FOREIGN AFFAIRS

OCTOBER 1935



Inter-Racial Implications of the Ethiopian Crisis

W. E. B. Du Bois

Volume 14 • Number 1

The contents of *Foreign Affairs* are copyrighted.©1935 Council on Foreign Relations, Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduction and distribution of this material is permitted only with the express written consent of *Foreign Affairs*. Visit www.foreignaffairs.com/permissions for more information.

INTER-RACIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE ETHIOPIAN CRISIS

A Negro View

By W. E. B. Du Bois

THE hands which the Land of Burnt Faces is today stretching forth to the God of Things-that-be are both physical and spiritual; and today, as yesterday, they twine gnarled fingers about the very roots of the world. Physically, Ethiopia's fingers are those rough mountain masses of Northeast Africa which form the defensive rampart of the continent and against which Egyptian and Persian and Turk, British and French and Italian, have so far hammered in vain. It is a great pear-shaped mountain mass, cut into island-like sections which are separated by deep gorges and ravines. "It looks," says the traveller, "like a storm-tossed sea, suddenly solidified." In these highlands both the Blue Nile and the Atbara rise, and thus Abyssinia commands a full half of the waters of the Nile. It was a German who said that the power which held the Abyssinian highlands could dominate the imperialism of Europe in Africa. On these stark physical facts is built a spiritual history almost as old as man and yet half forgotten even in the recent revival of strained interest in the Land of the Blacks.

Why, for instance, is Haile Selassie Emperor of "Ethiopia" and not of "Abyssinia," as his predecessors often called themselves? Abyssinia is a word of Semitic origin, but Ethiopia is Negro. Look at the pictures of Abyssinians now widely current. They are as Negroid as American Negroes. If there is a black race they belong to it. Of course there are not and never were any "pure" Negroes any more than there are "pure" whites or "pure" yellows. Humanity is mixed to its bones. But in the rough and practical assignment of mankind to three divisions, the Ethiopians belong to the black race. In the mountains of Abyssinia the black hordes from the region of the Great Lakes have been mixed with Semitic strains from the shores of the Red Sea, where Asiatic upheavals have driven Jews and Arabs to Africa. The trading station at Axum, near modern Adua, was a gateway for merchants and brought Ethiopia and Abyssinia in contact. This kingdom took its name "Abyssinia" from a Semitic tribe,

Council on Foreign Relations
is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve, and extend access to
Foreign Affairs
www.jstor.org

"Habesh." But the people of Habesh were neither contented nor safe in being simply Abyssinians. Trade and defense forced them toward ancient Ethiopia in the Nile valley, and they disputed with the Arabs and Nubians over the domination of the island of Meroe. Here they claimed sovereignty as early as 356 A. D., and actually destroyed the capital a century later. Greek and Roman influence filtered into Abyssinia from the East, and trade made Axum flourish. Myths about its origin began to arise: the Jewish myth of the descent of its royal house from Solomon; the Negro myth of its descent from Aethiopis, whose tomb was pointed out in Axum.

The new Christian religion came to Abyssinia in the fourth century and thus a third great center of Christianity, after Rome and Constantinople, was established. Then came waves of conquest from the north, and the history of Abyssinia becomes dim and shadowy. As Gibbon has written, "Encompassed on all sides by the enemies of their religion, the Ethiopians slept near a thousand years, forgetful of the world by whom they were forgotten." It was not until the sixteenth century that the Portuguese again brought Abyssinia to the attention of the world, by locating there the source of the legend of Prester John, that ghostly Christian ruler who during the Middle Ages was supposed to reign in Africa or India.

II

This is the land that in 1935 comes suddenly to the world's attention by being involved in war and rumors of war, a threat to the sanctity of international agreements, a crisis in Christianity, foreboding a new orientation in the problems of race and color.

To understand this let us note the changes through which the color problem has passed. The mediæval world had no real race problems. Its human problems were those of nationality and culture and religion, and it was mainly as the new economy of an expanding population demanded a laboring class that this class tended here and there to be composed of members of alien races. The attempt, however, to expand the application of the factory system to the new land of America met difficulty: first, the opposition of right-thinking men and women to the methods of slave trading; and secondly, the democratic movement to lift the laboring classes. With the end of the slave trade and the general emancipation of slaves, the problems of race did not disappear but simply were transformed. The imperialist nations of

Europe first used their African colonies as reservoirs from which to import slaves. But in the nineteenth century they began exploiting their African subjects on a large scale in the development of Africa itself. No problem of race and color need have arisen, under such circumstances, had there not been so wide a difference in cultural level between European and colonial peoples. The belief that racial and color differences made exploitation of colonies necessary and justifiable was too tempting to withstand. As a matter of fact, the opposite was the truth; namely, that the profit from exploitation was the main reason for the belief in race difference. When Germany, Belgium and Italy saw what chances for profit were furnished the other Powers through the possession of colonies, they determined to construct their own colonial empires. Indeed, they felt that if they were to follow the path of modern industrialism, they must do so or die.

Asia, South America and Africa were the areas open to expansion, but in differing ways. Asia, the seat of highly developed civilizations and states, was less susceptible to direct political control by Europe than to its economic tutelage through capital investments. Yet before the war Japan alone seemed destined to escape European dominance. South America was protected from European political interference by the Monroe Doctrine. The white ruling classes there were served by the Indian peons and laborers, against whom racial discrimination was practiced, though not so sharply as in Asia and Africa. In Africa, however, and in the West Indies, the policy was definitely to dominate native labor, pay it low wages, give it little political control and small chance for education or even industrial training; in short, to seek to get the largest possible profit out of the laboring class.

There were of course local variations of this general economic problem. In the United States, chiefly in the South, eight or ten million former slaves formed a laboring class with the nominal rights of free laborers but actually subject to caste. In the West Indies, both British and French, there was a similar condition, except that the exploiting capitalists were fewer and recruited their ranks from among the rich natives. Three black countries were nominally free: Haiti, by revolution; Liberia, by settlement of American blacks; and Ethiopia as a strange survival of one of the most ancient human states.

Cutting across these economic arrangements, buttressed by theories of race and color, ran the effort of the Christian religion

to spread its propaganda among the natives. The result is one of the most astonishing and baffling phenomena of modern times, one which because of the contradictory nature of the facts involved makes it almost impossible to argue about race problems. For instance, it is undoubtedly true that Christian missions were a great factor in the civilization of the African and American Negroes, and that they exercised some influence in Asia. On the other hand, there also is no doubt that industry and economic exploitation continually used Christianity as a smoke-screen to reduce the natives to submission and keep them from revolt. Sometimes the Christian workers were entirely unconscious of their rôle in this respect. At others, they rationalized the whole system and argued that the best thing which could happen to the poor natives was to become docile Christian workers under the profit-makers of Europe. One can see current cases of this sort in the work of the White Fathers in Uganda and of both Protestant and Catholic missions in the Belgian Congo.

Such was the situation at the time of the World War. The war brought about a revolution of thought in regard to race relations. Japan, instead of being regarded as the exception, came to be looked upon as heralding a new distribution of world power. It was no longer considered the destiny of the white race to rule the world, but to share the world with colored races who more and more would become autonomous. The question was how thoroughly and how quickly they could assume self-rule. It was, for instance, generally admitted that when China got over the birth-pains of evolving a new order, she was going to be a self-ruling nation freed of white dominance. When the movement for self-rule in India became formidable, a small measure of self-government had to be granted, with the distinct promise that in the long run India would become a dominion within the British Empire. Haiti, after being occupied by the United States for twenty years, gained a nominal political freedom, though at the price of shouldering an enormous debt which will keep her in chains for many generations. Liberia was practically mortgaged to the Firestone Rubber Company after being threatened with absorption by both France and Great Britain.

Ethiopia, on the other hand, had kept comparatively free of debt, had preserved her political autonomy, had begun to reorganize her ancient polity, and was in many ways an example and a promise of what a native people untouched by modern exploita-

tion and race prejudice might do. Against the current of the new ideals strikes the program of Italy — a program conceived in the worst of the prewar ideology. It accuses Ethiopia of savagery because she is not an industrialized state and because she still harbors the institution of domestic slavery, forgetting that the slavery which survives in Ethiopia has nothing in common with the exploitation of slaves through the slave trade or modern industrialism. Italy proposes openly to deprive this African people of its land, always the first step toward rendering them economically and politically helpless. This was one of the first measures taken by England, France, Portugal and Belgium to establish their economic power in Africa. In India and in China it lies at the bottom of economic exploitation. But in most of these cases the process is hidden by legal phrase and chicanery. Seldom has it been so openly and brazenly declared as in the present case where Italy simply says that she needs the land of the Ethiopians for her own peasants.

There seems to be little doubt that the demand of certain states to participate in an increased colonial exploitation of Africa was a principal cause of the World War, and that it heightens the danger of another similar conflagration. Germany before the war had economic footholds in Asia and Asia Minor which seemed to promise well for the future. But she was not satisfied in Africa; she regretted her loss of Uganda and the chance to share in the exploitation of the upper Nile valley. She undoubtedly proposed sooner or later to dispossess Belgium in the Congo, and she did not intend to allow France to monopolize Lake Chad and the upper valley of the Niger. Her determination to accomplish these objects was one of the reasons why she welcomed war.

Today in somewhat the same way Germany is determined to have back her colonial empire and Italy is determined to make France and England fulfill to her the indefinite promises of the Treaty of London of 1915. Toward this end Mussolini and Hitler sought to cement an alliance, but the project was suddenly ended by the attempt of the Nazis to take possession of Austria. This alarmed both France and Italy and threw them into each other's arms, with the result that France withdrew her opposition to Italian expansion in Ethiopia. But if Italy takes her pound of flesh by force, does anyone suppose that Germany will not make a similar attempt? Then, too, there are other fears. The Arabs hate Italy for the ruthless slaughter which accompanied her

seizure of Tripoli and Cyrenaica. Japan has gained a considerable part of Ethiopia's trade, while Indian merchants have invaded all of East Africa. This oriental influx has raised the problem of political rights and civil liberty in an acute form; the white exploiters of Africa have repeatedly asked that Asiatics be excluded.

Italy has now mobilized against Ethiopia, in spite of the League of Nations, in spite of her treaty of arbitration, in spite of efforts at conciliation and adjustment. She does not disguise her intention to seize Ethiopian territory. She may not attempt complete subjugation — the inner citadel is very strong. But annexation of the plateau and economic strangulation would accomplish much that direct force cannot do immediately.

All this is not pleasant reading for those who pin their faith on European civilization, the Christian religion and the superiority of the white race. Yet these are the bare facts. They might be differently interpreted and variously supplemented, yet under any form they remain a story of selfishness and short-sightedness, of cruelty, deception and theft.

III

The probabilities are that Italy, by sheer weight of armament and with the complaisance of Europe, will subdue Ethiopia. If this happens it will be a costly victory, both for Italy and the white world. There will be not only the cost in debt and death, but the whole colored world — India, China and Japan, Africa in Africa and in America, and all the South Seas and Indian South America — all that vast mass of men who have felt the oppression and insults, the slavery and exploitation of white folk, will say: "I told you so! There is no faith in them even toward each other. They do not believe in Christianity and they will never voluntarily recognize the essential equality of human beings or surrender the idea of dominating the majority of men for their own selfish ends. Japan was right. The only path to freedom and equality is force, and force to the uttermost."

Nor will Italy's indefensible aggression prove to the dark peoples their weakness; rather it will point the path to strength: an understanding between Japan and China will close Asia to white aggression, and India need no longer hesitate between passive resistance and open rebellion. Even black men will realize that Europe today holds Africa in leash primarily with African troops, a religion of humility, vague promises and skilfully encouraged

jealousies. One of these days the very troops by which Europe holds Africa may cease to play the part assigned them.

Turning from this drear prospect of blood and waste, suppose we contemplate the possibility that Ethiopia succeeds in repulsing Italy or even in holding her for months in check. This does not now seem probable, but it is possible. What would be the result? A grim chorus from the dark worlds: "The spell of Europe is broken. It is the beginning of the end. White can no longer depend on brute force to make serfs of yellow, black and brown." Such reasoning may be fallacious and fail to accord Europe and the white race due credit for bringing the mass of men into the circle of human culture. But it is inevitable.

Italy has forced the world into a position where, whether or not she wins, race hate will increase; while if she loses, the prestige of the white world will receive a check comparable to that involved in the defeat of Russia by Japan.

Black men and brown men have indeed been aroused as seldom before. Mass meetings and attempts to recruit volunteers have taken place in Harlem. In the West Indies and West Africa, despite the efforts of both France and England, there is widespread and increasing interest. If there were any chance effectively to recruit men, money and machines of war among the one hundred millions of Africans outside of Ethiopia, the result would be enormous. The Union of South Africa is alarmed, and in contradictory ways. She is against Italian aggression not because she is for the black Ethiopians, but because she fears the influence of war on her particular section of black Africa. Should the conflict be prolonged, the natives of Kenya, Uganda and the Sudan, standing next to the theater of war, will have to be kept by force from joining in. The black world knows this is the last great effort of white Europe to secure the subjection of black men. In the long run the effort is vain and black men know it.

Japan is regarded by all colored peoples as their logical leader, as the one non-white nation which has escaped forever the dominance and exploitation of the white world. No matter what Japan does or how she does it, excuse leaps to the lips of colored thinkers. Has she seized Korea, Formosa and Manchuria? Is she penetrating Mongolia and widening her power in China itself? She has simply done what England has done in Hong Kong and France in Annam, and what Russia, Germany and perhaps even the United States intended to do in China. She has used the same methods

that white Europe has used, military power and commercial exploitation. And yet in all her action there has been this vast difference: her program cannot be one based on race hate for the conquered, since racially these latter are one with the Japanese and are recognized as blood relatives. Their eventual assimilation, the accord of social equality to them, will present no real problem. White dominance under such circumstances would carry an intensification of racial differences. Conquest and exploitation are brute facts of the present era, yet if they must come, is it better that they come from members of your own or other races?

To this question Italy is giving a terrible answer. Though the center of the Catholic Church and the home of the Renaissance of modern culture, she says flatly: We are going to subdue an inferior people not for their good but for ours. We are going to take Ethiopia just as we took Somaliland and as England took Kenya. We are going to reduce black men to the status of landless serfs. And we are going to do this because we have the power to do it, and because no white nation dare stop us and no colored nation can.

The moral of this, as Negroes see it, is that if any colored nation expects to maintain itself against white Europe it need appeal neither to religion nor culture but only to force. That is why Japan today has the sympathy of the majority of mankind because that majority is colored. Italy's action in Ethiopia deprives China of her last hope for aid from Europe. She must now either follow Japan or fall into chaos.

In India, Gandhi made one of the finest gestures of modern days toward realizing peace and freedom in a distracted land. To this and other forces England has yielded enough not to endanger the profits of her investors or the domination of her army. Her skilful use of the differences between Mohammedans and Hindus, between the upper castes and the untouchables, between the princes and the popular leaders, may make real progress in India negligible for many generations. The result of Italy's venture must inevitably tend to destroy in India whatever faith there is in the justice of white Europe.

Let us turn now to the Africas, which may be said to include the British West Indies and the Negroes of the United States.

In South Africa a small white minority of Dutch and English descent have already done much to reduce the natives to the

position of landless workers. They propose to further this degradation by drastic means; to deprive of the right to vote even those few educated Negroes who now enjoy the franchise; and to continue to deny the colored population any representation in the legislature. Educational facilities for the blacks are to be increased very slowly, if at all. All this is to be done with the intention of forming an abject working class below the level of the white workers. This program the Union of South Africa is enforcing not only on its own black citizens but on those of its mandate, South West Africa. In order to make it uniform, the Union is trying to obtain control of the British colonies in Basutoland and the Rhodesias, thereby consolidating the serfdom of the black man in South Africa. Italy now proposes to do exactly what South Africa has done without the frank Italian statement of aims. South Africa rightly fears resentment and disillusionment among her own blacks, who are still being fed with the idea that Christianity and white civilization are eventually going to do them justice. For the more radical natives and the few with education, the Italian program merely confirms their worst fears.

British East Africa consists of three parts: Tanganyika, Kenya and Uganda. In Kenya, a system of seizing native land and denying the natives education and all political rights has been persistently followed, with little real change even under the British Labor Government. The whites of Kenya have gone so far as to regard themselves as defending a modern Thermopylae against a new attack from Asia in the form of Indian merchants and Japanese commerce. They openly say that since Asia presents more and more limited opportunities for white exploitation, Europe must concentrate on the domination of African land and labor.

In Tanganyika and Uganda, there have been different degrees of the celebrated British "indirect" rule, namely the method of supporting in power such native rulers as pursue policies favorable to the ruling whites. This method preserves native customs, but stifles reform and keeps education at a minimum. It brings peace, but usually peace without progress. This is the case in Tanganyika; but in Uganda, where there was considerable native culture before annexation, native development may break its bonds and go forward. Such peaceful and natural development, however, depends upon the faith which the people of Uganda have in the justice of the British. Such faith will not be increased by the action of Italy and the hesitation of white Europe. This venture of

African conquest may well bring back to the intelligent people of Uganda a memory of the outrageous way in which Protestants, Catholics and Mohammedans murdered natives in Uganda for the glory of God.

In British West Africa we find the widest development of the principle of indirect rule, which approaches autonomy in some cases. Moreover, these colonies were established and had some political power before the policy of land sequestration had begun. Thus black West Africa owns its own land and this gives it unusual economic power. Nevertheless, legislation is largely in the hands of the governors and the British Chambers of Commerce (a curious political development which has not been widely noticed), and there is in West Africa a continuous, overt, or partly concealed, battle between the educated blacks and the exploiting British. The British have lately tried to circumvent the black intelligentsia by increasing the power of the chiefs, even to the extent of conferring knighthood on two of them. In this situation the action of Italy and the weakness of the League will make a very unfavorable impression. The leaders of black West Africa, some of whom have been educated in the best English universities, will be convinced that the policy of submission and dependence upon the good will of Europe will never insure eventual autonomy and economic justice in black Africa.

French and Portuguese Africa present quite different problems. The French have put forth every effort to make it possible for educated and ambitious natives to be absorbed into the French nation. Contrary to the British custom, the French schools are not blind alleys which prevent natives from going too far in education, but are articulated with the French university system. This does not mean, however, that education is widespread in French black Africa. The exploitation of labor precludes this. At most this liberty means a chance for the few that can take advantage of it; but they are very few, and the result is mainly to drain off and Frenchify the native leadership of the blacks. This class of educated natives becomes a part of the ruling French caste and leaves little to choose between white and black exploiter. The black man educated in France has no native ideals for the uplift of his fellows. There is, in Senegal, Algiers and Tunis, no such color line as one finds in India and South Africa and Sierra Leone. But there is, on the other hand, just as great poverty,

exploitation and stagnation. Will not the masses of the French black world be taught by new white aggression in Africa that leadership from without offers nothing, even though that leadership is placed partially in black hands?

In the Belgian Congo the unrest of the black masses has long been manifest. There the policy has been to educate no Negro leaders and to develop no black élite. There have been fierce native revolts, but there has been scarcely a single instance of an educated black leader whom Belgium has tried to use for the uplift of the black mass. Even without adequate leadership, the unrest will increase.

The mulattoes of the British West Indies, and the richer and more intelligent blacks, have been so incorporated with the ruling British that together they hold the mass of black workers in a vise. The number of voters and landholders is limited. The means of livelihood depend entirely upon the employers, and the wage is low. Masses of the workers migrate here and there. They built the Panama Canal. They work in Cuban cane fields. They came to the United States. The unrest in these islands is kept down only by starvation and severe social repression.

Only a word needs to be said concerning the Negroes in the United States. They have reached a point today where they have lost faith in an appeal for justice based on ability and accomplishment. They do not believe that their political and social rights are going to be granted by the nation so long as the advantages of exploiting them as a valuable labor class continue. Moreover, while some of them see salvation by uniting with the white laboring class in a forceful demand for economic emancipation, others point out that white laborers have always been just as prejudiced as white employers and today show no sign of yielding to reason or even to their own economic advantage. This attitude the action of Italy tends to confirm. Economic exploitation based on the excuse of race prejudice is the program of the white world. Italy states it openly and plainly.

The results on the minds and actions of great groups and nations of oppressed peoples, peoples with a grievance real or fancied, whose sorest spot, their most sensitive feelings, is brutally attacked, can only be awaited. The world, or any part of it, seems unable to do anything to prevent the impending blow, the only excuse for which is that other nations have done exactly what Italy is doing.