



## Chapter 5 The Abyssinian War 1935 - 1941

"The Race for Empire, C 1890



With the blessing of Britain, Italy decided to move troops into Ethiopia in 1895. Their previous pacts and agreements with Emperor Menelik were no longer valid and their former ally, turned on them with a vengeance and defeated and annihilated an Italian military force of six thousand troops at a fierce battle at Aduwa. This defeat brought down the government of Prime Minister Francesco Crispi, forcing Italy to recognize the Emperor as the unconditional sovereign of Ethiopia, and to pay an indemnity of two million dollars to the Ethiopian government. Mussolini was now thirteen years old and was deeply impressed with this defeat and loss of lives, although still very young.

The Abyssinian problem remained on Mussolini's mind. He knew that Ethiopia remained a backward nation socially, economically and politically. Speaking to the Italian Chamber on May 25, 1935, he said:

i>This problem does not date from today nor from January 1935, but (as proved by documents, which may be published in due course) it goes back to 1925. It was that year that I began to examine the problem. Three years later it seemed that a political treaty was the instrument best suited to assist our pacific expansion in that vast world, still enclosed in its prehistoric system and yet capable of great progress.

When Benito Mussolini became the Prime Minister of Italy in 1922, the Race for Empire was in reality no longer a race. The entire continent of Africa was in the hands of European nations, save for Abyssinia.

Mussolini was shut out of every African potential source of raw materials and vital resources by which to run a vibrant and productive economy in Italy other than Italy's old antagonist - Ethiopia.

In November of 1934, a British officer, given the task of defining the frontier of British Somaliland and Abyssinia, arrived at Wal-Wal with an escort of the Somaliland Camel Corps. Abyssinian tribesmen gathered around the British officer and his military party of troops. Wal-Wal, was a fort and a watering place close to where three jurisdictions of sovereign territory came together; Abyssinia, Italian Somaliland and British Somaliland. The watering wells of Wal-Wal were recognized as belonging to the Italian Somaliland Colony, in practice, as the borderline there and at other border areas was ill-defined. A formal frontier line had never been drawn with the agreement of the three governments. The tribesmen attacked the Italians at Wal-Wal. A battle ensued, with the Italian native troops being victorious, but they suffered heavy casualties. Mussolini, at once, demanded an unconditional apology, a large indemnity, and a final settlement of the frontier borders. There now existed a heavy climate of mutual recrimination and suspicion between the two nations and their governments.

What he did not know was, at the same time as he was looking for British and French support of his problems in Somaliland and Abyssinia, both countries were busy sending military and political advisers to Addis Ababa, along with the sale and shipment of arms to the Abyssinian Emperor.