

America's Response to Italian Subjugation of Ethiopia: Black Mobilization vs. Government

Neutrality

Italian annexation of Ethiopia during the second Italo-Ethiopian war sparked outrage amongst black populations in the United States. While President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Secretary of State Cordell Hull were passing Neutrality Acts to preserve isolationism, Benito Mussolini was gaining a free hand in Ethiopia to subjugate one of the only remaining independent African countries. The warfare reigned onto Ethiopia warranted more of a response from the American government, and many African Americans pleaded for the government take a more active stance on the matter. These pleas fell on deaf ears. Black citizens who wanted to fight militaristically for Ethiopia would risk their citizenship by doing so. Still, African American organizations and communities came together to raise money, send medical supplies, boycott Italian goods, and spread awareness. Through the press, the American public was able to make sense of the conflict. While these reactions did not result in a victory against Mussolini's regime, African American mobilization in response to the Italo-Ethiopian war heightened black nationalism in America and drew more attention to imperialist causes which affected black populations abroad.

In the 1930s, the United States government had little interest in African affairs when they did not involve the U.S. directly.ⁱ When the Italo-Ethiopian crisis began, Secretary of State Cordell Hull admitted his limited knowledge surrounding the conflict, saying that he did not know what issues were involved.ⁱⁱ Rather than attempting to understand the event, Hull and Roosevelt focused on endeavors to maintain peace. This took the form of passing two Neutrality Acts, one in 1935 and the other in 1936, when most aspects of the first would expire.ⁱⁱⁱ The first act placed embargoes on "arms, ammunition, or implements of war" to either side.^{iv} Violators

would risk a fine of up to \$10,000, imprisonment for up to five years, or both.^v On October 30, 1935, President Roosevelt released a statement to the press where he stated, “This Government is determined not to become involved in the controversy and is anxious for the restoration and maintenance of peace”.^{vi} The Second Neutrality Act furthered the measures of the first by directing the President to extend embargoes on arms to any new country which would enter the war, rather than simply allowing the President to do so.^{vii} This meant that any country whose sanctions against Italy led Mussolini to attack it would be cut off from supplies produced by the United States. Additionally, people who sent letters to the U.S. government asking for help to support Ethiopia received letters back that warned them about criminal codes which would prohibit them from serving in foreign militaries. Section 21 of Title 18 of United States Code stated that any citizen who accepted a position to serve a foreign people of war with which the United States was at peace risked a fine up to \$2,000 and imprisonment for up to 3 years. They also risked their citizenship.^{viii}

Although the United States claimed neutrality through these means, they were directly preventing international assistance to Ethiopia on the grounds that it might cause more trouble for them. Braddick points out that Secretary Hull instructed the *chargé d'affaires* in Addis Ababa to tell Haile Selassie, Emperor of Ethiopia, that American policy “was designed to promote ‘peace’ rather than ‘to be helpful to Ethiopia’”.^{ix} When skeptical that the Ethiopia might cite the Kellogg-Briand Pact, a peace pact signed by various countries including the United States after World War I to prevent another war, Wallace Murray, chief of the Division of Near Eastern Affairs, said to make “every effort to avoid having the matter dumped on our laps as if we were

the initiators of the pact”.^x This led Hull to instruct the chargé d'affaires not to take any action that would “encourage the Ethiopian government to request the mediation of the United States”.^{xi} These correspondences show that America’s neutrality during the Italo-Ethiopian conflict was less about promoting peace, which had already been broken by Mussolini when he invaded Ethiopia, and more about keeping their hands clean from the matter. The United States, after all, did not enter World War II until Japan invaded Pearl Harbor. Their isolationist efforts, despite their eventual fight on the “right side” of the war, proved from the beginning that the government’s interest in peace stretched as far as the country’s borders. In January of 1936, the United States government refused to act against Italian bombing of a Seventh Day Adventist Church because “the hospital had no U.S. government authorization and...the organization operating it was not clearly and wholly American”.^{xii} Furthermore, their assessment to let the League of Nations take care of the Italo-Ethiopian conflict disregarded Ethiopia’s stance as a responsible member of the League. Ethiopia had taken action against aggression from fellow League members,^{xiii} further showing that the United States’ lack of action against Italian aggression was likely rooted in racism and a myth of inferiority.

White supremacy had a hand in the United States white public’s understanding of the situation. When the Italo-Ethiopian conflict came to light, white Americans knew little about Ethiopia and its history. This led to misconceptions surrounding African culture, in line with Western depictions of African peoples throughout history as barbaric and savage in an attempt to “other” them. Bill Chapman, an American journalist, joined the Italian army in Ethiopia and watched much of the warfare take place. He wrote in his war diary, “The natives little realize it,

but if Italy's purpose in this war is achieved and the white man's civilization is imposed on the blacks, it is the swan song of savagery, the death rattle of barbarism, which is sung tonight".^{xiv} Attempts to bring realities of the situation to light were shut down by Roosevelt's government. The Federal Theater planned to showcase *Ethiopia*, a "living newspaper" where performers would use quotes by Mussolini and Selassie as stated in newspapers. The play would end differently every night based on real news updates, but the federal government shut it down after months of preparation because they feared the "dramatization" would "antagonize the Italians," and they forbade impersonation of any foreign head of state.^{xv} It was impossible for white America to grasp the situation when they were frequently absorbing one-sided accounts. Some white supremacists refused to support Ethiopia because an African triumph against Europeans would go against their beliefs regarding the inferiority of the African race.^{xvi} Additionally, many white Americans supported Roosevelt's neutrality endeavors because they believed that any involvement in East Africa could end in direct war entanglement.^{xvii} Despite the white public's ignorant stance on the situation, the press worked hard to spread awareness.

The American press's coverage of the Italo-Ethiopian war gives insight into the way the American public viewed Italy's attack on Ethiopia and America's neutrality stance. Daniel Fitzpatrick's political cartoon, "The rainy season in Ethiopia," was featured alongside Edmund Duffy's "The Road from Rome" in *The New York Times* on October 6, 1935. Fitzpatrick's drawing features a parade of bombs falling from the sky^{xviii}, commenting on the brutality of Italy's aggression on Ethiopia. Duffy's cartoon features a large, angry-faced Mussolini carrying a piece of paper that says, "With the League, without the League, against the League." He is

following a road sign that is surrounded by skulls and reads “TO WAR,” untouched by an explosion going off in the background.^{xix} These works aimed to criticize Mussolini’s reign of terror on Ethiopia and its contradictions to the League of Nations’ ideals. It also shows how American views of the war were critical of the government’s neutrality stance, as countless Ethiopian lives were lost for imperialistic aims.

African Americans were the only large group within the American public to fight for U.S. intervention against Italian aggression^{xx}. Many prominent black newspapers and journals, including the Pittsburgh *Courier*, the Chicago *Defender*, the New York *Amsterdam News*, the Baltimore *Afro-American*, the NAACP *Crisis*, the California *Eagle*, and the National Urban League’s *Opportunity*^{xxi}, took active measures to write commentary on the crisis and to organize mobilization. Despite Roosevelt’s policies, many used the press to raise money, medical supplies, and soldiers for the Ethiopian cause. Willis N. Huggins formed The Friends of Ethiopia within the United States and sponsored a drive to provide hospitalization for wounded Ethiopian citizens.^{xxii} W.E.B. Du Bois, Walter White, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., J.A. Rogers, Carter G. Woodson, and other prominent African American writers published articles emphasizing how unjust Italy’s aggression in Ethiopia was^{xxiii}, connecting it to issues back home. Du Bois argued that Ethiopia was an “example and a promise of what a native people untouched by modern exploitation and race prejudice might do,”^{xxiv} highlighting the hope and pride that independent Ethiopia had given black Americans who were enduring prejudice and oppression. Ethiopia provided a sense of black achievement and solidarity, and Italy was attempting to strip that away so it could pursue more land and power.

The U.S.'s black community mobilized in an attempt to pressure Italy out of Ethiopia when it was clear their government would not take action. African Americans lobbied the government and the League of Nations.^{xxv} Reports in March 1935 claimed that 50,000 black Americans volunteered for duty in Ethiopia.^{xxvi} Churches held all-night prayer services and vigils. Two women, wearing sweatshirts that read "Hands off Ethiopia," chained themselves to a lamppost in front of the Italian consulate in Chicago.^{xxvii} Many took to the streets to protest Italian aggression and America's neutrality stance. Some boycotted Italian goods in an attempt to pressure Italy economically.^{xxviii} In Harlem, riots broke out between African Americans and Italian Americans, leading to police intervention.^{xxix}

Despite their best efforts, African Americans were unable to prevent Italian triumph over Ethiopia. Their mobilization could not counter their lack of access to political power. Disenfranchisement and gerrymandering prevented them from applying enough pressure on policymakers.^{xxx} Additionally, not all African Americans believed that America should focus on the struggle in Ethiopia when they had so much to fight for in the United States. *The Defender's* "Why Go to Ethiopia?" argued that black Americans should focus their efforts on fighting "lynchings, peonage, bastardy, discrimination, and segregation" at home. It told black Americans that if they had money to spend, they should use it to fight for their own independence rather than trying to fight a battle overseas.^{xxxi} Some black Americans also feared that too much attention toward Ethiopia would make white Americans question African American patriotism. The *Daily World* published a statement reassuring the American public that, although African Americans were sympathetic to the Ethiopian cause, their loyalty would always remain devoted

to the United States.^{xxxiii} African American disapproval of supporting Ethiopia directly often stemmed from the same issues which compelled so many to fight for it. Black Americans were oppressed, condemned, and ignored by white America. These experiences gave them solidarity with Ethiopia, but they also prevented them from getting the United States to take action.

The United States' refusal to use their resources to combat Italian aggression in Ethiopia shows that their fight to "preserve peace" was more of an excuse not to get their hands dirty. White America's focus on avoiding conflict and their ignorance toward African issues allowed them to remain idle and support a neutrality stance while Italy reigned terror on the last remaining independent African country. African Americans used every tool at their disposal to criticize government neutrality, spread awareness about the realities of the situation, and mobilize black America to pressure the United States to take action. They published articles, lobbied the government, engaged in boycotts and protests, and raised money and medical supplies to send to Ethiopia for support. The odds were against them from the start, but it did not stop them from doing everything in their power, severely limited by United States law and prejudice, to fight for black independence and pride. America's response to the Italo-Ethiopian War shows how race relations in the United States had global implications, and how Ethiopia stood as a hopeful symbol for black Americans as they fought against oppression at home.

Notes

- ⁱ William R. Scott, *Sons of Sheba's Race: African-Americans and the Italo-Ethiopian War*, 23.
- ⁱⁱ Henderson B. Braddick, "A New Look at American Policy during the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis, 1935-36." *The Journal of Modern History*, 66.
- ⁱⁱⁱ James H. Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935-1961*, 35.
- ^{iv} Office of the Historian, *Statement to the Press by President Roosevelt*, 1935, Document 696.
- ^v *The New York Times*, "Roosevelt Proclaims Embargo on Arms to Italy and Ethiopia." Oct. 6, 1-34.
- ^{vi} Office of the Historian, *Statement to the Press by President Roosevelt*, 1935, Document 696.
- ^{vii} Julius W. Pratt, *A History of United States Foreign Policy*, 600.
- ^{viii} Scott, *Sons of Sheba's Race*, 65.
- ^{ix} Braddick, "A New Look at American Policy during the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis, 1935-36," 66.
- ^x Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans*, 35.

- xi Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans*, 35.
- xii Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans*, 38.
- xiii Edward O. Erhagbe & Ehimika A. Ifidon, "African-Americans and the Italo–Ethiopian Crisis, 1935–1936: The Practical Dimension of Pan-Africanism," 69.
- xiv W.W. Chaplin, *Blood and Ink: An Italo-Ethiopian War Diary*, November 28, 1935.
- xv Scott, *Sons of Sheba's Race*, 42.
- xvi Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans*, 33.
- xvii Scott, *Sons of Sheba's Race*, 39.
- xviii *The New York Times*, "AMERICAN VIEWS OF THE ITALO-ETHIOPIAN CRISIS," Oct. 6, 1935, 60.
- xix *The New York Times*, "AMERICAN VIEWS OF THE ITALO-ETHIOPIAN CRISIS," Oct. 6, 1935, 60.
- xx Scott, *Sons of Sheba's Race*, 39.
- xxi Scott, *Sons of Sheba's Race*, 44-46.
- xxii *The New York Times*, "FUNDS SOUGHT HERE TO AID ETHIOPIANS," Oct. 6, 1935, 29.
- xxiii Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism: A History*, 137.
- xxiv W. E. B Du Bois, "Inter-Racial Implications of the Ethiopian Crisis: A Negro View," 85.
- xxv Scott, *Sons of Sheba's Race*, 28.
- xxvi Scott, *Sons of Sheba's Race*, 62.
- xxvii Scott, *Sons of Sheba's Race*, 59.
- xxviii Adi, *Pan-Africanism*, 137.
- xxix *The New York Times*, "The Beginning: The Week in the Italo-Ethiopian Conflict," Oct. 6, 1935, 59.
- xxx Scott, *Sons of Sheba's Race*, 34.
- xxxi Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans*, 40.

xxxii Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans*, 42.

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1935, pp. 60. [https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/](https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1935/10/06/93778377.html?pageNumber=60)

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