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H-Diplo Review Essay on G. Bruce Strang, ed. *Collision of Empires: Italy's Invasion of Ethiopia and its International Impact*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013. xii + 385 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4094-3009-4 (hardback, \$129.95).

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Reviewed for H-Diplo by **Molly Tambor**, Long Island University

Fascist Italy's drive to secure an empire and great power status has acquired new relevance in recent years. Scholars have sought to reevaluate the history of the interwar years through the lens of new approaches, influenced especially by the rise of postcolonial studies, that de-emphasize an assumed natural model of the nation-state in favor of frameworks that account for the wide variety of political and governmental entities (empires, dominions and commonwealths, protectorates and mandates, weak states, and even stateless territories) in play in the global geopolitics of the period.¹ This collection of essays has the admirable goal of updating the scholarship on the international politics surrounding the Italo-Ethiopian crisis of 1935-1936. Given the dated nature of work on the topic -- most of the important earlier work cited by the authors was done in the 1960s and 1970s, the chapters present much new original archival evidence; also, the very title is itself meant to "draw attention to the pervasiveness of empire in the 1930s" (xi). The thirteen chapters by eleven contributors examine the conflict from multiple points of view, not only the familiar questions of British, French, and American positions on sanctions against Italy and upholding the doctrine of collective security of the League of Nations, but also the status of Ethiopian sovereignty, the role of racialist and Social Darwinist thought among great power leadership and public opinions, the diplomacy of lesser powers and neutral states, the role of the Vatican, and the question of Nazi Germany's foreign policy.

By and large the accumulated effect is to confirm the general lines of argument of the previous historiography, though in an updated and more nuanced form. The far-reaching and balance-tipping nature of the crisis is affirmed, as the authors show that the League of Nations was fatally

¹ Among others, see J. Andall, C. Burdett, and D. Duncan, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* (special issue on Italian colonialism), v. 8 n.3 (2003); Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller, eds., *Italian Colonialism* (New York: Palgrave, 2005); Matteo Dominioni, *Lo sfascio dell'impero: Gli italiani in Etiopia 1936-1941* (Bari: Laterza, 2008); Patrizia Palumbo, ed., *A Place in the Sun. Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003).

weakened, Great Britain cemented its policy of appeasement, and Japan, Italy, and Germany were pushed into each other's embrace as the Axis alliance began to form and the alignments that would go to battle in World War II took clear shape. Nuance is brought to the explanation of how novel and fragile the concept of collective security was, and how easy for all parties great and small the slide back to Realpolitik and direct interest was. Somewhat perplexing is the chapter by Gaynor Johnson on erstwhile Labour MP and advocate of disarmament and the League of Nations Philip Noel-Baker, who, despite his admirable ideals and lofty later achievements, appears to remain a minor player. The argument for his relevance in reevaluating British policy or League of Nations debates is not entirely convincing, as he was out of office at the height of the crisis and his calls to stiffen British support of the League's mission went unheard. The choice to emphasize the significance of empire, however, does yield some strong shifts in emphasis, if not exactly new arguments. Strang's first chapter, "'Places in the African Sun': Social Darwinism, Demographics and the Italian Invasion of Ethiopia" makes a powerful case for the influence of racialist and Social Darwinist doctrine on Italian planning and the determination to invade Ethiopia despite the clear risks. It also helps explain why Benito Mussolini in particular insisted on an all-out attack that would include the use of such genocidal tactics as mass civilian targeting and the use of poison gas. The placement of this work as the first chapter inflects the implications of several authors' arguments, such as when Francine McKenzie shows that despite Canada's role at the League of Nations as "The Last Ditch Defender of National Sovereignty" of Ethiopia (Chapter Seven), most Canadians "accepted European expansion at the expense of African people," believing in the legitimacy of empire and the superiority of whites over blacks (172). Similarly, Remco van Diepen punctures the myth of the idealism of the smaller, neutral, powers of Europe in supporting the League of Nations and the doctrine of collective security. When it came to committing to sanctions against Italy and their eventual military enforcement, Switzerland, Denmark, and the Netherlands were quick to retreat to the reaffirmation of their own neutrality. Despite the Spanish championing of Manchuria against Japan's predations and Ethiopia against Italy's threat, Spain's Prime Minister Manuel Azaña admitted to not caring "one bit" for Haile Selassie, while expressing "'warm sympathy' and his 'great admiration' for Mussolini" (331). Strang's second chapter, which offers a new look at the role of the United States in the conflict, does a first-rate job of reviewing and clarifying the arguments about President Roosevelt's room for maneuver in the context of American isolationism, taking stock of additional forces from public opinion, Italian propaganda intervention, and financial and business interests. None of these agents emerge unscathed, but the chapter is a valuably fair-minded account of the United States' role in allowing Mussolini to move forward with his agenda.

The methodology of most of the articles, however, does not in general reflect a similar updating. The analysis is most frequently at the level of high formal international relations. Most authors have relied on the 1960s and 1970s secondary sources of diplomatic history they seek to update, with few seeking out new inspiration in other fields; the archival work has been done almost exclusively in various national archives of Ministries of Foreign Affairs, which tends to result in arguments that emphasize the naturalness of the nation-state and of the point of view of elite white men. J. Calvitt Clarke's chapter on Soviet appeasement suffers in this sense. Although I am admittedly no expert in this field, the article does not appear to rely on significant new archival sources, nor even much of the secondary work that has been done since the fall of the Soviet Union and the opening of those archives. Notable exceptions to this rule include the chapter by Steven Morewood on the gap between the analyses of Britain's 'men on the spot' in military and colonial

administration in Africa and the choices of the chiefs of staff in the Cabinet in the metropole. Morewood has done intensive work reconstructing the meaning and significance of military deployments throughout the British Empire, interweaving this evidence with more traditional diplomatic sources and personal papers, and writing it all up with great clarity and narrative force. The messiness and contingency of state decision-making, rather than the actions of a seemingly organic entity, emerge revealingly. Nicholas Virtue has done admirable work finding new sources in the Vatican secret archives and evaluating them in relation to the current historiography on the relationship of the Italian state to the Catholic Church. Also a praiseworthy effort is the chapter by Ian S. Spears, which seeks to use Robert Jackson's concept of "quasi-states" to evaluate the nature of Ethiopia's sovereignty before, during, and after the Italian invasion.²

The essays are in general well-written and solidly argued, and Strang provides a concise and relevant introduction of the overall issues at stake. The book will certainly prove useful to scholars interested in the details of international relations during the Italo-Ethiopian crisis. General readers, however, might be put off by this price point; and those who need an introduction to the key problems of interwar history would be better served by the one big work in particular that looms large throughout, being cited in the majority of chapters: Zara Steiner's *The Triumph of the Dark*.³ And, though Strang argues in the preface and some of the book's promotional material that the book addresses the historical questions of genocide and the prevention of crimes against humanity, most authors sidestep that topic. In sum, this is a book that deserves recognition as high quality scholarship, doing the less provocative but equally necessary work of bringing archival evidence to readers and testing the continuing soundness of historiographical conclusions.

Molly Tambor has lived and studied in the United States and Italy, including as a Rome Prize fellow at the American Academy in 2002-2003. She is the author of *The Lost Wave: Women and Democracy in Postwar Italy* (Oxford, 2014) and the translator of Gian Giacomo Migone's *Mussolini and the United States: On the Origins of American Hegemony in Europe* (originally *Gli Stati Uniti e il fascismo. Alle origini dell'egemonia Americana in Europa*) (Cambridge, 2014). She is assistant professor of contemporary European history and women and gender at C.W. Post Long Island University.

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² Robert H. Jackson, *Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Third World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

³ Zara Steiner, *The Triumph of the Dark: European International History, 1933-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). See also Steiner, *The Lights that Failed: European International History, 1919-1933* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).