

Italian Colonial Empire

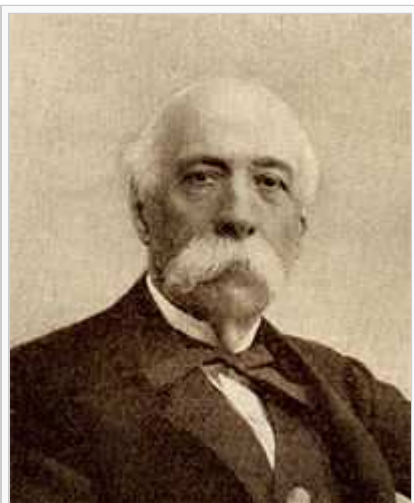
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The **Italian colonial empire** was created after the Kingdom of Italy joined other European powers in establishing colonies overseas during the "scramble for Africa". Modern Italy as a unified state only existed from 1861. By this time Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, Britain, and France had already carved out large empires over several hundred years. One of the last remaining areas open to colonisation was on the African continent. By the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Italy had annexed Eritrea and Somalia, and had wrested control of portions of the Ottoman Empire, including Libya, though it was defeated in its attempt to conquer Ethiopia. The Fascist government under Italian dictator Benito Mussolini which came to power in 1922 sought to increase the size of the empire further, which it did so via force or threat of force. Ethiopia was successfully taken, four decades after the previous failure, and Italy's European borders were expanded at the expense of its neighbours. Italy sided with Nazi Germany during World War II and initially enjoyed successes. However, Allied forces eventually captured Italian overseas colonies and by the time Italy itself was invaded in 1943, its empire had all but ceased to exist.

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Birth of a Nation and Scramble for an Empire (1861-1914)



Francesco Crispi, Italian Prime Minister and advocate of the annexation of Abyssinia.

The unification of Italy in 1861 brought with it a belief that Italy deserved its own overseas empire, alongside those of the other powers of Europe, and a rekindling of the notion of *mare nostrum*.^[1] However, Italy had arrived late to the colonial race, and its relative weakness in international affairs meant that it was dependent on the acquiescence of Britain, France and Germany towards its empire-building.^[2]

Italy had long considered the Ottoman province of Tunisia, where a large community of Tunisian Italians lived, within its economic sphere of influence. It did not consider annexing it until 1879 when it became apparent that Britain and Germany were encouraging France to add it to its colonial holdings in North Africa.^[3] A last minute offer by Italy to partition Tunisia between the two countries was refused, and France, confident in German support, ordered its troops in from French Algeria, imposing a protectorate over Tunisia in May 1881 under the Treaty of Bardo.^[4] The shock of the "Tunisian bombshell", as it was referred to in the Italian press, and the sense of Italy's isolation in Europe, led it into signing the Triple Alliance in 1882 with Germany and Austro-Hungary.^[5]

Italy's search for colonies continued until February 1885, when by secret agreement with Britain it annexed the port of Massawa in Eritrea on the Red Sea from the crumbling Egyptian Empire. Italian annexation of Massawa denied the Abyssinian Empire of Emperor Yohannes an outlet to the sea^[6] and prevented any expansion of French Somaliland.^[7] At the same time, Italy occupied territory on the south side of the horn of Africa, forming what would become Italian Somaliland.^[8] However, Italy coveted Abyssinia itself, and in 1887, Italian Prime Minister Agostino Depretis ordered an



Italian mounted infantry in China in 1900.



Prime Minister Vittorio Orlando (second from left) with the leaders of Britain, France and the USA at the signing of the Treaty of Versailles.



Benito Mussolini, whose fascist policies sought the expansion of Italian territories, but he ultimately led Italy to defeat during World War II.



"Imperialism is the eternal and immutable law of life. All considered, it is only the need, the wish, and the will to expand each individual that each lively and vital people carries in itself."
 -- Benito Mussolini, 1919^[16]

<i>Impero Italiano</i> Italian Empire	
 ←  ←	1936 – 1943
 Flag	 Coat of arms
Motto <i>"Foedere et Religione Tenemur"</i> "We are held together by Pact and Religion"	
Anthem Royal Anthem <i>Marcia Reale d'Ordinanza</i> "Royal March of Ordinance" ¹	

In 1922, the leader of the Italian fascist movement, Benito Mussolini, became Prime Minister of Italy after a coup d'état. Mussolini resolved the question of Dodecanese sovereignty at the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which formalized Italian administration of both Libya and the Dodecanese Islands, in return for a payment to Turkey, the successor state to the Ottoman Empire, though he failed in an attempt to extract a mandate of a portion of Iraq from Britain.

The month following the ratification of the Lausanne treaty, Mussolini ordered the invasion of the Greek island of Corfu after the murder of an Italian general there. The Italian press supported the move, noting that Corfu had been a possession of the Republic of Venice for four hundred years.^[17] Though the matter was taken by Greece to the League of Nations, Mussolini successfully resisted its pressure, and it was only the threat of war with Britain that convinced him to evacuate Italian troops,^[18] in return for reparations from Greece. The confrontation over Corfu, and Italy's obvious determination never to give up Dodecanese sovereignty, led Britain and Italy to resolve the question of Jubaland in 1924: it was merged into Italian Somaliland.^[19]









In October 1935, Mussolini launched the Second Italo-Abyssinian War and invaded Ethiopia. Emperor Haile Selassie fled the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa on 2 May 1936 and the Italians entered the city on 5 May. The Italians merged Eritrea, Italian Somalia, and newly captured Ethiopia into Italian East Africa (*Africa Orientale Italiana, A.O.I.*). The invasion had the tacit approval of France and Great Britain, who did not wish to alienate Italy as a potential ally against Nazi Germany.

Victory was announced on 9 May 1936 and Mussolini declared the creation of the "Italian Empire".^[20] Italian King Victor Emmanuel III added Emperor of Ethiopia to his titles. Mussolini dreamed of sending millions of Italian settlers to Italian East Africa, and Italians had high hopes of turning the area into an economic asset. However, by overrunning Ethiopia, a member of the League of Nations, Italy attracted widespread international hostility.

During the 1930s, emigration to the colonies was encouraged due to a belief that Italy was suffering from "excess population". Most went to Libya which by 1938 contained 89,098 Italians, primarily concentrated in the coastal cities of Tripoli and Benghazi. The coastline of Libya was referred to as Italy's "Fourth Shore" (in Italian: *quarta sponda*).

There was emigration to Italian East Africa as well. According to the 1931 census, there were 4,188 Italians in Eritrea and 1,631 in Italian Somaliland.^[21] During the five-year occupation of Ethiopia, roughly 300,000 Italians were absorbed into East Africa But fully one third of these Italians were military.^[22] After a disastrous period under brutal Rudolfo Graziani, Italian East Africa was ruled more successfully by Amedeo, 3rd Duke of Aosta. The Duke brought a program of progressive improvement that included 2,000 miles of new paved roads, 25 hospitals, 14 hotels, dozens of post offices, telephone exchanges, aqueducts, schools, and shops. Even so, the tight grip on security that the Italians maintained did not extend far beyond the main population centers.^[23]

In 1939, Italy invaded and captured Albania and made it a protectorate. The region of modern-day Albania had been an early part of the Roman Empire, which had actually been held before northern parts of Italy had been taken by the Romans, but had long since been populated by Albanians, even though Italy had retained strong links with the Albanian leadership and considered it firmly within its sphere of influence.^[24] It is possible that Mussolini simply wanted a spectacular success

 <p>The Italian Empire in September 1939.</p>	
Capital	Rome
Language(s)	Italian (official), Arabic, Albanian
Religion	Roman Catholicism (official), Islam, Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity
Government	Constitutional Monarchy
King of Italy, Emperor of Ethiopia, King of Albania - 1936-1943	Victor Emmanuel III of Italy
First Marshal of the Empire - 1938-1943	Victor Emmanuel III of Italy
- 1938-1943	Benito Mussolini
History	
- Declaration of the Italian Empire	1936
- Disestablished	1943
Currency	Italian lira
Preceded by	Succeeded by
 Kingdom of Italy (1861–1946)	Ethiopian Empire  Kingdom of Italy (1861–1946) 
 Ethiopian Empire	Nazi Germany  Albania under Nazi Germany 
	Independent State of Croatia  Italian Social Republic 

over a smaller neighbour to match Germany's absorption of Austria and Czechoslovakia.^[25] Italian King Victor Emmanuel III took the Albanian crown, and a fascist government under Shefqet Verlaci was established to rule over Albania.

World War II (1940-1943)

Mussolini entered World War II on the side of Adolf Hitler with plans to enlarge Italy's territorial holdings. He had designs on an area of southern France, Corsica, Malta, Tunisia, part of Algeria, an Atlantic port in Morocco, French Somaliland and British Egypt and Sudan.^[26]

On June 10, 1940, Mussolini declared war on Britain and France. Both countries had been at war with Nazi Germany since September of the prior year. Mussolini's troops invaded southern France. But an armistice was soon signed between France and Germany. As a result, Italian troops pressed no further than a few miles into France. Two days later, a separate agreement between France and Italy ceded Nice and parts of the Savoy to Italy.^[27]

In October 1940, keen to emulate the successes that Hitler was enjoying, Mussolini ordered the invasion of Greece, but the invasion faltered, and the Italians were pushed back into Albania.^[28]

In April 1941, Germany launched an invasion of Yugoslavia and then attacked Greece. Italy and other German allies supported both actions. The German armies overran Yugoslavia in about two weeks and, despite British support in Greece, the Germans overran that country by the end of April. The Italians gained control over portions of both occupied Yugoslavia and occupied Greece. An Italian Duke, Aimone, 4th Duke of Aosta, ruled over the newly created Independent State of Croatia as King Tomislav II.

During the height of The Battle of Britain, the Italians launched an attack on Egypt in hope of capturing the Suez Canal. By 16 September 1940, the Italians advanced 60 miles across the border. However, in December, the British launched Operation Compass and, by February 1941, the British had cut off and captured the Italian 10th Army and had driven deep into Libya.^[29]

The East African Campaign started with Italian advances into British-held Kenya, British Somaliland, and the Sudan. In the summer of 1940, Italian armed forces successfully invaded all of British Somaliland.^[30] But, by the end of 1941, the British had counter-attacked and pushed deep into Italian East Africa. By 5 May, Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia had returned to Addis Ababa to reclaim his throne. In November, the last organised Italian resistance ended with the fall of Gondar.^[31] However, following the surrender of East Africa, some Italians conducted a guerrilla war which lasted for two more years.

In November 1942, Italian-occupied France was expanded slightly when the Germans occupied Vichy France during Case Anton.

End of Empire (1943-1960)

By the fall of 1943, the Italian Empire effectively came to an end. On May 7, the surrender of Axis forces in Tunisia and other near continuous Italian reversals, led King Victor Emmanuel III to plan the removal of Mussolini. Following the Invasion of Sicily, all support for Mussolini evaporated. On July 24, at a meeting of the Grand Council of Fascism, Mussolini was deposed by the King and Dino Grandi. Afterwards Mussolini was arrested, only later to be rescued on the orders of Hitler and become leader of the Italian Social Republic.

Outwardly, the new Italian government under the King and Field Marshal Pietro Badoglio remained part of the Axis. But secretly it started negotiations with the Allies. On the eve of the American landings at Salerno which started the Allied invasion of Italy, the new Italian government secretly signed an armistice with the Allies. On September 8, the armistice was made public. In Albania, the Dodecanese, and other territories still held by the Italians, German military forces successfully attacked their former Italian allies and ended Italy's rule. Some Italian troops in the Balkans chose to join the resistance fighting against the Germans there. During the Dodecanese Campaign, an Allied attempt to take the Dodecanese with the cooperation of the Italian troops ended in total German victory.



The surrender of the last organised Italian resistance in Italian East Africa, November 27, 1941.

In 1947, the Republic of Italy formally lost all her overseas possessions as a result of the Treaty of Peace with Italy. In November of 1949, Italian Somaliland was made a United Nations Trust Territory under Italian administration. This lasted until July 1, 1960, when Italian Somaliland was granted its independence along with British Somaliland to form the Somali Republic.

See also

- Republic of Genoa
- Republic of Venice
- Mare Nostrum
- Greater Italia
- Albania under Italy
- Dodecanese Campaign
- Italian East Africa and List of colonial heads of Italian East Africa
- Axis occupation of Greece during World War II
- History of Libya as Italian Colony
- Concessions in Tietsin

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Notes

1. ^ Betts (1975), p.12
2. ^ Betts (1975), p.97
3. ^ Lowe, p.21
4. ^ Lowe, p.24
5. ^ Lowe, p.27
6. ^ Packenham (1992), p.280
7. ^ Packenham (1992), p.471
8. ^ Packenham, p.281
9. ^ Killinger (2002), p.122
10. ^ Packenham, p.470
11. ^ Killinger, p.122
12. ^ Packenham (1992), p.7
13. ^ Killinger (2002), p.133
14. ^ Fry (2002), p.178
15. ^ Lowe, p.187
16. ^ Barker, p. 10
17. ^ Lowe, p.196
18. ^ Lowe, p.198
19. ^ Lowe, p.191,199
20. ^ Lowe, p.289
21. ^ Howard (1998), p.95.
22. ^ Barker, p.154
23. ^ Barker, p.152
24. ^ Dickson (2001), pg. 69
25. ^ Dickson (2001), pg 69
26. ^ Calvocoressi (1999) p.166
27. ^ Calvocoressi (1999) p.142

28. ^ Dickson (2001) p.100
29. ^ Dickson (2001) p.101
30. ^ Dickson (2001) p.103
31. ^ Jowett (2001) p.6

External links

- [Speech of the proclamation of the empire, 9 May 1936](#)

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