

BOOK REVIEW

Ian Campbell. *Holy War: The Untold Story of Catholic Italy's Crusade Against the Ethiopian Orthodox Church*. London: Hurst & Company, 2021. xxxi + 449 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$36.55. Hardcover. ISBN: 9781787384774.

In a May 1937 telegram sent to one of his army officers, Marshal Rodolfo Graziani, the Viceroy of Italian East Africa, commanded his army to "... execute summarily all monks without distinction, including vice-prior" (188). The monks ordered to be executed were residents of the Monastery of Debre Libanos in Ethiopia. The pretext for the summary execution was a false accusation that the monks were complicit in the assassination attempt on Graziani in February 1937. In a meticulously planned massive operation, the Italian fascist army executed between 1800 and 2200 unsuspecting monks, clergy, and pilgrims of Debre Libanos in cold blood (211). The massacre was neither the first nor the last systematic and officially sanctioned murderous act of the fascist Italian occupying force in Ethiopia perpetrated against institutions, clergy, and followers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Ian Campbell's *Holy War: The Untold Story of Catholic Italy's Crusade Against the Ethiopian Orthodox Church* chronicles, in harrowing details, the massive killings of clergy and laity and the desecration and looting of churches and monasteries by the Italian army between 1935 and 1941 in a bid to terrorize the Ethiopian Orthodox Church into submission. The central contention of Campbell's *Holy War* is that the Catholic Church, from the Holy See down to its ordinary clergy in Italy, was an active accomplice in the Italian war against Ethiopia and the Orthodox Church. Campbell exposes how the Catholic episcopate threw its religious weight behind the Italian war by justifying, promoting, and sanctifying it. The Catholic Church dressed the naked war of aggression in a religious garment by framing it as a holy war against what the sitting pope, Pius XI, called "heretics and schismatics," thereby giving his theological imprimatur to the Italian fascist army to destroy the Orthodox church and its clergy with impunity. Speaking *ex cathedra*, Catholic officials effectively sold the war to a reluctant Italian populace as a divine instrument by which the true teachings of Christ would be spread among the Ethiopians. One of the

eminent officials of the Church, the archbishop of Milan, Cardinal Ildefonso Schuster, described the Italian invasion of Ethiopia as a task to which the Italian nation was called forth by God; he called the Italian soldiers “missionaries of the Gospel” and bearers of “the cross of Christ” (77). Campbell argues that despite its best efforts, the Italian government’s propaganda machinery was not effective enough in persuading the Italian people of the importance of the invasion of Ethiopia, and it was only the Catholic Church’s propaganda work that “almost overnight would transform the majority of the hesitating population of Italy into holy warriors” (58).


Campbell contends that the reason why Italian soldiers acted viciously against civilians and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was because they were conditioned by the Catholic Church to believe that “they were doing righteous work of God” (127). Beyond their propaganda efforts, Italian Catholic churches collected donations from their congregations and even contributed their gold artifacts to finance the war effort (71). Abandoning his moral authority, Pope Pius XI neither voiced opposition to the war nor expressed any sorrow in the face of an overwhelming evidence of the wanton killing of civilians, clergy, monks, and nuns and the destruction of churches and monasteries in Ethiopia.

The strength of Campbell’s *Holy War* lies in its meticulously detailed exposition of Italian atrocities against Ethiopian civilians and the religious, ideological, and logistical support the clerico-fascist elements within the Catholic Church provided to the Italian war efforts. However, Campbell’s argument that the atrocious behavior of Italian soldiers in Ethiopia was the result of their conditioning by the Catholic Church is simplistic and overlooks other factors at play. To press home the role of the Catholic Church in the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, Campbell tends to exceptionalize the church-state collaboration and problematically asserts that “nothing like this had been seen since 1209, when the great crusading Catholic armies set out down the Rhone valley to wreak havoc among the heretical Cathars in the Languedoc” (12). Without going far, any serious student of Ethiopian affairs, past and present, would easily draw an example of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church working hand in glove with the Ethiopian state in its war against internal and external adversaries.

Another perplexing aspect is Campbell’s retelling of the genealogy of his interest in the main topic of the book. While researching in the Ethiopian highlands three decades ago, he learned from local priests about the massacre of Debre Libanos. Campbell expresses astonishment at this revelation, given his prior belief that fascist Italy, unlike Nazi Germany and Japan, had soldiers who were “bumbling, harmless and friendly young men fighting reluctantly in a war in which they had been drafted against their will; atrocities were not something I associated with Italians” (1). Despite his knowledge of the civilian massacres in Addis Ababa following an attempt on Graziani’s life in 1937, he thought the massacre was a “hiccup in an essentially peaceful occupation—a momentary aberration” (2). Considering the available

Ethiopian and non-Ethiopian literature documenting the various atrocities the Italians committed in Ethiopia, including the use of chemical weapons, the basis for Campbell's conception of fascist Italian soldiers as "harmless and friendly" remains puzzling.

doi:10.1017/asr.2023.96

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