

Mussolini Attacks Abyssinia

Benito Mussolini saw in his Italian Fascist state the rebirth of the ancient Roman Empire. He dreamed of vast colonial territories in Africa, such as Rome had once possessed. He called the Mediterranean Sea *Mare Nostrum*—Our Sea—and occasionally he wore a toga. Italy had several colonies in Africa: Libya and Tripolitania, Eritrea, and Italian Somaliland. But il Duce also wanted the ancient Empire of Abyssinia (modern-day Ethiopia). Once before, in 1896, the Italians had tried to conquer it but had suffered inglorious defeat at the Battle of Adowa. Now, in 1935, Mussolini made his bid against the badly armed soldiers of the Emperor Haile Selassie. On 3 October, he hurled his army, equipped with armour, artillery, and automatic weapons, and his air force, fitted with mustard gas sprayers, into Abyssinia.

Reaction of League

This onslaught aroused far more world indignation than the Manchurian affair had four years earlier. The League was stirred into action and on 7 October 1935 it condemned Mussolini's aggression; and in less than two weeks, with the approval of fifty-one nations, it decided to impose economic sanctions on Italy. Unfortunately, the sanctions excluded vital commodities such as steel, copper, and oil. At the same time, the League stopped all arms exports (except those actually in transit) to the combatants. Clearly, the Abyssinians weren't going to receive any military aid! Nevertheless, there had been *some* positive action; perhaps the League would at last show some strength and stop the fighting. Yet it was soon obvious that the sanctions were having absolutely no effect on Mussolini—who was threatening a general war if anyone dared to cut off his oil supplies. Finally, Anthony Eden, then a minister of the

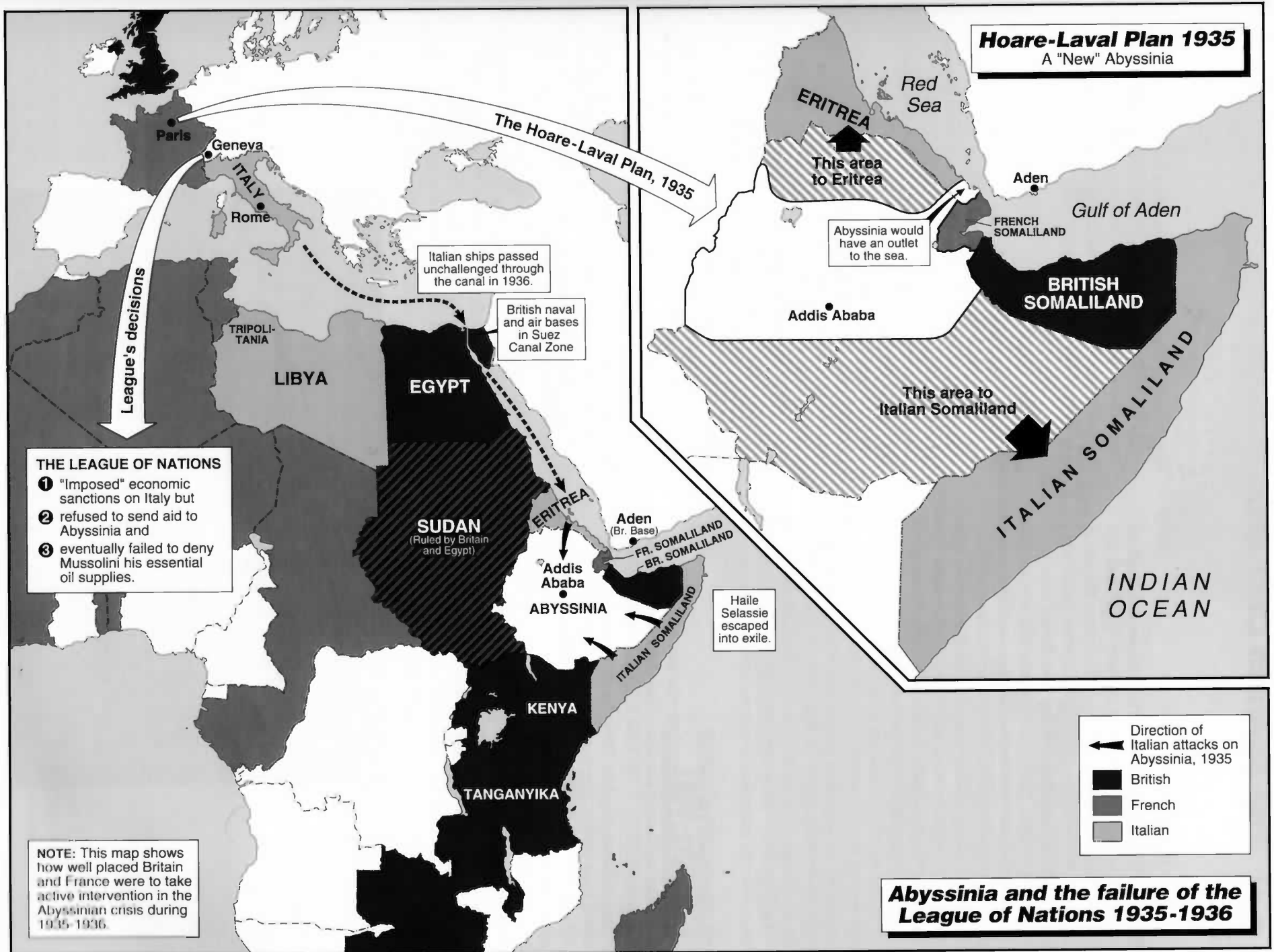
British government with special interest in the affairs of the League, suggested that an oil embargo might begin during December.

Hoare-Laval Pact

Then came an extraordinary event. Samuel Hoare, the British foreign secretary, visited Paris a few days before the oil sanctions were due to be imposed. Hoare had some talks with his French counterpart, Pierre Laval, in which the pair agreed on a plan known as the Hoare-Laval Pact. Their plan was simple: if Mussolini would stop fighting immediately he could have most of Abyssinia. He had already captured more than half of it. When some reporters learned of this arrangement and published the details in British and French newspapers there was a tremendous public outcry—and Hoare had to resign. The Hoare-Laval Pact was never implemented—but the damage had been done. Obviously neither Britain nor France, the most powerful members of the League, really intended to take any positive action and soon the other supporters of sanctions drifted away. Mussolini completed his conquest of Abyssinia during 1936 without interruption and forced Haile Selassie to flee abroad. Il Duce's own words were significant: "If the League had extended economic sanctions to oil, I would have had to withdraw from Abyssinia within a week."

Failure of the League

The oil sanctions never *failed*, because they were never even applied. What had failed, and for the second time since 1931, was the League of Nations. The Abyssinian war was the last nail in the coffin of the League, and after 1936 politicians sought other ways of maintaining world peace, eventually turning to the policy known as "appeasement."



Abyssinia and the failure of the League of Nations 1935-1936