

1936

Salim Khayyata, 'Oppressed Ethiopia, or The Start of The Final Fight Against Colonialism in the Period of its Downfall' (Excerpts)

Citation:

"Salim Khayyata, 'Oppressed Ethiopia, or The Start of The Final Fight Against Colonialism in the Period of its Downfall' (Excerpts)", 1936, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Salim Khayyata, *Al-Habasha al-mazluma, aw fatihat akhar niza' li-l-isti'mar fi dawr inhiyarihi* (Oppressed Ethiopia, or The Start of The Final Fight Against Colonialism in the Period of its Downfall) (Beirut: Matba'at rawdat al-funun, 1936), p. alif, jim, dal, ha, zay, ha, ta, ya, kaf, lam. Contributed, translated, and annotated by Cyrus Schayegh. <https://digitalarchive.umd.edu/document/291023>

Summary:

Following a year-long buildup of tensions, Fascist Italy conquered Ethiopia between October 1935 and May 1936 in a brutal war that included the use of airplanes and chemical weapons. Its "success" came 40 years after Ethiopia had defeated Italian troops, making this ancient African center of Christianity a paragon of successful anti-imperialism. The war formed part of broader Fascist Italian aspirations in the Mediterranean and Africa, renewing Ancient Rome's empire. European powers, including the French and British empires, and other countries condemned Italy's attack, and at the League of Nations adopted some economic sanctions against Italy. After all, Ethiopia had become a League member in 1923. But those sanctions were feeble, exemplifying how inter-state power politics could bypass the League's collective security engagements, doubly if an aggressed country was non-white. (In fact, France had signaled it would not react massively already before Italy's attack.) Italy withdrew from the League and concluded separate deals with France and Britain, which above all wished to keep Italy content to deal with the emerging Nazi challenge of the post-World War I order in Germany and on the continent.

However, the war triggered massive protests around the world, most intensely by African and leftist organizations. It was the most serious proof to date of the threat posed by Europe's extreme right-wing-ruled states, especially Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. Arabs, too, commented extensively on this case, as Haggai Erlich's *Ethiopia and the Middle East* (1994) has shown. People who like the Egyptian Yusuf Ahmad had Muslim sensitivities condemned Ethiopia for always having maltreated Muslims and opined that for them, Fascist rule would be preferable. Ahmad's book, *Al-Islam fi al-Habasha* [Islam in Ethiopia] was financed by Italy and praised inter alia by Shakib Arslan (excerpts of a book of whose are included in this collection). Critique of Italy's colonial war came mainly from liberal nationalists and leftists. Among the latter was

Salim Khayyata.

The text printed here is a series of key excerpts from the introduction to his Arabic book *Al-Habasha al-mazluma, aw fatihat akhar niza' li-l-isti'mar fi dawr inhiyarihi* [Oppressed Ethiopia, or The Start of The Final Fight Against Colonialism in the Period of its Downfall]. Born in 1909 in the United States to migrant parents, Khayyata returned with them to Tripoli, Lebanon, in 1922. He became a member of the Communist Party of Syria and Lebanon (CPSL). As noted in Tareq Ismael's *The Communist Movement in the Arab World* (2011), the CPSL was founded in 1924, following French North Africa (1919), Egypt (1922), and Palestine (1923). A writer, Khayyata published inter alia in the leftist journals *al-Duhur* and *al-Tali'a*, both of which he also edited for some time in the 1930s. (This collection's document on the 1939 Anti-Fascist Congress in Beirut is from the latter journal.) Torture in a French prison in Lebanon early on in World War II left him very impaired mentally. He passed away in 1965.

Original Language:

Arabic

Contents:

Translation - English

Introduction and dedication

Oh friend! You asked me to travel to Ethiopia to study her and to enlighten my oppressed Arab people about a brother's cause. You asked me to do this when the last Fascist attack [against Ethiopia] was still in its first stage - when that country was still drowned in the total pitch black darkness of the shadow of the "black continent," hidden behind the curtain of the white conquerors. Those whites, savage nobles (*al-nubala' al-mutawahhashin*), live by sucking the life out of this continent and by spreading ignorance in and around it, making sure that no two oppressed (persons) will meet there or that a free person will meet a brother bound in shackles.

[...]

They say - oh dear Arab who is fighting with the band of revolutionaries for the liberation of your people together with all the people of the world! - they say that Ethiopia is the last independent country in Africa. This means that Ethiopia, together with the Soviet republics and some of its allies, is the last independent country on earth that we know according to the meaning of (the term) independence as we understand it, i.e. independence from the will of colonialism (*isti'mar*) and, in consequence, from capital, the two being two sides of the same coin. ...

I proceeded to investigate what I had heard. I did not leave a bookstore or library, in this city [Beirut] and elsewhere without exploring its shelves to find something instructive about this independent Eastern neighbor ... Based on all of this, it appeared to me that the European and American imperialists, who are incessantly composing hundreds and thousands of books and articles and conferences about every Tom, Dick, and Harry, forgot that in a corner of this inhabited world there is an ancient kingdom that is deep-rooted in its particular civilization and history, clear as daylight in the tragedies of its situation and the life of its inhabitants, and rich in inestimable treasures of nature's gifts on its land. It then appeared to me that the reason for this disregard, for this conspiracy of silence, has to do with Ethiopia being surrounded by colonies while at the same time not being colonized. I found that since the second half of the last century to this very hour, she has been engaged in a violent, deep, many-sided fight with the countries of capitalist conquest. And it is obvious to those who know the viciousness of the imperialists that they follow the principle "silence is worth gold" in these cases.

[...]

I assure you that I could not go to that country [Ethiopia], and the colonialist bands were sharpening their knives. Ethiopia became humankind as a whole, catching those bands in flagranti! Be confident and tell everybody to act according to their conscience of what is love and good.

And if somebody objects to you on your path and asks you "How does an emir from Lebanon talk their language?," then shut him up answering that in Lebanon there are 10,000s of emirs of this kind; and ask if Mussolini represents his people while destroying them and if Shakib Arslan represents the Arabs while selling them out.

[...]

Our turn to write history has come. The times are over when the world believed what people like Lord Cromer writes in *Modern Egypt*, and [what] the brothers Tareaux write about the barbarism of the French colonies and the strength of Nazi Germany, and Asad Beg and the historian Chamberlain on the Russian Revolution, and the newspapers *Le Temps* and *The Times* about the Egyptian and Syrian and Palestinian revolutions. ...

This pithy history of mine differs from much of what we have read in our language. That's because I do not intend it to simply tell a parable-like story (although I do not deny the need for entertainment), or compose a book of sad prose (although it contains numerous occasions for sadness) about the past of the nation (*umma*) and its conquest and bondage and a description of its many-sided conditions.

I intend to learn and teach through the following pages. I take note of what appears to me to be accurate and scientifically correct, according to the law of social development laid out raised by the two teachers, Marx and Engels. Then, I turn to impart to my brothers what I have learned. ... This requires telling the truth, for it clashes with the interests of the rulers and [land]owners, on whose payroll most authors live.

Our turn writing history has arrived! Let's write it well and fast and in a compact manner. This is what I have tried to do. And if was not sufficiently good or fast or compact - then excuse me, for I am still in the stage in which all the effort of human beings is to prepare themselves and their fellow men to welcome the sun of the new morning.