Revisiting Fascist Italy’s Crime in Ethiopia

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This essay will make a brief historical synopsis and analysis of the crimes perpetrated by the Italian fascists against the Ethiopian people in the 1930s. At this particular juncture, it may sound ironic to revisit the crimes against humanity committed in Ethiopia by Fascist henchmen like Marshall Pietro Badoglio and Marshal Rodolfo Graziani, but sometimes the past contends with the present especially if justice has not been served and no official apologies extended by state and/or religious leaders of the perpetrator nation.

This essay is also aimed at reinforcing the Global Alliance for Ethiopia, a group of Ethiopians’ initiative in an effort to convince the Vatican and Pope Benedict XVI to apologize to Ethiopians as he has done to the Jews in Germany with respect to the Holocaust committed by the Nazis. As a matter of fact, one of the members of the Global Alliance for Ethiopia, Ato Kidane Alemayehu has written a letter to the Holiness Pope Benedict XVI (Vatican_Apology_to_Ethiopia.doc) but to this day no answer was given.

As the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, ‘justice delayed is justice denied’. To be sure and to be fair, the Italian government, by way of redemption and gesture of apology constructed the Koka Dam in Ethiopia, but that is a drop in the bucket vis-à-vis the heinous crimes committed against Ethiopians by the fascist occupation forces.

The fascist crimes in Ethiopia are well documented and this is not the first attempt to critically examine the atrocities of the 1930s. There is indeed abundant literature on the Ethiopian-Italian conflict and the subsequent massacre and systematic killings of Ethiopians. The grand criminal Badoglio himself has documented his war experience, perhaps with malicious glee, in his book *La Guerra d’ Etiopia*.

Our own, Professor Richard Pankhurst, the adopted child of Ethiopia, following the footsteps of his mother Sylvia Pankhurst, has also documented the war crimes committed by the Italians. Pankhurst, like most Ethiopians (I gather) has been ruminating with disappointment in relation to the fascist crimes while at the same time serving as a combatant foot soldier for the Ethiopian cause. In his presentation to Northeast African Studies, Pankhurst eloquently summarizes the war crimes in Ethiopia as follows:

“The 1935-36 Italian fascist invasion and subsequent occupation of Ethiopia were accompanied by numerous atrocities: the use of mustard gas, the bombing of Red Cross hospitals and ambulances, the execution of captured prisoners without trial, the Graziani massacre, the killings at Dabra Libanos monastery, and the shooting of “witch-doctors” accused of prophesying the end of fascist rule. These acts are historically interesting, not only in themselves, but also in that they were brought to the international community’s
attention on two separate occasions: to the League of Nations, when they were committed, and latter, to the United Nations.1

The massacre of the Debra Libanos monks is also documented by many historians including others who sympathized with Ethiopians like Baron Eric Hanshovdingar, a Swede, who illustrated the massacre of the monks with a painting in his book Kejaren och hans hovdingar (Stockholm, 1948).

Following the attempt on Graziani’s life by Ethiopian patriots, the wanton and indiscriminate massacre of Ethiopians on February 1937 that continued non-stop for 72 hours in the Sidist Kilo area and vicinity in Addis Ababa, is also well documented by the Italian fascists themselves, who apparently bragged about their atrocities and have indeed made numerous photography of their executions and massacres. Later, the Addis Ababa massacre was published in the New Times and Ethiopia News (edited by Sylvia Pankhurst) entitled “Italy’s War Crimes in Ethiopia.” Furthermore, Graziani, in his own biography, stated that the ‘Black shirts’ or the fascist soldiers were responsible for the massacre.

The fascist war crime in the use of poison gas against Ethiopian fighting forces and civilians in Tigray, northern Ethiopia is also well documented. The April 1936 issue of the Punch illustrates an Ethiopian victim of the poison gas (see cartoon). The Italian fascists used mustard gas in violation of the International Gas Convention, although they justified their crimes in the name of progress as the subtitle of the Cartoon implies.

The fascist warplanes poured bombs and poison gas on the Ras Imuru Northern Ethiopian frontier defense forces in Tigray and one of the warplanes pilots was Vittorio Mussolini, the son of Duce Mussolini. Incidentally, the bravado and cynical glee of Vittorio Mussolini was captured by Daniel Gizaw in his novel Fikre Kudus (ፅጌረዳ ፍቅረ ከወደት) as follows:

The fascist crime in the northern frontier (Tigray), was also documented by the late H. E. Ato Haddis Alemayehu in his eye-witness account memoir entitled Tizita (Memories):
Ato Haddis Alemayehu’s testimony of the barbarian atrocities committed by the Italians is beyond any human imagination and hard to fathom and grapple for a person equipped with the basic tenets of moral standard. However in spite of the crimes against humanity and in an effort to encourage and challenge the Ethiopian patriots to counter the Italian aggression in unison, Ato Haddis wrote a poem, *The Cry of Ethiopia* or የኢትዮጵያ በየራሳቸው ድር ከእና በማመን በምኝ ከአፍ ከአፍ ይችላሉ። መምታቸውን ከአፍ ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአፍ ከአፍ ይችላሉ። መምታቸውን ከአፍ ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአፍ ከአፍ ይችላሉ። መምታቸውን ከአፍ ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአፍ ከአፍ ይችላሉ። መምታቸውን ከአፍ ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአፍ ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአፍ ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአፍ ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአፍ ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአፍ ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአፍ ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአፍ ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአፍ ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአፍ ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአፍ ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአፍ ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአፍ ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአፍ ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአፍ ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአፍ ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአፍ ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአፍ ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአፍ ከአፍ ይችላል ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአፍ ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአፍ ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአፍ ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአፍ ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአفش ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአفش ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአفش ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአفش ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአفش ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአفش ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአفش ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአفش ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአفش ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአفش ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአفش ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአفش ከአፍ ይችላል ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአفش ከአፍ ይችላሉ። በምኝ ከአفش ከአፍ ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችላል ይችልcheduled to...
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The Italian forces had a flashback and nightmare of their humiliating defeat at Adwa in 1896 and in 1935, thus, were determined to use anything at their disposal to destroy Ethiopians. As soon as they began their offensive and mounted their invasion of Ethiopia on October 3, 1935, they started their indiscriminate aerial bombardment that continued till April 1936.

On two occasions, Emperor Haile Selassie, now exiled, brought the fascist crimes directed against Ethiopians before the League of Nations, first on June 1936 and second on March 1937. Despite Ethiopia’s membership of the League, however, the latter completely ignored the Ethiopian charges against Italy. This disregard of the Ethiopian case by the League is not surprising, given the predominance of the Berlin Conference signatories in the world organization founded after the end of the First World War. Incidentally, it is the same colonial powers that indeed gave green light to Mussolini to invade Ethiopia.

However, Ethiopians were not alone in their struggle to preserve their independence. Diaspora Africans, in particular, were in sympathy and solidarity with the Ethiopians. As I have observed in some of my previous works, “prominent Nigerians formed an Abyssinian support association, and subsequently they formed the International Friends of Abyssinia in London. Ultimately, this organization transformed itself into the International African Service Bureau in 1937. The Italo-Ethiopian conflict ignited a Black-White clash in Harlem, New York and by default heightened the pan-African consciousness of Black New Yorkers. All of a sudden, Ethiopia became a rallying cry and a nerve center for pan-Africanism…and to be sure, Garvey’s national anthem incorporated, in part, ‘Ethiopia, land of our fathers.’ Likewise, George Padmore, in his article ‘Ethiopia in World Politics,’ condemned the Italian aggression against Ethiopia as racist and a conspiracy of revenge. In West Africa, major newspapers like the Sierra Leone Weekly, the Nigerian Daily Times, Vox Populi of Gold Coast, The Gold Coast Spectator, and the West African Pilot all expressed the fury of the African people against
Italian attack on Ethiopia. Jomo Kenyatta, who served as honorary chair of the International African Friends of Abyssinia, wrote ‘Hands off Abyssinia’ in *Labour Monthly* of September 1935.\(^5\)

Moreover, “descendant Africans abroad rallied around the symbol of their identity,” says Joseph E. Harris, and thus “C. L. R. James, a Trinidadian living in London, organized the International Friends of Ethiopia and led protest demonstrations on behalf of Ethiopia. In Washington D. C., William Leo Hansberry, Ralph Bunche, and William Steen were joined by Hosea Nyabongo of Uganda and Malaku Bayen of Ethiopia to form the Ethiopian Research Council to rally support around and funnel support to the African state. Protest movements also developed in Jamaica, Barbados, St. Kitts, and Trinidad.”\(^6\)

“A group of Caribbean and United States physicians in New York organized the Medical Committee, which sent medical supplies to Ethiopia, while other groups throughout the country raised money to assist the cause. This was a time of commitment to African identity: A number of African-Americans adopted Ethiopian names and small schools were formed to teach African history and languages. And at least two African-Americans, John Robinson and Hubert Julian, joined the Ethiopian armed forces. But after the emperor’s exile, the cause seemed lost. …During that struggle Bayen and several African-Americans had founded the Ethiopian World Federation, which became the major pan-African organization in the United States at the time. It had branches throughout much of the country and the Caribbean. Its newspaper, *The Voice of Ethiopia*, advocated the substitution of black for the term Negro. In fact, a number of African-Americans called themselves Ethiopian. After the return of the emperor to Addis Ababa, the federation was given land on which some of its members settled. …. Several black technicians from the United States and the Caribbean went to Ethiopia as teachers, mechanics, and pilots. They were employed in the government and in schools; some organized a pilots’ school, which trained the first Ethiopians to serve in the country’s air force and the Ethiopian Air Lines.”\(^7\)

Despite the just struggle of the Ethiopians for their liberation and the enormous support they enjoyed from Diaspora Africans and the worldwide condemnation of the fascist atrocities, however, the Allied Forces were insensitive to the Ethiopian cause at least till 1940 when Italy declared war on Britain. The British then were compelled to become objective allies of Ethiopia, but not necessarily genuine supporters of the Ethiopian cause.

In January 1942, the Allied leaders labeled Hitler’s government as ‘regime of terror’ and supported the idea of trying the Nazi war criminals while they were shy in condemning the fascist regime in Italy. In point of fact, both Hitler and Mussolini founded state of exception governments of the fascist type, shared same ideology of jingoism, and were menace to world peace and as such should have been treated equally. The difference between the two was that Hitler was a menace to the very existence of European nations while Mussolini was engaged in destroying a black nation and an island of independence in colonized Africa.
Adding fuel to the fire, long after Mussolini was ousted from power and Badoglio was appointed as prime minister by King Vittorio Emanuele, the Allied leaders, particularly the British, continued to ignore all charges of war crimes against Badoglio. By some secret machinations, Badoglio, who seemed to have promised the British to keep the peace and preserve stability in Italy, had become the ‘good guy’ in the eyes of the Allied Powers.

When the War Crimes Commission was established under the auspices of Britain on October 1943, Ethiopia was deliberately excluded from the Commission, due to fear, perhaps, that Ethiopians will demand the trial of the fascist criminals. In fact, Britain’s Foreign Office made all efforts to frustrate Ethiopian demands and the lobbying efforts of friends of Ethiopia and Sylvia Pankhurst in London. The efforts of Ethiopian officials in London, for instance that of Blatta Ayale Gebre during the formative period of the Commission and later in 1949 of Ato Abebe Retta was also frustrated.

For all intents and purposes, the British Foreign Office and the War Crimes Commission wanted to confine crime charges to the wars they were engaged in, i.e. beginning 1939 and not the 1935/36 Italo-Ethiopian war. Ultimately, however, the Foreign Office reconsidered its position and decided to include the Ethiopian demand in June 1945 and subsequently invited allies to sign the London Agreement on August of the same year. At long last, i.e. ten years after Emperor Haile Selassie appealed to the League, Ethiopia was in a position to establish the Ethiopian War Crimes Commission on May 1946 but it had encountered two major hurdles: 1) the Allied leaders were not willing to prosecute the Italian war criminals; 2) Ethiopia did not have enough professional personnel who could gather data in regards to the fascist crimes and coherently present them before the War Crimes Commission. One factor that contributed to the second deficiency was the systematic killings of the Ethiopian educated elite of the 1920s and 1930s. Thus, after Ethiopia established its own Commission, it took another eight months when Ato Ambaye Woldemariam submitted a report to the UN War Crimes Commission on behalf of Ethiopia.

“Despite these difficulties,” says Panhurst, “the Ethiopian Committee, in the ensuing weeks, succeeded in drawing up charges of fifty suspected war criminals, from which the nominal ten were selected for actual trial. Those so chosen were:

1. Marshal Pietro Badoglio, Commander-in-Chief of the Italian forces in East Africa, at the time of the invasion.
3. Alessandro Lessona, Italian Secretary of State for the Colonies, for much of the occupation period.
5. General Guglielmo Nasi, sometime Italian Governor of Harar.
6. General Alessandro Pirzio Biroli, sometime Italian Governor of Amhara.
7. General Carlo Geleso, sometime Italian Governor.
8. General Sebastiano Gallina
9. General Ruggero Trachia
10. Enricho Cerulli, sometime Chief of the Political Office for East Africa in the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Director-General of Political Affairs, and Vice-Governor-General of Italian East Africa.

The position of the Allied sponsored War Crime Commission goes against all powers of reason and history in spite of the overwhelming evidence of the fascist crimes against Ethiopians and despite Ethiopia’s relentless exhortations to justice. The UN War Crime Commission was flagrantly counter Ethiopian and its proceedings and dispassionate examination of the war crimes in Ethiopia were tainted with sinister political gymnastics that was engineered to undercut the Ethiopian initiative. The implicit assumption of the Commission that Ethiopia must directly deal with Italy in prosecuting the charged individuals was in fact an attempt to preempt the Ethiopian demands. Quite obviously, Italy and Ethiopia were at loggerheads, had no diplomatic relations, let alone extradition treaty, and it is for this apparent reason that Ato Abebe Retta’s demand of the surrender of Badoglio and Graziani in 1949 became a futile diplomatic exercise. And by the time the Emperor made a last attempt to convince the UN War Commission in 1950, Ethiopia was distracted by a more pressing UN agenda, that of the disposal of Eritrea and was compelled to abandon its charges of the war criminals and focused on the question of Eritrea.

Sometimes, history is indeed cruel. Marshall Badoglio, who ordered the use of poison gas against Ethiopians, without encountering any prosecution lived honorably and dignified, and in fact rewarded, till he died in 1956. Marshall Graziani, responsible for the 1937 massacres in Addis Ababa was tried by the Italian government in 1950, not for his crimes in Ethiopia but for his collaboration with the Germans. He served less than a year in prison although the pretentious and theatrical Italian court sentenced him to 19 years behind bars.

It is not surprising to witness a miscarriage of justice in relatively unequal partnership, let alone in antagonistic political relationships. But, I found it incredibly astounding and unconscionable when the Vatican, presided over by the Holiness, the Pope Benedict XVI, is reluctant to apologize to Ethiopians when in fact the global Christian leader should have taken such a noble initiative without grassroots demand and/or political lobbying.

Notes

2. የስምሮ ለማወሰን ይታረፋ የ2004 ይወ 123
3. የሽሁ እስማማት ይታረፋ ለ20 እና የ1985 ይዓ ይወ 61: 65: 93
4. የሽሁ እስማማት ይታረፋ ይወ 163-164
7. Joseph E. Harris, Ibid, pp. 264-65

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