Nicolae Titulescu & Ethiopia

A Romanian Statesman's Stand for Ethiopia at the League of Nations

Compiled from historical, Romanian, and Ethiopian sources



Mural inside Holy Trinity Cathedral (Kidist Selassie), Addis Ababa, depicting Emperor Haile Selassie I addressing the League of Nations Assembly, Geneva, 1936.



Nicolae Titulescu, Foreign Minister of Romania and President of the League of Nations Assembly (1930–1931).



Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia, who appealed to the League of Nations in 1936.

I. A Romanian at Geneva

Nicolae Titulescu (4 March 1882 – 17 March 1941) was one of interwar Romania's most celebrated diplomats and statesmen. Born in Craiova, he trained as a lawyer in Paris before entering Romanian public life, serving as Minister of Finance and, on two occasions, as Minister of Foreign Affairs (1927–1928 and 1932–1936). From 1921 he served as Romania's permanent delegate to the League of Nations in Geneva, and in 1930 and 1931 he was elected President of the League's General Assembly — the only person in the League's history to be re-elected to that office for a consecutive term.

As League President and Foreign Minister, Titulescu was a leading advocate of collective security, stable borders, and the equality and sovereignty of all nations, large and small, within the international community. It was this conviction that placed him, in June 1936, on the side of a distant African monarch appealing to the world for help.

II. Ethiopia's Appeal to Geneva

Following the invasion and occupation of Ethiopia by Fascist Italy in the Second Italo-Ethiopian War (1935–1936), Emperor Haile Selassie I travelled to Geneva to address the League of Nations Assembly in person, appealing for collective action against the aggression. When he rose to speak, a group of Italian journalists in the gallery jeered and mocked him.

Nicolae Titulescu, who had presided over the Assembly in the two preceding years and remained one of its most respected figures, reacted immediately and publicly — demanding that the hecklers be removed so that the Emperor could be heard. His outburst became one of the best-remembered moments of the entire Abyssinia crisis at the League.

“To the door with the savages!”
“À la porte, les sauvages!”

Said by Nicolae Titulescu, President of the Assembly of the League of Nations (1930–1931) and Foreign Minister of Romania. Said at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, Switzerland, during a special session of the League Assembly, on 30 June 1936, as Emperor Haile Selassie I addressed the Assembly appealing for help against the Italian invasion of Ethiopia.

Romania, under Titulescu’s direction, also supported the League’s economic sanctions imposed on Italy on 18 November 1935 — measures approved by fifty member states, with only Italy voting against. Titulescu’s outspoken anti-fascism ultimately cost him his position: on 28 August 1936, King Carol II removed him from office, and he spent his final years in exile, dying in Cannes, France, on 17 March 1941.

III. Remembered by an Emperor

Ethiopia did not forget. Nearly three decades later, at a banquet held in his honour by Romania’s State Council on 26 September 1964, Emperor Haile Selassie I himself paid tribute to Titulescu’s stand, in words set down here in full:

“I personally will never forget the courageous support I have received from Mr. Titulescu, then Foreign Affairs Minister of Romania, on the day when I asked the League of Nations for help against the fascists who invaded Ethiopia. What Titulescu did for the Ethiopian people is written in the hearts of all the Ethiopians, and the memory of his deeds will live forever.”

— Emperor Haile Selassie I, at a State Council banquet, Bucharest, 26 September 1964

IV. A Place of Honour in Addis Ababa

Holy Trinity Cathedral, known in Amharic as Kidist Selassie, is the highest-ranking cathedral of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church in Addis Ababa. It was built as a monument to Ethiopia’s victory over the Italian occupation and to the patriots who died resisting it, and it is the burial place of Emperor Haile Selassie I and Empress Menen Asfaw.

Alongside its religious iconography, the cathedral’s interior includes historical murals commemorating the Emperor’s 1936 appeal to the League of Nations and his 1941 return and liberation of Ethiopia. Romanian sources, Ethiopian tradition, and the historian Richard Pankhurst — founder of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies — identify Nicolae Titulescu among the figures depicted in the League of Nations scene, painted by the Ethiopian artist Agegnehu Engida.

As one Romanian official who visited the cathedral put it: “In the Holy Trinity Cathedral in Addis Ababa is the Emperor’s tomb, and above, on the right, is painted the scene from the General Assembly of the League of Nations. For them, Titulescu is like a true prophet.”

A note on certainty: the identification of the depicted figure as Titulescu rests chiefly on Richard Pankhurst’s scholarship and on Romanian institutional and press accounts that draw on it; the mural itself does not appear to carry an inscription naming him. It should therefore be understood as a strong, well-credentialed historical tradition rather than a formally documented and labelled portrait.

V. A Lasting Legacy

— Titulescu is the only person in League of Nations history re-elected as Assembly President for a consecutive term (1930 and 1931).

— His 1936 defence of Haile Selassie is still cited today as a rare moment of principled solidarity for Ethiopia at Geneva.

— Ethiopia’s own tradition honours him with a place among the historical figures painted inside its most important cathedral.

— His remains, following his wish, were reburied in Romania in 1992, at St. Nicholas Church, Scheii Brasovului, Brasov, after the fall of communism made this possible.

Sources: Wikipedia; A. J. Barker, The Rape of Ethiopia 1936; Richard Pankhurst, “Who was Nicolae Titulescu?” (Tigrai Online); the Nicolae Titulescu European Foundation; and Ethiopian and Romanian press accounts of the cathedral’s murals.