



Aethiopia 11 (2008)

International Journal of Ethiopian and
Eritrean Studies

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Article

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Aethiopia 11 (2008), 68–84

ISSN: 1430–1938

Published by

Universität Hamburg

Asien Afrika Institut, Abteilung Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

Hiob Ludolf Zentrum für Äthiopistik

African-Americans and the Italo–Ethiopian Crisis, 1935–1936: The Practical Dimension of Pan-Africanism

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Introduction

Since the beginning of the Ethiopian situation with the Wal Wal incident in December 1934, it was only from early September 1935 that the League of Nations began to seriously address Italian aggression against Ethiopia. Ironically, it was in the middle of the League's efforts that Italy, without formally declaring war, launched a full-scale attack on October 3. By May 7, 1936, Ethiopia had been defeated. It is generally agreed that the invasion of Ethiopia was the consequence of a long-standing interest in establishing an Italian stronghold in East Africa. However, when it attacked in 1935, Italy apparently stood to gain nothing perhaps beyond the revenge of 1896, for other powers already acknowledged that Ethiopia was in its sphere of influence.¹

Benito Mussolini, it has been argued, was inhibited from launching the military invasion of Ethiopia in 1932 by "alarm at the resurgence of a German nationalism increasingly located in the Nazi movement".² But 1935 was no more auspicious from the point of view of German national resurgence: it was in March 1935 that Germany announced the re-introduction of conscription, and Hitler acknowledged the existence of the Luftwaffe. These openly challenged Versailles and threatened the security of Europe. True, Britain and France virtually endorsed Italian action in Ethiopia ostensibly as compensation for Italian commitment to the Stresa Front, a support that provided a favourable international environment, yet there was no tangible interest to be served: "Mussolini was concerned to show off Italy's strength, not to acquire the practical gains (if any such exist) of Empire".³

Ethiopia in 1935 had become a *responsible* member of the international community. It was a member of the League of Nations and consequently entitled to respect for its sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-aggressive conduct towards it and action against aggression from fellow members. Mussolini's intentions were not unknown to the major powers, but none

¹ TAYLOR, 1964, 119–121.

² CASSELS, 1999, 61.

³ TAYLOR, 1964, 128.

appeared willing to prevent the inevitable. There seemed to have been a consensus that Ethiopia did not deserve to be treated as an equal member of the League. At least, Britain did not think Ethiopia sufficiently civilized to be a member of the League in 1925.⁴ And at the meeting of the League Council on September 4, 1935, the Italian representative did not think Ethiopia should be “considered a civilized sovereign state”.⁵

Behind Anglo–French complicity and Italian determination was the race element usually concealed in the notion of the civilizing mission: Ethiopians being non-white and African were racially inferior and in need of civilization. No other justification was needed for any action against them. Italian Fascism, like German Nazism, was after all a racial philosophy.⁶ “For the Pope”, Mussolini had asserted, “souls have no color, but for us faces have color”.⁷ Pressured by the claim of Nordic racism that Italian blood was tainted by Negro blood and therefore not pure, Mussolini was driven to adopt an extreme form of anti-Africanism that inferiorized Africans, and designed to bolster Italian racial pride. Thus, even though he argued that “when a people becomes conscious of its own racial identity, it does so in relation to all the races, not of one alone”, he specified that “We became racially conscious only in the face of the Hamites, that is to say, the Africans”.⁸ The legal instrument for achieving this goal was the racial decree of August 5, 1936. For the Fascist elite generally, Ethiopia was “nothing but a collection of heterogeneous tribes dominated by various primitive chieftains”, where tribal wars were endemic and slavery a national institution.⁹ This was the Ethiopia that Italy had committed itself to civilizing. By motivation, therefore, the Italian invasion of Ethiopia was racial, and it was a racial interpretation that the non-Caucasian world, Asian and African, gave to it.¹⁰ It is in this context that the African-American response should be understood.

The Italo–Ethiopian Crisis has been described as “some sort of tangible – certainly a legitimate issue – around which the black nationalist could rally, and indeed rally a great section of the black population”.¹¹ Ottley in fact asserts that he knows of “no event in recent times that stirred the rank and file of Negroes more than the Italo–Ethiopian war”.¹² African-Americans were

⁴ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁵ LEONARD, 1951, 147.

⁶ KALLIS, 2000, 45.

⁷ GILLETTE, 2002, 57.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁹ HIBBERT, 1962, 69.

¹⁰ See PLUMMER, 1996, 50.

¹¹ OTTLEY, 1943, 105.

¹² *Ibid.*, 111.

moved to action. Beyond the rhetoric and idealism of the Delanys, Turners and Garveys, African-Americans took practical steps to help defend an independent African nation. In what ways did they contribute to this defense?

The Basis of African-American Solidarity

The African-American response to the Italian invasion was influenced by the unique role Ethiopia played in their world view.¹³ Ethiopia was a symbol of black achievement, having retained virtually intact its ancient institutions; but under the circumstance of a worldwide downturn in the status of the Negro, it was also a symbol of racial pride and hope. Africa had featured prominently in the nationalist-emigrationist plans of African-Americans, but in most cases such schemes were directed toward West Africa, especially Liberia and not to Ethiopia. There were, however, some few cases in which Ethiopia was seen as the place of return, as, for example, the cases of W.H. Ellis of 1903 and that of Rabbi Arnold Josiah Ford who aimed to establish a settlement near Lake Tana in Ethiopia.¹⁴ While there was no successful mass back-to-Ethiopia movement, there was a black American community established in Ethiopia by individual migrants. This community by the early 1930s had over one hundred African-Americans.¹⁵ Indications are that Ethiopians on their part were willing to accept returning African-Americans. For example, Azzaž Wäraqnäh Ḥšäte (otherwise Martin), the Ethiopian ambassador to the court of St. James, was sent to America in 1927 to encourage needed black professionals and technicians to settle in Ethiopia.¹⁶ The *Chicago Defender* of December, 1935, reprinted excerpts from a letter purportedly written by Crown Prince Johannes (sic!) in 1909 for his father, Emperor Menelik, in which the emperor promised to reserve six million acres in the Land of Judah for New World blacks willing to return home. There is no evidence that African-Americans heeded or took advantage of this call and opportunity. A very visible exception was Colonel Hubert Fauntleroy Julian, the 'Black Eagle of Harlem', who went to serve in Ethiopia before the War of 1935.¹⁷ For most African-Americans that thought of Ethiopia, their interest was sentimental rather than emigrationist. From the moment Italian aggression against Ethiopia became a possibility, this sentimental interest took on a strong racial activist character.

¹³ See ERHAGBE, 2006, 152–154 for a discussion of African-American perception of Ethiopia.

¹⁴ WEISBORD, 1973, 90–94.

¹⁵ OTTLEY, 1943, states that several hundreds resettled in Ethiopia: 107.

¹⁶ WEISBORD, 1973, 92.

¹⁷ BULLOCH, 1964, 81–91.

African-American Response to the Italian Invasion: The Practical Dimension

African-American intellectuals and press had created the ideological platform on which stood the diverse organizations and efforts that emerged in defense of Ethiopia. As early as December 1934, the Ethiopian Research Council had been established at Howard University in Washington, D.C., directed by Professors W. Leo Hansberry, an anthropologist, and Ralph Bunche, then a professor of politics at Howard University. It was set up “for the purpose of disseminating information on the history, civilization and diplomatic relations of Ethiopia in Ancient and Modern Times”.¹⁸ A similar association set up at Wilberforce University in Ohio hoped, according to the *Pittsburgh Courier*, “to aid in the preservation of the territorial integrity and political sovereignty of the kingdom of Abyssinia, to spread information and helpful propaganda in its interest, to petition the government of the United States to use its good offices to the end that the differences between Italy and Abyssinia may be settled by arbitration.”¹⁹

African-American media organizations as the crisis unfolded had called on the international community, particularly the League, to intervene to stop a probable Italian invasion. *The Opportunist*, for example, in its editorial of May 1935 bemoaned the failure of the tri-power conference in Paris and heaped its hope on the meeting of the League scheduled for early September, warning of the conflagration that may result from a failure to restrain Italy. “If the League fails”, it concluded, “then war is inevitable”.²⁰ In spite of this apparently neutral and pacifist position, the African-American perspective on the crisis was racial. Thus, in another editorial of July 1935, *The Opportunist* reiterated the black man’s solidarity with Ethiopia warning of the possible consequence an Italian attack on Ethiopia might have for the ‘Nordic Race’. It argued that although Ethiopia was not a Negro nation “according to strict adherence to current ethnological definitions”, it had become the “spiritual fatherland of Negroes throughout the world, and from Bahia to Birmingham, and from New York to Nigeria”.²¹ And in strong pan-Africanist language, the *Crisis* in 1935 concluded that “when all is said and done, the struggles of the Abyssinians is fundamentally a part of the struggle of the black race the world over for national freedom, economic, political and racial emancipation”.²²

¹⁸ ROSS, 1975, 325.

¹⁹ *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 9, 1935, Section 2, 1.

²⁰ *The Opportunity – The Official Newspaper of the National Urban League*, May 1935, editorial page.

²¹ *Ibid.*, September 1935, 230.

²² *Crisis* 42, 8, 1935, 214.

The Italian threat to Ethiopia led to the establishment of ad hoc organizations whose main purpose was to help preserve Ethiopian independence. In the course of the crisis, some of these organizations dissolved, while others merged. In the main, they hoped to mobilize money, arms and ammunition, and medical supplies for Ethiopia. In addition, they also aimed at influencing United States foreign policy for the benefit of Ethiopia. These organizations were not always established by African-Americans, some were the handiwork of white American liberals and pacifists. An indication of the kind of support these organizations hoped to render Ethiopia could be seen in the resolutions adopted at a mass rally held in March 1935, under the auspices of the Provisional Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia. These included

1. Ethiopia needs money, arms and munitions rather than manpower.
2. Resolutions of protest to be sent to Mussolini, League of Nations, Secretary of State, and Mayor of New York.
3. A 50,000 person parade will be held in Harlem soon.
4. Harlemites spend no money where it might find its way to Italian fascists to be used "to stab our brothers in the back".²³

These standpoints remained the main rallying points for support of Ethiopia. Other angles that were added included organizing special prayers for Ethiopia; and, although not successful, organizing volunteers from the African-American community who were willing to go to Ethiopia to fight.

The active organizations that were established to help Ethiopia included the American Committee on the Ethiopia Crisis, and American Aid for Ethiopia – these were multi-racial groups dominated by white liberals. African-Americans formed the core of organizations such as Friends of Ethiopia, the Medical Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia, the Ethiopian Emergency Medical Aid, and United Aid for Ethiopia. Outside of these new organizations older organizations in the African-American community such as the Pan-African Reconstruction Association based in New York also came to the aid of Ethiopia. The mass of African-Americans, especially in New York, attended rallies and demonstrations organized by these groups.

In certain cases individuals such as Samuel Daniels, President of the Pan-African Reconstruction Association, and Harold H. Williams, a representative of the Ethiopian League of America, campaigned for volunteers who were willing to come to the military defense of Ethiopia. As reported in the *Afro-American* on July 6, Daniels and Williams set out on a nationwide tour to recruit volunteers for Abyssinia.²⁴ Although by mid-July Daniels

²³ *Amsterdam News*, March 9, 1935, 1.

²⁴ *Afro-American* (Baltimore), July 6, 1935, 10.

boasted that he had signed up over 17,500 volunteers, made up of volunteers from Boston (200), Detroit (5,000), Chicago (8,000), Kansas City, Missouri (2,000), Philadelphia (1,500), and New York (850), these volunteers never succeeded in going to Ethiopia.²⁵ He reputedly charged a minimum of 25 cents per enlistment as a private and higher sum for commissioned and non-commissioned officer positions.²⁶ The failure of these volunteers to depart for Ethiopia could be attributed to the fact that there was lack of money to transport them to Ethiopia. It was calculated that it would cost at least one thousand dollars to send a volunteer to Ethiopia, and considering the total amount of money that the Ethiopian support groups could collect, they could not meet the cost.²⁷ In addition, United States law prevented Americans, including African-Americans, from enlisting as combatants;²⁸ and the euphoric response, indicated even in the newspapers, did not necessarily mean that African-Americans that volunteered were genuinely prepared to actually go to Ethiopia and fight. More importantly, Ethiopia did not need fighting volunteers, for as ambassador Teclé Hawariat told an *Afro-American* correspondent in Geneva, “we have plenty of native soldiers ... the Ethiopian soldiers can operate on much less than could an American recruit and know the kind of fighting that must be done”. He even added that “the cost of maintaining one American soldier would be far more than that of a large number of Ethiopians”. He concluded by saying that what they needed were arms and ammunition.²⁹ There were, however, two African-Americans who became directly involved in the military aspect of the conflict. These were Colonel Hubert Fauntleroy Julian, ‘the Black Eagle’, a former New York aviator, and William H. Robinson, ‘the Brown Condor’, a Chicago youth and Tuskegee graduate who later became the head of Haile Selassie’s airforce.

Julian had worked in the Ethiopian air force when it was still in its infancy. Although he left Ethiopia after a controversy surrounding a crash during an air manoeuvre honouring the Emperor, when hostilities were imminent he returned to Ethiopia.³⁰ On his return to Ethiopia, he was not permitted to serve as a pilot; instead, he was made to drill new infantry recruits. Following an altercation with the Brown Condor, Julian was sent to be the military governor of Ambo, a town some eighty kilometres west of Addis Ababa. While in this district he helped with building the defences for

²⁵ Ibid, July 20, 1935, 1.

²⁶ See ROSS, 1975, 332.

²⁷ See Ibid., 333.

²⁸ See the *Courier*, July 20, 1935, front page.

²⁹ *Afro-American*, week of September 28, 1935, 4.

³⁰ See BULLOCK, 1964, Chapter 9.

the area, but with the outbreak of actual hostilities, Julian returned to Addis Ababa, where he came to the conclusion that he had to leave Ethiopia since “with the lack of weapons and ammunition, and the disorganization in the capital, there was no hope of stopping the well-armed and highly trained Italian army”.³¹ He therefore left Ethiopia without being involved in any combat operation. During his period of stay, however, his very substantial salary was all accumulating for him in a bank in Europe.³²

Robinson turned out to be the replacement for Julian in the air force, a fact which must have been more responsible for the hostility between the two rather than the false stories which Robinson allegedly told about Julian.³³ The Saturday, June 6, 1936 edition of the *Courier* carried photographs of Robinson’s return to Chicago and reported that “thousands give ‘Brown Condor’ of Ethiopia a conquering hero’s welcome”. Upon his return to the United States, Robinson started lecturing under the auspices of United Aid for Ethiopia, starting with a lecture in New York on June 7, 1936.³⁴

Instead of sending military volunteers to Ethiopia, most organizations and individuals concentrated on mobilizing medical and diplomatic aid for Ethiopia. One such organization was the Committee for Ethiopia headed by Robert F.S. Harris. On July 1, 1935, Harris sent out five thousand circulars to concerned persons, especially clergymen, asking their cooperation in both accepting a place on his committee and contributing financially to his programme. The sevenfold programme of the committee included

Molding public opinion, setting up a nationwide day of prayer, preventing communist elements from taking advantage of the Italo–Ethiopian crisis to further their subversive propaganda and agitation among Americans of African descent, sending medical supplies to Ethiopia, and erecting a modern shortwave station in Addis Ababa.³⁵

Harris, having set up a 49 member executive committee, organized a petition campaign calling upon the United States to invoke the Kellogg-Briand Pact, by which the 63 signatories (that included Italy, Abyssinia, and the United States) renounced war as an instrument of national policy. To achieve this, he printed 235,000 circulars which he sent to various individuals and peace groups throughout the country. In addition to this, Harris was instru-

³¹ Ibid., 112.

³² Ibid., 111.

³³ Ibid., 106–107.

³⁴ For detailed studies of Julian and Robinson’s activities in Ethiopia, see SCOTT, 1971, especially Chapters VI and VII.

³⁵ See ROSS, 1975, 334.

mental in the coordination of the August 18, 1935 prayer activities. Although Harris solicited medical supplies by distributing coin cards to churches throughout the nation, by the beginning of September he had received less than one hundred dollars.³⁶ Through a donation from the Squibbs Company, the Committee had succeeded in late August in sending its first shipment of medical aid to Ethiopia on board the steamship *Ingria* of the Franco–Liberian Line.³⁷ By mid-October, the Committee announced that the first American volunteer field hospital unit consisting of a full staff of seven Negro physicians and complete field equipment would be transported to Ethiopia from New York at a cost of five thousand dollars.³⁸ This was not achieved, however.

The efforts of such groups as the Ethiopian Emergency Medical Aid and United Aid for Ethiopia did not result in the sending of large shipments of medical supplies to Ethiopia. United Aid for Ethiopia seems to have collected a reasonable amount of money but this was not converted into medical supplies for Ethiopia.³⁹ The group was established in January 1936, through the efforts of Lij Tesfaye Zaphiro, a secretary from the Ethiopian legation in London. He succeeded in uniting a number of black-led Ethiopian aid groups into the new organization. Zaphiro raised funds through tours of New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Brooklyn, and Chicago, raising \$305 from a New York Christmas Eve rally of about three thousand persons at Adam Clayton Powell Sr.'s Abyssinian Baptist Church⁴⁰, and \$350 from a Brooklyn appearance.⁴¹ While in Chicago, three churches, Olivet Baptist Church, the Ebenezer Baptist Church and the Pilgrim Baptist Church collected \$94.50, \$106, and \$100 respectively for the organization during Zaphiro's visit.⁴² By the end of his stay, he had raised about five thousand dollars for the Ethiopian cause.⁴³ Zaphiro's efforts were taken over by Dr. Malaku Bayen, a cousin and personal physician to the emperor. Bayen came to the United States with his wife to coordinate all relief efforts on behalf of Ethiopia, and this led him to establish the Ethiopia World Federation, Inc., after working initially with the United Aid to Ethiopia.⁴⁴ Al-

³⁶ Ibid., 335.

³⁷ Ibid., 340.

³⁸ *Courier*, October 19, 1935.

³⁹ SCOTT, 1971, 251.

⁴⁰ *New York Times*, December 25, 1935, 3. See also PLUMMER, 1996, 52.

⁴¹ *New York Age*, February 22, 1936, 7.

⁴² *Chicago Defender*, February 1, 1936, 12.

⁴³ PLUMMER, 1996, 52.

⁴⁴ For a detailed discussion of the career of Dr. Malaku Bayen in the United States, see SCOTT, 1971, Chapter 8. The Ethiopian World Federation, Inc. became a national organization with broad political objectives, but concerned itself largely with aiding the

though the Federation worked hard to rekindle widespread interest among African-Americans in the plight of Ethiopia, it did not succeed better than previous organizations in sending aid to Ethiopia. In the years of Ethiopia's embattlement, the organization that made a fairly tangible contribution to its cause was the Medical Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia, later incorporated into the United Aid for Ethiopia.

The *New York Times* reported on September 10, 1935, that in New York City, the Medical Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia (MCDE), a predominantly black group composed of thirty physicians, dentists, pharmacists, nurses and technicians, had announced an energetic drive to send immediate medical assistance to the Ethiopian people.⁴⁵ The group was led by Dr. J.J. Jones, Dr. P.M.H. Savory, and Dr. Arnold Donawa. On October 26, 1935, the MCDE came up with an advertisement asking those wishing to make contributions to send cash, bandages or materials which could be made into bandages to the MCDE's headquarters at the United Negro Improvement Association building, 36 West 135 Street.⁴⁶ It was reported in the *New York Age* on November 30 that Dr. Donawa had informed the press "that two tons of recently shipped medical and surgical supplies had arrived in Ethiopia".⁴⁷ The *Courier* reported on January 18, 1936 that the MCDE had launched a campaign to purchase medical equipment to replace the hospital unit destroyed by Italian invaders when they attacked Dessye on December 6, 1935. By January 13, 1936 it reported that on December 31, a field hospital unit was shipped to Ethiopia via the S.S. *Steel Age* of the Isthmian Steamship Lines. This shipment, which constituted the main transfer of aid to Ethiopia from African-Americans during the war, included nine tons of bandages and sterilized dressings.⁴⁸

African-Americans cooperated with white-dominated groups that sympathized and organised aid for Ethiopia. Willis Huggins, who had set up the Friends of Ethiopia in October 1935, joined the Executive Committee of American Aid for Ethiopia by December 1935. Some groups never got af-

thousands of Ethiopian refugees living in Kenya, Uganda, Egypt, Palestine and elsewhere. The Federation established branches in other cities outside of New York, and had a weekly organ called the *Voice of Ethiopia*, which "was rabidly pro-Negro as well as pro-Ethiopia": OTTLEY, 1943, 110. In assessing Bayen's efforts before his death on May 4, 1940, Scott points out that he was succeeding in "rekindling widespread interest among black Americans in the plight of Ethiopia and effecting a greater understanding between some of his countrymen and Afro-Americans": SCOTT, 1971, 284.

⁴⁵ *New York Times* September 10, 1935, 13.

⁴⁶ *New York Age*, October 26, 1935, 1.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, November 30, 1935.

⁴⁸ *Courier*, January 18, 1936, Section 1,3.

filiated to the white groups, but still cooperated with them. For example, the Pan-African Reconstruction Association instructed its female members to help prepare the bandages that the American Aid for Ethiopia sent to Ethiopia.⁴⁹ The willingness of the various Ethiopian interest groups to cooperate was demonstrated by the fact that several such groups jointly sent Dr. Willis N. Huggins to Geneva to argue their case. Huggins, representing the Provisional Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia, the Committee on Ethiopia, and the American League Against War and Fascism, carried a petition urging that the League of Nations take measures to restrain Italy, assure Ethiopia of the League's support, and send a neutral commission to Ethiopia to report on boundary disputes.⁵⁰

Apart from the new groups that were established specifically for the defense of Ethiopia, older existing groups with interests in the African-American community also lent their solidarity to the Ethiopian cause. Hence American churches condemned the invasion.⁵¹ At the 68th session of the Pittsburgh American Methodist Episcopal conference, the Methodists condemned the Italian action and called on the League to protect "the oldest and most peaceful Christian nation in the world". It resolved among other things "that the darker peoples of the world, of whatever religious faith, be entreated to refuse to do anything either of moral or material or even spiritual nature to assist this tyrant to subjugate a Christian people to satisfy his lust for greed".⁵² African-American churches observed August 18, 1935 as a day of prayer for Ethiopia. This day was observed by over 3,000 congregations in America and the West Indies.⁵³ Special hymns were composed for the Ethiopian cause. A new Ethiopian marching song composed for the special services devoted to Ethiopia at the Zion Baptist Church took Los Angeles Ethiopian enthusiasts by storm.⁵⁴ It was also reported later that a Negro Church in Indianapolis remained open all night and made it possible for pedestrians to enter, kneel, and pray for the safety of Ethiopia.⁵⁵

The National Association for the Advancement of Coloured Peoples (NAACP) was another long-established organization in the African-American community that came to the aid of Ethiopia by denouncing Ital-

⁴⁹ *New York Times*, November 27, 1935, 13.

⁵⁰ *Afro-American* (Baltimore), July 27, 1935, 7.

⁵¹ For example, the *Courier* carried a news item on its church page of August 31, 1935, headlined "Churchmen Denounce Mussolini War Policy".

⁵² *Ibid.*, October 5, 1935, church section.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, August 3, 1935, church section; and the *Afro-American* (Baltimore), August 24, 1935, 7.

⁵⁴ *Afro-American* (Baltimore), August 24, 1935, 7.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, September 21, 1935.

ian aggression. The NAACP, in its 26 Annual Confab held at St. Louis, unequivocally condemned “Italian aggression in Ethiopia and the imperialist selfishness of all nations in their shameless aggression upon the sovereignty of other nations” and vigorously urged “the President and the Department of State to voice publicly their disapproval of the Italian government’s action in Ethiopia”.⁵⁶ A front page report in the *Courier* of December 21, 1935 informed its readers that the NAACP had sent a cable to the League denouncing “the peace proposal advanced for the settlement of the Italian–Ethiopian war” branding it as “a robber proposal rewarding shameless aggression of Italy”.

The various ad hoc groups, as well as the established groups with pacifist interests, and those working in the interest of African-Americans, lent their support to Ethiopia. Their combined efforts did not improve the chances of Haile Selassie defending his empire, especially as their efforts were directed more towards medical relief than military assistance. The existence of such groups with functioning offices gave some African-Americans the opportunity to express in practical terms their positive sentiments of sympathy toward the Ethiopian cause. Even without monetary or military contributions, the mass of African-Americans had another outlet for demonstrating their solidarity with Ethiopia. They showed this solidarity through demonstrations against Mussolini in the United States and through the boycott of Italian stores. The *Courier* on August 10, 1935 reported a mass parade of twenty thousand in Harlem demanding peace and excoriating Italy and Mussolini for their war-like advances against Ethiopia. Another report indicated that three hundred Ethiopian sympathizers were jailed in Chicago after a planned demonstration against Mussolini was broken up.⁵⁷ Clashes between African-Americans and Italian-Americans in Brooklyn and Harlem on October 4 attracted one thousand New York City policemen.⁵⁸ Added to these demonstrations were attacks on Italian-Americans and the boycott of their shops, especially in predominantly African-American communities.⁵⁹ The *Afro-American* carried a report on October 12, 1935 that ‘Down with Italian Merchants’ was the cry of Ethiopian sympathizers in New York when a drive was launched to force Italian-Americans out of Harlem.⁶⁰ These activities threatened Harlem and Chicago and got to such a peak that the Rev. Senior Powell opposed Harlem attacks upon Italians

⁵⁶ *Courier*, July 13, 1935, Section 2, 3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ PLUMMER, 1996, 50.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Afro-American*, October 12, 1935, 12.

remarking that “store owners are hanging out signs announcing that they are not Italians as the differences between this nationality and coloured Americans are growing into something of a menace as a result of the war in Africa”.⁶¹ Another paper reported that “up in Harlem, Italian fruit vendors and ice men were feeling the reprisals of the kinsmen of the Ethiopians along economic lines if in no other way”.⁶² The same paper also reported the news that “pickets put ‘Blood’ at the Italian consulate great building to give dramatic realism to the protests of anti-war pickets against Mussolini’s war of plunder against the Ethiopians”.⁶³ Chicago, with its growing African-American population, witnessed similar protests. In some of these cities, especially the Harlem section of New York City, news reports about the war in Ethiopia increasingly affected the relationship between African-Americans and their Italian-American compatriots.⁶⁴

Discordant Voices in the African-American Community

Generally therefore, it can be argued that there was obvious sympathy backed by action on the part of African-Americans with Ethiopia. The point must be made, however, that there were some discordant voices in the African-American community who did not feel any obligation to help, voices which called on their compatriots to concentrate on their own problems in the United States. Surprisingly, even the *Courier*, which was later to be in the vanguard for mobilizing aid for Ethiopia, echoed this provincial sentiment. In an editorial of Saturday, July 20, 1935, entitled ‘Helping Ethiopia’, the paper examined the needs of Ethiopia and identified the sending of money to be the most viable way African-Americans could help Ethiopia. It went on to say, however, that

Aframerica has a war on its hands – a war that has been going on for generations. It is a war against discrimination, segregation, disenfranchisement, illiteracy, ignorance, shiftlessness, peonage, ruthless exploitation, bad housing and bad health. It needs every dollar it can spare in this war right here.⁶⁵

It further contended that aid that could be sent to Ethiopia could be used instead to give scholarships to African-American children to attend the

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*, October 14, 1935, 12.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, October 26, 1935, 3.

⁶⁴ See SCOTT, 1971, Chapter 9, 315–320 for the racial conflicts that developed in the United States as a result of the war.

⁶⁵ *Courier*, July 20, 1935, editorial page.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology or Howard Medical School; to build one thousand playgrounds with swimming pools; and to win school segregation cases. The editorial concluded,

Much as we all sympathize with Ethiopia, it is evident that our burdens here are sufficiently heavy without assuming those of Negroes over 7,000 miles away. It is noteworthy that, while our disabilities have been fairly well publicized throughout the world since emancipation, no aid has ever come from our brethren across the seas. We have fought our battle alone and they will have to do likewise.⁶⁶

In spite of this earlier editorial, the *Courier* became one of the main instruments for mobilizing African-American support for Ethiopia. An explanation for this change of heart is the reality of Italian invasion which in July 1935 was still just a possibility, and more importantly, the paper might have been responding to the seeming dominant sentiment in the African-American community, which was that of doing something to help Ethiopia. Although the majority of African-Americans were dealing with the problems caused by the Great Depression, the newspapers, intellectuals and various established organizations in the African-American community seem to have been more inclined toward the sentiment of doing something to help Ethiopia. But the earlier sentiment expressed by the *Courier* was still there in the community. In a letter to the *Afro-American*, one reader from Annapolis, Maryland expressed such a feeling.

I sympathize with Ethiopia one hundred percent but in view of the many ills and misfortunes that confront us here I cannot understand why some of those red-blooded volunteers don't advocate improving our own situation before going abroad.⁶⁷

In addition to the fact that problems of African-Americans sometimes caused some not to want to identify with Ethiopia, one particular issue also worked against their unity on behalf of Ethiopia. This was the question of whether Ethiopia was actually a Negro nation.

Ottley points out that "rumors that the Ethiopians were not Negroes nearly ended the unity of black men in this country with those in Africa".⁶⁸ Mussolini's supporters tried to point out to African-Americans that since the Ethiopians and their Emperor did not consider themselves Negroes there was no basis for African-American sympathy. African-American

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Joseph Hardesty to the *Afro-American* (Baltimore), August 10, 1935, 4.

⁶⁸ OTTLEY, 1943, 111.

newspapers had to counter this allegation and described it as an attempt to fool African-Americans and not to help Ethiopia.⁶⁹ The papers carried articles and stories to show that the Ethiopians were Negroid.⁷⁰ Dr. Maluku Bayen, an indigenous Ethiopian, who arrived in the United States in 1936 as the Emperor's official representative, "attempted to counteract such propaganda with the explanation that the Ethiopians reject the term Negro because of its connotation of slavery. But this, he added, did not prevent the Ethiopians from aligning themselves with American Negroes in blood brotherhood because of common ancestry".⁷¹ Ottley also indicates that when Dr. Huggins went abroad before the outbreak of war, he had "visited the Chief Ethiopian legations to check the 'racial classification' of the Ethiopians".⁷² Huggins from his inquiry reported that "the emperor is very conscious of the fact that he is today the only Black Sovereign in the world, and he considers himself as the natural leader of the (black) Negro race", and that the emperor "is fond of repeating the phrase that 'Ethiopia is the trustee for the future of the black races'".⁷³

While it is impossible to assess the damage this propaganda might have done to positive responses from African-Americans to the Ethiopian call for help, there is no doubt that it was a threat to the Ethiopian cause, hence, editors and feature writers painstakingly devoted time and space to asserting the blackness of Ethiopians.⁷⁴ We find that even in his appeal for help from African-Americans, Zaphiro had to emphasize that there was a decided blood relationship between Negroes and his people. Assessing the damage the propaganda had done to the cause of supporting Ethiopia, he declared: "it appears that this racial controversy is responsible to a marked degree, for the present state of confusion, which can be attributed to the lack of cooperation to aid Ethiopia in her hour of need". He concluded the appeal by pointing out that "Ethiopia needs our support ... in order to preserve her independence and freedom and thus maintain the oldest and only black empire in the world".⁷⁵ Although this controversy continued there is no evidence that it actually stifled whatever help African-Americans were capable of giving to Ethiopia.

⁶⁹ See, for example, the *Courier*, November 16, 1935, 1.

⁷⁰ *Afro-American* (Baltimore), October 5, 1935; and the *Courier*, March 21, 1936.

⁷¹ OTTLEY, 1943, 111.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 112.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ OTTLEY, 1943, argues that while such defense helped reassure the nationalist elements in the country, "the fact is, Ethiopians think of themselves as a nation, and not as a race": 112.

⁷⁵ *Courier*, December 21, 1935, Section 1, 4.

Conclusion

The fact that African-Americans, in spite of their distance from Africa, responded so vigorously to developments in Ethiopia between 1935 and 1936 is testimony to their African consciousness. Whether for positive or negative reasons, African-Americans had to occasionally look toward Africa and developments in the continent. Although among the intellectuals and other members of the middle class there was an awareness of developments in the continent, the Italo–Ethiopian crisis was the first major event which galvanized both the masses and their leaders into working for an African cause.

The remarkable nature of their efforts stems from the following facts: First, many years had separated African-Americans from Africa, unlike most Italian-Americans who had just recently left their home country and still bore Italian names; but in spite of this African-Americans still identified with African interests in the continent. Second, African-Americans still had weighty problems to contend with in the United States. Thus, the fact that they found time and energy to help their distant cousins in Ethiopia was remarkable. And third, evidence shows that most African-Americans at this time were still very poor, with the population in the ghettos swelling constantly. This was the period of the Great Depression which led to a worsening of the living conditions of the poor, a class dominated by African-Americans. Their poverty did not however stop them from contributing their cents to those organizations that worked toward mobilizing medical aid for Ethiopia. Fourth, there was even the controversy of whether Ethiopians were actually Negroes or if they even considered themselves as having any racial solidarity with other Africans. In these circumstances, therefore, the orchestrated campaigns by African-Americans to help the Ethiopian cause cannot but be appreciated. The Ethiopian monarch recognized the possible contributions African-Americans could make towards his cause, hence he sent envoys to campaign for their support. Ethiopia fell not because of the lack of support from African-Americans or lack of willingness on the part of Ethiopians to defend their empire, but because of the military superiority of Italy and the ineffectiveness of the League of Nations which, because of the selfish interests of the two major members, France and Britain, refused to come to the aid of Ethiopia. As Dr. Huggins, under the auspices of the International Council of Friends of Ethiopia, prophetically warned the League of Nations in 1935, the Fascist destruction of Ethiopia did put the peace of the world in peril,⁷⁶ a situation which a decisive action of the League of Nations could have helped to prevent.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ OTTLEY, 1943, 109.

⁷⁷ HARRIS, JR., 1964, 71.

The campaign by African-Americans to help Ethiopia constituted their first major practical demonstration in the international arena of the African-American consciousness of their solidarity with the black race throughout the world. African-Americans were therefore responding to a development in Africa, trying to defend the independence of an African nation. As Floyd J. Galvin stated in a report in the *Courier*, “for the first time in the history of America, the Negro citizen has a burning interest in the international policy of his country”.⁷⁸ In the same vein, John Hope Franklin in his later assessment of the crisis, states that with the invasion of Ethiopia, “almost overnight, even the most provincial among American Negroes became internationally minded”.⁷⁹ The political horizon of African-Americans was broadened, a result which Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. Du Bois had, in their respective ways, worked for.

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⁷⁸ *Courier*, September 14, 1935.

⁷⁹ FRANKLIN – MOSS, 1988, 561.

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Summary

In a world where the Negro groped for recognition, Ethiopia (Abyssinia), with its ancient institutions and sovereignty virtually intact, was a symbol of racial pride and achievement. This Ethiopia was however invaded by Italy in 1935. It was a racial interpretation that the Negro world gave the Italian invasion. African-American interest in Africa which hitherto had been romantic and sentimental, with the Italian invasion became practical, and in this case designed to strengthen Ethiopian resistance. In the end, African-American contribution, though symbolically significant, was paltry. This can be accounted for by the relative poverty of African-Americans, and the time and cultural distance separating them from Africa.