

Haile Selassie: Champion of Reconciliation

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The late Emperor of Ethiopia, His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I (1892-1975), may be known for his emotionally charged appeal to the League of Nations in June 1936, but his legacy goes far beyond this one speech. Among his many quotes and discourses, perhaps his most influential and compelling address occurred on May 5, 1941, after he led British, South African, Ethiopian and other African forces into the capital of Addis Ababa and declared victory over the brutal Italian Fascist occupation.

In this article, we examine Haile Selassie's early life and the events that culminated in his May 5, 1941 speech to the Ethiopian people.

The First Italo-Ethiopian War

On March 25, 1889, King Menelik II from the Shewa region of Abyssinia (European for "Ethiopia") declared himself emperor. Barely a month later, on May 2, in an effort to gain international legitimacy, Menelik II signed a treaty of amity with Italy in which the area known as Eritrea was delineated and ceded to Italy in exchange for recognition of Menelik II's rule.

The Treaty of Wuchale, which was executed in both Amharic and Italian, was highly disputed between the two countries. In Italian, the treaty stated that Ethiopia was "obliged to conduct all foreign affairs through Italian authorities, in effect making Ethiopia an Italian protectorate, while the Amharic version merely gave Ethiopia the option of communicating with third powers through the Italians."¹ Menelik II refused to acknowledge the Italian version of the treaty, leaving compliance to be resolved by force.

War broke out between Italy and Ethiopia in 1895 and lasted until 1896. This first war between these countries was historically significant for many reasons. Italy, mirroring

¹ "Treaty of Wuchale," *Wikipedia*, Available online: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_Wuchale.

its European counterparts, attempted to acquire African colonies in a haphazard and tardy attempt at Imperialism. Unfortunately, for the Italians, their attempt at the end of the 19th century was too late in the famed “Scramble for Africa.”

Haile Selassie and the First Italo-Ethiopian War

Born Lij Tafari Makonnen² on July 23, 1892, Haile Selassie had a unique perspective on the First Italo-Ethiopian War. His father, Ras Makonnen Woldemikael Gudessa, was a General and hero of the Ethiopian Army during the Battle of Adwa (March 1, 1896), in which the Ethiopians decisively defeated the Italians.³ Despite the lack of advanced weaponry, the Ethiopians had an enormous manpower advantage. Upon learning of an attack, the Ethiopian force met the Italians head on and, after employing human wave tactics, obliterated the Italians. The Italian casualty rate at the Battle of Adwa was the highest in a single battle by a European power during the 19th century, exceeding the Battle of Waterloo.⁴

The war shaped Lij Tafari Makonnen. He witnessed Emperor Menelik II’s unification of the Ethiopian tribes, and his father’s involvement in the war gave him a front row seat to observe the military and political fervor during this defining era. Tafari Makonnen witnessed the suffering of his people in the name of independence and self-determination. The future emperor also learned from Menelik II the importance of strategic communication as evidenced by his continuation of the aggressive but discretionary policy of modernization. Like Ataturk, both Menelik II and Haile Selassie believed that if the Ethiopians were to defend themselves from European weaponry (kinetic and diplomatic), they too would have to acquire such technology and education.

Interbellum Period and Haile Selassie’s Rise to Power

From 1913 to 1916, Iyasu V served as the uncrowned Emperor of Ethiopia. During this period, Ethiopia was primarily Orthodox Christian. Iyasu V was friendly toward the Muslim community, and there were rumors that he had become a Muslim, a faux pas in Ethiopian noble circles. As a result, Iyasu V was deposed on September 27, 1916, and his aunt, Zewditu, assumed the throne.

In 1916, Tafari Makonnen became heir-apparent to the Ethiopian throne and was officially given the title of “Ras.” Because he was considered a minor, for an extended period of time he was the Regent for Empress Zewditu. In 1923, in his most significant act

² Lij Tafari Makonnen (Haile Selassie) was part of a noble family that traced its direct lineage to the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon of Israel. Later he would assume the title “Ras” (“Head”) instead of “Lij” (signifying a child of noble blood), which would provide the etymologic seed to Rastafarianism. In the Rastafari movement, Haile Selassie is considered the messiah.

³ The Italian forces became the first Western “modernized” army to be defeated by the “savages in Africa.” The Italians were shamed in European imperial circles for their inability to quell the under-armed Ethiopians. Similar to the German Fascists in World War II, many scholars reference this shaming as an instigator for Mussolini’s aggressive actions that led to the Second Italo-Ethiopian War (1935-1936).

⁴ Bruce Vandervort, *Wars of Imperial Conquest in Africa, 1830-1914*, London: UCL Press, 1998, 164.

as Regent, he facilitated Ethiopia's admission to the League of Nations.⁵ The name Haile Selassie ("Might of the Trinity") was bestowed upon him at his coronation on November 2, 1930.

League of Nations

At the League of Nations in 1936, Haile Selassie stated, "It is us today. It will be you tomorrow."⁶ This ominous foreshadowing of the deplorable actions that would later be committed in the name of fascism during World War II is eerie in its accuracy. Only Sir Edward Grey's, "The lamps are going out all over Europe," is comparable in its foreboding nature.

The Second Italo-Ethiopian War (October 1935-May 1936) coincided with Benito Mussolini's rise to power in Italy. Fascist Italy's desire for foreign territories led to aggressive maneuvering that eventually led to the placement of an Italian fort in what was considered Ethiopian territory (as defined by the Italo-Ethiopian Treaty of 1928). Over the next few years, tensions escalated and troop build-up ensued. The Mussolini regime's aspiration to avenge the embarrassment of the First Italo-Ethiopian war finally came to a head in 1935 when Italian troops invaded Ethiopia.

The outnumbered and outgunned Ethiopians were decimated by the Fascist Italians. After much debate, it was decided that Haile Selassie should leave Ethiopia, go into exile with his family and approach the League of Nations for support in the conflict.

Haile Selassie's internationalist perspective and belief in collective security, as demonstrated in his appeal to the League of Nations, are well known. What led him to deliver such a moving and memorable speech? Both Ethiopia and Italy were members of the League of Nations, so how was he able to expose the institution's weaknesses?

Haile Selassie went to the League of Nations on June 30, 1936, with first-hand knowledge of the Fascists' brutal occupation of his homeland. In his appeal, he condemned the use of chemical weapons (namely mustard gas) by the Italians on non-combatants and targets of little strategic importance. Furthermore, he elaborated on the hypocrisy of collective security and the League of Nations itself by noting that the League's lack of involvement in the conflict would immediately nullify the League's existence, based on the principle of collective security. In Haile Selassie's words, "It is international morality that is at stake."⁷

Although he was allowed to address the League of Nations, Haile Selassie did not receive the League's assistance apart from ineffective sanctions against Italy. It is believed that the non-Fascist European powers were too busy trying to strike a deal to limit German

⁵ "Haile Selassie I," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Available online: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/251817/Haile-Selassie-I>.

⁶ "The Lion is Freed," *TIME Magazine*, 8 September 1975.

⁷ Haile Selassie, *Appeal to the League of Nations*, 30 June 1936.

expansion. Ethiopia also asked for assistance from Japan, but to no avail. At the time collective security was a Wilsonian ideal, but self-preservation was the name of the game when it came to the practice of international politics during the interbellum period. With his country under Italian occupation, Haile Selassie remained in exile in Bath, England until 1941.

The End of the Italian Fascist Occupation

The presence of the Italians in Ethiopia was far from peaceful; brutal and barbarous treatment of one's foe became the norm. What started as a remnant medieval tradition of removing body parts from captured enemies viewed as traitors soon escalated into an immoral and unethical genocidal catastrophe. Reports abound that make one question the very value of human life, including the use of mustard gas, forced labor camps, mutilation of corpses, and humans as test subjects. In addition to the horrible atrocities already occurring, the Mussolini regime set forth a policy of terror, ordering the killing of all captured and authorizing the use of mustard gas on a vast scale.

In 1941, Haile Selassie secured British support and undertook a campaign to secure Ethiopia's liberation from the Italians. Ethiopian exiles and British troops secured victory over the Italians in only a few months, and Haile Selassie returned to Addis Ababa on May 5, 1941. In an address to the Ethiopian people, he gave one of the most under-recognized but influential speeches ever given and focused on something his countrymen had been denied under the Italian regime: mercy.

Haile Selassie's Great Speech of Reconciliation

Exactly five years to the day of his exile, Haile Selassie, carrying the Lion of Judah, the symbol of his people, led Ethiopian, British and South African troops into the capital of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa. In a speech, recorded in shorthand by a British reporter, he stated:

“No human lips can express the gratitude which I feel to the merciful God who has enabled me to stand in your midst on this day, of which the angels in heaven and the creatures on earth could neither have thought of nor known about. Before everything else, I want to tell you and to make you understand that this...is a day on which a fresh chapter of the history of the New Ethiopia begins. In this new era, new work is commencing, which is the duty of all of us to perform.”

These first lines of Haile Selassie's speech might refer to the New Ethiopia, but it was indicative of the world. Acknowledging the atrocities committed and calling on his people not to seek revenge, the Emperor continued:

“...[T]oday is the day on which we defeated our enemy. Therefore, when we say let us rejoice with our hearts let not our rejoicing be in any other way but in the spirit of Christ. Do not return evil for evil. Do not indulge in

the atrocities which the enemy has been practicing in his usual way, even up to the last moment.

Take care not to spoil the good name of Ethiopia by acts which are worthy of the enemy. We shall see that our enemies are disarmed and sent out the same way they came. As St. George who killed the dragon is the Patron Saint of our army as well as of our allies, let us unite with our allies in everlasting friendship and amity in order to be able to stand against the godless and cruel dragon which has newly risen and which is oppressing mankind.”⁸

The words, “Do not return evil for evil,” rang true. Ethiopians had been tormented, tortured and dehumanized, yet Haile Selassie asked them to forget the past. Essentially, if his people were to continue to partake in the bloodshed and utter carnage, then they themselves were no better than the occupational force.

This novel and unexpected charity of reconciliation was unprecedented after such brutality. The speech itself is great, but what makes it legendary is what followed. Ethiopians listened to their once exiled leader and, through Haile Selassie’s leadership, the people of Ethiopia were able to attain and maintain the moral high ground. Haile Selassie had returned to power, and with him he brought hope, integrity and an ethical and moral code that not only made him invincible in foreign policy, but a legend for all time and a champion of reconciliation.

⁸ Haile Selassie I, *The Autobiography of Emperor Haile Selassie I: King of Kings of All Ethiopia and Lord of All Lords (“My Life and Ethiopia’s Progress”)*, Volume Two, Chicago: Research Associates School Times Publications, 1999, 161-165.