‘With the Abyssinian Armies, in Defence of Africa’s Only Native State’: Varieties of South African Anti-Fascism, 1930s–1960s

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‘With the Abyssinian Armies, in Defence of Africa’s Only Native State’: Varieties of South African Anti-Fascism, 1930s–1960s

David Johnson

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ABSTRACT
Noting the prominence of anti-fascist rhetoric in contemporary South African politics, the article returns to the varieties of South African anti-fascism inspired by the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. Opening with a brief survey of South African support for the Italian invasion, three varieties of anti-fascism are analysed: first, white South African anti-fascism, both Prime Minister J. B. M. Hertzog’s support of sanctions against Italy in parliament and popular anti-fascism expressed in the white English-speaking press; second, black South African anti-fascism as articulated in newspapers like Bantu World and Umteteli wa Bantu; and, third, the socialist anti-fascism of the Communist Party of South Africa (in Umvikeli-Thebe/The African Defender and Umsebenzi), of Trotskyist groups (in The Spark), and of independent radicals. Two subsequent expressions of anti-fascism conclude the article. The first is the anti-fascism of the white South African soldiers who fought in Ethiopia in 1940–1941; the second, the 1966 speech in Addis Ababa by Jacob Nyaose, the Pan Africanist Congress Secretary for Labour on the national executive, which commemorated the South African soldiers who died liberating Ethiopia from fascism.

KEYWORDS
South Africa; Ethiopia; anti-fascism

Introduction

In June 1945, Hannah Arendt concluded her essay ‘The Seeds of a Fascist International’ with the portentous words, ‘[u]nquestionably, fascism has been defeated, but we are far from having completely eradicated this arch-evil of...
our time." Seventy-five years later, Arendt’s warning reverberates in waves of publications warning that the fight against fascism is far from over, with analogies repeatedly drawn between the fascist regimes of Mussolini, Hitler, and Franco in the 1930s and those of today’s authoritarian populist leaders – Modi, Bolsonaro, Erdoğan, Orbán, Duterte, and Trump. Focusing on the United States, historian Geoff Eley argues that ‘the 2020s will not be the 1920s [but] if fascism in that fully realised sense has not yet arrived, its tendential proximity is apparent’, concluding that the current crises call up ‘a different set of coercively authoritarian political interventions and modalities’ that can legitimately be labelled ‘fascist’. Confronting the contemporary rise of the right in Europe, political journalist Paul Mason dedicates much of his recent book, *How to Stop Fascism: History, Ideology, Resistance*, to European fascism in the 1920s and the 1930s before offering the following grim choice: ‘Either we now create the modern equivalent of the mass, cultural [anti-fascist] movement that appeared in France between 1934 and 1937, or we can kiss both democracy and the Green New Deal goodbye’.  

Eley’s and Mason’s fears about resurgent fascisms in the United States and Europe, and their appeals for a revivified anti-fascist movement, have had their South African corollaries. In July 2014, the secretary-general of the African National Congress (ANC), Gwede Mantashe, argued that the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) ‘use uniforms to mobilise in the same way that Hitler used brown shirts in the 1930s […] [T]he paramilitary content of their strategy shows early signs of a rebel movement designed and calculated to undermine democracy and state institutions’. Mantashe’s charge of fascism against the EFF could be read as an ANC strategy both to discredit an increasingly popular rival party and to deflect criticisms of the ANC’s own authoritarian tendencies, but similar accusations against the EFF have been made by many independent pundits. Since 2018, for example, 12 opinion pieces in the online

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newspaper *The Daily Maverick* have repeated Mantashe’s warning. In August 2018, Michael Neocosmos quoted EFF leader Julius Malema’s statement that ‘there’s a group of right-wingers who are being trained by Jews in Pretoria to be snipers’ to caution that the EFF’s ‘combination of militaristic discourses, the willingness to partake in the shedding of blood, vulgar anti-Semitism, and the idealisation of national soil for which one is prepared to die for are common tropes [of] fascism’. In September 2019, Imraan Buccus listed examples of fascism in the global south – in Uganda under Amin; in Latin America under the dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s; in India under Modi; and in Zimbabwe under Mugabe – before claiming that ‘we face a serious threat of fascism’ in both the EFF and the ANC’s pro-Zuma faction. In May 2020, Adam Habib located the rise of fascism broadly, expressing his ‘concerns around the growth of proto-fascist movements in SA which manifest in the existence of both the EFF and in certain far-right political groups in the white community’.

How can fascism in South Africa be opposed? An indigenous non-racial anti-fascism is held up as the essential antidote. Typically concluding with a paragraph summarising what ‘we’ must do to defeat fascism in South Africa, the *Daily Maverick* articles assume that South Africans of all races are opposed to fascism. For Francois Rabie, ‘we are trying to build […] a more humane and caring country that counteracts the forces of fascist regression’; for Richard Poplak, ‘democracy is a custom. In South Africa, as with so many places in the world, that custom is on the brink of disappearing [though] we can try hanging on’; and for Buccus, ‘it is vital that we are not naïve about the seriousness of the dangers we face’, so need to dedicate ‘ourselves’ to fixing the economy, addressing corruption, opposing street mobs, finding credible leaders, and rebuilding the Left. Whether such appeals to an anti-fascism transcending racial difference can transform South Africa’s citizenry today into an effective bulwark against these ominous forms of authoritarian populism – nascent fascism, for Mantashe and the *Daily Maverick* pundits – is the question which provides the context for revisiting the histories of anti-fascism from the

1930s to the 1960s. Focusing on the newspaper coverage of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, as well as significant sequels in 1940–1941 and 1966, the possibilities and limitations of a South African anti-fascist politics are explored.

The case for fascism in Africa, 1935–1936

Before considering anti-fascist opposition in South Africa in the 1930s, the staunch support for the Italian invasion of Ethiopia should be registered. Parliament debated a motion submitted by Dr D. F. Malan, the leader of the opposition ‘Purified’ National Party, which proposed dropping ‘any steps [against Italy], including the application of military or economic sanctions’. Arguing that the South African press had placed itself ‘not at the disposal of the Prince of Peace [but was being used] as an instrument in the hands of the God of War’, Malan insisted that newspaper reports of Italian atrocities had been exaggerated:

In order to create that war psychology, that press has been engaged in making the fullest use of so-called or imagined atrocities, atrocities which, after they brought them to light the first time, always appeared to be less and less real with the knowledge and extra light that was thrown on them. Those atrocities were meant to create a national psychology, which was intended to present the one nation which is concerned in this war and which is and which has a civilisation of 3,000 years behind its back, to the world, as a monster, and to represent the other nation, which is uncivilised, or half civilised and which is generally admitted to be so, on the other hand, as angelic.

For Malan, parliament should interrogate such media (mis)representations, at all times remembering the fear voiced by Smuts that ‘victory by Abyssinia […] can have an injurious effect on the black peoples of Africa, and that it can only encourage them in all kinds of aspirations’. Noting that South Africa’s trade with Italy generated an annual surplus of £400,000, Malan concluded that South Africa’s economy was best served by maintaining ties with Italy. Dr J. G. Strydom took up Malan’s argument, adding that Britain, the Afrikaner’s principal foe and the ‘power sheltering behind the League of Nations’, would benefit from sanctions against Italy.

Such views condoning the Italian invasion received wide coverage in the white press. The Cape Argus repeated reports in Die Burger about dissent in

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13. RSA, ‘Sanctions against Italy’, 32.
14. RSA, ‘Sanctions against Italy’, 35.
15. RSA, ‘Sanctions against Italy’, 100.
Hertzog’s cabinet, which bemoaned the prime minister’s decision to ‘allow South Africa to be dragged into a war in which Britain is involved, even if Britain’s foe is not ours, and even though we have no interest in the matter’. The *Sunday Times* reminded its readers about the application of the Foreign Enlistment Act, which imposed a two-year prison sentence and heavy fine upon anyone fighting (on either side) in the Italo-Abyssinian conflict, concluding with the approving quotation of an unnamed lawyer’s assessment: ‘Nothing can give rise to international trouble more than the headstrong behaviour of some fools who want to join a fight for the fun of the thing’. The *Cape Argus* gave Count Natale Labia, minister plenipotentiary for Italy in South Africa, several columns to justify Mussolini’s actions in Ethiopia. Labia set out the fascist rationale as follows:

> Abyssinia for centuries has been and still is nothing but a conglomeration of savage tribes whose conception and system of life is to fight among one another to secure a commanding power for their respective chiefs and through it the possibility of abandoning themselves to the usual orgy of dispossessing, destroying and enslaving the vanquished unfortunate tribes.

Claiming that since 1933 Abyssinia had committed ‘no less than 90 attacks […] upon subject tribes of Italy’, Labia argued that Abyssinia ‘has shown her utter inability to be anything but a slave-ridden, intriguing, deceitful, provoking and unreliable country’. As evidence, Labia cited Kathleen Simon’s book *Slavery* (1929), which claimed that there were two million slaves in Abyssinia and that Haile Selassie’s personal wealth was derived largely from slave labour. In conclusion, Labia declared that Italy’s occupation was justified because it did no more than extend the principle of European superiority to Abyssinia: ‘The occupation of the different parts of Africa by all the white nations has been justified […] by one principle, and quite rightly too, that it is up to the white nations to civilise the African continent.’

### White South African anti-fascism, 1935–1936

Europeans of widely diverse political persuasions fought against fascism; in the words of Enzo Traverso, ‘it is beyond debate that antifascism contained a plurality of currents (Marxist, Christian, liberal, republican) and did not present a

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South Africa was no different, with anti-fascists from across the political spectrum opposing Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia. Nigel Copsey’s capacious concept of a ‘minimum anti-fascism’, developed to account for the many varieties of British anti-fascism in the interwar years, can accordingly be applied to South Africa, as it accommodates the anti-fascism of the National Party prime minister, J. B. M. Hertzog, of the Trotskyist groups in the Cape, and of the myriad anti-fascist individuals and groups in between.

The Italian invasion of Ethiopia was opposed in parliament by Hertzog and his ruling National Party. For Hertzog, Italy’s breach of the League of Nations Charter was more important than any duplicitous politicking by Britain, as he argued that Italy’s self-interested actions threatened peace amongst all nations and should therefore be resisted:

I say that Italy took certain action there [in Abyssinia], and was declared as having been guilty of a breach of the League of Nations pact. We have the position here that Italy stepped in, and ignored every consideration and stated that it was not concerned with just and moral obligations. What Italy said was, ‘We are only concerned with our own interests’. I contend that never before in the last fifty years have we been faced with such a menace to the freedom of Africa.

Hertzog ended with a terse warning: if no international sanctions were to be imposed on Italy, a ‘pernicious principle’ would be established – ‘that a nation is at liberty to go and take something merely because it requires it for itself’. Acquiescing to such a principle in the Italo-Ethiopian conflict would enable aggressors in the future to invade mineral-rich South Africa with impunity. Speculating upon Hertzog’s motives for supporting Abyssinia, one historian has suggested that his ‘resentment of Italy’s assault on Ethiopia does indeed reverberate with his own history of fighting against British imperialism in South Africa’. The debate was settled in Hertzog’s favour by 93 votes to 14.

The white English-language press gave extensive coverage to individuals and organisations condemning Italy’s actions. A wide variety of reasons for supporting the Ethiopian cause were expressed. The Rand Daily Mail in July 1935 reported on General J. A. Royston’s plan to raise a brigade of unemployed white ex-servicemen to fight against the fascist invasion, explaining, ‘[i]t is far better for these gallant men to face shot and shell and die on the battlefield than to have to face the pick and shovel which is most degrading in a black

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25. RSA, ‘Sanctions against Italy’, 58.
26. RSA, ‘Sanctions against Italy’, 58.
man’s country’. Rather different priorities in the fight against fascism were suggested in a letter from Elsie M. Ireland (Order of the Golden Age, Natal Branch), who protested against the export to Ethiopia of one thousand South African mules for the Italian army. Not only did exporting the mules compromise the peace efforts of the League of Nations, but ‘these mules are to be made to swim ashore through shark-infested waters […] That they should be subjected to the risk of being mutilated by sharks must surely be quite intolerable to any Christian conscience’. The Sunday Times in August 1935 reported a speech by General J. C. Smuts criticising Italy for its aggressive acts ‘that might disturb the present orderly relations [in South Africa] between white and black’. In October 1935, the Rand Daily Mail reported on five white women’s organisations petitioning the minister of agriculture to subsidise the lower grades of meat ‘for the benefit of our own poor, both European and native, rather than for the maintenance of foreign [Italian] troops in North East Africa’. A week later, the Rand Daily Mail recorded the Bishop of Johannesberg’s support for the League of Nations:

Italy […] has betrayed the cause of civilisation, and the hopes of the future, and it is as proper and desirable that the League of Nations should intervene against her as that a policeman should intervene, by force if necessary, to prevent the commission of a crime.

Black South African anti-fascism, 1935–1936

Mussolini’s campaign in Africa provoked outrage in Europe and North America, with leading anti-colonial figures like C. L. R. James organising mass protests in solidarity with the beleaguered Ethiopian nation. Building upon the long history of black South Africans looking to Ethiopia for

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29. ‘S. A. General Wants to Fight for Abyssinia’, Rand Daily Mail, 23 July 1935, 11. A report a week later recorded that Haile Selassie had sent a telegram to Ethiopia’s representative in Cape Town requesting that only ‘European officers’ be enlisted to fight against the Italian army (‘Ethiopia Refuses Foreign Offers of Enlistment’, Rand Daily Mail, 10 August 1935, 11).  
inspiration, pro-Ethiopia mass meetings and embargoes on Italian economic activities were organised and reported on in both the international press and the white South African press. In September 1935, the Cape Argus reported on a meeting by the League Against Fascism and War, an organisation of 23 trade unions and left-wing organisations, where the ‘Hands off Abyssinia’ Committee was constituted and where the committee’s chair, W. H. Andrews, ‘likened the dispute to the quarrel between the wolf and the lamb’. The Rand Daily Mail also covered the impact of the war on black South Africans: a letter to the editor from a reader describing themselves as ‘a member of the non-European section of the population’ noted: ‘Now Italy, a civilised country, has acted worse than a barbarous and backward nation (as she calls Abyssinia); a report on a mass meeting in Port Elizabeth recorded that ‘over 2,000 New Brighton natives will ask the Government to allow them to join the Abyssinian Army as “descendants of Ethiopians”’; and a report on a meeting of the chiefs in the Klip River area concluded with the declaration that ‘we fear for the safety of the millions of poorly-armed and unwarlike Africans [and] have therefore decided to offer morning prayers daily immediately before sunrise for peace and for the cause of the helpless Africans whose territory has been invaded’.

South Africa’s black newspapers published many reports, editorials, and letters attacking Italy’s actions. The biggest-selling newspaper aimed at black readers was Bantu World, started in 1932 by white businessman Bertram Paver and modelled on British tabloids. Bantu World followed the build-up to the war in Ethiopia closely. In July 1935, a report on the burning of an effigy of Mussolini on the steps of the Johannesburg City Hall claimed


37. ‘Against War in Abyssinia’, Cape Argus, 11 September 1935, 4. The meeting was also reported in ‘Hands Off Abyssinia: Against War in Africa’, Umsebenzi, 21 September 1935, 2.

38. ‘Italy’s Treatment of Abyssinia: Non-Europeans Deeply Moved by the War’, Rand Daily Mail, 10 October 1935, 4.


that many white ex-servicemen in the crowd ‘were eager to join the Abyssinian Army in the event of war breaking out’.43 A month later, Bantu World reported on the global and local support for Abyssinia, with articles on protest meetings in London, Cairo, Harlem, and Somaliland;44 on the petition to the minister for native affairs on behalf of 6,000 black South African seeking to enlist in the Abyssinian army; and on Chief Walter Kumalo of Ladysmith ‘offering to raise an impi of Zulu warriors to serve in Abyssinia’.45 In September, a letter from W. M. B. Nhlapo quoted Heinrich von Treitschke and August Comte to bolster his denunciation of Italy’s misdeeds, concluding with the prayer, ‘Father lead the Abyssinians, as thou didst lead the children of Israel. Shield them in this time of storm. Guide them to victory and to maintain their independence which is their precious right through thine providence’.46 A week later, Bantu World published S. M. Stanley Silwana’s poem ‘I sing of Africa’, which opens with the lines, ‘I sing of Afric’ my Native land, | Let England hear if she hath ears. | Ethiopia yet shall stretch her hand | To vanquish all who caused her tears’; and reiterates in conclusion the loyalty Ethiopia inspires: ‘Land of my heart I pledge to thee | My faith and my strength and my all | And when at last I shall cease to be | May it be for thy last freedom’s call’.47

In the opening weeks of the war, defiant messages from Addis Ababa were relayed to South African readers, as in the report on Waizer Chamerga Gaby, a wealthy woman leader who was leading 15,000 Abyssinian soldiers into battle with the words, ‘We do not fear the Italians […] They are effeminate, emotional and excitable and cannot cope with the bravery of hardened African warriors’.48 Accompanying such optimistic predictions, however, were more sober assessments of Italy’s military superiority,49 as well as editorials exposing the economic motives driving the invasion: ‘Fundamentally speaking Italy is attacking the Ethiopians simply because she wants to take possession of Abyssinia so as to exploit her undeveloped resources’.50 In December 1935, Bantu World published arguably its most powerful attack on Italy, S. E. K. Mqhayi’s poem ‘Umbongo Nge Abyssinia’ (Poem about Abyssinia), which expresses the hope that snakes, scorpions, and spiders would assail the Italian troops and that aeroplanes would be provided to fly Xhosa warriors to Abyssinia to fight alongside their brothers.51

43. ‘Signor Mussolini Rattles the Sword’, Bantu World, 20 July 1935, 1.
44. ‘Mussolini Determined to Grab Abyssinia for Fascist Empire’, Bantu World, 24 August 1935, 1.
50. ‘Italy’s War of “Civilisation”’, Bantu World, 12 October 1935, 8.
In contrast to the consistent anti-fascist rhetoric of Bantu World, Umteteli wa Bantu at first provided more equivocal coverage. Published by the Chamber of Mines, specifically by its Native Recruitment Corporation, Umteteli initially combined its attacks on Mussolini with criticisms of slavery in Ethiopia and praise for Britain’s diplomacy. For example, an editorial in July 1935 counselled readers that ‘[c]ertain considerations should not be overlooked by Africans themselves; and one of these is that the Abyssinians are slavers who raid African tribesmen on their borders’; and a month later, the editorial concluded with the soothing words, ‘Britain meanwhile continues to fight for peace, and make her influence felt on behalf of justice. In this role, and in her traditional part of protector of the coloured races, she continues to function’. Worried about the impact of war in Ethiopia on South African race relations, Umteteli repeatedly hailed Britain’s benevolence, expressing the ‘hope that leaders of African opinion will make it clear that most of the white races are striving hard to avert war [in Ethiopia]: and that there is no cause for race feeling in South Africa’. Once the war began, however, Umteteli adopted an uncompromising pro-Ethiopia stance, criticising Britain’s failure to cut off Italian ships destined for Ethiopia in the Mediterranean and highlighting any news of successful acts of Ethiopian resistance. A report on a pro-Ethiopia mass meeting in Cape Town held in October 1935 encapsulates the change from the earlier reports:

All the speakers blamed Fascism in particular, and capitalism in general, for the present war, and urged the workers of the world to unite in the face of serious danger. One speaker drew a parallel between the present Italian invasion of Abyssinia and the treatment of Natives in the Union. An Italian defeat in Abyssinia, he said, would weaken Fascism in Italy and Germany, and in any other countries where it had taken root.

Even as an Italian victory looked inevitable, Umteteli continued to excoriate fascist empire-building, arguing,

[i]n this most unrighteous war, [Italy] has been justly stigmatised as an aggressor. She has jeopardised the peace of Europe. Our fervent hope is, therefore, that she will not succeed in the present campaign; that retribution will come to her by way of defeat.

52. ‘May the League Bring Peace!’, Umteteli wa Bantu, 27 July 1935, 2.
55. ‘Fighting Said to Have Begun’, Umteteli wa Bantu, 4 October 1935, 1.
56. As late as December 1935, for example, a setback for the Italians was hailed with an optimistic headline: ‘ Mussolini Facing Defeat’, Umteteli wa Bantu, 7 December 1935, 3.
57. ‘Signor Mussolini Burned in Effigy: Strange Scenes in Cape Town’, Umteteli wa Bantu, 19 October 1935, 4. The meeting had also been reported in the white press: ‘Mussolini Effigy Burnt’, Rand Daily Mail, 14 October 1935, 2. Similar meetings were held across the country, including in small towns like Vryheid (see ‘Italian Boycott’, Umteteli wa Bantu, 26 October 1935, 5).
58. ‘Italy Rejoices too Soon’, Umteteli wa Bantu, 22 February 1936, 2.
As reports of the Italian use of poison gas against Ethiopian civilians filtered through, Umteteli’s rhetoric hardened further: ‘By adopting these methods in the name of “civilisation”, [the Italians] have betrayed that civilisation which they claim to be bringing to the last Black Empire in Africa’.59

Communist anti-fascism, 1935–1936

A year before the Italian invasion, Umsebenzi, the mouthpiece of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), argued that fascism was already entrenched in South Africa: ‘[S]o far as we natives are concerned, we have always been treated in a fascist manner [and the government] needs only to carry out in full the anti-Native laws and you have fascism pure and simple’.60 Defining fascism ‘as a form of self-defence and attack on the part of the bourgeoisie against the revolutionary proletariat’, Umsebenzi distinguished between fascism, on the one hand, as a ‘reactionary movement of the capitalist class, the open dictatorship of the bourgeoisie against the working class [directed against] the national liberation struggle of the oppressed and exploited Native toiling masses’, and, on the other, as an authoritarian government scapegoating the Jews ‘for the failures of the capitalist system’.61 How to fight fascism in South Africa was decisively framed from 1935 onwards by the Comintern’s New Line, which prescribed that communists the world over should seek alliances with liberals and social democrats in order to form a broad popular front. In the words of historian Anson Rabinach, the Comintern sought to effect ‘a marriage of convenience between anti-fascism and philo-Sovietism’.62

The CPSA seized upon the coincidence of the New Line and the spontaneous and widespread surge of anti-fascist sentiment provoked by the Italian invasion. Already providing extensive coverage of the Italo-Ethiopian war in Umsebenzi, the CPSA started a second newspaper dedicated specifically to the war, Umvikeli-Thebe/The African Defender, which published 12 issues between January 1936 and November 1937.63 The same people – Edward Roux, Winifred Lunt (Eddie and Win Roux), and Gaur Radebe – produced nearly all the content for both publications. However, despite Umvikeli-Thebe owing its raison d’être to

59. ‘Civilisation by Poison Gas’, Umteteli wa Bantu, 4 April 1936, 2.
the Italo-Ethiopian conflict, *Umsebenzi* carried the more extensive coverage of the war in English, including in-depth articles largely absent from *Umvikeli-Thebe*, which compensated by providing more visual content – both cartoons and photographs of the war. Compared to the 9 short articles in English on the war in the 12 issues of *Umvikeli-Thebe*, there were 45 articles in *Umsebenzi* during the same period. The April 1936 issue of *Umvikeli-Thebe* acknowledged that the Italian invasion of Ethiopia had increased sales dramatically: ‘[T]he war in Abyssinia has stimulated an interest in the Bantu press […] Many [black newspapers] have doubled their circulation on the strength of it […] Mussolini without knowing it, has caused an important social development in South Africa’. By May 1936, however, *Umvikeli-Thebe’s* promising start had faltered:

When this paper started there was a tremendous demand for Abyssinian war news and pictures. We had no difficulty in selling thousands of copies at twopence each […] But in March came a terrible slump. With reports of Abyssinian defeats interest waned rapidly.

The July 1936 issue confirmed that the fates of Ethiopia and *Umvikeli-Thebe* were bound together, apologising to its readers that the eight-page newspaper had been reduced to four pages.

In its analysis of the Italo-Ethiopia conflict, the CPSA treated as one the fascist invasion in East Africa and the passage of the segregationist ‘Hertzog Bills’ in South Africa:

The Ethiopians are fighting to save their country from the Italian robber imperialists. They do not want to be ruled by white bosses, to have to carry passes, to be treated like dogs in their own country. We black people of South Africa know what it is to be under the heel of imperialism. Therefore we are prepared to defend Abyssinia […] The fight against the robber laws of Hertzog, Smuts and Pirow is at the same time the fight in defence of Abyssinia. We want freedom for black people in Africa!

The argument that racial oppression in South and East Africa was rooted in the same imperialist pathology was then extended to all varieties of European colonialism:

[A]trocities have not only occurred in the French colonies in Africa. The Portuguese, Belgians, Germans, and English have often adopted similar methods. Today the Italian imperialists are bombing hospitals and undefended towns in Abyssinia […] Imperialism is the same under any flag.

*Umsebenzi* also provided a longer historical perspective on Britain’s colonial interests in Ethiopia, emphasising Britain’s hypocrisy in the past and the

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66. ‘Defend Ethiopia and the Cape Native Franchise! Down with the War and Hertzog’s Slave Bills’, *Umvikeli-Thebe/The African Defender*, January 1936, 1.
Britain is bitterly opposed to the Italian invasion of Abyssinia – despite the fact that Italy today is only doing what Britain did to South Africa, West Africa, India, and many other colonies at an earlier stage; and its immediate economic motives in backing the League of Nations’ sanctions against Italy: ‘[Britain] is keenly interested in the water of Lake Tsana and the Blue Nile [in Abyssinia], which is used for irrigating the British cotton fields in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan.’68 With its focus exclusively on the present, Umvikeli-Thebe rejected as ‘silly talk’ Italian allegations that the Ethiopians had killed unarmed Italian road-builders, declaring that ‘these invaders are not behaving like civilised gentlemen,’ 69 as their use of poison gas confirmed that ‘Mussolini is now resorting to this form of terrorism.’70 As the tide turned against the Ethiopians, Umvikeli-Thebe counselled greater vigilance to check the rise of fascism in South Africa, which was exemplified by Hertzog’s disenfranchisement of Africans and his attacks on trade unions. However, as oppressive as South Africa was under the Fusion government, Umvikeli-Thebe argued that far worse would follow if the fascist elements represented by Malan and Pirow seized power: ‘If fascism comes to this country it will mean the even more open and brutal suppression of the African people. Whereas at present the African workers, peasants and intellectuals are scourged with whips, they will be scourged with scorpions.’71

The anti-fascist rhetoric of South Africa’s Communist press concealed Soviet realpolitik, which prioritised its economic rapprochement with Italy at the expense of campaigning publicly against Italy’s land-grab in the Horn of Africa. In May 1935, George Padmore criticised the Soviet Union’s silence on Ethiopia, describing its failure to condemn the Italian invasion in the League of Nations as a betrayal of the international anti-imperialist movement, and in October 1935 an editorial in the radical US magazine The Crisis accused the Soviet Union of selling coal and wheat to Italy for use in the war in Ethiopia.72 Such criticisms were echoed in the newspapers of South Africa’s small anti-Stalinist left, which focused upon the limitations of the popular front as a strategy for fighting fascism in Africa. The Spark, the publication of the

68. ‘A Disturbed “Equilibrium”: Great Britain, France and Italy Embroiled’, Umsebenzi, 22 February 1936, 1.
69. ‘What is Happening in Abyssinia?’, Umvikeli-Thebe/The African Defender, April 1936, 1.
Cape-based Trotskyist group The Workers Party of South Africa, attacked the CPSA’s obeisance to Comintern policy (in this case the New Line), mocking the CPSA-backed ‘Hands Off Abyssinia’ campaign which accommodated organisations ranging from ‘the Fabians to the Young Men’s Christian Association, and from the University Women’s Association to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals’. Quoting the CPSA’s desire to include all who value ‘democratic rights’ within its broad coalition opposing fascist expansionism in Ethiopia, *The Spark* asks: ‘[W]ho but the Grey Shirts do not value the democratic rights? Even General Smuts, even Abe Bailey value the democratic rights’. As an alternative to the CPSA’s popular front anti-fascism, *The Spark* proposed the creation of a new party ‘based on the science of Revolutionary Marxism’; only such a party ‘will be able to fight the decisive battle against fascism and war’.

Not all socialist and communist anti-fascism followed the lines laid down by the CPSA or the other left-wing parties, with vernacular articulations of anti-capitalism expressed alongside reiterations of the party lines at pro-Ethiopia mass meetings. One such meeting was attended by 400 at Marabastad, Pretoria, on 24 November 1935, where five ‘agitators’ (the descriptor used in the police report) addressed different aspects of the fascist invasion in Afrikaans, English, and Sesotho. The first speaker was Gideon S. Botha, one of the few white Afrikaans-speaking communists, who emphasised that the Italian working class would gain no advantage from the invasion:

> Mussolini says he wants to free Abyssinia’s slaves, but his own people live in slavery under him. He is going to Abyssinia with bombs, poison gas and dum-dum bullets – it is cruel murder. He has blinded the Italian people. We know they will gain no benefit.

Referring in conclusion to the Hertzog Bills, Botha appealed for the creation of a South African popular front, imploring the competing political organisations – the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union, the CPSA, and the ANC – to unite: ‘Our interests are the same, and to prevail, we must stand together. Let us unite and defeat Mussolini’. The second speaker, George Daniels, insisted that ‘[f]ascism under Mussolini is a final stage of Capitalism’; that ‘capitalist classes who are parasites must spring on you and suck your blood’; that

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74. ‘People’s Front’, 232.

75. ‘People’s Front’, 234.

76. The only report of the meeting was in the CPSA newspaper: ‘A Mass Meeting’, *Umsebenzi*, 1 December 1935.


78. SANA, RNA, JUS 925, 24 November 1935, 3.
under capitalism, ‘colour makes no difference, whether white, black, green or yellow’; and that, therefore, ‘let us fight as one class’. The next speaker, Piet Ramuthla, connected the Italian invasion explicitly to South African racist policies, arguing that the fight against Mussolini in Ethiopia was continuous with the fight against Hertzog’s segregationist bills:

We are the people who know the points of the War. The Italians want to take the black man’s land. The reason is that in Abyssinia there is petrol and oil and all kinds of things, that is why they want to take the black man’s land. They have no right to do it. What are the League of Nations doing? They are asleep. Why don’t they stop the War? Because they are afraid of Mussolini. We are not afraid of him. We will fight him, and also fight the Hertzog, Pirow and Smuts Government for our rights […] We will go to Abyssinia and fight the Italians. Cairo is already moving and the natives in Rhodesia are already moving and it is time that we must also move forward and help Abyssinia. We must also fight the Union Government. We must also fight to have a vote in Parliament.

The final speaker, Simon Matseke, made no mention of the war in Ethiopia, focusing in his brief speech on racist by-laws in South Africa, but the meeting concluded with a dramatic return to events in East Africa when an effigy of Mussolini was burnt.

South African soldiers in Ethiopia, 1940–1941

Neither the ‘2,000 New Brighton natives’, nor the 6,000 Africans in Johannesburg who petitioned the minister of native affairs, nor Mqhayi’s Xhosa warriors, nor Chief Kumalo’s Zulu impis, nor Piet Ramuthla of Marabastad achieved their ambition to join the battle in Ethiopia against fascist rule. The Italians’ vastly superior military technology ensured that the war was over before they could leave South Africa’s shores, as Italy declared victory in Addis Ababa on 5 May 1936 (although guerrilla fighting continued). When South Africans did confront Mussolini’s armies in Ethiopia, it was five years later as part of the Allied campaign at the beginning of the Second World War. In the official history, the South Africans who contributed to the liberation of Ethiopia are listed in the terminology of racial classification: on 12 April 1941, the South African forces totalled 38,730, comprising 31,205 ‘Europeans’; 3,605 ‘Cape Corps’; 2,545 ‘Indian and Malay Corps’; and 1,377 ‘Native Military Corps’.81

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79. SANA, RNA, JUS 925, 24 November 1935, 3.
80. SANA, RNA, JUS 925, 24 November 1935, 4–5. Like Botha, Ramuthla had also for a time been a member of the CPSA (see Roux, Time Longer than Rope, 272, 280).
Fighting alongside troops from the United Kingdom, India, Uganda, Kenya, Nigeria, and the Sudan, as well as the Ethiopian Patriot Movement, the South Africans faced 350,000 Italian soldiers and African askaris. With the South Africans playing a major role on the southern front, the Allies swiftly drove back the Italian forces, declaring victory in Addis Ababa on 5 May 1941 – five years to the day after the Italians had proclaimed their triumph. The lives of 270 South African soldiers and 79 airmen were lost in the campaign.82

In the accounts of South Africans who took part in the Ethiopia campaign, anti-fascism is an important element in their explanations as to why they were risking their lives in East Africa. George Steer – The Times of London’s war correspondent during the 1935–1936 invasion and an intelligence officer in the British Army on the northern front in the 1940–1941 campaign – embraced the Ethiopian cause, giving his book on the invasion the ironic title Caesar in Abyssinia and detailing fascist war crimes: ‘Caesar sent his aeroplanes on long-distance bombing raids […] against the civilian population, attacked the Red Crosses deliberately, used gas with ever-increasing efficiency, and cornered and smashed the Ethiopian armies’.83 In his book on the liberation of Ethiopia, Sealed and Delivered, Steer recounts how he re-used for propaganda purposes a photograph in a captured Italian’s wallet of six Ethiopians swinging on a gibbet, captioning the image, ‘Italian Civilisation Elevates the Ethiopians’.84 Although Steer reverted at moments to colonial stereotypes of African primitivism in his descriptions of Ethiopians, his anti-fascism was rooted in a sense of shared humanity and an admiration for Ethiopian courage. Caesar in Abyssinia is dedicated to the Ethiopian military leader Gerazmatch Afewerk, whose death in battle inspired Steer’s effusive tribute: ‘I thank God that made me and Africa, and bound us together in such a bitter union, that once in my life I met this man’.85 Steer was also scrupulous in acknowledging that ‘Britain would not have wound up the Ethiopian campaign […] as early as she did if it had not been for the Ethiopian patriot movement’.86

Steer’s first-hand experience of both the invasion and the liberation of Ethiopia was unusual; most of the South Africans arrived in Ethiopia in 1940 as volunteer soldiers fighting on the southern front. Carel Birkby, the war correspondent who reported on the Ethiopian campaign, remembered the spontaneous opposition to Mussolini’s declaration of war:

82. Orpen, South African Forces, 327.
86. Steer, Caesar in Abyssinia, 162.
All in South Africa realised then that we were fighting, in the words of General Smuts, to safeguard ‘that larger tradition of human freedom, freedom of conscience, freedom of thought and freedom of religion, which is threatened as never before in history by the Nazi menace’.  

James Ambrose Brown, who fought in Ethiopia and wrote a popular history of the campaign, described the motives of his fellow volunteers in similar terms: ‘The spirit was high and the will to fight for an ideal of decency was strong’. Emphasising the youthful idealism of the soldiers, he noted that they were ‘hardly out of school’ but had ‘enthusiastically volunteered to destroy [fascism and Nazism]’. In describing the mindset of the white South African soldiers in the Horn of Africa, however, both Birkby and Brown invoked their hatred of fascism less often than their love of sport. Reflecting upon the South African victory in the Battle of Juba in February 1941, Birkby observed that ‘at the end of that battle they knew that they could smash through the Italians like a Springbok rugger pack through a club team’, and Brown, reflecting on the success of the campaign, concluded that ‘the young, untried South African forces embarked on this war with the enthusiasm of a Springbok sports team on a foreign tour’. Steer’s support for Ethiopian freedom, intrinsic to his anti-fascism, was not shared by all South Africans, however. Keith Ford, another soldier who published a memoir of the campaign, described the Ethiopians in negative racial stereotypes but praised the Italians: ‘[They] are superb colonists, bloody hard workers and builders, immaculate craftsmen, but bloody awful soldiers’. 

The Pan Africanist Congress in Addis Ababa, 1966

The 1940–1941 campaign against fascist-colonial rule in Ethiopia has barely registered in South Africa’s national memory. Brown argues that its significance has never been appreciated, that ‘it was a war that struck the first and fatal blow against the idea of colonialism and empire. Not that those that fought it were aware of that – it just happened that way’. 

One act of remembrance that stands out as exception to the historical amnesia was a speech made in 1966 by Jacob D. Nyaose, the Pan Africanist

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87. C. Birkby, Springbok Victory (Johannesburg: Libertas Publications, 1941), 16.
90. Birkby, Springbok Victory, 96.
Congress (PAC) Secretary for Labour on the national executive. In 1959, Nyaose had formed the Federation of Free African Trade Unions of South Africa (FOFATUSA) with 17 affiliated unions and had aligned it to the PAC. An executive member of the PAC at the time of Sharpeville massacre in 1960, he spent two years in prison before being forced into exile, first in Swaziland and later in Ethiopia. Nyaose was extremely critical of the SACP and especially of white Communists, but took a generous view of the white South African soldiers who had fought in Ethiopia. At the ceremony in Addis Ababa marking the 25th anniversary of Ethiopia’s independence, Nyaose invoked a non-racial South African anti-fascism as he remembered the white South African soldiers who died fighting Mussolini’s armies. Following a tribute to Emperor Haile Selassie, the gathered dignitaries, and ‘fellow-Africans, the sons and daughters of the soil’, Nyaose paid his homage:

To Fellow White South African Soldiers lying here side-by-side with the Sons of Africa […] from our adage we say ‘A PERSON IS ONLY Praised AFTER DEATH’. Wherefore, we now praise you, you are the only generation of Whitemen who died on the battlefield in Africa against foreign White Armies of aggression on this Continent. The Ethiopian Peoples’ War of resistance against the Italian invasion was just one of the many African people’s just struggles fought in the defence and preservation of freedom and National Independence. For you White Soldiers to have fought and died in a War for the restoration of freedom and independence with inalienable rights to land being left in the hands of the African state […] a role that these Whites, who died with our brothers did […] on Ethiopian soil, is really commendable indeed. We therefore take this occasion after their death to thank them accordingly. Africa could not be so mean […] and we black South African leaders representing our country […] cannot blench our eyes to the selfish extent of depriving our fellow white South Africans their equal praise and right to sit with us […] at this commemoration service and thanksgiving to our Armies.

In dedicating ‘equal praise’ to these white South African soldiers who sacrificed their lives, Nyaose extends his pan-Africanist vision to include individuals of all races fighting against fascism. In a letter to Benjamin Pogrund, Nyaose later explained further that ‘[w]e are not fighting Whites, Indians, Coloureds, nor fellow indigenous “African peoples”; we are trying to develop policies for co-existence and respect for a human being irrespective of his colour and nationality’.

**Conclusion**

In moments of crisis like the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, South Africans of all races have demonstrated the capacity to express and enact anti-fascist
commitments. Reviewing the examples described above, the list of self-pro-
claimed South African anti-fascists is lengthy and diverse: Prime Minister
Hertzog; General R. A. Royston; Elsie M. Ireland’s Order of the Golden Age;
General Smuts; the Bishop of Johannesburg; W. H. Andrews; 2,000 New
Brighton Africans; S. E. K. Mqhayi’s Xhosa warriors; Chief Kumalo’s Zulu
impis; 6,000 black volunteers from Johannesburg; W. M. B. Nhlapo;
S. M. Stanley Silwana; the CPSA; the Workers Party of South Africa; individual
white communists like Gideon Botha and black communists like Piet Ramuthla;
white war correspondents and soldiers like George Steer, Carel Birkby, and
James Ambrose Brown; and pan-Africanists like J. D. Nyaose. The speeches
of Botha and Nyaose are especially striking in their promises of a radical anti-
fascism that defies state-imposed racial identities.

The evidence of such disparate South Africans opposing Mussolini’s colonial
project in Africa might suggest the possibility of a sustained non-racial anti-
fascist politics. But the wide variety of reasons accompanying the individual pro-
tests within this spontaneous anti-fascist consensus casts some doubt. Beyond
the immediate objects of halting or at least frustrating the fascist invasion of
Ethiopia, how much common ground can be found – to take extreme examples
– between those wanting to protect South African mules from East African
sharks (the Order of the Golden Age) and those wanting to use anti-Mussolini
sentiment to create a new party inspired by the science of revolutionary
Marxism (the Workers Party of South Africa)? The limits of South African
anti-fascism of the 1930s are perhaps even more vividly demonstrated in the
record of Hertzog himself, who opposed fascist-colonial plunder in East
Africa as he was promulgating segregationist legislation in South Africa. Anti-
fasicism is a promiscuous ideology that attaches itself readily to the very
widest range of political tendencies. Appeals to a racially inclusive South
African anti-fascism today might, therefore, generate a radical anti-fascist alli-
ance in the short term, but in isolation anti-fascism is at least as likely to frag-
ment, dissipate, or be incorporated within the official discourse of the liberal
nation state.

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