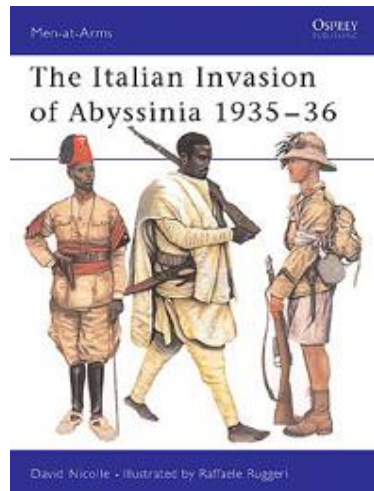


The Italian Invasion of Abyssinia 1935-36
Osprey Men-at-Arms series No. 309 (1997)
Text by David Nicolle; colour plates by Raffaele Ruggeri

Review by Rob Morgan

This is an interesting read, and a campaign much overlooked these days. The war -- a complete chronology appears in the text -- was undertaken as a punishment for the astonishing defeat of Italian arms at Adowa 40 years previously. There were pretexts, of course, but Adowa was why. Mussolini's powerful armed forces, newly re-equipped, defeated the Imperial troops and levies of Haile Selassie, but not with ease. The country we now know as Ethiopia was an horrific place to cross, let alone fight, and the major part of Italian effort was spent in road-making.



The invasion was two-pronged, from the Italian colonies of Somaliland and Eritrea, though the Eritrean Front was by far the most active. The Italian order of battle was impressive, and clearly meant to impress the world's onlookers. There were battles, though these were far from set-piece encounters, given the terrain, and bear more resemblance in some cases to alpine warfare, fought at close ranges -- there were sieges too, as the Abyssinians held several almost medieval strongholds, and elsewhere relied upon fortified lines resembling the trenches of World War I. The Italians use of armoured fighting vehicles was less

than effective, their CV33s and 35s and their heavy Lancia armoured cars were unsuited to the terrain, but powerful propaganda. The Italian air force removed the threat of the small Imperial air arm early on, and their attacks on enemy columns and towns were crucial to the Italian victory. The use of chemical weapons especially so, it seems!

This is not a day-by-day, battle-by-battle example of an Osprey, but rather a discussion and examination of Italian pre-WWII power, equipment, uniforms and tactics. Very useful indeed, but by comparison, the lengthy account of the Emperor's armed forces, must be complex, and it is! The Imperial levy was truly feudal in essence, but there were some remarkably efficient units, the Emperor's Guards, in particular. Equipment was a nightmare, field guns captured in 1880s -- from the Italians -- made up the bulk of the 200+ guns of the artillery, but the Germans sold Haile Selassie 12 Pak 35/36 a/t guns, during the seven-month war, and there were also a small number of Stokes mortars,

and 175 Browning .3 machine guns. Tactics were restricted by the fact that they were reliant on mules, and communications were appalling! As a tale of a 20th century war, the volume makes fascinating reading and must be recommended for that alone. The Abyssinians were, of course, far from alone, and many mercenaries, adventurers and volunteers came to fight against the fascists, and rather effectively. The colour plates are superb, especially those of the Italian colonial forces, and plate D is probably indicative of the most amazing uniforms to see action in the century.

As for wargaming, well, this is not the easiest of conflicts for the table-top. In fact, given the nature of the *mufti* worn by many if not most of the Imperial troops, and the odd levies in action, in 6mm the Irregular Miniatures Colonial range might provide the best option for Haile Selassie's forces. Italians, especially the Metropolitan troops and the vehicles and light armour are much better served in most scales, but, if you want to put the exquisitely uniformed colonial forces on the table, the Askaris, camel troopers and the irregulars, then look at the Raventhorpe Miniatures list. Not cheap these days, but of high quality, and covering everything you'd need on Mussolini's side. The photographs **below** are of figures from my collection. You can, and at a pinch, convert a few to make up a decent Abyssinian unit, but there are a few loyalist figures available from Raventhorpe.

Different? Very!



A pair of CV33 tankettes and a Lancia armoured car wait to advance.



Eritrean Colonial troops with mountain gun advancing across a flat bit of Abbyssinia.



Three mountain guns with mixed crews open fire. Figures are Raventhorpe. Guns are Peter Laing 15mm.



Colonial infantry on the march. The mounted Italian officer is a Hinchliffe conversion.



Raventhorpe Ethiopian Patriot soldiers attack the Italians, covered by a Lewis gun.