

COMMUNICATION

IMPERIAL DREAMS: THE MUSSOLINI–LAVAL ACCORDS OF JANUARY 1935*

G. BRUCE STRANG

University of New Brunswick

ABSTRACT. *The infamous January 1936 accords between Italian dictator Benito Mussolini and French foreign minister Pierre Laval have been the subject of vigorous debate. Did Laval promise Mussolini a ‘free hand’ in Ethiopia, giving tacit French approval for an Italian invasion? The two men kept no formal record of their final meeting, leaving contemporary critics and historians to speculate about their bargaining. Italian foreign ministry documents reveal the contents of the first two meetings between Mussolini and Laval. The evidence strongly indicates that Laval did give his approval for Italy to invade Ethiopia. Laval hoped to maintain limited French economic interests, but sacrificed French treaty rights in Ethiopia in order to enlist Italy in a defensive front against Germany. Laval failed to foresee the results of his diplomacy, and ended up alienating the Italian dictator.*

In January 1935, Pierre Laval, the French foreign minister, travelled to Rome to revitalize flagging Franco–Italian negotiations. Italian insistence on a French renunciation of its sphere of influence in Ethiopia, delimited by the 1906 Treaty of London, was one of the major outstanding issues, and the negotiations occurred against a background that included a border clash between Ethiopian and Italian troops. For the first two days of Laval’s visit it appeared that the negotiations might fail, despite two meetings with the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini. After a sumptuous feast at the Palazzo Farnese (the French Embassy in Rome) on 6 January, Mussolini and Laval met without advisers, appearing in the small hours to announce ‘*C’est fini*’. The following day, the two men signed eight agreements, though they published only four. The public declarations covered co-ordinated action in the event of a threat to Austrian independence, resistance to unilateral unrestricted German rearmament, a colonial arrangement regarding interests in Tunisia, and French

* I am grateful to Doctor Gabriele Erasmi of the Department of Modern Languages at McMaster University for his translation of notes of the Mussolini–Laval meetings. I am, of course, fully responsible for the text.

cession of territory adjoining Libya and Eritrea. The rapprochement apparently brought to an end longstanding tension over colonial issues and helped to assuage ill-feeling in France in the wake of Mussolini's support for the terrorists who had killed the Yugoslav king and French foreign minister in Marseilles in 1934. Most importantly for French politicians, the pact appeared to recruit Italy into a French security arrangement against a resurgent Nazi Germany. The French chamber of deputies overwhelmingly approved Laval's signature. Mussolini's renunciation of the interests of Italian citizens in Tunisia represented an enormous concession, and, on the surface, the *modus vivendi* seemed heavily to favour France, leading some contemporary observers to speculate that Laval had made some secret concessions of his own.

It would be some months before the full ramifications of the Mussolini–Laval accords became apparent, and historians have debated ever since whether or not Laval promised Mussolini a 'free hand' in Ethiopia during their private *tête-à-tête* on 6 January. They kept no written record of the meeting, and little relevant documentation apparently survives in France. Until relatively recently, evidence has been unavailable in the Italian archives. Historians have had to rely on letters exchanged afterwards and the claims asserted by the two politicians, neither of whom had a reputation for their honour or veracity.¹ In the immediate aftermath, Laval told a parliamentary committee that he had made no promises that would infringe Ethiopian independence. Later, he qualified this statement heavily, saying that he had made secret concessions, though he insisted that he had not encouraged Mussolini to go to war.² Other French politicians and diplomats have made similar assurances. Charles De Chambrun, the French ambassador in Rome, said that there was no mention of any concessions other than economic ones. Hubert Lagardelle, the noted French publicist, said in his memoir that Laval had given no commitment regarding a free hand by word or gesture. Joseph Paul-Boncour, the French premier, said that the term 'free hands' was used, but that the *procès verbaux* referred only to Italian economic penetration.³

Several historians have accepted Laval's version. William Shorrock presented one of the strongest expressions of this view. He wrote that it was clear that Laval did not give a green light for invasion. Basing his explanation on the letters exchanged by Mussolini and Laval, Shorrock generally accepted Laval's contention that the 'free hand' meant that France had made only

¹ Published copies of the letters exist in Franklin Laurens, *France and the Italo–Ethiopian crisis, 1935–1936* (The Hague, 1967), pp. 404–12 and Hubert Lagardelle, *Mission à Rome* (Paris, 1955), pp. 275–87. The letters are dated Laval to Mussolini, 22 Dec. 1935, Mussolini to Laval, 25 Dec. 1935, Laval to Mussolini, 23 Jan. 1936, Mussolini to Laval, 19 Feb. 1936.

² For more extensive coverage of Laval's claims and equivocations, see Charles O. Richardson, 'The Rome accords of January 1935 and the coming of the Italian–Ethiopian war', *The Historian*, 41 (1978), pp. 41–58, and Laurens, *France and the Italo–Ethiopian crisis*, pp. 22–9.

³ Charles De Chambrun, *Traditions et souvenirs* (Paris, 1952), pp. 192–7; Lagardelle, *Mission à Rome*, p. 111; Joseph Paul-Boncour, *Entre deux guerres: souvenirs sur la III^e République* (Paris, 1945–6), pp. 14–15.

economic concessions. Shorrock condemned as seriously flawed those analyses that depicted Laval as approving aggression or as Mussolini's dupe. In the euphoria surrounding the French success in enlisting Italy in a defensive front against Germany and the settlement of the longstanding Tunisian question, it suited Laval to turn Italian eyes toward Ethiopia. Still, Shorrock insisted that Laval did not approve outright aggression.⁴ Others present a more mainstream explanation; the two men left the agreement deliberately vague. Laval certainly encouraged Mussolini to dominate Ethiopia, though Laval's calculated imprecision left open whether that domination would be economic, political, or military.⁵

Mussolini, for his part, always insisted that the January accords gave French licence to his Ethiopian war. A captured document that had been prepared within the Italian foreign ministry in 1936 and later found in the United States National Archives indicates Mussolini's understanding. The report on France for 1935 reads in part,

the fate of Ethiopia and the entire French position on the question of East Africa was virtually decided at the end of the Mussolini–Laval talks at Rome. With the exchange of letters of January 7 and Laval's verbal assurances the French government was bound to accord Italy a free hand in East Africa and for the settlement once and for all of any questions with the Ethiopian government.⁶

This statement is not entirely convincing, however, because it leaves unclear the alleged verbal assurances that Laval extended.

Several historians have insisted that a document existed proving that Laval gave Mussolini a free hand. René Albrecht-Carrié, for example, wrote that he had seen a document committing Laval to give Italy a free hand, but he did not publish it.⁷ The doyen of Italian historians of the fascist era, the late Renzo De Felice, wrote that documents existing in the Italian foreign ministry archives

⁴ William I. Shorrock, *From ally to enemy: the enigma of fascist Italy in French diplomacy, 1920–1940* (Kent, OH, 1988), pp. 111–5. For a similar view, see H. James Burgwyn, *Italian foreign policy in the interwar period, 1918–1940* (Westport, CT, 1997), pp. 110–11.

⁵ G. W. Baer, *Test case: Italy, Ethiopia and the League of Nations* (Stanford, 1976), pp. 78–83. A. J. Barker, *The civilizing mission: the Italo–Ethiopian war, 1935–1936* (London, 1968), pp. 71–5; Laurens, *France and the Italo–Ethiopian crisis*, pp. 28–9; D. C. Watt, 'The secret Laval–Mussolini agreement of 1935 on Ethiopia', *Middle East Journal*, 15 (1961), pp. 69–78. Robert J. Young, *In command of France: French foreign policy and military planning, 1933–1940* (Cambridge, 1978), pp. 82–4. Young stated that his explanation was frankly speculative owing to the lack of documentation.

⁶ National Archives, Microfilm Series T586, roll 1291, Francia: situazione politica nel 1935. For a published selection, see William Askew, 'The secret agreement between France and Italy on Ethiopia, January, 1935', *Journal of Modern History*, 25 (1953), pp. 47–8. See also Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri (hereafter ASMAE), Ufficio di Coordinamento [hereafter UC] 60, Relazione sugli accordi italo-francese del 7 gennaio 1935.

⁷ René Albrecht-Carrié, *Italy from Napoleon to Mussolini* (New York, 1950), p. 242. Others who indicated similar beliefs include Maxwell H. H. Macartney and Paul Cremona, *Italy's foreign and colonial policy 1914–1935* (London, 1938), p. 132n2, and Luigi Villari, *Storia diplomatica del conflitto italo-etiopeo* (Bologna, 1943), pp. 183–6.

proved that Laval gave Mussolini *carte blanche* to invade Ethiopia. He quoted sections of records of the two meetings between Mussolini and Laval where observers were present. Laval, De Felice argued, knew that Mussolini planned a conquest of Ethiopia, and he was willing to sanction Mussolini's plans, including the annexation of territory.⁸ Others, such as De Felice's assistant, Rosaria Quartararo, said that De Felice's work was absolutely definitive.⁹ But De Felice's work is much-disputed, and, until recently, these documents have not been available to the wider historical community.¹⁰

Given the debate surrounding the issue and the language barrier for most non-Italian scholars, it therefore seems useful to present English language translations of the relevant Italian documents made at the time by Fulvio Suvich, Mussolini's under-secretary of state for foreign affairs. These documents represent the best evidence to date and quite possibly the best that will ever be available to explain what Mussolini and Laval decided in Rome. The first meeting took place on the morning of 5 January and the second on 6 January.

MEETING OF THE HEAD OF GOVERNMENT AND
MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS, MUSSOLINI, AND
THE FRENCH MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
LAVAL.¹¹

Notes of the meeting.

Rome, 5 January 1935. Time: 10:00–11:45

Mr Laval professes to be very happy to be in Rome for it fulfils an old aspiration of his that for other reasons could not be realized in past years. He has always pursued a policy of friendship toward Italy that has been vindicated by his present visit and by the agreements that will be reached on this occasion.

The Head of Government is also happy about this meeting and is confident that it will be profitable for both our countries.

Minister Laval goes on to address some general questions.

Germany is today a big question mark in Europe and a disturber of the peace.

⁸ Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il duce: Gli anni del consenso 1929–1936* (Torino, 1974), pp. 524–32.

⁹ Rosaria Quartararo, *Roma tra Londra e Berlino: La politica estera fascista dal 1930 al 1940* (Roma, 1980), pp. 95–7. Esmonde Robertson also cited De Felice's documents in advancing his argument, though Robertson heavily qualifies De Felice's conclusion. Robertson argued that Laval understood Mussolini's aim to annex certain regions but did not foresee the occupation of the entire country. Esmonde M. Robertson, *Mussolini as empire builder: Europe and Africa, 1932–1936* (London, 1977), pp. 116–17.

¹⁰ For a penetrating criticism of De Felice's writings on foreign policy, see MacGregor Knox, 'The Fascist regime, its foreign policy and its wars: an "anti-anti-Fascist" orthodoxy?', *Contemporary European History*, 4 (1995), pp. 347–65.

¹¹ ASMAE, UC 60, Primo colloquio fra il Capo del Governo Italiano e il Ministro degli Affari Esteri francese signore Laval, 5 Jan. 1935. The document is published in *I documenti diplomatici italiani* (hereafter *DDI*), *Settima serie*, XVI (Roma, 1990), #391, pp. 404–7.

The most important event in the near future will be the plebiscite in the Saar.

Laval, for his part, has always treated the Saar question with the utmost objectivity; he realizes that the Saar is German territory, but he cannot, on the other hand, ignore French interests in it.

The Saar question has been actually resolved by Laval himself on the day he came to an understanding with Köster, the German ambassador (the latter is not a Nazi, but a good German patriot), about the plebiscite in the Saar.

The Head of Government is of the opinion that the 'quality of the vote', that is [the extent of] the majority that the Germans will have, will be of the utmost importance. Laval agrees.

The French Minister goes on to say that, after the plebiscite, all that will be left will be the settlement of economic questions, a problem already solved thanks especially to the prompt and shrewd intervention of Baron Aloisi who, in so doing, has provided a great service to the cause of peace.

The Minister thinks that, once the Saar question is solved, Germany might again turn against Austria.

The Head of Government is of the opinion that, for this reason, the accord proposed for Austria is quite timely. Such an agreement, however, should not last more than ten years in order to impress upon Austria the idea that, after a period of adjustment, the country will be able to survive on its own strength and on its own will and not merely on the good will and guarantees provided by other nations.

Laval is thinking about introducing in general international agreements – he is talking about the important ones that have wide political implications – a minimal duration of twenty-five years, in order to give nations the confidence that there will be peace for one generation. He believes that this idea of his can be employed generally with great consequences for the stabilization of the world situation. He realizes, however, that it is not in Austria's best interests to prolong too much the duration of the accord and is, therefore, inclined to accept the limit of ten years proposed by the Head of Government.

Moving on to Germany, the Minister says that the question of German armaments must be dealt with. The passive attitude adopted so far by France does not solve the problem and, on the other hand, the passing of time only exacerbates the question.

The Head of Government has always maintained what Minister Laval is now stating. Germany is actually arming itself very rapidly; we all have this information. The *Reichswehr* already counts 210,000 men and it will reach 300,000 by springtime. The air force that causes so much preoccupation in England is quite real. One can calculate that in a few months Germany will have 1,600 aircraft. It is clear that Germany today is no longer satisfied with what it was proposing just a few months ago. At that time, it was clamouring for defensive weapons; now it is already building what we might call offensive weapons. It is not possible to turn the clock back. To destroy those armaments there is only one means, that of materially destroying them through a war.

Laval observes that no one is thinking of a war.

The Head of Government is also of the opinion that a war waged just to punish Germany for not adhering to the clauses of the treaties would not be popular.

The best thing would be to negotiate with Germany the recognition of its rearmament by providing, for our part, the necessary guarantees, which could be the return of Germany to the League of Nations, and the control of a margin of superiority for us. It must be noted nevertheless that this kind of control is not easy to achieve.

Laval agrees. And he is of the opinion that it will be necessary to follow the course suggested by the Head of Government. He cannot ignore, however, the difficult questions that will be raised by the French political establishment and part of the press and public opinion. Nevertheless, it will be necessary to act decisively in order to find a reasonable solution; '*ça n'ira pas tout seul, mais ça ira*'. He is not personally acquainted with Hitler and considers him 'a great German', but one who is infatuated with some of his more or less acceptable ideas and with his mission. The Minister is nevertheless of the opinion that, one day, it will be possible to hold talks with him in order to try to convince him to collaborate.

The Head of Government thinks that an eventual acceptance by Germany of the Pact of Non-interference may open the way to renewed contacts with Germany.

Suvich points out that in the procedures to be followed in the application of the Pact of Non-interference, it will be necessary to give Germany a special position in order not to place it at the same level as the other lesser nations, which would offend its sensitivity and might prevent it from adhering to the Pact.

Laval thinks that, at any rate, Germany could be invited to be the first to sanction the Pact, which would be all right also in terms of alphabetical order.

The Head of Government points out that, in judging the German situation, it is important to keep in mind the decisive influence exercised at present by the *Reichswehr*, which follows a political line of its own. In the first place, the *Reichswehr* is for the monarchy; secondly, it is against the excesses of the national-socialist extremists and, thirdly, while it pursues an intensive rearmament policy, it is not interested in dubious ventures.

The discussion then moves on to the French-Italian agreements. It is ascertained that there is general agreement on questions of principle, but, as there is no agreement about the application of principles, the questions pertaining to Tunisia, to the southern borders of Libya, to Somalia and to Ethiopia remain open.

Suvich clarifies the Italian point of view about Tunisia. All those born in those ten years [1935-45] must be deemed to be Italian, for this is an extension of the conventions that establish precisely that state of affairs.

Laval has the impression that the Italian point of view on this question is correct. He considers, however, the period of transition between [19]'45 and [19]'65 to be too long.

Suvich insists on the acceptance of this period and Laval maintains his reservations. On the Libyan question, Suvich points out that we would need one or two locations in the Tibesti region on which to base our defences of the southern border.

Laval states that it is impossible for him to change by a single line the concession already made because it is tied to a particular decision of the French

Council of Ministers. There are also '*deux villes*' in the territory that has been ceded. They are not, obviously, important centres, but they are inhabited settlements.

Suvich disagrees and proclaims that complying with these additional Italian requests is a necessity.

As for Somalia, Suvich points out that French concessions are minimal.

On this point, too, Laval refers to decisions made by the Council of Ministers and calls into consideration the serious loss of prestige that France will suffer in Moslem countries.

Suvich argues the point and refers to the fact that England, in surrendering Giubaland, a territory one hundred times larger than what France is proposing to give away, has not lost, as a consequence, any prestige at all in the Orient.

Laval states that these are important concessions on the part of France and they are made without receiving anything in exchange.

Suvich answers that it is not a question of concessions, but of settling a debt to Italy contracted in the war. French concessions are not very much if one considers that France received a mandate for Togo and Cameroon and the restoration of a portion of the French Congo that France had in the past ceded to Germany.

That is as far as Africa is concerned; let us not talk of the Eastern Mediterranean where Italy, according to the spirit of all the agreements made before, during, and after the war, should have received benefits together with France and England, but has been completely left out.

The Head of Government points out that the main question for him is that of having a free hand in Ethiopia, the so-called '*désistement*'.

Laval is in full agreement with this notion. He is only looking for a formula that will present the French position as proper even in the eventuality that it might become public knowledge in the future.

Suvich notes that such a formula is being studied and that it will be presented for approval tomorrow.¹²

Tomorrow Laval wants to speak as well about Yugoslavia. On this topic he will present some communications to the Head of Government. He makes then a reference to the Mediterranean pact.

The Head of Government says he is not quite sure about the meaning of this Mediterranean Pact, which should involve, besides France, Italy, and England, all the lesser states such as Turkey, Greece, Albania, Yugoslavia, and perhaps even Romania and Bulgaria which depend on their links through the [Turkish] straits to the Mediterranean.

Laval has no definite reasons to insist on this Pact.

It is agreed to continue the conversation tomorrow at 10:00 a.m.

¹² For the text of this proposal, see *DDI*, 7, *xvii*, #386, Controproposte italiane, 4 Jan. 1935, pp. 394-7.

MEETING OF THE HEAD OF GOVERNMENT AND
MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS, MUSSOLINI, AND
THE FRENCH MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
LAVAL.¹³

Notes of the meeting.

Rome, 6 January 1935, 10–11:30 a.m.

The Minister Laval reports to the Head of Government on conversations held with the representatives of the Little Entente during the negotiations for the Italo–French agreement.

Benes¹⁴ has asked the Minister to inform the Head of Government that in all the agreements stipulated among the nations belonging to the Little Entente there is nothing aimed against Italy. Benes, moreover, has enjoined Laval to ask the Head of Government whether or not there is a military pact between Italy and Hungary directed against the countries of the Little Entente and requests, if possible, that a written declaration on that issue be released to the French Minister.

The Head of Government does not issue written declarations. But he is in a position to state, because this is a fact, that there are no military pacts between Italy and Hungary directed against anyone at all.

Yugoslavia has been very active during the negotiations.

From letters in possession of Minister Laval and from some telephone conversations it appears that during the course of the negotiations Yugoslavia has expressed numerous doubts and raised several questions. In the first place, Minister Laval has become convinced that in Yugoslavia there is a definite notion that Italy is continuing a policy of destabilization of Yugoslavia itself. Yugoslavia, moreover, desired a closer form of consultation as far as Austria was concerned, and it issued a warning that in case of disorders it will never consent that Italy could go into Austria on its own. Yugoslavia also specifically demands that it be given satisfaction for the attempted assassination in Marseilles;¹⁵ that Italy ceases supporting terrorists; that the inquest in Hungary be conducted seriously and with severity; that the Croats involved who are presently residing in Italy be put on trial; that the other protocols signed in March 1934 be extended to third parties and, finally, that Italy cease encouraging the Hungarian campaign for border revision.

The Head of Government emphasizes the gravity of these Yugoslav demands made in such peremptory and threatening terms. He has already declared that he is willing to examine the possibility of improving relations with Yugoslavia at an opportune time and under favourable circumstances. But he cannot entertain requests made in this fashion and in such specific terms.

¹³ ASMAE, UC 60, Secondo colloquio fra Il Capo del Governo Italiano e il Ministro degli Affari Esteri francese signore Laval, 6 Jan. 1935. The document is published in *DDI*, 7, *XVI*, #399, pp. 416–17.

¹⁴ Czechoslovak president Edvard Beneš.

¹⁵ Laval refers here to the 9 Oct. 1934 assassination of Yugoslav King Alexander and the French foreign minister Louis Barthou. Though the assassin was a member of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, three Croat Ustaša members were also arrested. The Ustaša had also allegedly received support from Italy and Hungary. It is unclear why Laval uses the term ‘attempted assassination’.

Minister Laval hastens to point out that, in his last conversations with Jevtić,¹⁶ there has been a change of tone and that Jevtić has told him that he truly wishes the success of the negotiations in Rome and that he hopes that they will consequently lead to an improvement in Italian and Yugoslav relations.

The Head of Government reiterates that he thinks that better relations between Italy and Yugoslavia will result as a logical and desirable consequence of the French–Italian agreements, but this will only happen when there will be certainty that it will lead to a positive outcome.

In the meantime, Yugoslavia must change its attitude. Moreover, the irredentist propaganda that found such a manifest expression at the Maribor Conference must cease.

The Head of Government will provide Minister Laval with a report on that Conference.

Minister Laval inquires whether the Italian Government intends to put Pavelić and Kwaternik on trial.¹⁷

The Head of Government responds that this will depend on the evidence of their presumed guilt, and that France must provide such evidence.

Minister Laval is of the opinion that it would be desirable to start criminal proceedings without awaiting the outcome of the trial in Marseilles.

The Head of Government states that this will actually depend on the documentary evidence that must be provided.

As for extending the Protocols of Rome of March 1934 to the other countries of the Danubian basin, the Head of Government stresses the fact that these protocols have a very specific character and are tailored to the existing relations between Italy, Austria, and Hungary.

Suvich points out that it is practically impossible to extend those protocols to third parties, since these protocols were stipulated as bilateral agreements between the individual countries concerned.

The Head of Government and Laval recommend that the agreements be formally written down in order that they may be signed at the earliest convenience. With reference to this, the Head of Government reiterates the importance for us of the *désistement* in Abyssinia.

Laval confirms once again that he understands very well the Italian concept and that, aside for economic interests that France wishes to protect, his country has no intention to interfere with Italian penetration in Abyssinia.

The first meeting on 5 January dealt primarily with the German question, with Ethiopia only arising near the end. Suvich, not Mussolini, presented the detailed Italian case on several substantive issues, further signalling that the Duce's real interest in the negotiations lay in the free hand in Ethiopia. The Italian record makes it clear that Mussolini used the term 'free hand,' and that the issue was the central Italian requirement for an accord. Laval's response indicated that he understood Mussolini's aims, though this record is hardly

¹⁶ Yugoslav foreign minister, Bogoljub Jevtić. Jevtić had assumed the premiership on 20 Dec. 1934 after a Cabinet crisis.

¹⁷ Croatian Ustaša leader Ante Pavelić and fellow conspirator Eugen Dido Kwaternik, a Croatian student.

conclusive. Based on this summary alone, it would be possible to argue that Laval did not necessarily understand that Mussolini planned an Italian conquest. It is interesting to note, however, Laval's search to couch a French *désistement* in terms that would not offend world opinion if it were to be published.

The issue of the free hand in Ethiopia was clearer at the second meeting. The Italian record largely confirms De Felice's description of the nature of the bargain that the two men reached. Laval's declaration that 'he well understood the Italian concept', combined with his insistence on maintaining limited economic interests, leaves no doubt that Laval did not intend only an economic *désistement*. In fact, it was quite the reverse; he wanted to preserve French economic interest in the Djibuti–Addis Ababa railway while conceding other French interests in Ethiopia. Furthermore, it seems unlikely that his promise not to 'hinder the work of Italian penetration in Abyssinia' foresaw only peaceful Italian expansion. Laval certainly should have understood that Mussolini intended to take some action that would lead to the Italian occupation of Ethiopian territory. By ceding virtually all French political rights under the 1906 treaty, Laval gave a priori French approval for changes in the status quo, whether or not such changes occurred after military action. This interpretation is also entirely consistent with Laval's failure to protest against Italian ambassador Bonifacio Pignatti's 18 June 1935 declaration of Mussolini's plans to use military force against Ethiopia. Laval did not object precisely because he had already given Mussolini French permission as a *quid pro quo* in the Mussolini–Laval accords.¹⁸

It is also important to note that the Rome meeting occurred after several years of exploration of a French disinterest in Ethiopia. As early as 1931, Laval and Philippe Berthelot, then French secretary-general at the Quay d'Orsay, had raised the issue of an Italian occupation of Ethiopia.¹⁹ Shortly before Laval arrived in Rome, Mussolini had advised Chambrun that Italian 'expansion' in Abyssinia was a necessary *quid pro quo* in order for Italy to become 'an

¹⁸ *DDI*, 8, 1, #392, L'ambasciatore a Parigi Pignatti, al Capo del Governo e Ministro degli Esteri Mussolini, 18 June 1935, pp. 407–8.

¹⁹ When Grandi mentioned the need for territory to compensate for the aspirations born in Italy's 'mutilated victory', Laval replied, 'Ethiopia, for example.' *DDI*, 7, x, #413, Il Ministro degli Esteri, Grandi, al Capo di Governo, Mussolini, 25 July 1931, pp. 652–9. See also: E. M. Robertson, 'Mussolini and Ethiopia: the prehistory of the Rome agreements of January 1935', in R. Hatton and M. S. Anderson, eds., *Studies in diplomatic history* (London, 1970), pp. 339–56; Andrew Crozier, 'Philippe Berthelot and the Rome agreements of January 1935', *Historical Journal*, 26 (1983), pp. 413–22; Enrico Serra, 'Il confine meridionale della Libia e gli accordi Mussolini–Laval,' in Jean-Baptiste Duroselle & Enrico Serra, eds., *Italia e Francia dal 1919 a 1939* (Milan, 1981), pp. 173–4. For more on the deep context of Mussolini's designs on Ethiopia, see Giovanni Bucciante, *Verso gli accordi Mussolini–Laval: Il riavvicinamento italo-francese fra il 1931 e il 1934* (Milan, 1984) and Giorgio Rochat, *Militari e politici nella preparazione della campagna d'Etiopia: studio e documenti, 1932–1936* (Milan, 1971).

element for the maintenance of general equilibrium'.²⁰ Suvich had told Chambrun that

the spirit of the accord between France and Italy regarding Abyssinia must be the following; France has a vast colonial empire where it can for generations commit all its energy. Italy has only one strictly limited colony for exploitation. So France disinterests itself in Abyssinia, leaving Italy free to expand and also intends to assist Italy in its task.²¹

In the context of French attempts to secure Italian support against Germany, the settlement of the longstanding Tunisian issue, as well as past French attempts to turn Mussolini's eyes towards Ethiopia, the Italian documentation seems clear; Laval did give Mussolini a free hand to invade Ethiopia. At the very least, it is no longer sustainable to argue that Laval misunderstood Mussolini's aggressive intentions or that he withheld his permission for Italian expansion. Laval's approval for Italian colonial aggrandizement appeared to be a small price to pay to secure a potential ally against Hitler's Germany. At the same time, however, Laval knew that his naked imperial bargain would inflame opposition from some members of the French chamber of deputies, and his desire to secure quick approval underlay his dishonesty in presenting the accords to the chamber. What Laval did not envisage was that British opposition to Mussolini's war would place French politicians on the horns of a dilemma – having to choose between France's new Italian ally and the continued association with Great Britain that underpinned French strategic planning. Laval's lack of prescience ended up alienating Mussolini and beginning the Duce's long manoeuvres towards embracing Nazi Germany and the Pact of Steel, but the French foreign minister could hardly foresee that occurrence during the triumphalism that greeted the Mussolini–Laval accords.

²⁰ *DDI*, 7, *XVI*, Colloquio fra il Capo del Governo e Ministro degli Esteri, Mussolini, e l'ambasciatore di Francia a Roma, Chambrun, 27 Dec. 1934, pp. 351–3.

²¹ *DDI*, 7, *XVI*, Colloquio fra il Sottosegretario agli Esteri, Suvich, e l'ambasciatore di Francia a Roma, Chambrun, 28 Dec. 1934, pp. 257–60.