

"AMERICAN BLACKS AND ITALY'S INVASION OF ETHIOPIA"

by Edmund L. Drago*

On June 25, 1935, thousands of blacks swarmed into Yankee Stadium to see their champion "the Brown Bomber," Joe Louis, fight Italian champion Primo Carnera. Likewise, a goodly portion of New York's Italian population was present to cheer on its ethnic idol. Police patrolled the event, fearful of a full-fledged riot. Black-Italian relations were strained taut by Italy's decision to invade Ethiopia.¹ For many blacks at the Stadium, indeed, all over America, Ethiopia and Haile Selassie were a symbol of black power and resistance to white aggression as embodied by Italy and its Fascist leader Benito Mussolini. The boxing match personified this struggle.

Black intellectuals, exemplified by the black press,² strongly sympathized with the besieged Ethiopia and vociferously opposed Italy's imperialism. "[T]he 'Carnera' of Italy, Benito Mussolini," *The New York Age* reported, "continues his vitriolic threats to Haile Selassie, Emperor of Ethiopia, who refuses to bow before the loquacious dictator. Maybe Joe Louis' prowess can be repeated in Ethiopia."³ The comparison between Ethiopia's defiance and the 190 pound Brown Bomber successfully flooring the 260 pound Italian giant was also too overwhelming for the other black newspapers to ignore. "Ethiopia Stretched Forth A Hand," exclaimed *The Chicago Defender*, "and Italy Hit the Canvass."⁴ *The Cleveland Gazette*, likewise, observed: "It was such a beating as the Italian soldiers, sent years ago to conquer Abyssinia [Ethiopia], received, that 'Mussolini' Carnera got . . . from 'Haile Selassie Louis.'"⁵

Headlines reporting the conflict further illustrated the black press's extremely anti-Italian, pro-Ethiopian stance:

- "Mussolini Drunk with his Power"
- "Ethiopia's Three Latest Victories!" (*The Cleveland Gazette*)⁶
- "Babies, Women Slaughtered as Italy's War of Conquest Rages in Ethiopia"
- "New Italian Atrocities Bared; Rape of Young Girls, Nuns, Exposed"
- "Selassie Traps Italian Army!" (*The Pittsburgh Courier*)⁷
- "Ethiopians Butcher Italians in Surprise Night Attack"
- "Look Out, Italy!" (*The Chicago Defender*)⁸
- "Benito the Assassin"
- "Ethiopians Smash Line of Italians" (*The New York Age*)⁹

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Not surprisingly, the black press was hostile to anybody unsympathetic to the Ethiopian cause. When Herbert Jullian, Harlem's "Black Eagle," returned home disenchanted from a volunteer stint in Ethiopia and openly hoped Italy would win the war, black newspapers described him as "disgraceful," a "traitor," and a "four flusher."¹⁰ Black Congressman Arthur Mitchell, critical of Haile Selassie, was denounced by *The Pittsburgh Courier*: "Congressman Mitchell, in our opinion, deserted the black man at the crucial moment. Trying to win applause from the whites, Mitchell . . . makes his statement on the Italian-Ethiopian war. The statement is just like an Uncle Tom trying to carry water on both shoulders."¹¹ *The Cleveland Gazette* claimed blacks like Julian and Mitchell, "Play Right Into the Hands of Prejudiced Whites."¹² After the Hearst publications blessed Italy's invasion as a crusade to end barbarism in Ethiopia, *The New York Age* editorialized: "The N.A.A.C.P. rightly concludes its protest that 'if your editorial be true . . . Mussolini should then invade America, seize our government and civilize us. Especially in the Southland.'"¹³

The Black press's strong support for Ethiopia reflected a grass roots feeling among American blacks. In New York, Harlem blacks held a mass-meeting to denounce the Italian invasion and to raise funds for Ethiopia. Twenty thousand New Yorkers, white and black, including prominent black leader, Father Divine, marched in Central Park to protest Italy's imperialism.¹⁴ In Ohio, Cleveland blacks formed a "Chapter of the American League Against War and Facism"; blacks in Youngstown met at a local Congregational Church to form the "Friends of Ethiopia."¹⁵ In California, Los Angeles blacks planned a boycott of Italian goods.¹⁶ Black columnist George Schuyler of *The Pittsburgh Courier* reported that this grass roots support of Ethiopia reached deep into America's black communities. "I have not yet met any Negro," he claimed, "who did not want to do something to help Ethiopia. In the most remote parts of rural Mississippi I have found colored people intensely interested in the present struggle and burning to do their little bit to aid the largest remaining independent colored nation in the world."¹⁷

Scores of letters poured into black newspapers supporting Schuyler's observation.¹⁸ A Pennsylvania black asked the editor of *The Pittsburgh Courier*: "The

Ethiopian crisis is serious and those Abyssinians over there need our help. Let us stop talking and raise some funds in aiding them. They are our people and it is no more than right that we should protest and help that little country. Are we going to stand by and see a dark race swept into oblivion?"¹⁹ A Florida black wrote: "I would like to volunteer for army service to aid the Ethiopian cause. I am a married man with a wife and two children, but I am willing to go if I can. Please give me the details."²⁰ Many other blacks also volunteered. In New York and Chicago hundreds flocked to recruiting stations, hoping to enlist (1500 from Harlem alone). Six hundred blacks in Texas and one hundred from Oklahoma proclaimed themselves willing and eager "to spill blood in behalf of our native land, Ethiopia."²¹

Ethiopia, however, was not the native land of most American blacks, and few Ethiopians, if any, considered American blacks their blood relations. "We are more civilized than you are," one Ethiopian told an American black journalist.²² Another Ethiopian suggested American blacks be more properly called "British Slaves of North America."²³ In addition, Ethiopia did not abolish slavery until the middle of the war with Italy.²⁴ Nevertheless, Italy's invasion transformed Ethiopia for many black Americans into a symbol of black resistance to white aggression and imperialism. With Liberia virtually a subsidiary of the Firestone Company,²⁵ they perceived Ethiopia as the last independent black nation in the world. It was psychologically important for them that a black nation be able to survive in a white-dominated world. *The Cleveland Gazette* feared that "Mussolini and his gangster associates will be permitted to destroy . . . the only remaining country in Africa with any real claim to independence."²⁶ Blacks also reflected their Americanism in their support of Ethiopia. They saw Ethiopia as more than a black nation, but a Christian and democratic one as well, battling against the foes of democracy. Ethiopians are the "most democratic people imaginable," black journalist William Brown wrote in *The New York Age*. "If Italy cannot be halted in its nefarious plan of gobbling Ethiopia, the freedom, democracy, language, religion and very being of the world's oldest Christian nation will be swept away at a single blow and by a single crime."²⁷ A black World War I veteran more gruffly stated. "We fought a grim fight of death,