

The martyrs of Debre Libanos

Under Mussolini, Christian soldiers obeyed orders to target the Ethiopian church.

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [January 18, 2017](#) issue



Debre Libanos Monastery in Ethiopia. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Owen Barder](#).

Christians have always remembered their martyrs, but they do so selectively. Some martyr stories resonate less with the faithful than others, often because they do not contribute so powerfully to addressing current concerns. Racial factors also play a role in how memories are built and preserved.

Italian television recently broadcast a heartrending documentary about one of the largest single acts of mass Christian martyrdom in the 20th century. This happened in 1937 when soldiers and militias slaughtered some 300 Ethiopian monks at one of the country's holiest religious houses. In this instance, the perpetrators were neither communists nor Islamists but Catholic Italians, serving the fascist regime of Benito Mussolini. That massacre at Debre Libanos was one instance in a larger campaign of several years' duration in which Ethiopian monasteries and churches were systematically bombed and subjected to mustard gas attacks. Outside Ethiopia, the

persecutions remain largely unknown.

In popular memory, fascist Italy has always been regarded as a less pernicious member of the Axis powers, but in his colonial policies Mussolini yielded nothing to Hitler. In 1935, Italy invaded Ethiopia, and in the words of its local commander, Rodolfo Graziani, “the Duce will have Ethiopia, with or without the Ethiopians.”

The savage Italian campaign ultimately killed several hundred thousand Ethiopians—some sources say a million. Graziani envisaged the extermination of all local chiefs and elites, much as Hitler would later attempt in Poland. Given the profound identification of the Ethiopian church with national spirit, Italian forces particularly targeted religious establishments.

Following a 1937 attempt to assassinate Graziani, thousands of Ethiopians were murdered in Addis Ababa on a day that the country still recalls by its date, Yekatit 12. Graziani ordered special retaliation against the monastic house he suspected was involved, namely, Debre Libanos. Founded in the 13th century, the monastery enjoyed immense prestige as a pilgrimage shrine and center of scholarship, and its abbot was the second most powerful figure in the nation’s church.

All the monks were killed, and by a dreadful coincidence the murders occurred on the feast day of the house’s founding saint. Other massacres around the same time killed several hundred deacons and laypeople. (I am using Ian Campbell’s authoritative reconstruction of the incidents.)

People around the world soon found out about these atrocities. Although this was the age before cable news, global media were quite sophisticated, and Ethiopia was a center of political attention. Yet although Americans and French people heard about the mass murders and the gas attacks, they virtually never placed them in a religious context. We hear of Ethiopians being killed, but usually in the context of “natives” or “tribesmen,” rarely as “Christian monks,” still less as martyrs. The political left denounced fascists for their brutality, while many on the right were quite unconcerned about violence against colonial insurgents. Nobody at the time troubled to frame the conflict in religious terms, or to group the Debre Libanos monks with the other Christian martyrs being widely mourned at this same time in the Soviet Union, Spain, and Mexico.

That silence about the religious dimension speaks volumes about the general failure to appreciate the strength or antiquity of Christianity in Ethiopia—or to imagine that

the faith could exist in any authentic form outside the Euro-American world. In that age, African Christians of any denomination were curious and anomalous figures, scarcely to be taken seriously.

By far the most globally minded Christian body was, of course, the Roman Catholic Church, and it was absolutely not going to sympathize with the Ethiopians. The Vatican at this time had good (if not uncritical) relations with Mussolini's regime, and the Italian church passionately favored the war effort in Ethiopia as a manifestation of revived national pride. Some prelates spoke glowingly of the rich opportunities to convert Ethiopian Christians to the Catholic form of the faith. For many Italian Catholics, Graziani's war was nothing short of a modern-day crusade. In 1939, the brilliant fascist propaganda film *Abuna Messias* depicted the plots of sinister Ethiopian clerics against 19th-century Italian Catholic missionaries in the region.

At the time, those obscure African Christians had very few supporters anywhere in the world. One glowing exception was among African Americans, who struggled to show solidarity with Ethiopia's native resistance. But the general lack of attention was reflected in the failure to punish Italian perpetrators after World War II, not even the monster Graziani. A court accepted his defense that he had been obeying orders, and he died a free man in 1955. Nobody seemed to care about those Ethiopian martyrs.

Today, new global conditions must affect our view of past events. A global church must have a global memory. Let's never forget Debre Libanos.

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