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Review

RAINER BAUDENDISTEL, *Between Bombs and Good Intentions: The Red
Cross and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935–1936*

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Reviews

This essay qualifies Bairu Tafla as an attentive historian looking at details, substance, innovative material of a period in which historical memory was mainly produced by Italian administrators, scholars and explorers. A work about the Eritrean highlands written by a native living in Hamasen is very welcome, because the memory of the past transmitted through generations is no longer, today, an instrument that can be used in history.

The hope of finding more written sources such as journals and biographies is still alive, given the fact that many families in Asmara preserve today documents not often available to scholars.

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RAINER BAUDENDISTEL, *Between Bombs and Good Intentions: The Red Cross and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935–1936 = Human Rights in Context*, vol. 1, ed. by **MARGUERITE GARLING** and **GUGLIELMO VERDIRAME**. New York – Oxford: Berghahn Books, first edition 2006. xvii + 342 pages + a map. Price: US-\$ 80,-/GB-£ 47,-. Hardback ISBN: 1-84545-035-3

Most of the studies on the Italo-Ethiopian war of 1935-36 have so far concentrated on the military activities and their impact on international politics. But the repercussions of the war extend far beyond these themes, as the work under consideration shows. At long last we now have a cogent study on the medical and logistical aspects of the history of the war, thanks to the Swiss historian who pursued the subject. When in connection with the famine of 1984-85 the author visited northern Ethiopia, where the greater part of the military campaign had taken place some five decades earlier, he wondered what the logistics of transport and medicare of the huge Ethiopian army (estimated at 250-350 thousand men) had looked like. His curiosity eventually resulted in a substantial book.

The research shows that the Ethiopian army had one physician per 12,000 persons in contrast to the adversary who could afford one medical doctor per 400 soldiers. The discrepancy in the amount of medical and food supplies and the availability of qualified personnel in every field was also enormous. The Ethiopian Red Cross was established only a few months before the outbreak of the war; and, in spite of the active support given by the women's association, the organisation was in no way capable of rendering the desired service. It lacked the financial and medical means as well as the necessary transport vehicles and the medical personnel. Some help came from sister-organisations in Egypt, France, Great Britain, Sweden, Norway and other countries.

The responsibility of coordinating the multifarious teams fell on the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Geneva which sent delegates to Addis Abäba, but it was precisely in this organisation that the most disgraceful scandal of the time occurred. Instead of upholding the principles of the organisation, its leaders turned out to be timeservers. According to the Geneva Conventions of 1864 and 1906, the Red Cross flag or symbol enjoyed the right of inviolability. No sooner did the various Red Cross teams set up their tents under the Red Cross flag in the northern and southeastern parts of the country than the Italian air force bombarded them thereby killing a couple of foreign physicians as well as several Ethiopian noncombatants. Moreover, the use of chemical warfare in hostilities was banned by an international treaty which the Fascists grossly violated. To avoid international condemnation, Fascist Italy campaigned in Europe quite intensively in order not only to hamper any help intended for Ethiopia, but also to influence governments, international organisations and the press so that they might regard its invasion of Ethiopia as a war of a civilised nation against a barbarian state. The Italian campaign also included an accusation that the Red Cross teams hoarded weapons and transported enemy soldiers. Some authorities in the Swiss government as well as the officials in the headquarters of the ICRC soon succumbed to Mussolini's scheme and suppressed the reports of their representatives on the war front. In fact, the ICRC recalled the leader of their delegation, Sidney Hamlet Braun (a Swiss lawyer who eventually published his account), and relieved him of his post, evidently on grounds of a sinister allegation insinuated by a representative of the Italian Red Cross to the ICRC. A few months later, the same organisation endorsed the lifting of the sanction imposed by the League of Nations. The Swiss government also denied Emperor Ḥaylä Śəllase the opportunity to reside in his own villa on Bodensee when he came to appeal to the League of Nations.

The book, which inaugurates a promising series launched to publish monographs "... based on original empirical investigations, innovative theoretical analyses or multidisciplinary research", is well documented and very clear in its presentation. It includes biographical sketches interspersed in the main body of the text, numerous photographs, a map, a few illustrations, a chronology of the political and military events, a glossary, lists of the ICRC members at the outbreak of the Italo-Ethiopian war as well as of the Red Cross field hospitals, a bibliography and an index of personal names.

In short, it is a welcome enrichment to Ethiopian studies.

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