**THE SUPPORT OF SYRACUSE’S ITALIAN AMERICANS FOR THE RISE OF FASCISM IN 1930s ITALY AND THE INVASION OF ETHIOPIA**

Joseph J. Heath

**Byline:** Heath is general legal counsel to the Onondaga Nation and Cayuga Nation traditional leadership. He is currently an adjunct clinic professor at Cornell University. His legal career spans 50 years, beginning with work representing Attica prison inmates.

**Summary:** Mussolini’s fascist endeavors in the 1920s and 1930s are connected to the history of Christopher Columbus’ glorification as a hero in the United States and the placement of a Columbus Statue in Syracuse, NY.

In Syracuse, New York, the ongoing efforts to move the honorary statue of Christopher Columbus from a central public space has significant resistance from the Columbus Monument Corporation, led in part by Nicholas J. Pirro, Jr. Mr. Pirro and friends claim the Columbus monument is about the 1930s, and their GoFundMe page is entitled “The 1934 Fund”, with its opening sentence reading: “In 1934, thousands of Italian Americans donated their nickels and dimes to erect a monument in downtown Syracuse, celebrating their successful assimilation as US citizens.” The page also says the Fund was organized by Richard C. Pietrafesa, Jr. and eight others. This ‘1934 Fund” is under investigation by the Attorney General’s Office for apparent violation of New York’s not-for-profit law.

History is complex, and unfortunately, this group seems to know as little about this historic period as they do about the 1490s and the onslaught of violence perpetrated by Spanish and European colonialism. This red paper aims to shed more light on the international sociopolitical context of the 1930s, the rise of fascism in Italy, the brutal 1935 colonial invasion of Ethiopia, and the war crimes committed there by Italian fascist troops. The support of this invasion by Italian Americans from Syracuse is discussed in the context of rising fascism and colonial plunder.

**THE ROLE OF BENITO MUSSOLINI IN THE HISTORY OF THE SYRACUSE, NY MONUMENT:**

Italian Americans in Syracuse had been raising money for decades for the design and creation of this statue and this monument. However, the arrival of the depression, in 1929, resulted in a shortfall of funding, with no money left for shipping the multi-ton monument from Italy. We learn, from the Onondaga Historical Association’s book: *SYRACUSE* *Landmarks–An AIA Guide to Downtown and Historic Neighborhoods*, that the fascist dictator, Benito Mussolini stepped in to bridge this funding gap:

Finally, the Depression made it difficult, if not impossible, to pay for the shipment of the bronze figure and the massive granite stones cut from Italian mountains. None other than Benito Mussolini came to

the rescue by paying the shipping costs from Italy to New York,

and the inscription, “Christoforo Columbo, Discoverer of America,”

is there at his request.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Syracuse community does not benefit from continuing to honor this monument that was supported, in any manner, by one of modern history’s most vicious dictators, particularly given that American soldiers died to liberate Italy from his fascist dominance. It is also telling that Mussolini is said to have been responsible for spreading the “discovery” myth. Fundamentally, we now face a choice of celebrating freedom and democracy or celebrating fascism and colonizer violence.

**MUSSOLINI’S IMPERIAL INVASION AND OCCUPATION OF ETHIOPIA:**

Mussolini came to power in 1922, and by the mid-1930s his goal was to be seen as the man who restored Rome to its ancient grandeur. For this, a new empire was needed and his sights turned to Ethiopia, one of only two countries in Africa not already under some European colonial rule. On October 3, 1935, Italian forces invaded Ethiopian territory. The Italian forces were a well-equipped army and air force with much more modern military equipment than Ethiopia. Italy had 795 tanks compared to Ethiopia’s four, 595 aircraft compared to 13, and 2000 artillery pieces compared to 200.

**SUPPORT OF MUSSOLINI BY SYRACUSE ITALIAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY:**

On May 26, 1936, an article ran in the Syracuse Herald, under the headline: “*300 Italian Women Given Duce’s Rings*.” The article documents a rather remarkable event, which may have been well meaning at the time, but the unpleasant details of which have been exposed by history.

The subtitle of the article was: “*Ceremony Marks Presentation of Steel Rings of Patriotism*”, and it describes an event, blessed by the Catholic Church, but orchestrated to support the fascist dictator, Mussolini and his vicious invasion of Ethiopia. Mussolini had issued a funding appeal to all Italian Americans, to help support his invasion, particularly after limited financial sanctions had been imposed on Italy by the League of Nations, due to international outrage over the invasion and its atrocities.

300 Italian American women from Syracuse donated their gold wedding rings, which were sent to Italy:

As their names were called, the women marched up to a platform

and they were fitted with the new bands to substitute for golden marital rings which they have several months ago sent to Italy to

help Mussolini finance the Ethiopian war.

The steel rings bearing the inscription, “Gold to Our Country” and

the date, Nov. 18, 1935 (marking the date sanctions were applied) were presented by **Joseph Pietrafesa**, chairman of the Italian Red Cross in Syracuse, . . . The rings were blessed by the Rev. Angelo Strazzoni at a mass in St. Peters Italian Church earlier in the day. [Emphasis added.]

Syracuse was not the only city to show such support for the invasion, but opposition to the invasion was also present in other cities. For instance, on May 30, 1936, a United Press story appeared in the Syracuse Herald: “*Buffalo hold Four Protesting at Italian Victory Celebration*”:

Twenty-five persons, both men and women, hold “protest” banners,

attempted to picket the meeting of Federation of Italian American

Societies. The picketers refused to obey police orders to disperse.

Black Americans responded in a sharply contrasting reaction against Mussolini’s invasion. Their public outcry was documented by Prof. Ruth Ben-Ghat (professor of history at New York University and author of the book: “Strongmen: From Mussolini to the Present), in an opinion piece in the [Washington Post on August 3, 2020](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/08/03/):

On August 3, 1935, a day so humid you could taste the air, 25,000 Black and White New Yorkers marched down Harlem’s Lenox venue to protest fascist Italy’s plans to invade Ethiopia. Ruled by Emperor Haile Selassie, Ethiopia was a League of Nations member and one of two African nations that had not been colonized. The urgency of the cause brought together Black labor, religious and pan-African groups, Italian American leftists and the event’s sponsor, the American League against War and Fascism.

Often relegated to the margins of history, the Italo-Ethiopian War

(October 1935–May 1936) brought the war home for America’s

Black communities. It awakened many people to sentiments of belonging and allegiance that transcended national boundaries

and sparked mass protests. Outside the United States, the war also galvanized many in the Black diaspora to the stake of anti-racist

and anti-fascist struggles. . .

For the fascists, occupying Ethiopia was not merely payback for

that humiliating defeat 40 years earlier, but a chance to implement dictator Benito Mussolini’s plan to make Italy an agent of white

racial rescue. . . In 1927, years before Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany, Mussolini warned that white people could face extinction, while “black and yellow people” were “at our doors,” armed with

“a consciousness of the future of their race in the world.”

This invasion played a key role in the advance of fascism and the Axis powers, as it was one of the first invasions by an Axis power. When the League of Nations took very limited actions against Italy for this act of aggression, the green light was on for Hitler’s subsequent invasions of Poland and so many other countries.

[Large demonstrations were held](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/08/03/when-fascist-aggression-ethiopia-sparked-movement-black-solidarity/) in cities across the country protesting the invasion, and Black men and women offered to go fight in defense of Ethiopia. Many have learned of the Lincoln Brigades of Americans who volunteered to fight fascism in the Spanish Civil War, but the history of this African American support for Ethiopia is not well known.

In 1936, Haile Selassie, the Emperor of Ethiopia was made Time Magazine’s Man of the Year for his resistance to the Italian invasion.

**ITALY’S ATROCITIES AND WAR CRIMES IN ETHIOPIA:**

Italy’s invasion and occupation was responsible for massive war crimes and hundreds of thousands of casualties:

The 1935-36 Italian fascist invasion and subsequent occupation of

Ethiopia were accompanied by numerous atrocities: the use of mustard gas, the bombing of Red Cross hospitals and ambulances, the execution of captured prisoners without trial, the Graziani massacre, the killings at Debre Libanos monastery, and the shooting of “witch-doctors” accused of prophesying the end of fascist rule.

The extensive and damaging use of chemical weapons, primarily mustard gas, by Italy is [well documented](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Italo-Ethiopian-war.pdf):

The War is also remembered for Italy’s successful use of chemical

weapons, primarily the blister agent sulphur mustard. The use of sulphur mustard was particularly effective because the Ethiopian soldiers wore traditionally light desert garb that exposed the skin.

In addition, Ethiopian soldiers typically wore sandals or were barefoot. . .

Exposure to sulphur mustard can promote the development of infection by the damage it causes to the respiratory system. It can

also cause genetic mutations and there is strong evidence suggesting that those exposed to sulphur mustard will develop health problems, including chronic respiratory disease, cancer and an increased risk

of blindness. . .

The use of sulphur mustard played an important role in shifting the

momentum of fighting in favor of the Italian forces and in demoralizing the Ethiopian forces. Its use resulted in many long-lasting, painful injuries and in a significant number of deaths.

The advantages gained by Italian forces due to their advanced military equipment and chemical weapons caused massive Ethiopian casualties and deaths, a great many of which were civilians:

 In a memorandum to the Paris conference in 1946, the Ethiopian government enumerated 275,000 men killed in action, 78,500

 Patriots killed in hostilities during the occupation from 1936 to

 1941, 17,800 women and children by bombing, 30,000 people killed in the [Yakatit 12] massacre of February 1937, 35,000 people died in concentration camps, 24,000 Patriots killed in obedience to orders from summary courts, 300,0000 died after their villages had been destroyed, a total of 760,300 deaths.2

**CONCLUSION:**

As we learn more of the destruction of the 1935 Italian invasion, we find lessons which should be helpful today, as communities continue to work collaboratively to find a healing solution to the divisions caused by the Columbus monument.

How will history record the current resistance of a small portion of Syracuse’s Italian American community? Will it show that this group is once again supporting colonialism and its inherent white supremacy, at the expense of so many other nationalities? Or, will they work to positively join the community dialogue to collectively find solutions that heal and unify, by consensus?

We can see from a review of the historic facts that giving money and gold to Mussolini to support this horrific, colonial invasion, was a significant mistake; and it is one from which we should learn. History will also show the errors of the current, stubborn resistance of the Columbus Monument Corporation and their few supporters. Rather than file lawsuits, which divide our community, we can hope that lessons will be learned from history. Instead of minimizing and ignoring atrocious violence, our communities can come together, with one mind, to heal the historic traumas caused by systematic racism and colonialism.

 2 *The Civilizing Mission: Italy, Ethiopian War 1935-6,* A. J. Barker, London, 1968(ISBN 978-0-304-93201-6.

 \*The author acknowledges and thanks Ed Kinane, a long-time peace and drone resistance activist, for the original idea which prompted this research\*

1. *SYRACUSE Landmarks–An AIA Guide to Downtown and Historic Neighborhoods,* by Evamaria Hardin, Photographs by Jon Crispin, Forward by Dick Case; Onondaga Historical Association, Syracuse University Press, p. 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)