

History: Italy's 1937 Ethiopian Massacre Finally Comes to Light

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By [Adeyinka Makinde](#)

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The 20th century is often remarked on by historians to have been one of the most tumultuous periods in human history. Some would go so far as to assert that it was the most violent century in modern times. Certainly, the advances in technology ensured that human life could be destroyed in far greater numbers and with more rapidity. And in an age of warring empires, colonial repression and the coming to power of regimes adhering to the ruthless ideologies of totalitarianism, episodes of the mass murder of innocent civilians are abundant.

The loss of life during the massacre of Nanjing and the bombing of Guernica, for instance, are tragedies that are emblematic of the troubled times leading to WWII, as are the names of the death camps and mobile killing units associated with Nazi Germany during that conflict.

Less well-known, if known at all, is the massacre which was initiated by Fascist Italy in the Ethiopian city of Addis Ababa in February 1937. This savage event, staged as a retributive measure, after an assassination attempt on Marshal Rodolfo Graziani, Benito Mussolini's viceroy to Italian East Africa, is essentially a half-forgotten one.

The fact that an atrocity of this magnitude was not thoroughly documented, dissected and memorialised until recent times may strike the observer as somewhat surprising.

This amnesia persisted in regard to both perpetrator and victim. There was no war crimes investigation and little scholarship was directed at it. The reasons for this are manifold and are revealed by Ian Campbell in his book *The Addis Ababa Massacre: Italy's National Shame*, the fruit of two-decades of research.

The task of setting out the chronology of events while striving to maintain accuracy, as well as reaching empirically valid conclusions pertaining to the controversial matter of an overall death count was an onerous one.

For instance, the author had to contend with the large-scale destruction of evidence. This relates both to the destroying of official records as well as to the physical elimination of Ethiopian witnesses.

Thus, he needed to find alternatives to the use of archival documents as historiographical sources.

Most notably, this involved painstakingly tracking down and interviewing eyewitnesses over a considerable period of time, recording their recollections and then embarking on a laborious process of cross-checking and cross-referencing.

He also assembled and reproduced a vast array of photographic evidence. Many of the shots were originally published in Sylvia Pankhurst's anti-fascist journal *New Times and Ethiopia News*, while other previously unpublished ones taken by foreign diplomats, residents of Addis Ababa, rampaging Blackshirts and Italian soldiers.

The book captures the world on the precipice of an enormous conflagration and serves to remind the reader that the outbreak of WWII had several preludes.

Whereas the Asian prelude is composed of both the 1931 Japanese invasion of Manchuria and the Sino-Japanese War of 1937 (with the European prelude occurring in 1939 when Germany invaded Poland), for Africa, the dawning of that conflict was marked by the invasion of Ethiopia by Italy in 1935.

The issue of appeasement looms large in the African context as it did in the European arena. An analogy can be made between the sacrifice of Czechoslovakia at the 1938 conference in Munich, which arguably emboldened Adolf Hitler to pursue his objective of further territorial acquisition, and the failure of the collective security system promised by the League of Nations in restraining Mussolini's expansionist ambitions in East Africa. Campbell's work may also remind the reader of the degree to which earlier events on the African continent prefigured the policies followed by the totalitarian powers prior to and during the war.

For instance, the racial experiments conducted by Joseph Mengele at Auschwitz were foreshadowed by those carried out by Mengele's mentor, Eugen Fischer, on the indigenous population of German South West Africa (Namibia).

Further, the concentration camp system established during pre-world war colonial conflicts by the Italians in Libya, Eritrea and Somaliland was, during the war, extended to Yugoslavia and to Italy itself.

The war crimes committed by Italian forces during the Spanish Civil War, and during WWII in Greece and Yugoslavia, were a continuum of the brutality exhibited during the period of Italian colonisation of East African territory.

Campbell's book provides clear and ineluctable confirmation of fascism's inherent tendency towards brutality and violence. The killing of Ethiopians began during the afternoon of Friday 19 February, almost immediately after Graziani was injured by a grenade attack carried out by two Eritreans, Moges Asgedom and Abriha Deboch.

An official declaration promulgating three days of vengeance followed soon after and the author constructs, in harrowing detail, the methodology of revenge. Guns, knives, pick-axes and truncheons were handed out to 'repression squads' consisting of black-shirted militias and Italian civilians, who, working in concert with armed soldiers and *carabinieri*, attacked defenceless Africans.

The victims were stabbed, bludgeoned and incinerated. Flamethrowers were used to set fire to cottages dotted around Addis Ababa in which thousands of innocents - defenceless children, women and the elderly- were immolated. Campbell estimates that 18-19,000

people were killed in Addis Ababa out of a population of 100,000.

The merciless and unrelenting nature of the violence is underlined by the fact that the pogrom continued even after Mussolini sent word for the killings to stop on the day Graziani had awoken from his coma.

Image on the right: Marshal Rodolfo Graziani



Graziani ordered Guido Cortese, the local leader of the Black Shirts, to halt the slaughter. But Cortese had promised his underlings three days, and so the murders, centred now in the outlying suburbs where they were not as visible to the party leadership, continued until the Sunday evening. This marked the first phase of the genocide. The Italian authorities then targeted Ethiopia's 'nobles and notables'. Travelling 'Caravans of Death', consisting of portable gallows, were used to hang influential members of the community including those of the aristocratic class. The author provides evidence ascertained from the national archives in Rome that this was not an improvised policy but had in fact been planned in advance. There had been a stated policy of the fascists to behead the intellectual leadership of Ethiopia, a cadre of persons specifically selected by Haile Selassie to be educated in European and North American institutions.

The rounding up and summary execution of many of this elite who were referred to as the 'Young Ethiopians' fulfilled an order given by Mussolini on 3 May 1936.

Again, it is worth reminding that the merciless forms of homicidal violence employed by the Italians and their attendant rationales presaged their implementation by the Fascists and Nazis in impending war in the European theatre.

The destruction of the social elite -the 'Young Ethiopians'- with the objective of leaving an occupied population rudderless and more malleable to subjugation, mirrored the *Intelligenzaktion* employed by the Nazis in Poland which targeted Polish teachers, priests and doctors.

Also, the merciless retribution employed not only in Addis Ababa, but extended to the ruthless destruction of the priests of the monastery of Debre Libanos who were suspected of having harboured Graziani's assailants.

And of course, the initial invasion of Ethiopia which featured the merciless aerial bombardment of towns and villages predated the notorious bombings by the Luftwaffe of republican enclaves in the Spanish Civil War, during which the *Aviazione Legionaria* of the Italian Air Force was responsible for the deliberate targeting of civilians in Barcelona.

Campbell brings the reader's attention to the reasons for Western silence and inaction at the time of the Addis Ababa Massacre. The evidence he provides shows that information compiled by foreign diplomats and journalists in relation to the atrocity was actively suppressed in the futile hope of keeping Mussolini from entering into a military pact with Hitler.

He also addresses the issue of why figures such as Graziani and Cortese were not made subject to war crimes trials, did not face the same punishment as the likes of General Hideki Tojo and SS-Obergruppenfuhrer Karl Hermann Frank did. The answer is simply that the dawning of the Cold War and the fear that Italy could fall into the hands of communists meant that figures associated with fascism needed to be preserved.

A war times trial in East Africa along the lines of the ones in Nuremberg and Tokyo would have been considered impolitic given that it would in essence have presented a situation where black Africans were prosecuting white Europeans – an affront to the sensibilities of the time when most of the black and brown world was still under European colonial rule. Ethiopia was thus denied membership of the United Nations War Crimes Commission.

Selassie's ostensible act of magnanimity in forbidding reprisals and calling for reconciliation can be understood as a pragmatic response to British pressure consisting the threat not to support Ethiopia in its claims over Eritrea and the Ogaden region if it insisted on pressing its claim for a war crimes trial. He was also keen to recommence his programme of modernisation, in regard to which he would need Western assistance.

The book achieves a great deal. In overcoming the formidable obstacles related to the destruction of original sources of information and the passage of time, Campbell puts a lie to the idea of Italy having governed itself and others through a form of 'benign' fascism.

Silvio Berlusconi's description of the fascist regime's internment camps as having been 'like holiday camps' does not reflect the brutal circumstances in operation at the concentration camps to which Ethiopians were sent during the period of Italian occupation: Danane in the Ogaden region and Nokra in the Dahlak Archipelago.

The book offers confirmation of high-level Vatican support for the Italian conquest which many priests considered to be a 'holy mission'.

For while the rationales for the colonisation of Ethiopia encompassed the racial doctrine of subjugating a people considered as being of an inferior race, as well as serving as a revenge for the Italian defeat suffered in 1897 at the Battle of Adowa, some within the higher echelons of the Roman Catholic Church considered the Ethiopian Christian Orthodox Church to be a heretical institution.

This research also exposes a chapter of Italian history which has been practically expunged. The unexpurgated truth regarding Italy's legacy of violent colonial rule in East Africa, as well as its military adventures in the Balkans, has never been made the subject of public debate.

Instead a combination of the institutions of the state, the media and academia has propagated the myth of Italy as having been solely the victim of fascism. An early indication of the sensitivity about these matters came in the 1950s when the makers of a film depicting the Italian invasion of Greece were arrested and jailed.

Also, a 1981 Libyan-financed movie entitled *The Lion of the Desert*, which depicted

Graziani's pacification of Libya was banned from Italian cinemas. Academic inquiry into Italy's colonial policies is seemingly *verboden* (forbidden). Historians such as Angelo Del Boca, who have examined Italy's colonial crimes, have been subject to obloquy. Italy has in effect remained a nation in denial. The book puts firmly in the public domain a groundbreaking work of history that will add to the overall understanding of how the war impacted on Africa, which for the most part is dominated by renditions of British battles with Italian and German armies in the North African desert.

The Addis Ababa Massacre: Italy's National Shame is a magisterial work which deserves the attention of a wide audience as it provides a sober yet spellbinding narrative of one of the era's greatest desecrations of humanity.

While some may choose to accuse the author of being overtly prosecutorial, it would be more accurate to describe it as a project which sets the record straight. It points the finger and is accusatory but is by no means defamatory.

That the massacre of Addis Ababa is not as firmly imprinted in the consciousness of history on par with the massacres of Katyn, Babi-Yar and Nanking is an injustice, and with this book, Ian Campbell has played a part in correcting this oversight.

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This article was originally published on [Adeyinka Makinde's blog](#).

*Adeyinka Makinde is a writer and law lecturer based in London, England. He is a geopolitical analyst, historian and aficionado of boxing. He is the author of the book *Dick Tiger: The Life and Times of a Boxing Immortal*.*

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