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## Sweden and the Italo-Ethiopian crisis 1935\*

### Issues

For most of the European nations involved in the so-called Abyssinian crisis of the mid-thirties, the fate of Ethiopia was of little significance, overshadowed almost completely by the possible consequences of the crisis for the future of the League of Nations and peace in Europe. Had not Ethiopia been a member of the League and insisted that the aggressive designs of Italy were a matter for the League, it is not likely, to say the least, that the crisis would have engaged the public and the governments in fifty odd countries in any way to the extent it actually did.

Britain and France had a long history and major interests of their own in the area. At the turn of the century they had managed, together with Italy, to encircle Ethiopia and cut her off from the sea. In the Tripartite Treaty of 1906,<sup>1</sup> they had arrogated to themselves the task of “maintaining the territorial integrity” of Ethiopia at the same time as they agreed on how to partition the country if and when an opportunity arose. The text was both vague and self-contradictory, and the attempts of the following years to translate the words of the agreement into lines on a map naturally depended on the relations between the three limitrophe powers at any given moment. Before the First World War Britain was looking for the lion’s share.<sup>2</sup> A map drawn just after the war shows an approximately fifty/fifty partition – France to be compensated elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> As late as 1925 Italy and Britain exchanged notes on their respective interests in Ethiopia in a manner which provoked Ethiopia, then a member of the League since 1923, to launch a protest at Geneva.<sup>4</sup> When the crisis was a fact in 1935, a British government committee under the chairmanship of Sir John Maffey summarized the interests of the three limitrophe Powers as follows:

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The main and, indeed, almost exclusive interest of the French has been the safeguarding of their interest in the Jibuti Railway. The main preoccupation of the United Kingdom has been to regularize the position on the frontiers, to protect our interest in Lake Tana, and to secure the abolition of slavery. The Italians have constantly thought in terms of spheres of influence and wide economic concessions.<sup>5</sup>

Looking back beyond the Tripartite Treaty to the years of the spurious protectorate over Ethiopia, before “the scar of Adwa” had been inflicted in 1896, Mussolini aimed for the whole and demanded “a free hand” with regard to Ethiopia.

In comparison with the commercial and strategical value of the railway and the importance of controlling the waters of Lake Tana and the Blue Nile, the interests of Italy’s other competitors in Ethiopia were marginal. Germans, Belgians, Americans and others had some concessions and commercial interests to protect. The growing import of Japanese merchandize was regarded as exceptionally objectionable by Europeans and Americans. This could be used and was used as an argument in favour of Italian military action.<sup>6</sup>

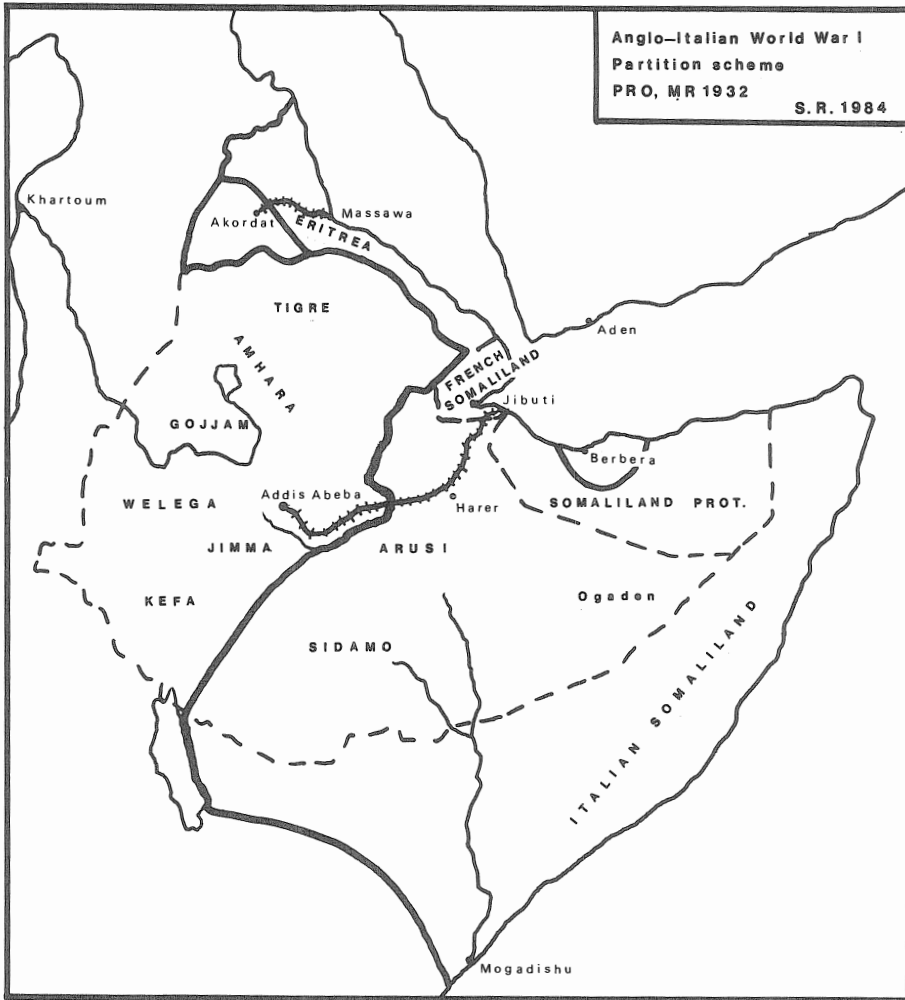
Considering the fact that Sweden was neither a Great Power nor a colonial one and that it had, moreover, a long and strong tradition of neutrality in times of international conflict, one might have expected Sweden to be one of the countries least concerned with the fate of Ethiopia in 1934. This was not so. No issue of international politics in the whole inter-war period – with the possible exception of the Ruhr occupation 1923 – aroused Swedish public opinion to the same extent as “the Abyssinian crisis”.<sup>7</sup>

Swedish public opinion and Swedish government policy in the Ethiopian crisis were conditioned by two different realities: Sweden’s membership in the League of Nations and many years of close Swedish-Ethiopian contacts.

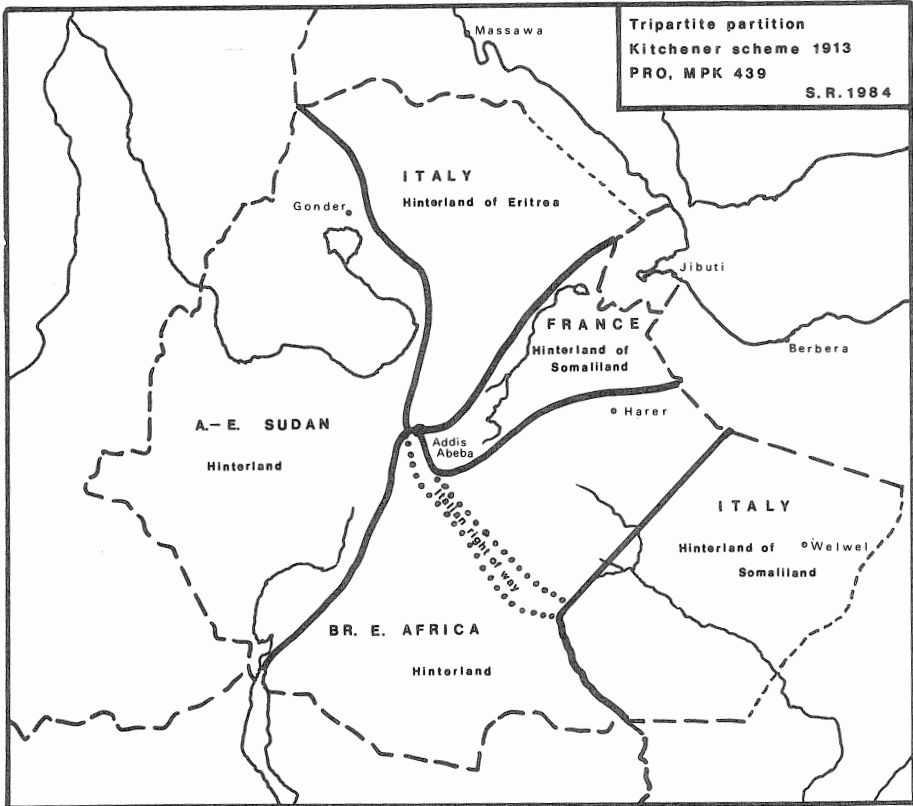
### **Sweden and the League**

At the end of the First World War, with a century of nonbelligerency and an increasing commitment to neutrality in matters of foreign policy behind her, it was by no means a foregone conclusion that Sweden would accept the invitation to join the League of Nations, which was by many seen as an organization by the victors for the victors. Once the decision to join had been taken in 1920, however, the Swedes by and large closed ranks and accepted membership as something positive.<sup>8</sup>

In Sweden the League was conceived primarily as a juridical community. Swedish delegates consistently advocated the institutionalization of procedures for arbitration and adjudication of international disputes. That arbitration could and should be mandatory was almost taken for granted. The



attitude towards sanctions was ambivalent. From the outset the Swedish government made it clear that Sweden joined the League on condition that it did not involve any obligation to participate in military sanctions. This stand was maintained over the years. On economic sanctions, commercial and financial, opinion in Sweden was divided, sometimes on moral grounds (the inhumanity of a hunger blockade), sometimes on political grounds (the risk of being dragged into a war where no Swedish national interests were at stake). At any rate, economic sanctions were the ultimate step Sweden would take, and this only if the League Council was unani-



mous in its verdict that a state had gone to war in violation of the Covenant.

As might be expected from an ex-neutral, Sweden in general advocated conciliatory and therefore by implication pro-German solutions with regard to the aftermath of the war, for instance in the Ruhr crisis 1923 and the Council membership crisis 1926. In the Corfu crisis it was the rights and interests of a smaller nation vis-a-vis a major power that activated Swedish opinion against Mussolini's Italy. In several ways it was a test case that foreshadowed the Ethiopian crisis; the outcome, however, was far less disastrous. When Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931, the Swedish press demanded that the League act decisively, and the Swedish representatives at Geneva censured Japan in no uncertain terms, as did the representatives of other smaller nations. But they stopped short of invoking article 16 – and sanctions – and the matter was settled by a Great Power compromise at the

expense of Manchuria. If Mussolini needed an object lesson, he had received it.

In spite of disappointments and setbacks Sweden remained a loyal member of the League. To those directly involved it was a question of patiently working towards an international society based on justice. They and much of the Swedish press were quite prepared to find extenuating circumstances for the failures and shortcomings. There were those, however, who ridiculed the Swedish government for attaching too much importance to its involvement in international politics. The leading Gothenburg paper, for instance, wrote in 1926, "With our blue-eyed trueheartedness we believe ourselves capable of solving these conflicts as if it was the question of a legal or moral ruling. In the eyes of the big fellows we must seem pathetic in our naiveté until the day when we get into the way and have to be removed." – "We are more honest than either party believes and much more foolish than any of them has dreamt."<sup>9</sup> As far as the general public goes, interest in the activities of the League was negligible. The Swedish Association for the League of Nations had 335 members in 1925, 150 in 1932. In comparison, the British League of Nations Union counted some 800,000 members in the late twenties.<sup>10</sup>

### Sweden and Ethiopia: The missionaries

If the League of Nations as such, its policies and actions, successes and failures, was the concern of a few publicists and politicians and not many more, there was a large section of the Swedish public who had for generations concerned themselves with the people of Ethiopia. These were the Low Church members of two missionary societies with Ethiopia as their overseas mission field.

Ethiopia was in fact the first foreign mission field of any Swedish missionary society. Swedes had arrived in what later became Italian Eritrea in 1866, three years before the Italians acquired their first foothold at Aseb. By 1935 more than 150 missionaries had been sent to Ethiopia, Eritrea and Italian Somaliland and at no time before 1935 had the field been evacuated.<sup>11</sup>

Many of the missionaries were diligent correspondents and filled the mission journals with accounts of Ethiopia and of their work there. The number of subscribers to the most important mission journal, *Missionstidningen*, grew from 3,000 in 1865, when the first missionaries were commissioned, to 17,000 in 1875, which shows how important the opening of a foreign mission field of one's own was. From 1900 onwards the subscribers counted approximately 25,000 which at the time implied a readership of possibly 100,000.<sup>12</sup> In addition there was the continuous flow of information to the "mission friends" through pastors, preachers and missionaries on furlough. The statistics on membership in the two missionary societies

working in Ethiopia in 1935 are incomplete. The larger one, Evangeliska Fosterlands-stiftelsen, however, had 33,000 members in its youth organizations that year and reported a total membership of 100,000 in 1000 local associations in 1942.<sup>13</sup>

My impression is that a feeling of affinity with and in most cases a sympathy for the Ethiopians had developed to an extent which did not exist with regard to any other African or Asian people. Perhaps the fact that Ethiopia remained an independent country – was nobody else's backyard – had something to do with this. Nevertheless relations between the Swedish missionaries and the Italian colonial authorities in Eritrea were normally satisfactory, and the Swedes were by no means immune to the European "superiority complex" which developed so disastrously from the seeds of "social Darwinism" in the 19th century. But there were exceptions, and during the First World War the political views of some missionaries led to trouble with the Italian authorities. Some were expelled from Eritrea, others fled across the border to Ethiopia. In 1923 the Italian government declared that no new Swedish missionaries would be permitted to enter Eritrea and the following year missionaries on furlough were also barred from returning. As Fascist ideology gained ground and nationalism and Italian exclusiveness increased, the Swedish mission suffered more and more restrictions, particularly with regard to its educational work.<sup>14</sup>

Especially after 1927, Ethiopia became the refuge for Eritreans who desired education and opportunities for advancement. By that generation of Eritreans Ethiopia was, in fact, regarded as their real mother country. Many of these Eritreans were Protestants, who actually defined themselves in religious terms as "Svedese". Likewise, missionaries who could not return to Eritrea, found new openings in Ethiopia, largely because of the positive attitude of the Regent, Ras Teferi. The welcome extended to the Swedish missionaries and the support they received from the Ethiopian government naturally increased the sympathy of the "mission friends" for Ethiopia and her ruler. The image produced by lectures as well as articles and letters in the mission journals was that of a country with great needs, spiritually and in terms of health and educational services, but also of a country on the road to progress under an enlightened regent. This was particularly the case after the visit of the Mission Director, Rev. N. Dahlberg, to Ethiopia in 1925 and the friendly reception he received from Ras Teferi.

Dissenting voices existed but they were few and seldom reached the public. A former missionary in Eritrea, Olle Hagner, for instance, remained an Italophile although he had been prevented from continuing his work in Eritrea and was obliged to start work at Adwa instead in 1934. His patience ran out very soon and friendly contacts with the Italian consul at Adwa opened the way back to Eritrea: "... never anything but words, words, words in this 'promising' country ... [We will] try to get away from here as quickly as possible. Poor country! Nevertheless they believe themselves to

be so enlightened and distinguished. Perhaps it may be correct and true to speak of 'Ethiopia's enlightened regent' but to regard Ethiopia as a civilized state is most certainly rather hasty, since slavery and the worst barbarism are prevalent in by far the greatest part of the country. [The emperor] is even incapable of asserting himself in Addis Abeba more than in part and in the countryside his influence is zero."<sup>15</sup> Another missionary, Rev. Martin Nordfeldt (apparently forgetful of the fact that Sweden practiced conscription), criticized the recruitment of "200 Shanqilla children" from his area in Wellega as potential soldiers: "What is this except slavery? You must forgive me, if I tell you in plain words that I do not believe very much in the imperial piety about which people speak at great length. However, for the sake of the mission, I shall keep silence."<sup>16</sup>

But these voices were exceptions. The views recorded by Staffan Söderblom of the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs after an interview with Rev. P. Stjärne in September 1935 are certainly more representative. The missionary was "an ardent supporter of the Abyssinian emperor and could not sufficiently praise his wisdom and caution with regard to the reforms he had made up his mind to accomplish." No colonial power could better promote the social change which was called for. The slaves were few and treated well. None could be held in slavery against their will since the Emperor was determined to abolish slavery altogether.<sup>17</sup>

### Sweden and Ethiopia: The "experts"

By 1934, however, the missionaries were no longer the only Swedes in Ethiopia. Ten years earlier Ras Teferi had made his tour of European countries. Sweden was not on his list of official visits, but as he later wrote in his memoirs, "Having come to Europe, We had the intention of visiting the countries of Europe as a whole, even though not officially . . . and although it was impossible to visit all the European countries, We made a firm resolve to visit at the same time the countries in Northern Europe . . . i.e. Holland, Germany and Sweden." No arrangements, however, seem to have been made for Holland and Germany. Ras Teferi travelled practically straight to Sweden where he spent, not three days as planned, but five (8–13 June). This visit was to have very important consequences for future Ethio-Swedish relations. It was then and there that the first contacts were made which eventually led to the first group of what we today call "experts", including a military mission.<sup>18</sup>

In the major capitals there was business to conduct in addition to the formalities of a state visit: in Paris the revision of the Klobukowski Treaty and railway business, in London the delimitation of common boundaries and an eventual Lake Tana barrage, in Rome primarily the acquisition of an Ethiopian free zone at the port of Aseb. But what brought Ras Teferi to Sweden? In his memoirs he emphasizes that the visit to Stockholm was

“private and not official” and both in a speech he made in the cathedral at Uppsala and in an interview with *Dagens Nyheter*, he stressed the activities of the missionaries as the sole reason for his interest in Sweden.<sup>19</sup> In reply to a direct question by the journalist why he had come to Sweden, the Regent is reported to have replied, “I am here solely because of love for the country which has sent such missionaries to my people. They have done great work there . . .” The initiative for the visit had been taken by Ras Teferi with the missionaries as intermediaries and the arrangements seem to have been made largely by the directors of the two missionary societies, N. Dahlberg and A. B. Svensson. Both became personal friends of Teferi/Haile Sellassie from then onwards, which facilitated both the mission work in Ethiopia and other Ethio-Swedish contacts.<sup>20</sup>

Of equal importance were the meetings between Ras Teferi and Archbishop Söderblom who with his great interest in the Orthodox churches and commitment to ecumenism made a strong and lasting impression on the Regent. It was at Uppsala that the name of Johannes Kolmodin was first mentioned between them, Söderblom suggesting that this Orientalist and Tigrinña scholar (and son of a former Mission Director) might be interested in going to Ethiopia. Teferi immediately responded by offering to make Kolmodin his adviser and followed up the matter from Addis Abeba six months later. It was, however, not until early 1931 that Kolmodin actually took up the position as Foreign Affairs Adviser to the recently crowned Haile Sellassie I. In the interval the Regent had tried in vain to obtain advisers from Sweden through diplomatic channels and by writing to the Swedish king in person. The Swedish government replied that it could not find suitable candidates which would seem to reflect a lack of interest in the matter. In the end it was through Dr. Knut Hanner, who had been employed to head a government hospital in Addis Abeba, and Archbishop Söderblom that the services of Kolmodin were secured.<sup>21</sup>

The recruitment of medical personnel for the Ethiopian government was a much simpler matter. Dr. Hanner and two nurses arrived in 1926 presumably as the direct result of a letter from Ras Teferi to Rev. Dahlberg. Dr. Harald Nyström was recruited as physician to the Imperial Guard in 1927 and Dr. Gunnar Agge entered government service as Medical Officer for the Ogaden in 1932. The former was the son of a Swedish missionary with forty years of service in Eritrea; the latter himself a former missionary. A Swedish engineer, Frank Hammar, was recruited for the delicate position as technical director of the new radio station at Aqaqi in 1932. Hanner handled this appointment through friends.<sup>22</sup> It was only when Kolmodin suddenly died in October 1933 that the Emperor turned to the Swedish government. Even so, he asked Dr. Hanner, who had been appointed honorary consul in 1930, to inquire unofficially first in order to avoid a negative reply. The Emperor now wanted a Swedish general to act as both political and military adviser. Stockholm took its time before responding. Erik Vir-



gin, commander of the Swedish Air Force, was approached in January 1934, and having resigned from active duty, he left for Ethiopia in May.<sup>23</sup>

The recruitment of General Virgin marked a turning-point in the attitude of the Swedish government towards involvement in Ethiopian affairs. One of Virgin's first initiatives was to propose the establishment of an officers' cadet school with Swedish instructors. He had to overcome opposition in government circles in Addis Abeba: the Swedes had no war experience and they were more expensive and less competent in French (the medium of instruction) than the Belgians. On the other hand, he immediately received the cooperation of the Swedish government and, within a matter of about three months, five Swedish officers arrived in Addis Abeba, three days before the Welwel incident on 5 December. They had not been obliged to resign as Swedish officers but were to return to Sweden if war broke out between Ethiopia and any other state.<sup>24</sup>

Further proof that the Swedish government was finally taking a positive interest in Ethiopia was the visit of the Swedish Crown Prince and Crown Princess, and an entourage which included Björn Prytz representing the Swedish General Export Association, to Ethiopia in January 1935. Though it might be regarded as nothing more than a belated response to Ras Teferi's visit in 1924, the timing and the fact that it was Stockholm that took the initiative are important as evidence of the attitude on the eve of the Ethiopian crisis.<sup>25</sup>

### Sweden and Ethiopia: the businessmen

Little is known about the history of Ethio-Swedish business contacts before 1935. It was fairly common to assume, both at the time and later, that none existed.<sup>26</sup> In fact the trade was almost negligible and passed through the middlemen of other nationalities. Nevertheless there had been one major attempt to capture future business in Ethiopia – by no one less than Ivar Kreuger.

Here no missionaries or bishops were involved. The first known contact was established in 1926 by the British traveller and author C. F. Rey as agent for one of Kreuger's many subsidiaries, The Alsing Trading Company in London. Its Swedish director John Schéle reported to Kreuger that Rey had "brought rather encouraging news" with him from Addis Abeba, namely that "the people concerned with the Match Monopoly", *i.e.* the Ethiopian government and the Société Ethiopienne de Commerce & d'Industrie (SECI) in which Ras Teferi had a stake, had declared "their willingness to sell the monopoly".<sup>27</sup> Though all the major points of the deal were reportedly agreed upon the following year, it did not materialize due to problems in Ethiopia. The terms "£ 15,000 all told" and 50 % of the profits until 1964, when the monopoly was to expire, were regarded as "very favourable" from the Swedish point of view. The consumption was admitted-

ly very small, but it could, in Schéle's words, "doubtless be made quite important if special steps were taken to sell matches at cheap prices during a year or two in order that the natives should become familiar with the use of matches".<sup>28</sup>

When the matter was raised again in May 1930, a month after Empress Zewditu's death, it was by SECI on behalf of the Ethiopian government, and the reason was that the Ethiopian government needed a "small loan", about £250,000 or approximately 5,000,000 Maria Theresa dollars. This would be the first national loan ever contracted by Ethiopia.<sup>29</sup> There was nothing strange in turning to a private company for such a loan, and to the Kreuger Concern the amount was almost negligible, for by 1929 Kreuger had already lent 185 million US dollars to various governments throughout the world in exchange for monopolies and was in May 1930 raising no less than 125 million for the German government.<sup>30</sup>

If the loan to Ethiopia were granted, at 6% interest and with a share of the customs revenues as security, the match business would also be concluded "à votre satisfaction".<sup>31</sup> The loan was reduced to half by Kreuger and the interest raised to 6.7%. This was accepted by the Ethiopian side, but it turned out that Kreuger's idea of what satisfactory terms meant with regard to the match monopoly differed considerably from that of the Ethiopians who thought in terms of the 1927 proposal. Now Kreuger wanted sole ownership, exclusive control of prices, no customs duties, no Ethiopian share in the profits and no cash compensation.<sup>32</sup> The Ethiopians had not expected to pay for the loan both directly and indirectly.<sup>33</sup> The negotiations between SECI and Schéle dragged on into 1931 without leading anywhere.

The most interesting aspect of these negotiations from the point of view of Ethio-Swedish relations is the way in which Kreuger transferred the matter from the London business link to the Söderblom-Hanner-Kolmodin connection. Aware that the Ethiopian government planned a currency reform and needed a loan to finance it, Hanner wrote to Kreuger, apparently on his own initiative and with no knowledge of the earlier contacts, and tried to interest the great financier in the matter. He did not think any serious efforts to raise the necessary money had been made yet. The Emperor was probably afraid of becoming politically dependent and therefore reluctant to turn to any of the Powers. This would not apply to "a financier of Swedish extraction". There was a match monopoly available and other things to do as well. So if Kreuger was interested, it would be easy for Hanner to bring up the matter with the Emperor. The consul closed by apologizing for his initiative on the grounds that he was a "good patriot" who loved to see Swedish interests flourish in Ethiopia.<sup>34</sup>

This was in May 1930. By early July the Emperor knew what the company in London wanted. Hanner was called and received the Emperor's instructions to approach his countryman Kreuger about a loan – and the match monopoly. What Hanner had written before, to which he had not

yet received any reply, was confirmed. Money had been offered from several corners, but the Emperor was reluctant to increase the influence of any of the Powers and distrusted the private financiers who had come forward: "In order to be sure that I will not be deceived I turn to Sweden." Hanner assured Kreuger that much more than the match monopoly could be gained (gold, oil, the construction of a hydro-electric plant) and repeated his opinion that it was high time that Swedish interests joined in the peaceful exploitation of the country "if they wanted to be in on it at all".<sup>35</sup> Kreuger cabled Hanner that he was interested, transferred the Ethiopian case from London to Stockholm (Dr. Per Jacobsson) and told Schéle to stall – but nothing more.<sup>36</sup> After six months Schéle to his great surprise learned from SECI that he had a Swedish competitor for the match monopoly called Kreuger and Toll!<sup>37</sup>

Hanner was delighted. He saw the Bank of Abyssinia as good as transferred from mainly British to Swedish control. In December he reported that the Emperor had raised the first £ 100,000 to buy the Bank but needed £ 100,000 more. An additional unrevealed amount would be needed to back a new currency. As security the Ethiopian government was prepared to offer shares in the Franco-Ethiopian railway to the value of 14 million French francs with about 3 million in annual dividends and, in addition, monopolies for alcohol, salt and, of course, matches. According to Hanner, the Emperor "would prefer to see that a Swede took charge of all financial matters and was employed as an expert". But first of all, and as quickly as possible, he wanted to meet a trusted man from the Kreuger Concern to negotiate with, a person who could examine the situation and tell him his opinion as to what to do. "There are," concluded the consul, "pretty big interests to take care of for our country out here." With Kolmodin as the Emperor's Foreign Affairs Adviser and the financial backing of the Kreuger Concern, Hanner saw a bright future for Ethiopia as well as for Swedish enterprise there.<sup>38</sup>

In August the following year Hanner received the reply that there would be no loan. If we are to believe his own letter to Kreuger, he cheerfully told the Emperor that the refusal was probably a blessing in disguise. In view of the wretched condition of the internal administration of the country, with all the theft and corruption which went on, the only consequence might have been that the country would have a debt it could not repay. The Emperor reportedly admitted the truth of what the consul said but pointed out that he had by now managed to buy the Bank of Abyssinia without foreign aid, that the loan was not the important issue but that he wanted "to place the financial administration in the hands of the great Swedish trust".<sup>39</sup> In a letter of his own Kolmodin supported the request of the Emperor. A loan would still be necessary for the currency reform but what the Emperor really wanted was to entrust a central organizational and auditing task to a Swedish concern which inspired political confidence.<sup>40</sup>

There the matter ended. Kreuger had much too much on his mind to bother about Ethiopia any more. Six months later he committed suicide, leaving behind a deficit of something like 200 million dollars and – in his safe – millions of dollars in Italian government bonds which he had personally forged.

Whether the Emperor and the consul recalled these matters as they prepared to receive the Crown Prince and the prominent industrialist Björn Prytz is a matter for speculation. The Crown Prince almost certainly knew nothing of this past history while Prytz, who incidentally succeeded Kreuger as director of Swedish Match, might have come across the information. The important thing is that they were in fact following up an established commercial interest in Ethiopia. They discussed economic and commercial relations with the Ethiopians, suggested the stationing of a Swedish commercial agent in Addis Abeba and, on their return to Sweden, Prytz proposed a trade treaty with Ethiopia. In spite of warnings from the Swedish envoy in Rome that Swedish trade with Italy would certainly suffer if a treaty was signed, the Swedish government went ahead and signed a Treaty of Trade and Friendship with Ethiopia barely two months before the Italian invasion.<sup>41</sup>

### **Ethiopia – a Swedish “colony”?**

Whether Mussolini had heard anything about the Kreuger business with Ethiopia or not,<sup>42</sup> sufficient had happened publicly in Ethio-Swedish relations between 1930 and 1935 to make him concerned: increasing educational input by Swedish missionaries, Swedish doctors in important positions and, in the case of Dr. Agge, in a very sensitive area (the Oga-den), two chief political advisers to the Emperor in succession, the second in charge of military planning and organization as well, a military mission to train modern officers, and finally a royal visit with the all too obvious purpose of laying the foundation for future economic cooperation.

Had the backwardness of the country, the political instability, the lack of discipline of the Ethiopian armed forces, etc., matters which filled the press columns and the propaganda speeches, been the genuine reasons for wanting to “civilize” Ethiopia, then the activities of the Swedes need not have caused so much concern. But the truth was exactly the opposite. Mussolini was on his own admission in the memorandum to Badoglio on 30 December 1934, in which he outlined his directives for the war, disturbed by the progress towards political and military centralization and unification, the beginning transformation of the military forces along European lines, accelerated by the presence of European instructors, etc. It was this progress, which he perceived as detrimental to Italian interests, that called for military action without further delay.<sup>43</sup> From Rome the Swedish envoy reported some six weeks before Welwel that a well-informed person had

told him that two new developments had added to earlier Italian dissatisfaction with Ethiopia. Firstly, Ethiopia had opened its doors to Japanese business interests. Secondly, "Ethiopia had above all incurred the displeasure of Italy by the military reorganization which – led by foreign officers from various countries – is going on there . . ." <sup>44</sup>

The attacks on Japan were outrageously misplaced – Japan had no concessions in Ethiopia and there were only three small-scale businessmen in all Ethiopia in 1934<sup>45</sup> – but Japan was, of course, a popular target in many countries. As for the military reorganization neither Belgium nor Sweden were mentioned. It was up to the Swedish authorities to recall the name of Virgin and the military mission that was about to leave for Addis Abeba.

### From crisis to war

Throughout the months wasted by the League and used by Italy to transport troops and war materials to Eritrea and Somalia, public opinion in Sweden became more and more critical of the League and hostile to Italy. One of the main themes in the Press was that the League should act decisively which, as we all know, was precisely what it was not doing. As the probability of an Italian attack turned into well-nigh certainty during the summer, the indignation in the papers increased. Fascism, Mussolini's defiance, the military build-up on Ethiopia's frontiers came in for their share of condemnation. What was going on in the case was universally denounced from the Left to the Right. There was less unanimity as to what Sweden should or could do about it: leave the League altogether, rather than be coresponsible for its failure to stop aggression, or alternatively be dragged into a war; take an initiative to bring about sanctions, whatever the consequences; wait for the solution that Britain and France would ultimately have a present and support it within the structure of the League.

One aspect of the crisis that took on increasing importance to the majority of the Swedish people during the months immediately preceding the outbreak of war was concern for the future in store for the Ethiopian people.<sup>46</sup> The mixture of anger and compassion that stirred the people found strong expressions:

The Italian-Abyssinian conflict has in a dreadful manner revealed the present inherent weaknesses of the League of Nations . . . Abyssinia, a member of the League is now, unless she subjects herself to Italian sovereignty of her own free will, going to be impelled to do so by force. Italian poison gas, tanks and airbombing will destroy a people who have nothing with which to confront the horrible destructive devices which a modern army has at its disposal. The Fascist State whose methods against its own internal opponents has aroused and still arouses abhorrence and anger in all of western Europe will as "the messenger of civilisation" be let loose against a people

that is, to be sure, quite backward, but that does not ask for anything but to be allowed to live in peace among its deserts and mountains.<sup>47</sup>

Note the prediction, even before war broke out, that poison gas would be used.

Considering the strength of Swedish public opinion, the official statements and actions by the government must be regarded as restrained. The first major opportunity to speak up was when the League Assembly met in September 1935, ostensibly to hear the verdict of the Welwel Arbitration Commission and be finished with the dispute, in fact to face the crisis in its true dimension. Once Hoare had made his famous speech on 11 September, taking an apparently very strong stand for the Covenant, collective security and, therefore, Ethiopia, it presented no problem for Sweden's Foreign Minister Richard Sandler to speak in the same vein, as did most of the others who took the opportunity to declare their views. Sandler's speech, however, did arouse attention as exceptionally strong in its criticism of Italy's conduct. This speech was actually used as an argument against Sweden in German-Italian diplomacy as late as December 1939.<sup>48</sup>

When war broke out on 3 October, Prime Minister Per Albin Hansson's stand was predictable: "As a member of the League of Nations, Sweden can for the moment only await the recommendations of the League of Nations". The prohibition against arms exports to Ethiopia remained in force but would of course be reconsidered as soon as the Council had taken its anticipated decision on sanctions.<sup>49</sup> In the months that followed, Sweden did no more, no less than follow the majority decisions regarding sanctions. At the outset, Sandler had been offered the opportunity to play a more prominent role, nominally at least, as chairman of the Sanctions Committee but had declined as Östen Undén had turned down Ethiopia's request that he serve as the fifth member of the Welwel Arbitration Committee some months earlier. Clearly no unnecessary risks were taken by Sweden in this kind of matters.<sup>50</sup> In the discussions on oil sanctions in December the delegates of Sweden (and Mexico) spoke up somewhat stronger than most, but that was all.<sup>51</sup> When everything was supposed to be over in July 1936, Sweden also followed the majority and lifted the sanctions.

Sweden's participation in the collective failure of the League of Nations is, however, only one part of Sweden's involvement with the Italo-Ethiopian war. The other, and more interesting part unfolded itself in Ethiopia. The sensitive problems were Virgin and the military mission. Some matters resembled what happened in Europe. In January 1935, for instance, the Italians proposed a neutral zone to avoid further clashes. The Emperor agreed and proposed to appoint one Swedish and one Belgian officer as technical experts with the Ethiopian commission. Unwilling to accept this, the Italian government approached Stockholm about the duties of the Swedish officers in Ethiopia. They were told that the Swedes

were being instructed to follow the same principles as the Belgians, *i.e.* not to accept any political commissions, and to return to Sweden if war broke out. It was, however, accepted practice that Swedish officers serving in foreign armies in time of war were allowed to resign and regain their commissions again on their return to Sweden. The officers in Ethiopia were informed that they could not take their re-instatement for granted, and Tamm was instructed not to accept any duties that might increase Italian susceptibilities. Considerable pressure was used against Tamm in particular but the officers decided to stay also if war broke out. When it happened, the Swedes (4 of 5) resigned their positions at home.<sup>52</sup>

Virgin who claimed credit for having made the operation plans for the Ethiopian armies in case the Italians invaded, as well as participated in drawing up the documents of the Ethiopian side on the Welwel incident, etc., decided to return to Sweden, ostensibly because of ill-health (he had suffered several heart attacks). Speculations that he had been recalled by the Swedish government were denied by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

One week after Virgin's departure on 1 October, Hanner cabled the Cabinet and the King for a successor, this time a lawyer with international experience. The fact that the request came through Hanner, not Virgin, and only after the latter had left, suggests that Virgin may have had more than medical problems. At any rate the Swedish government immediately declined the task of finding a replacement.<sup>53</sup>

The position was then filled by the American John Spencer, recruited privately through a friend of the Emperor in Paris. His assessment of Virgin's period of service was "not an unqualified success, due, allegedly to lack of discretion and to tense relations with certain Ethiopian officials; particularly with Wolde Guiorguis Wolde Yohannes, later to become the *éminence grise* in post-war Ethiopia."<sup>54</sup> Spencer, if anyone, had plenty of opportunities to find out during his twenty-five years of service with the Ethiopian government.

Tamm and his fellow officers had stayed on to complete the training of the first batch of officers. An unexpected attempt to deprive the Ethiopian army of their and their cadets' services in favour of protecting the legations and the other foreigners in Addis Abeba led to changed objectives. When Tamm was told about the police duties intended, the British minister had already asked his government to approach Stockholm with the request that the Swedish officers be re-instated in the Swedish army if they accepted the plan. Tamm offered to organize a fighting brigade of 5,000 men under the command if his cadets instead. The Emperor agreed at once and the Swedes had become even more involved in the war.<sup>55</sup> After tremendous difficulties and with his brigade only at half strength and poorly equipped, Tamm later told the ministers in Addis Abeba that he would attempt to organize the defense at Terma Ber 180 kms northeast of Addis Abeba if all other troops in the area, regular as well as irregular, would be placed under

his command. This was in mid-April. Tamm and the Ethiopian commander of the brigade, Kifle Nesibu, left for Terma Ber a few days later with as much of the brigade as possible. But it was too late. The Italians were approaching on the heels of the fleeing remnants of the Northern Army. It was abundantly clear that Addis Abeba could not be defended. Tamm and his Swedish colleagues resigned. They left Addis Abeba on 2 May a few hours after the Emperor.<sup>56</sup>

The contribution to Ethiopia's war effort of the Swedish Military Mission should not be exaggerated. They were only five persons and their period of service lasted only eighteen months. Their share in the instruction of the military forces was marginal (except in terms of the post-liberation period, perhaps), their part in the debacle minimal.

Virgin's contribution as political and military adviser is little known and difficult to assess. Whether the policy of restraint, moderation and confidence in the League of Nations which he advocated – and defended also after the Italian invasion had started – was in the best interests of Ethiopia is at least debatable. That it provided the League of Nations with the opportunity to establish that Ethiopia could not be proved guilty of the Welwel clash seems small comfort in view of the outcome.<sup>57</sup> To assess the soundness of his operational planning is even more difficult. We do not know how detailed it was or to what extent it was followed. In fact, we do not even know whether he really believed that the Ethiopians had a sporting chance or not. The interviews he gave as he sailed home via the Cape, headlined "The Italians will never get to Addis Ababa", "General Virgin emphatic that the task is hopeless" (for Italy!), "Climate and terrain alone adequate defence", "Italy can never conquer Abyssinia", etc.,<sup>58</sup> were either the products of wishful thinking or propaganda addressed to the Italian public. The Italian government at any rate took his pronouncements seriously enough to appeal to Foreign Minister Sandler to restrain him.<sup>59</sup>

In addition to the activities of the Swedish officers and the Treaty of Trade and Friendship mentioned above, the Italian government singled out Sweden's interest in the Ethiopian Red Cross as evidence of an unfriendly attitude towards Italy!<sup>60</sup> It is unlikely that they were at that moment referring to more than the fact that Dr. Hanner had initiated the Ethiopian Red Cross.<sup>61</sup> It was a somewhat premature resentment looking for its real object, the Swedish Red Cross Ambulance, which was to become the most overt and tangible sign of Swedish solidarity with the Ethiopian people in their moment of crisis.

The plans and preparations for a Red Cross Ambulance started in July 1935, more than two months before the war broke out. The initiative was taken by Drs. Hylander and Agge, both former medical missionaries in Ethiopia. The latter had recently returned to Sweden after his three years' service as Medical Officer in the Ogaden. The Chairman of the Swedish Red Cross, the King's brother Carl, wrote Virgin to obtain the views of the



Ethiopian authorities and asked Hylander to prepare a plan for an ambulance brigade. Within a week he had Hylander's reply. Prince Carl then turned to the Swedish government for its consent and financial support.<sup>62</sup>

Prince Carl's request dated 26 August is interesting in two ways. He stressed that he was asking for at least partial financing by the Government so that he would be able to send a sizable unit which could be "regarded as a kind of substitute for any serious Swedish sanctions against Italy which in all probability would not be forth-coming" even if sanctions in some form or another would be applied. Secondly, a Red Cross Ambulance would demonstrate "the sympathies of the Swedish government and the Swedish people *for Abyssinia against* Italy and this without Sweden having to abandon . . . her principle of neutrality" (my emphasis).<sup>63</sup> This was attempting to kill *more* than two birds with one stone: secure advance financing, assist the Government in finding an excuse for not applying eventual future sanctions, and *do* something for Ethiopia which was what the general public was asking for and would no doubt be demanding if and when the Italians actually attacked.

Exactly what the Government replied is not known but the preparations at the headquarters of the Red Cross continued. Hylander was informed that he had been selected to head the Ambulance and plans were made for a nation-wide fund-raising campaign. On the day of Italy's attack, Prince Carl made the official request to the Government for permission to send the Ambulance Brigade. The following day the Press was informed. Formal permission was granted on 8 October. By then a third former missionary in Ethiopia, Josef Svensson, had been appointed quartermaster and two weeks later all the equipment for a complete ambulance and field hospital was dispatched. Thirteen members including the pilot, Count von Rosen, had been selected from more than 400 applicants. Once more the commitment of the mission-oriented community showed up. Seven of the thirteen had connections with the missionary societies in one way or another. The response to the call for funds from the public matched the speed with which the organizers moved. This was a truly national effort which resulted in almost twice the estimated cost of the Ambulance Brigade within six weeks – without the benefit of television!<sup>64</sup>

The simple explanation is that the Italian attack, though anticipated, caused unprecedented anger and in some corners a sense of shame. In an article about the war and the Ambulance in his mission journal, A. B. Svensson spoke for more than himself:

The iniquitous war has become a reality . . . For the white race this war is a black stain in addition to all the others . . . This race which wraps itself up in a dense, disgusting fog of phraseology and talks about humanity, love of mankind, enlightenment and culture! One has to be ashamed of being a white man and a European.<sup>65</sup>

The Swedish Red Cross Ambulance was the first foreign ambulance unit to arrive. It was also the second largest, next to the British. It was divided into two units and sent to the southeastern front. Trusting that the symbol of the Red Cross would be respected, it did not hide and paid a high price for its trust when the larger unit was bombed on 30 December 1935. It continued its work until after the fall of Addis Abeba and left Ethiopia across the Kenyan border.<sup>66</sup>

### Conclusions

The main conclusion that can be drawn from a survey like this of the Swedish involvement with the Italo-Ethiopian conflict and war is that the commitment to Ethiopia's cause was by far the strongest in the mission-oriented sections of the Swedish population. There is of course nothing remarkable in this. The Swedish government, on the other hand, like all the others, was more concerned about the fate of the League of Nations than the fate of Ethiopia. The desire to appear neutral and remain on good terms with Italy asserted itself again and again. Until the war actually broke out the Press, too, concerned itself mainly with the Ethiopian crisis as a European problem. The feelings of solidarity with Ethiopia as the wronged party increased after the invasion and the hostility against Italy culminated after the bombing of the Red Cross Ambulance. Italy responded accordingly, accepted the speeches of the Swedish delegates at Geneva with reasonably good grace most of the time and attacked the Swedish presence in Ethiopia instead. The main targets were Virgin and Tamm, then the Red Cross Ambulance. In the end the conflict led with implacable logic to the expulsion of all the missionaries as well.

The Swedish "colony" of Ethiopia and the Swedish "war" against Italy as presented in the Italian propaganda did not exist in the meaning these words carried in international law and politics. Nevertheless at a different level there was a grain of truth in the Italian propaganda. Through identification with Ethiopia and the Ethiopians many Swedes felt, as individuals and groups, that they had shared in the defeat. When the war was over, they returned on the initiative of the Ethiopians and in larger numbers than ever before to assist in the development of this "chosen land" of theirs.

## NOTES

1. PRO, FO 93/33/220; Frank Hardie, *The Abyssinian Crisis*, London 1974, p 16.
2. PRO, MPK 439.
3. PRO, MR 1932.
4. Hardie, pp 17–20; Haile Sellassie I, *Autobiography*, Oxford 1976, pp 124–45.
5. Hardie, p 15.
6. Richard Pankhurst, *Economic History of Ethiopia*, Addis Abeba 1968, p 408; Haile Sellassie I, pp 208–09; Anton Zischka, *Abessinien. Das letzte ungelöste Problem Afrikas*, Leipzig 1935.
7. Herbert Tingsten, *Svensk utrikesdebatt mellan världskrigen* (Swedish Foreign Policy Debate Between the World Wars), Stockholm 1944, p 255.
8. This and the following paragraphs are mainly based on Tingsten, *op cit*, and Erik Lönnroth, *Den svenska utrikespolitikens historia* (The History of Swedish Foreign Politics), vol V, Stockholm 1959.
9. Tingsten, p 97.
10. *Ibid*, pp 112–13.
11. Gustav Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia*, Stockholm 1978; Viveca Halldin Norberg, *Swedes in Haile Selassie's Ethiopia*, Uppsala 1977, pp 67–71, 103–20.
12. H Lenhammar, *Budbäraren, Pietisten och Församlingsbladet*, Uppsala 1981, pp 133–34.
13. *Evangeliska Fosterlands-Stiftelsens årsberättelse 1942* (Swedish-Evangelical Mission Yearbook 1942).
14. *Missionstidningen* and the *Yearbooks* of the mission societies provide abundant material on the changing attitudes and their consequences.
15. Stockholms Stadsarkiv (Stockholm City Archives), Archives of Evangeliska Fosterlands-stiftelsen, E 1:371, Olle Andersson [Hagner], 19 Jan 1935.
16. *Ibid*, Martin Nordfeldt, 6 Nov 1934.
17. Riksarkivet (National Archives of Sweden), memorandum by S Söderblom, 6 Sept 1935.
18. Haile Sellassie I, pp 95–98.
19. *Ibid*, p 97, also 206.
20. Nils Dahlberg, *Dagar av nåd* (Days of Grace), Stockholm 1961, pp 71–75; quote from DN on p 75; Halldin Norberg, pp 121–23.
21. Halldin Norberg, pp 125–30.
22. *Ibid*, pp 123–24.
23. *Ibid*, pp 130–34; Erik Virgin, *Abessinska minnen* (Abyssinian Memoirs), Stockholm 1936.

24. Halldin Norberg, pp 135–37; Virgin, pp 151–54; Viking Tamm, *I tjänst hos Negus* (In Service with the Negus), Stockholm 1936.
25. Halldin Norberg, pp 146–47; Virgin, pp 163–89.
26. Among the papers of J Kolmodin at Uppsala University Library, Halldin Norberg found the carbon copies of two letters from Kolmodin and Hanner respectively to Ivar Kreuger in 1931, but in the absence of all other known source materials, she concluded (p 145), “We do not even know if Kreuger ever took any interest in becoming involved in Ethiopia’s economy.”
27. Swedish Match Archives (SMA), Stockholm, Schéle to Kreuger, 30 March 1926.
28. SMA, Schéle to Kreuger, 27 May 1930.
29. SMA, Balanos to General Manager, Alsing Trading, 10 May 1930.
30. Robert Shaplen, *Kreuger: Genius and Swindler*, New York 1960, pp 121–38.
31. SMA, Balanos to General Manager, Alsing Trading, 10 May 1930.
32. SMA, Schéle to Balanos, 19 June 1930.
33. SMA, Balanos to Alsing Trading, 7 July 1930.
34. SMA, Hanner to Kreuger, 28 May 1930.
35. SMA, Hanner to Kreuger, 2 July 1930.
36. SMA, Jacobsson to Hanner, 16 Sept 1930; Ahlström to Schéle, 14 August 1930.
37. SMA, Balanos to Alsing Trading, 21 Jan 1931.
38. SMA, Hanner to Jacobsson, 6 Dec 1930.
39. SMA, Hanner to Kreuger, 25 Aug 1931.
40. SMA, Kolmodin to Kreuger, 12 Sept, 1931.
41. Halldin Norberg, pp 146–50.
42. Kreuger had very secret personal contacts with Mussolini about loans and match monopolies in October 1930. See Shaplen, p 147.
43. Giorgio Rochat, *Militari e politici nella preparazione della campagna d’Etiopia*, Milano 1971, pp 376–79. See also Angelo Del Boca, *The Ethiopian War 1935–1941*, Chicago 1969, pp 14–29.
44. Riksarkivet, UD, HP 402, Sjöborg to Beck Friis, 22 Oct 1934.
45. Virgin, p 205.
46. Tingsten, pp 254–57.
47. *Uppsala Nya Tidning*, 18 July 1935.
48. Lönnroth, p 137.
49. Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå, 4 Oct 1935.
50. Lönnroth, pp 138–39; Kurt Strömberg, “Sverige och Abessinien” (Sweden and Abyssinia), *Vår tids historia i ord och bild*, vol 11, p 87.
51. Riksarkivet, UD, HP 1487/III and IV, Westman to Sandler, 12 & 13 Dec 1935.
52. Virgin, pp 220–21; Halldin Norberg, pp 150–54.
53. Virgin, pp 231–46; Halldin Norberg, pp 134–35.
54. John Spencer, *Ethiopia at Bay*, Algonac, Michigan, 1984, pp 4–8, 26.

55. Tamm, pp 192–94.
56. *Ibid*, pp 280–320; Del Boca, p 89; Anthony Mockler, *Haile Selassie's War*, Oxford 1984, pp 124–27.
57. Virgin, pp 257–58.
58. *Natal Advertiser*, 31 Oct 1935; *Pretoria News*, 4 Nov 1935; *Stockholms-Tidningen/Stockholms Dagblad*, 4 Dec 1935.
59. Riksarkivet, UD, HP 1488/VI, memorandum initialed “R S”.
60. *Ibid*, HP 402, Sohlmann, political report 23 May–31 Dec 1935.
61. Del Boca, p 39.
62. Halldin Norberg, pp 155–56.
63. Riksarkivet, UD, HP 1500/I, Carl to Sandler, 26 Aug 1935.
64. Halldin Norberg, pp 156–60.
65. *Bibeltrogn Vänners Missionstidning*, 1935, 11, pp 173–74.
66. Halldin Norberg, pp 161–62. The most comprehensive account of the ambulance is Friede Hylander (ed), *I detta tecken* (With This Symbol), Stockholm 1936.