

Who was Nicolae Titulescu?

By Professor Richard Pankhurst

Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia at the beginning of October 1935 was a "turning-point" not only in Ethiopian history, but also in the history of the then League of Nations. That international body, which had its permanent headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, was, you will recall, dear Reader, the precursor of the present United Nations Organisation, and had been founded in 1919, at the close of World War – the "War to End Wars" as some of the more naive liked to call it.

The League's stated aims included the preservation of international peace, and the protection of the rights of all Member States, irrespective of their size and wealth.

Nicolae Titulescu, with whom we are concerned in this article, was a Romanian scholar and statesman who devoted his life and career to the principles of the League. Born in 1882 he undertook his primary and secondary studies in his native Romania, after which, graduating with distinction, he travelled to Paris to read international law, and was awarded a doctorate. He was also active at this time in the Romanian National Committee which worked for Romanian national rights.

On returning to Romania he was appointed a Professor in law, first at the long-established Iassi University in 1905, and later at Bucharest University in 1907. Later, in 1912, he was elected to the Romanian Parliament, and subsequently held a number of important Ministerial posts between 1927 and 1936.

In 1921 he was appointed Romania's Permanent Representative to the League of Nations - a position in which we will see him shortly. Earning the respect of his fellow delegates, he was twice elected its President - in 1930 and again in 1931.

Throughout this period Titulescu worked for the maintenance of international peace, by insisting on the need to preserve national boundaries. He also urged the equality of all countries, small as well as large, and advocated the preservation of international peace through collective security.

While Titulescu sought to use the machinery of the League of Nations to protect the interests of its smaller members, Mussolini was planning to defy the international organisation entirely - by launching an outright invasion of one of its member states: Ethiopia.

The more important League members, Britain and France, paid lip service to a love of peace, but were in fact essentially uninterested in Mussolini's expansionist ambitions. On 6 January 1935 the, French premier, Pierre Laval, held a private conversation with Mussolini, telling him that France was "disinterested" in Ethiopia - in other words she was giving Fascist Italy a free hand to invade. Five months later, in June, a British Government committee chaired by Sir John Maffey, issued a report which similarly

concluded that there were “no vital British interests in Abyssinia”, and that “it would be a matter of indifference whether Abyssinia remained independent or was absorbed by Italy”.

On the basis of such thinking the British and French Governments decided to adopt a policy of what they chose to term “neutrality” in the forthcoming Italo-Ethiopian war. The two Great Powers accordingly banned the supply of arms to both countries – oblivious of the fact that one – Fascist Italy - was the declared aggressor, while the other – Ethiopia - was slated to be the victim of aggression. Oblivious of the fact also that one party was a relatively advanced European power, manufacturing most of its own arms, while the other was an economically underdeveloped African country which was obliged to import all its weapons other than spears, swords and shields, which were locally produced.

Anglo-French policy was further formulated at a meeting between Laval and the next British Foreign Secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare, on 10 September 1935, when the latter noted that the two governments were: “in agreement upon ruling out military sanctions [against the Italian invader], not adopting any measure of a naval blockade, and never contemplating the closure of the Suez Canal – in a word, ruling out everything that might lead to war” – by which, dear Reader, Sir Samuel meant of course a war between Italy and the western democracies, i.e. Britain and France.

All the above talks and conversations, it should be noted, were known to Mussolini, who was thus assured that his projected invasion would encounter little or no opposition from the two leading members of the League.

Thus assured, Mussolini launched his long-planned invasion of Ethiopia on 3 October 1935. The League responded, on 11 October, by branding Fascist Italy guilty of having “resort to war”.

In the next few days the League decided to impose what Lord Keynes described at the time as “relatively mild economic sanctions” against the aggressor. Winston Churchill later put it more forcibly, declaring that the League’s Sanctions against Fascist Italy were “not real sanctions to paralyse the aggressor, but merely such half-hearted sanctions as the aggressor would tolerate”.

So was it that when it was proposed to extend Sanctions to include petrol – without which the Italian Air Force would have been unable to fly – the British and French Governments both refused to extend them.

And it was not so different when the British and French Governments met early in December to consider the imposition of a Peace Plan. This plan, as formulated by Laval and the then British Foreign Secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare, proposed that Ethiopia should cede all the territory then seized by the invader, i.e. basically all Tegray and Ogaden, and grant “economic rights” to Italy over most of the remainder of Ethiopia. Nothing “neutral” about that!

So was it that the war was fought between two unequal armies - with the backdrop of disinterest on the part of the leading League members. So was it that the invader – for the time being at least – seemed victorious...

Addis Ababa fell to the invaders on 5 May 1935 - and Emperor Haile Selassie, who had left the Ethiopian capital three days earlier, duly travelled to address the League of Nations in Geneva, on 30 June 1936.

And this, dear Reader, is where Nicolai Titulescu comes in.

As the Emperor rose to deliver his internationally renowned address it was suddenly disrupted by the howls of half a dozen Italian journalists, Paolo Monelli, Giulio Caprini, Lino Cajani, Eugenio Morreale, Carlo Giunci and Alfredo Signoretti, who jumped around, and loudly booed – while the Emperor, to the admiration of many observers, stood in quiet and dignified silence.

On seeing and hearing the disturbance Nicolai Titulescu, who was the Chairman of that historic Session, at once jumped to his feet, and in a famous utterance, cried out, *A la Porte, les Sauvages*, i.e. “Out of the Door with the Savages!”.

That event found its way into many a subsequent history of those times, among them Angelo Del Boca’s *The Ethiopian War 1935-1941*, James Dugan and Laurence Lafore’s *Days of Emperor and Clown*, and Anthony Mockler’s *Haile Selassie’s War*.

Titulescu was also depicted in Ethiopian artist Agegnew Ingida’s painting of the Emperor at the League - a work of art discernable to this day in the cupola of Addis Ababa’s Selassie, or Holy Trinity, Cathedral.

Titulescu thus earned an honoured place in Ethiopian history.

His protection of the Emperor was however almost his last act in the League of Nations for though his Anti-Fascist stance was much appreciated in Democratic and Liberal circles, it won him more importantly many influential enemies. He was immediately dismissed from all official positions, and ordered by the King of Romania to leave the country forthwith. Though Titulescu succeeded in returning to Romania in the following year his official position had come to a final, irrevocable end. He subsequently protested when the Iron Guard, the local Romanian Fascist organisation, took over the country in 1941. He then went a second time into exile, and died in Cannes, France, later that year. His remains were not however returned to his native land – as he had wished - for half a century, until 1992.

Such was the story of Nicolae Titulescu, after whom, it is suggested, an Addis Ababa street might be named.