



From Oblivion to Memory

YEKATIT 12

Massacre & Mass Incarceration

EDITOR'S NOTE

We, the descendants, family members and relatives of Ethiopians confined in various prisons and Fascist concentration camps, in Italy and elsewhere between 1935–1941, are excited to bring you the very first edition of From Oblivion To Memory's (FOM) newsletter. It features the story of Yekatit 12. In line with our collective refusal to forget, this act of remembrance and responsibility is rooted in the lived histories of Ethiopians who resisted Fascism and endured imprisonment, exile, and death between 1935 and 1941. This issue is relevant and timely because Yekatit 12 occurred in February, 1937. This significant historical event led to the imprisonment of many of our ancestors in Asinara and other places in Italy and beyond. In this inaugural issue we lay the foundation of our work by revisiting the events surrounding the massacre of Yekatit 12 and the broader machinery of colonial violence that sought **not only to dominate a people, but to erase their memory, intellect and voice.**

Looking ahead, FOM will release quarterly newsletters featuring stories of descendants and critical reflections on the political and historical context of the time. We will also profile other important voices – of scholars, historians, artists, and witnesses – who can shed light on this period with clarity, depth and honesty. In doing so, we hope to remember, to learn, and to carry this history forward for ourselves and for future generations in honor of those who suffered or perished during this struggle.

Here is what you should know about this single moment in history.

The Roots of Revenge and Colonialism

The Roots of Revenge and Colonialism: In 1896, Italy's military campaign in Ethiopia ended with a decisive defeat at the Battle of Adwa. This being the second time^[1] that Ethiopia, an African country, had beaten Italy's forces, the loss had a lasting consequence. When Mussolini invaded Ethiopia in 1935, his aim was to fulfill Italy's colonial ambitions and to avenge Adwa, framing Fascism as the answer to Italy's humiliation. Advancing from Eritrea in the north and Somalia in the southeast, Italian forces faced resistance from the Ethiopians, but their superior equipment overpowered Ethiopian defense.^[2] Addis Abeba fell in May 1936.

[1] The Battle of Dogali was fought between Ethiopia and Italy in 1887 in Dogali, which is in modern day Eritrea.

[2] Italy used modern military equipment including aerial bombardment as well as chemical weapons against the population.

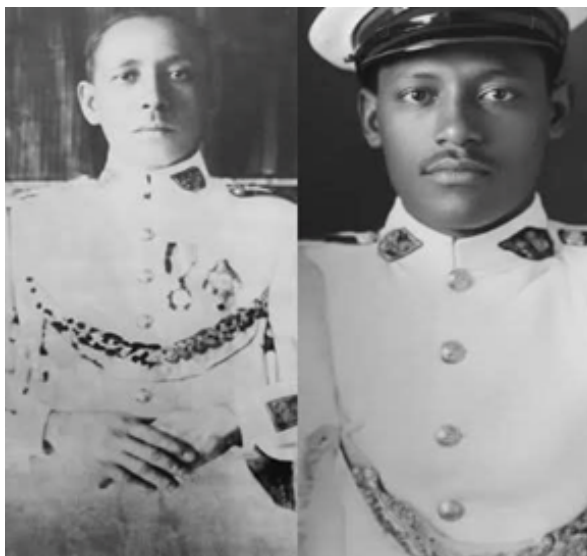
Occupation, Repression and Racial Segregation: Italy imposed racial segregation and white supremacist policies and declared Ethiopia a part of Italian East Africa. Rodolfo Graziani, notorious for brutal repression in Libya^[1] was appointed governor general and viceroy. Graziani, previously commander in Somalia, was known for his use of collective punishment and harsh reprisal. Under Italian rule, Ethiopians were treated as second-class citizens and lived in fear. Graziani declared, "The Duce will have Ethiopia, with or without the Ethiopians," and used severe tactics to suppress resistance. Italian control was strongest in places like Addis Abeba, while the resistance persisted in the outskirts. Graziani's focus and mission were crushing opposition rather than governing the country.

[1] Graziani's reputation of harsh repression earned him the name, "Butcher of Fezzan"



***Detail: Yekatit 12 Memorial Statue
Addis Ababa***

YEKATIT 12 MASSACRE AND MASS INCARCERATION



On February 19, 1937, two Ethiopians of Eritrean origin, Abraha Deboch and Moghes Asghedom, attacked Graziani with grenades during an event at the palace in Addis Abeba where the public had been gathered. Graziani and other officials were wounded; one person was killed. The Italian response was immediate and brutal. For three days, Italians—military black shirts and civilians— as well as askaris[1], were given free rein to attack Ethiopians. Thousands were killed on the streets or in their homes in the most gruesome manner. Houses were burned. In what was a deliberate and systematic act of erasure, Ethiopians who had been educated abroad were systematically targeted and killed as were intellectuals and storytellers. Having been informed that the attackers had sought refuge there, Graziani ordered the massacre of monks at Debre Libanos Monastery. Every monk in the monastery perished, along with lay persons who were present.

[1] Askaris were locals and others who served in the security apparatus of the occupying force

1/4 of the population of Addis Abeba and 298 monks, priests & lay people in the Holy Monastery of Debre Libanos were murdered

Forced Displacement and Detention After the carnage, the Italians continued to persecute suspected members of the resistance, detaining them in places like Danane and Ogaden. Nearly 400 people, including nobles, resistance fighters and their families, were forcibly sent to Asinara island, where many died in harsh conditions. Despite its significance, this history remains little known. The sacrifices made by Ethiopians to defend their independence and the trauma endured by those displaced and interned must not be ignored. The history of the massacre is often marginalized. Yekatit 12 is commemorated as a symbol of black resistance and sacrifice in a few scattered places, while Graziani was even honored in his hometown of Affile in 2012.



From Oblivion to Memory calls on us to remember those who suffered for freedom and to acknowledge these injustices, reflecting on our responsibility to tell their stories in the hope of building a better world-- for us, and for our children.

