

Ethiopia: How an African nation was never really colonised.

With the rise of European colonialism beginning in the 15th century, it soon became clear that European great powers sought to expand their influence worldwide. Particularly in the 19th century, during the so-called Scramble for Africa, the African continent was rapidly divided among countries such as the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, and the Netherlands.

Yet there is one notable exception: Ethiopia. Unlike virtually the rest of Africa, this country managed to remain largely independent of European rule.

But how was that possible? Why wasn't Ethiopia swept up in the European drive for expansion? And why isn't the Italian occupation of the country viewed by everyone as true colonization?

We'll explore these questions in more depth in this article.



Flag Ethiopia. Source:

[wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flag_of_Ethiopia)



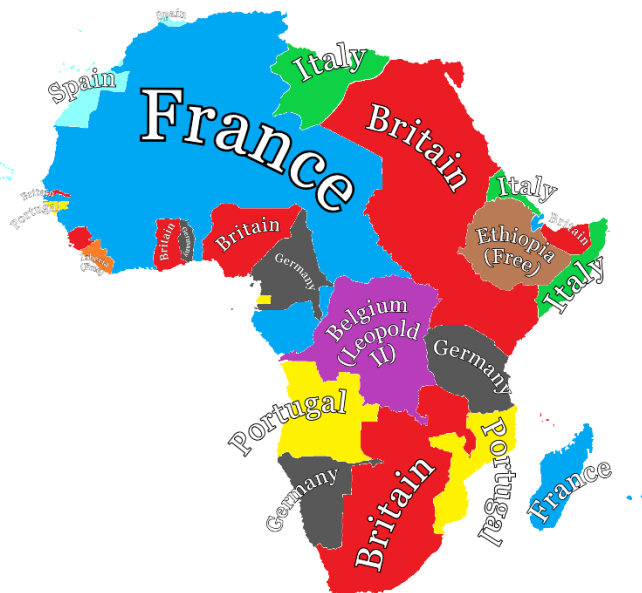
European expansion

For centuries, Europe had been expanding its power and influence. Countries such as Portugal, Spain, and the Netherlands, in particular, played a major role in this. With the help of their powerful navies, they managed to conquer and colonize large parts of the “New World” (North and South America) and Asia.

But in the 19th century, attention shifted increasingly toward Africa. Europe’s hunger for raw materials, trade, and power brought this continent into the spotlight as well.

A major turning point was the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885. During this gathering, European great powers divided Africa among themselves—without any input from African leaders or the local population. Borders were literally drawn on the map, without taking into account existing cultures, tribes, or political structures.

Incidentally, Europe had already gained a foothold in Africa before this conference. So-called trading posts or factories had been established in various coastal areas: places where European trading companies operated. A well-known example is the Cape of Good Hope, located near present-day Cape Town, which played a crucial role as a stopover for ships towards Asia.



Africa divided after the Conference of Berlin. Source:

reddit.com



As you can see on the map (especially if you look closely), there were two notable exceptions during the partition of Africa: Liberia and Ethiopia were not assigned to European powers.

The fact that Liberia remained outside the colonial division is relatively easy to explain. The country had strong ties to the United States, as it had been founded in the 19th century as a settlement for freed African American slaves. Because of this political and historical connection, European great powers did not want to risk a conflict with the U.S. and largely left Liberia alone.

But in the case of Ethiopia, the story is much more complex. Unlike Liberia, Ethiopia was not a country “protected” by a major Western power. Yet it managed to successfully resist European domination.

So why wasn't Ethiopia colonized?

Conflict against colonisers

The main reason Ethiopia was not colonized by a European power lies in something that many other African countries lacked at the time: a relatively modern and well-organized army.

Although Ethiopia was not one of Africa's largest countries, it played its geopolitical cards exceptionally well. Under the leadership of Emperor Menelik II, substantial investments were made in weapons and military modernization. Ethiopia imported large quantities of modern weapons from European countries such as France, Russia, and—ironically—even Italy.

The relationship with Russia was particularly important. This relationship was not only political but also religious in nature. Both countries were adherents of Orthodox Christianity, which fostered a sense of kinship. In addition, Russia viewed Italy as a geopolitical rival within the European power struggle, which made supporting Ethiopia all the more appealing.

Thanks to this shrewd diplomacy and military buildup, Ethiopia was in a considerably stronger position than many other African states at a time when European powers were continuing their expansion.





biography.com

Emperor Menelik II, emperor of Ethiopia during the Italian invasion. Source:

First Italo-Ethiopian War

Shortly after the Berlin Conference, Italy entered the colonial arena as a new player. Following earlier successes in Eritrea and Somalia, Italy set its sights on neighbouring Ethiopia in 1895—a region not yet under European control.

Emperor Menelik II, who had just come to power, signed a treaty with Italy: the Treaty of Wuchale. However, this treaty turned out to be a ticking time bomb.

The cause? A crucial translation error.

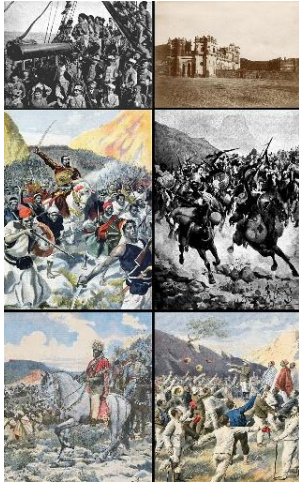
The Italian version of the treaty stated that Ethiopia would become a protectorate of Italy—meaning that Italy would control Ethiopia's foreign policy. The Amharic (Ethiopian) version, however, stated that Ethiopia was free to choose whether to make use of Italian diplomatic assistance.

In other words:

- Italy thought it had Ethiopia under its control
- Ethiopia thought it remained fully independent

When this miscommunication came to light, conflict was inevitable. Thus began the First Italo-Ethiopian War.





Course of the first Italo-Ethiopian War. Source: wikipedia.org

The war ultimately lasted less than a year and reached its climax at the Battle of Adwa in 1896. The Ethiopians won this battle decisively, and it would go down in history as one of the greatest humiliations suffered by a European power in Africa.

The Italian army was not so much small as it was poorly prepared, and it completely underestimated its opponent. It operated with inaccurate maps, poor communication, and a lack of coordination. In contrast, it faced a well-organized and motivated army led by Emperor Menelik II, which knew the terrain and was equipped with modern weapons.

What makes this victory particularly remarkable is its scale: Ethiopia managed to defeat a European great power with a largely African army at a time when virtually all of Africa was being colonized.

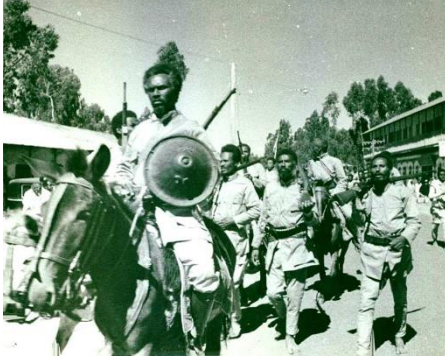
Following this defeat, the Italians were forced to withdraw from Ethiopia, thereby preserving the country's independence.

Second Italo-Ethiopian War

After its humiliating defeat in 1896, Italy did not abandon its colonial ambitions. Under the leadership of the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, Italy returned to Ethiopia in 1935—with one clear goal: to conquer the country once and for all and restore its lost honor.

For Mussolini, however, it was about more than just revenge. He wanted to turn Italy into a great power and dreamed of reviving the glory of the ancient Roman Empire. Ethiopia was seen as the key to that ambition.





Ethiopian soldiers in 1935 during the Second Italo-Ethiopian War. Source: wikipedia.org

Benito Mussolini did indeed succeed in raising Italy's profile on the world stage in the 1920s and 1930s. His fascist regime was seen in some countries as a model of order and stability, especially during a time of economic uncertainty. At the same time, this image was largely based on propaganda and was accompanied by oppression, censorship, and violence within Italy itself.

Yet that was not enough for Mussolini. He wanted to transform Italy into a true great power, comparable to colonial rivals such as the United Kingdom and France. Compared to these countries, Italy had achieved little colonial success, with only Eritrea and Somalia as significant territories.

That is why Mussolini set his sights on Ethiopia once again. It was one of the last independent countries in Africa and offered a chance for revenge after the humiliating defeat at the Battle of Adwa. For Mussolini, this was not only a strategic move but also a symbolic one: the restoration of national pride.



Benito Mussolini. Source: wikipedia.org

The main difference between the first and second wars lay primarily in Italy's preparations and resources. This time, Italy sent a large, modern, and well-



equipped army, complete with tanks, artillery, and an air force. Unlike in 1896, the army was better organized and had a clear strategy.

Ethiopia, on the other hand, was at a disadvantage. Although it still had a large army, it was less modern and focused primarily on ground forces. Ethiopia had virtually no defense against Italy's air attacks—which even involved the use of chemical weapons.

It was therefore only a matter of time before Italy gained the upper hand. In May 1936, the capital, Addis Ababa, fell, and the country was officially annexed by Italy. Emperor Haile Selassie fled.

Yet this did not spell the end of Ethiopia. Despite the occupation, resistance persisted among the population, which would later play a key role in regaining independence.

Colony or not?

Nevertheless, there is debate among historians regarding the extent to which Ethiopia was actually “colonized” by Italy.

In general terms, colonization refers to the process by which a territory is occupied and controlled administratively, economically, and culturally by a foreign power, often involving the establishment of its own administration and influence over local society.

In the case of Ethiopia, the picture is less clear-cut. Between 1936 and 1941, the country was indeed under Italian military occupation, but the extent of effective control was limited and unstable. Italy did attempt to establish a colonial administration as part of Italian East Africa, but this remained largely dependent on military force and was constantly challenged by local resistance.

Culturally and linguistically, too, the influence was relatively limited. The Italian language and culture barely managed to penetrate deeply into Ethiopian society, where languages such as Amharic and Afaan Oromo remained dominant. Economically, exploitation was also incomplete due to the ongoing conflict and unstable control over the region.



With the help of the Allies, including the British, Emperor Haile Selassie returned in 1941 and the Italian administration was driven out.

For this reason, some historians argue that Ethiopia during this period experienced a short-lived military occupation rather than fully successful colonial rule.

Conclusion

Although Italy did occupy Ethiopia militarily between 1936 and 1941, in practice it appears to have been more of a short-lived occupation than a fully-fledged colonization.

A key reason for this is the context of World War II. Italy was part of the Axis powers (along with Germany and Japan), while at the same time becoming heavily involved, both militarily and economically, in conflicts in Europe and North Africa. As a result, the administration and development of Italian East Africa came under severe pressure.

In addition, the strong and persistent resistance in Ethiopia itself played a major role. Italy never succeeded in establishing full stability or control over the entire territory, which constantly undermined the colonial project.

As World War II escalated, Italy's position in East Africa grew increasingly weaker. In 1941, the Italians ultimately lost control of Ethiopia, after which Emperor Haile Selassie returned and the country regained its independence.



For this reason, some historians view this period more as a failed colonial endeavour or military occupation than as a fully functioning colony.

What makes Ethiopia unique is precisely that—unlike many other African states—it was never fully and permanently incorporated into a European colonial system. It is therefore often seen as a symbol of African independence and resistance.

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