source of wide inspiration. But in the words of Manlio la Sorsa, who privately surveyed the battlefields of Tembien days after the fighting had subsided, fraternity was even stronger than ideology:

Our soldiers are animated by courage and the highest sense of patriotism. Yesterday, I visited a rifleman in the hospital who had been gravely wounded in combat, who wept because they had not allowed him to immediately return to the front to avenge his beloved lieutenant who – dying in his arms – had told him: 'Do not cry but vindicate me!'⁷⁴

Within a month of the First Battle of Tembien the Ethiopian campaign was all but over – a reality perhaps best evidenced by Badoglio's refusal to redouble the use of bacteriological weapons in late February on the grounds that "the enemy was [already] sufficiently weakened."⁷⁵ Though it would still



Candyland-style board game for Italian children chronicling the progression of the Ethiopian campaign
 Source: Brown University Special Collections

be several months until the Italians' triumphant procession into Addis Ababa on May 5, 1936 – an event publicized throughout the peninsula as the genesis of a new, fascist Roman Empire – the Ethiopians would never again seriously challenge the Italian advance, ultimately capitulating in the face of relentless and merciless military force. After months of brutal combat the news of Italy's victory was met with universal acclaim within the ranks. "Civilization has won," declared Manlio La Sorsa, basking in the grandeur of the fascist war machine.⁷⁶ "My dear mother," penned a young Sicilian conscript in a letter back home, "we have conquered a territory three times larger than all of Italy."⁷⁷ Prolific as ever – even from the seclusion of an Italian reserve camp – Elvio Cardarelli was even more ebullient, as he vividly recounted the pandemonium that gripped his comrades the moment victory was proclaimed:

In a moment we are flung from the car, the cries of joy spread rapidly between the regiments... immediately the shouting redoubles, while the vast plain is illuminated with hundreds and hundreds of tricolor rockets... the officers, expelled from their tents and mess halls, merge with us, shouting and singing with us; the enthusiasm becomes delirious... I retire to my quarters around midnight, sweaty, tired, and with almost no voice, but with my heart in celebration; in a [still unfinished] letter addressed to my loved ones, I introduce another sheet, transmitting my joy to them and describing our enthusiasm.⁷⁸

As had occurred throughout their journey south, Italy's soldiers were again engulfed in a surge of irrepressible euphoria. Yet this time the elation was different. More than an expression of pure exultancy, the catharsis of Italy's soldiers was now undergirded by a profound sense of validation and purpose rooted as much in their common triumph as in their common suffering. At one time – in the safe seclusion of their former lives – the bellicose exhortations of Il Duce may have inspired their enthusiasm for the campaign. But as Mario Ravenna mused privately, it was the experience of

shared sacrifice that ultimately solidified it:

The war is finished. Italy has achieved her objectives with a lightning action that has left the world stunned. The enemy flees, disintegrated... the Second Empire of Rome has had its baptism... Italians, at the realization of this great dream, tremble with joy, and we legionaries – who felt the profound meaning of this enterprise conducted with great skill – are proud of it. Our sacrifice will not have been in vain, of that we are sure.⁷⁹

Perhaps most telling of all, however, was the testimony of Giacomo Agnese. Months after the First Battle of Tembien – still stricken by the loss of his closest friend – Agnese had returned to the fateful battlefield to pay his respects. The scene was striking; almost pleasant. Where brutalized bodies had once strewn the mountainside, a modest memorial now paid tribute to Italy's fallen. Moved by the spectacle before him, Agnese could not help but feel enraptured by the momentousness of his friend's sacrifice, as he recorded privately later that day:

Before leaving, I go to the cemetery, which they have doubled in size... they have retrieved the remains of the other fallen from Oneglia... to the right a tombstone reads:

11th Div. CCNN "October 28"

I Fell

For the Fascist Empire

At the bottom, at the face of the entrance, there is a hill with a cross, and to the right another headstone:

You Go Before Il Duce

Our Last Cry: 'To Us!'

And to the left another:

O' Passing Traveler

The Legionaries Rest Here

Who Lived Up To The Laws of Rome

In the corner, right of the entrance, is the Madonna of Tembien. I salute my comrades for the last time, those from Oneglia and all the others, then I go out.

As Agnese's convoy moved slowly on, he looked out – to his awe – on a colony in motion. Here and there, workers carried bits of stone and wood. A handful of soldiers lounged in the sun. "An enormous road was under construction."⁸⁰ All around him, "everything was now alive and moving."⁸¹ For a moment he returned pensively to his diary. "We pass through Edaga Hamus, where I was stationed with Ferruccio for almost a month," he noted quietly to himself. "It is now completely changed: there is an asphalt road where there once was not even a footpath; new constructions made of stone."⁸²

Looking up, he surveyed the rapidly changing landscape. "There is intense work behind the lines," he mused, as if lost in his own thoughts and reflections. Returning to his diary, he put pen to paper one more time.

"You feel proud to be Italian."⁸³ 🏛️

Endnotes

- [1] Emilio De Bono, *Anno XIII: The Conquest of an Empire* (London: Cresset Press, 1937) 220.
- [2] Angelo Del Boca, *The Ethiopian War: 1935-1941* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 21-2
- [3] Boca, *The Ethiopian War*, 44.
- [4] Elvio Cardarelli, *Dove La Vita Si Nasconde Alla Morte: La Guerra D'Etiopia Raccontata Da Un Soldato Nel 'Diario Del Mio Richiamo'* (Vetralla: Davide Ghaleb Editore, 2008), 282.
- [5] Boca, *The Ethiopian War*, 57.
- [6] Ennio Flaiano, *Tempo Di Uccidere* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1973), 296.
- [7] Boca, *The Ethiopian War*, 47.
- [8] George Baer, *The Coming of the Italian-Ethiopian War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 4.
- [9] Alexander De Grand, "Mussolini's Follies: Fascism in Its Imperial and Racist Phase, 1935-1940." *Contemporary European History* 13, no. 2 (May 2004), 129.
- [10] Baer, *The Coming of the Italian-Ethiopian War*, 4.
- [11] The Associated Press, "Huge Picture of Mussolini Raised Over Aduwa Gate," *Historical New York Times*, October 10, 1935, <http://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1935/10/10/121567078.html? pageNumber=18>.
- [12] De Bono, *Anno XIII*, 266.
- [13] Cardarelli, *Dove La Vita Si Nasconde Alla Morte*, 294.
- [14] Nicola Labanca, *Posti Al Sole: Diari E Memorie Di Vita E Di Lavoro Dalle Colonie D'Africa* (Rovereto: Museo Storico Italiano Della Guerra, 2001), 97.
- [15] *Ibid.*, 342.
- [16] Olimpio Pasquinelli, *Diary of Olimpio Pasquinelli, Dalla Caserma Nomentana, 1936-1938*. MS. Archivio Diaristico Nazionale, Jesi, Ancona, 10.
- [17] Agnese, *Arruolamento*, 23.
- [18] Ennio Flaiano, *Tempo Di Uccidere* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1973), 305.
- [19] Cardarelli, *Dove La Vita Si Nasconde Alla Morte*, 317.
- [20] *Ibid.*, 327.
- [21] Christopher Duggan, *Fascist Voices: An Intimate History of Mussolini's Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 264.
- [22] *Ibid.*, 265.
- [23] Sbacchi, *Legacy of Bitterness*, 7.
- [24] Agnese, *Arruolamento*, 40.
- [25] *Ibid.*
- [26] Cardarelli, *Dove La Vita Si Nasconde Alla Morte*, 442.
- [27] *Ibid.*, 360-361.
- [28] *Ibid.*, 362.
- [29] Agnese, *Arruolamento*, 18.
- [30] *Ibid.*
- [31] *Ibid.*, 20.
- [32] *Ibid.*, 22.
- [33] *Ibid.*, 18-19.
- [34] *Ibid.*, 24.
- [35] *Ibid.*, 18.
- [36] *Ibid.*, 30.
- [37] Boca, *The Ethiopian War*, 77.
- [38] *Ibid.*, 77-78.
- [39] *Ibid.*, 77.
- [40] *Ibid.*
- [41] *Ibid.*, 100.
- [42] Cardarelli, *Dove La Vita Si Nasconde Alla Morte*, 422.
- [43] *Ibid.*
- [44] *Ibid.*, 28.
- [45] *Ibid.*, 37.
- [46] *Ibid.*, 48.
- [47] *Ibid.*, 48-49.
- [48] *Ibid.*, 49.
- [49] *Ibid.*, 49; 50.
- [50] *Ibid.*, 49.
- [51] *Ibid.*, 50.
- [52] Boca, *The Ethiopian War*, 110.
- [53] Agnese, *Arruolamento*, 51.
- [54] *Ibid.*
- [55] *Ibid.*
- [56] Duggan, *Fascist Voices*, 261.
- [57] *Ibid.*, 262.
- [58] *Ibid.*, 261.
- [59] Sbacchi, *Legacy of Bitterness*, 60.
- [60] Cited in Grand, "Mussolini's Follies," 140.
- [61] Boca, *The Ethiopian War*, 108.
- [62] *Ibid.*, 80.
- [63] Morlotti, "I Diari di Mio Padre," 238.
- [64] Cardarelli, *Dove La Vita Si Nasconde Alla Morte*, 414.
- [65] Agnese, *Arruolamento*, 52.
- [66] *Ibid.*
- [67] Angelo Del Boca, *Italiani, Brava Gente? Un Mito Duro a Morire* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2005), 2.
- [68] Duggan, *Fascist Voices*, 267.
- [69] Labanca, *Posti Al Sole*, 59.
- [70] Duggan, *Fascist Voices*, 261.
- [71] Francesco Milano and Antonio Milano, *Un Ragazzo Calabrese Alla Conquista Dell'Impero: Lettere E Appunti per Un Diario Mai Scritto 1934-1936* (Calabria: ICSAIC, 2005), 84.
- [72] Cardarelli, *Dove La Vita Si Nasconde Alla Morte*, 517-518.
- [73] Mario Ravenna, *Diario Di Un Legionario in A.O.I. 1935-1937* (Milano: La Legione, 1971), 27.
- [74] Agnese, *Arruolamento*, 75.
- [75] *Ibid.*
- [76] *Ibid.*
- [77] *Ibid.*
- [78] *Ibid.*
- [79] *Ibid.*, 342.
- [80] *Ibid.*, 99.
- [81] Agnese, *Arruolamento*, 48.
- [82] De Grand, "Mussolini's Follies: Fascism in Its Imperial and Racist Phase, 1935-1940," 140.
- [83] Labanca, *Posti Al Sole*, 58.