

***Friends of Abyssinia: West Indian Immigrant Mutual Aid Societies
and the Impact of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War***

“Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.”

-Psalms 68:31 King James Version (KJV)

On the eve of Italy’s second invasion attempt on the country of Ethiopia, Trinidadian-born pilot Hubert Fauntleroy Julian arrived in Addis Abba prepared to command the Ethiopian Airforce and aid the Black Empire in its defense. Julian, born in Port of Spain, Trinidad on January 5, 1897, became enamored with aviation as a young boy. As a teenager he immigrated to Montreal, Canada in 1914, where he trained under the tutelage of Canadian World War I ace Billy Bishop.¹ In 1921, he immigrated to the United States, where he would make Harlem, New York his home. Once in New York, Julian quickly became inspired by the Pan-Africanist ideas of Marcus Garvey and joined the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Proudly declaring himself a “Garveyite,” Julian flew his plane over UNIA parades in support. Borrowing from Garvey’s military-like aesthetic, Julian wore a military uniform and adopted a fictional title, renaming himself “Lieutenant Hubert Julian” of the Royal Canadian Air Force. He would also gain the moniker “The Black Eagle of Harlem” from *New York Herald* journalist, H. Allen Smith for the various aerial stunts he performed around the city.²

As the world moved into the 1930s and unknowingly toward another world war, Julian—like most people of African descent—was deeply aware of events occurring globally and closely followed the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. In fact, he had flown to Ethiopia on two separate occasions. In 1930, Emperor Haile Selassie was so impressed with Julian’s transatlantic

¹ Hubert F. Julian and John Bulloch, *Black Eagle: Colonel Hubert Julian*. London: Adventurers Club, 1965.

² David Shaftel, “The Black Eagle of Harlem: The Truth Behind the Tall Tales of Hubert Fauntleroy Julian,” *Smithsonian* (December 2008).

flight and aviation skills, he promoted Julian to Colonel and granted him Ethiopian citizenship. However, Julian was asked to leave when he crashed what was reportedly the Emperor's favorite private plane. Ethiopia had long been a bastion of Black freedom in the African Diaspora and seen as a symbol of hope and freedom from racial and colonial oppression.³ Julian had even named the first plane he purchased in the United States the *Ethiopia I* in 1924.⁴ So on October 3, 1935, when Italian troops under the direction of fascist dictator Benito Mussolini launched a full-scale attack and invaded the only independent African nation at the time, Hubert Julian and the entire African Diaspora took notice.

This article examines how this invasion galvanized groups of Caribbean people within the Caribbean and Diaspora and created a sense of a shared Black experience. Black people throughout the world coalesced around the events occurring in Ethiopia and saw an attack on the African country as an attack of their own liberties. Importantly, this work points to earlier iterations of Pan-Africanism outside of the conventionally thought of 1950s Pan African Movement and highlights the process in which Black identity formation and the subsequent creation of a Pan African community occurred among global Black communities, who used this event to assert their place as members of an African Diaspora. Caribbean immigrant mutual aid societies and benevolent associations in New York City rallied support for Ethiopian troops. Groups such as the Bermuda Benevolent Association (BBA) hosted and attended meetings inviting society members to unite to discuss a course of action to protest the Italian occupation. Members of the BBA also helped to plan a Peace Parade Conference to raise aid for the Ethiopian people in their fight for independence. Other groups collected money to purchase

³ Fikru Gebrekidan, "In Defense of Ethiopia: A Comparative Assessment of Caribbean and African American Anti-Fascist Protests, 1935–1941," *Northeast African Studies* 2, no. 1 (1995): 145–147.

⁴ Shaftel, "The Black Eagle of Harlem," *Smithsonian* (December 2008).

surgical supplies for wounded Ethiopian soldiers. The Italo-Ethiopian War was a matter of great concern for members of the Diaspora that saw the potential fall of Ethiopia as a blow to “the collective struggle for freedom and equality” for people of African descent.⁵

There has been much scholarship written on the second Italo-Ethiopian war, but much of this work focuses on the imperial objectives of Italy in their campaign to create an empire in the horn of Africa.⁶ In many ways, Africa serves as a backdrop for a study of European imperialism and colonialism. Few scholars have examined this topic from a social historical lens that centers the people of Africa and African descent and the impact of the invasion on their community.⁷ I argue that a study of the international Black response to this invasion is significant for several reasons. First, it points to an earlier iteration of Black internationalism and Pan Africanism than is often highlighted. Second, it demonstrates the ways in which members of the African Diaspora rallied around an idea of a shared Black identity that connected global Black communities. Finally, it centers the continued importance of Africa in the discourse on Black liberation and equality struggles for people of the African Diaspora in the 1930s.

The Invasion

On October 3, 1935, under the direction of Mussolini, Italian troops launched a full-scale attack and invaded Ethiopia, despite growing international disapproval. Italian forces had defied international law and indiscriminately used the full force of their modern weaponry, including

⁵ Fikru Gebrekidan, “In Defense of Ethiopia: A Comparative Assessment of Caribbean and African American Anti-Fascist Protests, 1935-1941.” *Northeast African Studies*, 1995, New Series, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1995): 145.

⁶ See Haile M. Larebo, *The Building of an Empire: Italian Land Policy and Practice in Ethiopia* (2006); G. Bruce Strang, editor, *Collision of Empires: Italy's Invasion of Ethiopia and its International Impact* (2013); Robert Mallett, *Mussolini in Ethiopia, 1919–1935: The Origins of Fascist Italy's African War* (2015) and others.

⁷ See William R. Scott, “Black Nationalism and the Italo-Ethiopian Conflict 1934–1936,” (1978) and *Sons of Sheba's Race: African Americans and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-1941* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1993); Fikru Gebrekidan, “In Defense of Ethiopia” (1995); Edward O. Erhagbe and Ehimika A. Ifidon’s “African-Americans and the Italo–Ethiopian Crisis, 1935–1936” (2008).

poisonous gas, on the country.⁸ Many believed this to be direct retaliation for the first Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1896, when Italian attempts at conquest were shut down by Ethiopian forces at the battle of Adwa.⁹ In addition, Italy had a vested interest in furthering its stronghold in East Africa, having already occupied neighboring Eritrea, Libya, and Somalia. Ethiopian emperor Menelik II was regarded as a hero throughout the African Diaspora, as he was able to successfully defeat the Italian army and maintain Ethiopia's status as the only African nation free of European control. Ultimately, cementing Ethiopia's place in the Diaspora's psyche as a symbol of Black resistance to imperialism and white supremacy.

Consequently, the Second Italo-Ethiopian War was a matter of great concern for members of the African Diaspora. Black populations in America, including Caribbean immigrants, saw the Italian invasion and eventual defeat of Ethiopia as a major setback in their collective struggle for freedom and equality, especially during the turbulent 1930s when racial injustice was prevalent in the United States. Leaders like George Padmore believed that Black individuals in the Diaspora must “unite with Ethiopia and declare a ‘Holy War’ against the whites [and] drive them out of Africa.”¹⁰ Arturo Schomburg served on the advisory board for the Ethiopian World Federation, Inc., a Harlem-based organization dedicated to “the cause of right, justice, and independence of Ethiopia.”¹¹ The UNIA provided frequent updates on the war and called for people of African descent to provide aid to Ethiopia: “The hour of negro progress is here and every man and woman of the race must ‘pitch in’ and do their bit to bring everlasting success to

8 William R. Scott, “Black Nationalism and the Italo-Ethiopian Conflict 1934–1936,” *Journal of Negro History* 63, No. 2 (April 1978): 118.

9 Edward O. Erhagbe and Ehimika A. Ifidon, “African-Americans and the Italo–Ethiopian Crisis, 1935–1936: The Practical Dimension of Pan-Africanism,” *Aethiopica* 11, no. 1 (2008): 68.

10 “Letter from George Padmore to Cyril Ollivierre dated July 28, 1934,” George Padmore Letters, MARBD, SCRBC.

11 “Letter dated September 22, 1938 from the Ethiopian World Federation, Inc.,” J. R. Casimir Papers, 1919–1981, Sc MG 110, MARBD, SCRBC.

the scattered children of Ethiopia.”¹² Dominican poet and Pan-Africanist J. R. Ralph Casimir corresponded with Ethiopian minister Dr. Asaj Martin and even sent funds collected from his own Ethiopian Defense Fund. In a letter to Martin, Casimir expressed his sense of international Black solidarity: “I can assure you that the Negroes (Africans and people of African descent) throughout the world are prepared to help Ethiopia in her hour of distress through which I hope she will emerge victoriously to attain a glorious and progressive future.”¹³

The Universal Ethiopian Students’ Association (UESA), established in 1927 by Arnold Hodge, a Trinidadian immigrant in Harlem, mobilized the Black community to fight against imperialism, colonialism, and fascist Italy. The objectives of the group were greatly influenced by the ideals of Ethiopianism, Black Nationalism, the New Negro Movement, Garveyism, communism, and Pan-Africanism.¹⁴ Many African American and Caribbean groups also contemplated boycotts of Italian made products as a show of solidarity against fascist Italy.¹⁵

The range of Black internationalism is also illustrated by buildings in Harlem named in honor of Ethiopian leaders; groups such as the ABB named their headquarters buildings in honor of Ethiopian leaders. Thus, buildings with names like Post Menelik and the Ethiopian Federation Hall were prevalent throughout Harlem.¹⁶

African American and Caribbean newspapers also played an important role in spreading pro-Ethiopia propaganda. Black newspapers such as the *Pittsburg Courier* and the *Chicago Defender* routinely reported on the invasion occurring in Ethiopia to appeal to the sympathy of Black

12 “Pamphlet dated April 1920,” J. R. Casimir Papers, 1919–1981, Sc MG 110, MARBD, SCRBC.

13 “Letter dated October 17, 1935,” J. R. Casimir Papers, 1919–1981, Sc MG 110, MARBD, SCRBC.

14 TaKeia N. Anthony, *The Universal Ethiopian Student’s Association, 1927–1948: Mobilizing Diaspora* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 1, 15, 16, 37.

15 Gebrekidan, “In Defense of Ethiopia,” 148.

16 “Letter dated May 16, 1939,” Membership Correspondence 1935–1970, Antigua and Barbuda Progressive Society Records. MARBD, SCRBC.

Americans.¹⁷ In the Caribbean, the *Jamaica Gleaner* and the *Port of Spain Gazette* also reported on the war with an Ethiopian bias. They routinely painted Benito Mussolini as a war mongering villain and Haile Selassie as a patriotic saint.¹⁸

Caribbean American Mutual Aid Societies

Another group that took particular interest in the Italian invasion was members of Caribbean American mutual aid societies and benevolent associations, who equally lent their support to Ethiopia during the war. These groups hosted several joint meetings of mutual aid societies to discuss a course of action they could take to aid the Ethiopian army. The Bermuda Benevolent Association (BBA), for example, attended meetings hosted by the editors of *The African: Journal of African Affairs*—which was the literary organ of the Universal Ethiopian Students' Association established in 1937—inviting their members to discuss the Italian occupation of Ethiopia.¹⁹ Members of the BBA also helped plan a Peace Parade Conference that met to discuss actions they could take to aid the Ethiopian people in their fight for independence.²⁰ They joined together with other Caribbean mutual aid societies and African American organizations such as the American League for Peace and Democracy. One resolution was to collect money to purchase surgical supplies for wounded Ethiopian soldiers.²¹ They saw this as a tangible way they could lend their support to the embattled nation and further highlighted the very real sense of diasporic connection Caribbean immigrants felt to the African Diaspora in the twentieth century.²²

¹⁷ Gebrekidan, “In Defense of Ethiopia,” 147.

¹⁸ Gebrekidan, “In Defense of Ethiopia,” 148-149.

¹⁹ TaKeia N. Anthony, *The Universal Ethiopian Student's Association, 1927–1948: Mobilizing Diaspora* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 1, 15, 16, 37.

²⁰ “African Journal of African Affairs Letter dated 1936,” Bermuda Benevolent Association Records, 1898–1969, Box 2. MARBD, SCRBC; “Letter dated July 12, 1938 from the American League for Peace and Democracy,” Bermuda Benevolent Association Records, 1898–1969, Box 2. MARBD, SCRBC.

²¹ “November Notes,” Bermuda Benevolent Association Records, 1898–1969, Box 8. MARBD, SCRBC.

²² Bermuda Benevolent Association Records, 1898–1969, Box 8. MARBD, SCRBC.

Ethiopia and its fight against Italy remained a topic of discourse among mutual aid societies for months during the battle and Italian occupation, with Caribbean mutual aid societies giving updates on the war in every meeting.²³ The Italian invasion was one of a series of events occurring in the twentieth century that helped shape a Black international identity for many members of immigrant mutual aid societies who connected not only with other Caribbean mutual aid societies in support of Ethiopia, but with African American groups as well.

²³ Bermuda Benevolent Association Records, 1898–1969, Box 8. MARBD, SCRBC.