

RESEARCH CONNECTION

Collective failure: The League of Nations and sanctions against Italy

By Bruce Strang, PhD



[Italian Artillery in Ethiopia](#)

Why this research is important

Military conflict remains endemic. Collective security, where nations voluntarily unite to defend a victim of aggression, potentially provides a powerful tool to compel aggressors to abandon war and use instead diplomacy or arbitration to settle international disputes. The victorious powers of World War II created the United Nations (UN) to provide a forum for international dispute resolution, yet the UN has largely failed to provide mechanisms to preserve peace. This research assesses the power of sanctions to compel aggressors to abandon the resort to arms but demonstrates the difficulties in building international coalitions to implement collective security measures, even when conditions might seem ideal.

What you need to know

This study seeks to answer three interrelated questions. Why did Italy invade Ethiopia in 1935? Why did the League of Nations impose economic sanctions against Italy? Why did the League decide not to impose an embargo on oil shipments to Italy when that sanction potentially could have been the most effective way to halt Italy's aggression?

How the research was conducted

This study presents research evidence from archives in Italy, Britain, Geneva, and the United States. The study uses documents from several published series and relies on diaries, letters, and a range of secondary sources.

What the researcher found

Mussolini invaded Ethiopia due to his social Darwinist and militarist ideology. He assumed that Italy could exploit the riches of the high Ethiopian Plateau and send Italian peasants and workers to Ethiopia to build an Italian province. Italian mechanized warfare, superior artillery and mobility, and the use of air power, including using poison gas against soldiers and civilians, destroyed Ethiopia's military and much of its cultural and political elite. Paradoxically, Mussolini also believed it necessary to defeat Ethiopia before Haile Selassie's reforms could centralize power and build a modern army.

The League of Nations imposed sanctions because the British National Government provided a strong impetus in Geneva. British public opinion strongly favoured a foreign policy rooted deeply in collective security through the League. The Baldwin Cabinet believed it had no choice but to follow the public's lead; by election results from 1934–5 had shown that failure to impose sanctions would bring a crushing defeat in the general election in the fall of 1935. The National Government successfully appropriated Labour's electoral platform of support for League collective security. While sanctions were a necessary evil, senior British political, diplomatic, and military leaders wanted, above all, to avoid a war with Italy. League members embargoed arms, munitions, and implements of war, denied the Italian government and Italian firms credit, and refused to buy Italian exports. This boycott of Italian goods would take roughly a year to exhaust Italian foreign currency reserves and force Italy to abandon its campaign; eventually, Italy's industry would collapse, and its people would go hungry.

An embargo on oil potentially would have worked more quickly. The League did not impose an oil embargo for several reasons. It might have provoked an Italian attack against League members. The French government preferred to maintain its informal military alliance with Italy. Technical studies showed that an embargo would require American adherence, as the United States produced two-thirds of the world's oil. American neutrality legislation prohibited the Roosevelt administration from imposing an embargo. American oil shipments to Italy rose fivefold; sanctions busting by American companies rendered an oil embargo ineffective.

How this research can be used

This research demonstrates the difficulties of building international coalitions to defeat aggression. No nation would risk war against Italy to defend Ethiopia, and robust sanctions could have provoked a wider war. The League

could not rely on nations outside its membership, such as Germany, Japan, and the United States, to cooperate in collective security measures. Sanctions failed to stop Mussolini's vicious war, broke apart the Anglo-French-Italian Stresa Front that sought to constrain Hitler's expansionism, and proved unable to save the lives of hundreds of thousands of Ethiopian soldiers and civilians. It was a vitally important breakdown in the interwar international system and a proximate cause of the Second World War.

About the researcher

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Keywords

Collective security, international relations, the League of Nations, sanctions, Ethiopia, Italy, Britain, France, United States

Publication based on this research

Strang, B. (2024). Title. In S. Paine, & A. Toprani (Eds.), *The strategy of sanctions*. Publication forthcoming. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges SSHRC for a Postdoctoral Fellowship and Standard Research Grant and the Lakehead University Senate Research Committee and the Brandon University Research Committee for funding this research. Research Connection is a periodical publication intended to provide information about the impact of Brandon University's academic research and expertise on public policy, social programming, and professional practice. This summary is supported by the Office of Research Services; the Centre for Applied Research and Education in Indigenous, Rural, and Remote Settings; and the federally funded Research Support Fund.

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<http://www.brandonu.ca/research-connection>

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