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A Letter from Louis Mallet, India Office, to the Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, regarding the Italian Occupation of Assab Bay

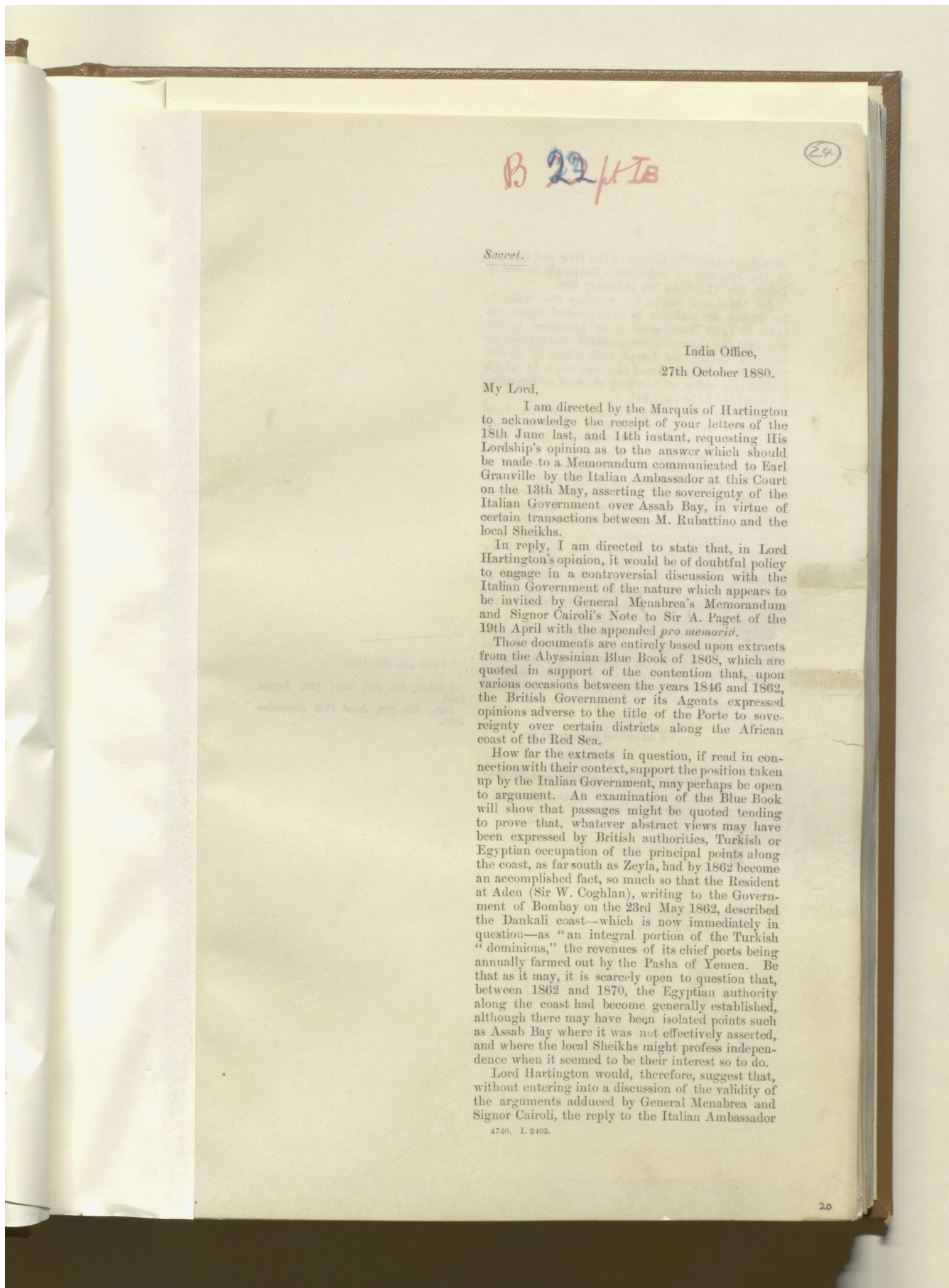
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About this record

A letter about the Italian occupation of Assab Bay, in which the author, Louis Mallet, India Office, suggests that a response to the Italian Ambassador be phrased only in general terms, as historical precedents have rendered the British position ambiguous. The author goes on to suggest that the British Government should now be content to let the matter rest.

A Letter from Louis Mallet, India Office, to the Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, regarding the Italian Occupation of Assab Bay [24r] (1/2)



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Secret.

India Office,
27th October 1880.

My Lord,

I am directed by the Marquis of Hartington to acknowledge the receipt of your letters of the 18th June last, and 14th instant, requesting His Lordship's opinion as to the answer which should be made to a Memorandum communicated to Earl Granville by the Italian Ambassador at this Court on the 13th May, asserting the sovereignty of the Italian Government over Assab Bay, in virtue of certain transactions between M. Rubattino and the local Sheikhs.

In reply, I am directed to state that, in Lord Hartington's opinion, it would be of doubtful policy to engage in a controversial discussion with the Italian Government of the nature which appears to be invited by General Menabrea's Memorandum and Signor Cairoli's Note to Sir A. Paget of the 19th April with the appended *pro memoria*.

Those documents are entirely based upon extracts from the Abyssinian Blue Book of 1868, which are quoted in support of the contention that, upon various occasions between the years 1846 and 1862, the British Government or its Agents expressed opinions adverse to the title of the Porte to sovereignty over certain districts along the African coast of the Red Sea.

How far the extracts in question, if read in connection with their context, support the position taken up by the Italian Government, may perhaps be open to argument. An examination of the Blue Book will show that passages might be quoted tending to prove that, whatever abstract views may have been expressed by British authorities, Turkish or Egyptian occupation of the principal points along the coast, as far south as Zeyla, had by 1862 become an accomplished fact, so much so that the Resident at Aden (Sir W. Coghlan), writing to the Government of Bombay on the 23rd May 1862, described the Dankali coast—which is now immediately in question—as “an integral portion of the Turkish dominions,” the revenues of its chief ports being annually farmed out by the Pasha of Yemen. Be that as it may, it is scarcely open to question that, between 1862 and 1870, the Egyptian authority along the coast had become generally established, although there may have been isolated points such as Assab Bay where it was not effectively asserted, and where the local Sheikhs might profess independence when it seemed to be their interest so to do.

Lord Hartington would, therefore, suggest that, without entering into a discussion of the validity of the arguments adduced by General Menabrea and Signor Cairoli, the reply to the Italian Ambassador

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should substantially adhere to the view put forward in the Marquis of Salisbury's Despatch to Sir A. Paget, No. 51, of the 7th February last.

An additional reason for wording the reply to the Italian Ambassador in very general terms appears to Lord Hartington to be furnished by the fact that the Governments primarily concerned are those of Turkey and Egypt, with whom it should rest to controvert in detail the arguments by which Italian aggression on territory claimed as Egyptian is attempted to be justified.

Under existing circumstances, however, Lord Hartington sees no objection to an intimation being conveyed to the Italian Government, should Lord Granville deem this step necessary, to the effect that, whilst Her Majesty's Government adhere to the opinion above referred to and already communicated to the Ministers of the King, they are content to waive further discussion of the question, as being now of little practical importance, in view of the categorical and peremptory declaration of Signor Cairoli in his note to Sir A. Paget of the 19th April last, that no Italian Government establishment of a military character will ever be formed at Assab, and that at no time will either troops or fortifications be maintained, either on the mainland or on the islands in the Bay.

Copies of a Memorandum lately prepared in this Office, which embodies the correspondence* on the subject up to the end of April last, are forwarded herewith for convenience of reference, together with copies of further letters† from India connected with the question.

* Dated 14th May 1880.

† Secret, No. 183, dated 17th August 1880.
Ditto No. 203, dated 17th September 1880.

I have the honour to be,
My Lord,
Your Lordship's most obedient Servant,
LOUIS MALLET.

The Under Secretary of State
for Foreign Affairs.