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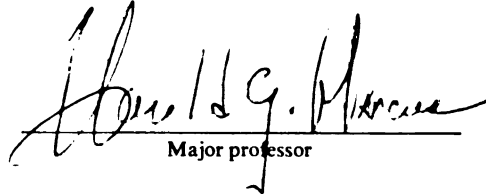
THE INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL DIMENSIONS  
OF THE ERITREAN CONFLICT

presented by

Daniel Kendie

has been accepted towards fulfillment  
of the requirements for

Ph. D. degree in History

  
Major professor

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**THE INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL DIMENSIONS  
OF THE ERITREAN CONFLICT**

**Volume I**

By

Daniel Kendie

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to  
Michigan State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of History

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## ABSTRACT

### THE INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL DIMENSIONS OF THE ERITREAN CONFLICT

By

Daniel Kendie

Under the rubric of what is known as "the Eritrean conflict," various conflicts have been on-going. The dissertation identifies these conflicts. It begins with the religious and ethnic strifes that have bedeviled Eritrea for many years. It then examines the root causes of the problems that have alienated the Eritrean elite from the Ethiopian state. It investigates the reasons behind the involvement of such countries as Egypt, Israel, and Syria in the conflict, and why the Eritrean conflict should also be studied as an extension of the Arab-Israeli dispute. It examines also the role played by the major western and eastern powers in the fighting. In the process, it uncovers the hidden agendas of those powers which have used the Eritrean conflict as a convenient mask for advancing their national objectives.

Data for this dissertation came from research work conducted in Eritrea, as well as at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, the Ethiopian National Library and at the Ethiopian Provincial Archives in Addis Ababa, at the Dag Hammarskjold United Nations Library in New York, and at the Michigan State University Special Collections on Ethiopia (1950-1969). Extensive interviews of individuals who provide the testimony of participants were also conducted in

Daniel Kendie

Asmara, Keren, Addis Ababa, Cairo, New York and Washington, D. C. In addition, numerous newspapers, periodicals and books were consulted.

Conclusion: The dissertation explores various probable scenarios which could be elicited from the current situation. (1) Eritrea could go on limping; (2) Unable to withstand all the internal and external pressures, Eritrea may disintegrate; (3) Eritrea could become expansionist; (4) Neighbouring Sudan may claim the eastern lowlands of Eritrea on ethnic and religious grounds; (5) The entire Red Sea coast of Eritrea could be annexed by the Afar Democratic Union which has declared its intention to unite all the Afar inhabited regions of the area; (6) The possibility of an Ethiopian nationalist government coming to power and claiming Eritrea, once again, cannot be ruled out; (7) Since the Eritrean Government has already proposed a confederation with Ethiopia, both sides may find it convenient to settle for a federation.

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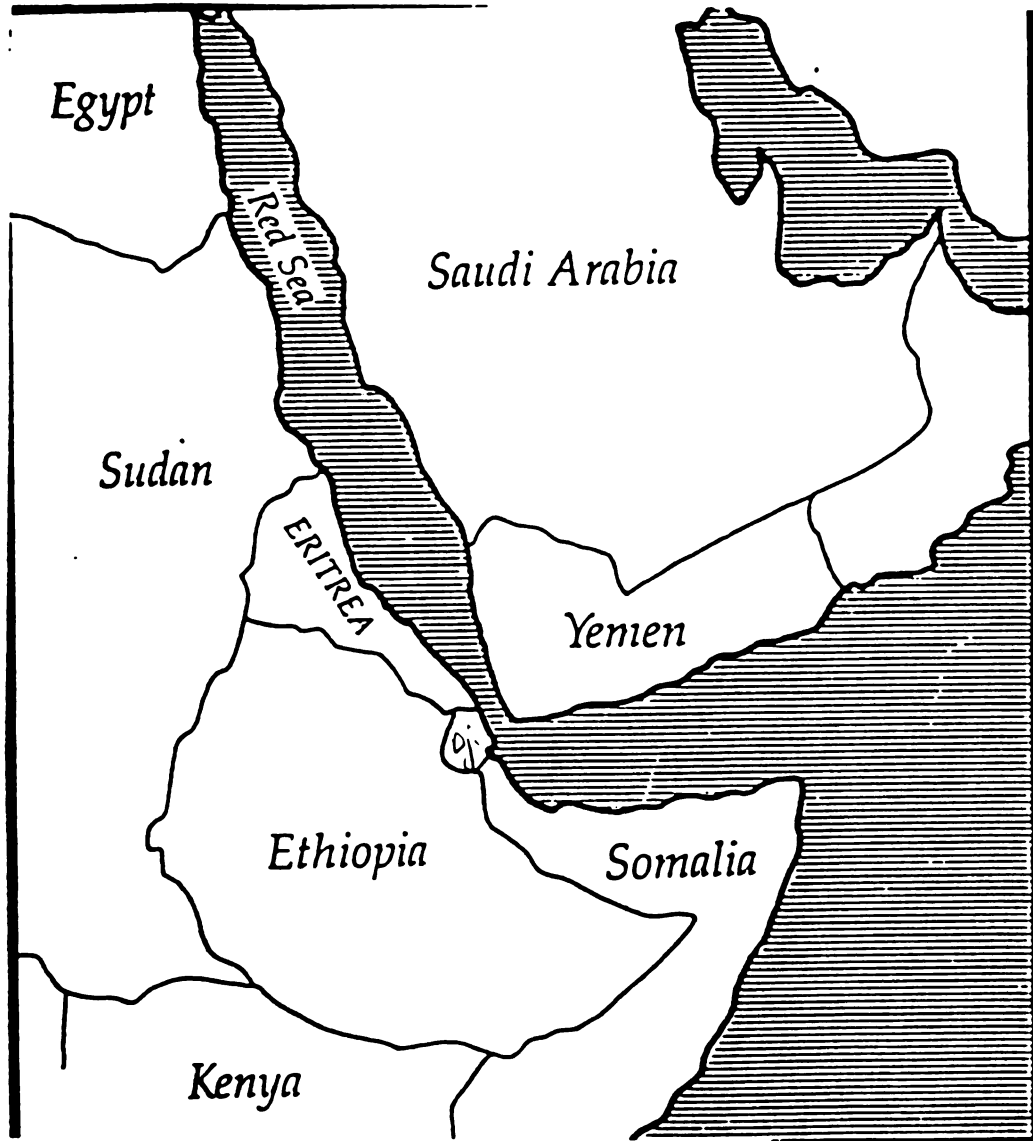
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Figure 1. Northeast Africa



## Introduction

### Statement of the Problem

Eritrea, which took its name from the ancient Greco-Roman designation for the Red Sea--Mare Erythraeum--was, until very recently, the northernmost province of Ethiopia. It is bounded by Ethiopia and Djibouti on the South, the Red Sea on the east, and the Sudan on the west. Inhabited by nine different ethnic groups, it covers an area of 36,170 square miles, and has an estimated population of 3.2 million.<sup>1</sup>

From 1890 to 1941, Eritrea was an Italian colony. Following Mussolini's defeat during World War II, it was taken over by the British, who administered it from 1941-1952. They wanted to carve up the territory by giving part of it to the Sudan and the rest to Ethiopia. However, the USA struck a deal with Addis Ababa in such a way that in return for supporting the Ethiopian claim to Eritrea, Washington received assurances that its communications base in Asmara would continue to operate.

On September 15, 1952, Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia under a United Nations General Assembly resolution. The federal formula was, no doubt, a compromise between Ethiopian absolutism and Eritrean representative democracy--a formula which attempted to reconcile two fundamentally different political systems. While the Ethiopian constitution was conceived with the prerogatives of "the divine right of kings" in mind, the Eritrean constitution was based on the principles of democratic pluralism

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<sup>1</sup>For understandable reasons, data on Eritrea are scanty and unreliable. It should be handled with care. Population density may be 88 inhabitants per square mile; estimated GDP=\$75 - \$150; currency is the Ethiopian birr: 7.2 - 7.8 birr=\$1.00; infant mortality rate is 135 per 1,000 births; life expectancy is 46 years; population per doctor, 48,000; population per nurse, 1,750; adult literacy rate, 22%; See *Economic Intelligence Unit, Eritrea, Country Report 3rd Quarter, 1993*; *African Profiles International*, August/September 1993.

and the rule of law. Apart from separation of powers, it contained a bill of rights and personal liberties vaguely defined in the Ethiopian constitution.

As might be expected, no sooner was the Federal Act adopted by the Representative Assembly, than political parties and trade unions were banned in Eritrea by the Ethiopian authorities. The press was silenced and civil liberties were trampled upon. In 1960, the Ethiopian Government unilaterally abrogated the Eritrean constitution, disbanded the federal status of Eritrea, and on November 14, 1962, made it one of Ethiopia's fourteen provinces. Subsequently, the lowland Eritrean Muslims initiated an armed uprising with Egypt's support, and established the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), which was soon to be at loggerheads with Eritrean Christians. Since the latter were alienated and persecuted by the ELF, they organized themselves under a movement called the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). Both movements fought against Addis Ababa, but in the end, the EPLF defeated the ELF and continued the struggle against the Ethiopian authorities. In the latter task, the military support provided by the Tigray Liberation Front, a movement which the EPLF had assisted in training and arming was crucial.

The Ethiopian Government was weakened by the insurrection, which turned into a revolution and brought the downfall of the pro-western Haile Selassie government.<sup>2</sup> Its replacement by a leftist military junta, which allied itself with the USSR, did not solve Eritrea's problems, but intensified the conflict. In the process, countless lives were lost, much property was destroyed, including industrial plants, farms, hospitals, schools and bridges and the infrastructure in general was wrecked. Hundreds of thousands of

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<sup>2</sup>For the truism of how an insurrection in an autocratic state could lead into a revolution, see Skocpol, Theda, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).



Eritreans became either refugees or internally displaced persons. In the end, because of a combination of internal, regional, and international factors that were favourable to the EPLF, Eritrea's independence was ensured.

The paralysis of the Ethiopian army, the decline of Soviet support to Ethiopia, including the refusal to provide spare parts to the weapons bought from it, the collapse of the USSR and the subsequent ending of the Cold War, the growing rebellion in Ethiopia, which led in May 1991 to the flight of Mengistu Haile Mariam from Addis Ababa, the mediating role played by the USA at the London Conference in which only those political forces sympathetic to Eritrean independence were allowed to attend, and most significant, the fact that the regime which took over Addis Ababa was largely a creation of the EPLF and therefore, deeply committed to Eritrean secession from Ethiopia, facilitated Asmara's independence. However, independence has not been easy for Eritrea. It has to reconstruct a war-shattered economy and infrastructure. It has also to repatriate and rehabilitate more than half a million refugees and displaced persons. As if that was not enough, much of the country suffers from chronic drought. For ten of the past twelve years, Eritrea's rainfall has been inadequate. In areas where lack of rain was not a problem, most recently, heavy flooding caused more destruction. In a killing blow, ravenous army swarms descended, followed by locusts, grasshoppers and rats. Nature has proven every bit as devastating as past governments--and more durable.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Parmelee, Jennifer, "Eritrean Hope for Big Harvest Dashed," *The Washington Post*, 29 November 1993.

## **Why the Conflict was Prolonged**

The Eritrean conflict is one of the most misunderstood conflicts in the region. It continues to confuse contemporary political and historical scholarship. How was it possible for Ethiopia, one of the poorest countries in the world, whose capacity to bear the enormous burden of war is quite limited, to sustain such a prolonged war? There are also the population groups in Eritrea who gave direct and indirect aid to the insurgents. Since they, too, did not have the required resources to finance a long term insurrection, it is obvious that both the government and the ELF/EPLF have had external support.

This study therefore defines the nature of the conflict, and examines how and why the conflict persisted for so long. It also considers the nature of foreign interference, the reasons for external involvement and the extent to which the Eritrean movements and the Ethiopian Government have been independent of the influence of those external powers who provided aid.

In this regard, the existing literature offers only precarious guidance to the understanding of the issues. In fact, because it is mostly written from the standpoint of one or the other party to the fighting, it has contributed to the general confusion. The literature is coloured by the hostilities, fears, and prejudices of the conflicting parties. Furthermore, it does not examine the conflict in all its forms and manifestations and, still less, investigate its internal and external dimensions. It is also highly fragmented. For analytical purposes, each dimension of the conflict can be studied separately. However, because the parts can only be understood in relation to the whole, the fragmented approach to the study of the conflict has had disruptive effects and contributed to its widespread misunderstanding.

Contrary to what is commonly realized, the Eritrean conflict comprises of on-going—religious, ethnic, political, ideological and geo-political conflicts. After reviewing the literature (Chapter I), and presenting a brief history of Eritrea under colonialism (Chapter II), the study examines in Chapter III, the internal political, religious and ethnic strifes that have bedeviled Eritrea for very many years. Chapter IV discusses the factors that have particularly alienated the Eritrean elite from the Ethiopian State. This alienation, has, despite the existence of deep internal differences, made it possible for Eritrean political movements to cooperate against the common Ethiopian “enemy,” in order to liberate Eritrea from what they call “Ethiopian colonialism.” Chapter V examines the various cultural, historical, economic and geo-political questions that have made the Eritrean conflict an extension of the conflicts in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. These include, Israel’s security interests in the Red Sea; Egypt’s historical entanglement in the water politics of the Nile; the interdependence of Gulf and Red Sea security issues for countries like Saudi Arabia and Iraq; the problem of Southern Sudan; Somalia's ambition to annex the Ogaden province of Ethiopia; the struggle between the conservative and progressive Arab states; and more recently, the conflict between secular and Islamic fundamentalist regimes and movements. Chapter VI examines the direct and indirect role of the major Western and Eastern powers in the fighting, which has further contributed to the internationalization of the Eritrean conflict.

The conclusion looks at the problems of independent Eritrea. For instance, it seeks over two billion dollars for reconstruction purposes. In a period in which donor governments are giving priority to their own domestic problems, how are Eritreans to reconstruct a war shattered economy? How can an overpopulated Eritrea absorb and rehabilitate the thousands of refugees,

war-displaced persons and victims of natural calamities? Apart from the paucity of resources, the on-going internal conflicts are already forcing the government to divert scarce resources from reconstruction into military and security purposes.

Furthermore, the Middle East conflict into which Eritrea continues to be enmeshed has not subsided. If anything, the emergence of fundamentalist Islam, and more particularly, the Mujahedeen of the Islamic Jihad, are adding fuel to the fire. Witnessing the ascendance to power of the essentially Christian Eritrean People's Liberation Front (the EPLF), the Arab countries are once again providing aid to the Muslim dominated Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), in order to help it prevail over its Christian adversary, the EPLF.

Although there are many imponderables, the conclusion explores various probable scenarios that could be elicited from the current situation:

- 1) Eritrea could simply go on limping, unstable and poor.
- 2) As a direct result of the policy of reorganizing society on an ethnic basis unleashed by the regime in Addis Ababa, and unable to withstand all the internal and external pressure, Eritrea may simply disintegrate;
- 3) Eritrea could become expansionist
- 4) Neighbouring Sudan may claim the eastern lowlands and the northern highlands of Eritrea on ethnic and religious grounds;
- 5) The entire Red Sea coast of Eritrea could be annexed by the Afar Democratic Union which has placed on record its intention to unite all the Afar inhabited regions of the area;
- 6) The possibility of an Ethiopian nationalist government coming to power in Addis Ababa and claiming Eritrea, once again, cannot also be ruled out;
- 7) Since the Eritrean Government has already proposed a confederation with Ethiopia, both sides may find it handy and convenient to settle for a federation. If Eritrea's former federal status were to be restored, in a situation where Ethiopia becomes a federal republic, the study examines how such an arrangement could go a long way to contribute to the security and viability of Eritrea, to the restoration of peace and stability in the area, and

how cooperation could promote growth and development in the Horn of Africa.

### **The Major Factors Behind the Internationalization of the Conflict**

Power, *i. e.*, the ability to influence the behaviour of other nations, is both the means used and the goal sought by states in their political, military, economic, and social competition with one another. Although not every state action is motivated by power considerations, those directly related to enhancing or defending the national interest are always deeply involved in power politics.<sup>4</sup>

The major components in the power equation of the state therefore, comprise: (1) the size, location, climate and topography<sup>5</sup> of the national territory; (2) availability of natural resources including sources of food stuffs and energy; (3) the size and composition of the population and its per capita income; (4) the size and efficiency of its industry; (5) the extent and effectiveness of the transport system; (6) the educational system; (7) the size and quality of equipment of its armed forces; (8) and the quality of its leadership and diplomacy.<sup>6</sup> The exercise of power can take many forms—political persuasion, economic coercion, cultural domination, and direct, or indirect, military pressure.

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<sup>4</sup>Self-preservation, independence, the maintenance of territorial integrity, military security, and economic well-being define the national interest. For Morgenthau, political relations are power relations, and international politics is the struggle for power among nations. See Morgenthau, Hans, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967).

<sup>5</sup>The importance of topography in a given place and time is determined by its relationship to other elements of power such as technology. In historical terms, cultural differences have been long lasting in regions where topographic features have impeded contact and communication.

<sup>6</sup>Op. cit., Morgenthau, 106-118.

Location is a component in the national power equation in both geographic and strategic terms. Political events occur in a geographic setting, and geographic factors can and do influence the course of events. Moreover, the study of the effects of geographic location in its physical, demographic, ethnic, economic and political dimensions and the conflicts that could possibly result from these are crucial. In fact, since it is widely recognized that geographic location and physical environment are important components of the power structure, it has given rise to the study of geopolitics<sup>7</sup>—a branch of geography which studies political entities in their geographical environments. It also studies geographical locations and the effect of locations on the behaviour of political entities such as states.

### **The Horn of Africa**

The Horn of Africa is a geo-political metaphor, rather than a political entity. It has no precise boundaries, but, the metaphor describes that vast land in Northeast Africa that resembles a horn, and which juts out into the Indian Ocean.

Situated between Northeast Africa and the Middle East, and forming a bridge between them, for the purpose of this study, the Horn of Africa is comprised of the following four state: the Somali Republic, which lies along

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<sup>7</sup>Geopolitics, *i.e.*, the view that location and the physical environment are important factors in the global power structure, is defined by Morgenthau as the attempt to understand the problem of national power exclusively in terms of geography. This tendency can degenerate in the process into a political metaphysics couched in a pseudo-scientific jargon (p. 55). Geopolitics should not be confused with geopolitik. The latter was developed in Germany in the 1920s and theorizes that individuals are subordinate to the state, because the state is usually engaged in perpetual struggle for survival. The state must expand with population growth, and claim more territory to fulfill its destiny. Such ideas were used as a quasi-science by the Nazis to justify their expansionist ambitions.

the coast of the Indian Ocean; Djibouti, at the southern end of the Red Sea, the Sudan, which stretches in part into the Sahara in the west and north to the boundary of Egypt, and Ethiopia in the centre. The sub-region occupies an area of more than 1.5 million square miles, and has a population of nearly 85 million.

The Horn of Africa is bounded to the east by the Red Sea—a passage-way connecting the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean, and which also serves as a bridge between Northeast Africa and the Middle East. According to Arab tradition, it is said that Africa and Asia were joined together from the time of creation until the legendary Dhu l'Karnayn, presumed to be Alexander the Great, split them asunder at Bab-al-Mandeb, thereby creating the Red Sea.<sup>8</sup> This Strait which is twenty miles wide, guards the southern entrance to the Red Sea. In geopolitical terms, it is considered a vital chokepoint and an important international waterway for commercial and maritime traffic. The Blue and White Niles, which water the sub-region, also provide a distinctive feature to the Horn of Africa, and constitute the life-blood of such countries as Ethiopia, Egypt and the Sudan.

The size, military strength, and geographic position of Ethiopia could have made it the dominant state in the Horn of Africa. However, its underdevelopment and its tenuous national unity have kept this role out of its reach. Instead, relations around the Horn of Africa have been influenced by an encirclement of Ethiopia, through a potential and sometimes actualized alliance among Sudan, the Eritrean liberation movements, and Somalia. These relations in turn have been backed by various other ready sources of support

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<sup>8</sup>Klieman, Aaron, "Bab-al-Mandeb, The Red Sea in Transition," *Orbis, Quarterly Journal of World Affairs*, vol. XI, Fall 1967, no. 3, Foreign Policy Research Institute, University of Pennsylvania.

from Egypt, Libya, and across the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, from the Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Syria, and Iraq. This pattern has been dominant for more than forty years, especially since the establishment of the state of Israel, even overriding cold war alliances. Nonetheless, within this potential regional alliance pool, there was also a global dimension backed by either the USA or the USSR, along which partners were chosen.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Middle East**

There is no general agreement concerning the precise boundaries of the Middle East. It is a complex interaction of states and peoples, cultures and aspirations. In fact, there is no agreement even among scholars about which territories or populations comprise the Middle East. Some would suggest all the territory from Morocco across North Africa through Western Pakistan up to the boundary of India, and from Turkey on the Black Sea southwards through Ethiopia and the Sudan.<sup>10</sup> Others prefer a narrow delineation bordering on Egypt in the west, Turkey in the north, Oman in the south and Iran in the east. For still others, the Middle East can only be synonymous with the Arab world. For the purpose of this study, however, the Middle East consists of the following twenty countries: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Israel, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.) and the Yemen.

With an area of more than four-and-a-half million square miles, and having a population of over 300 million, the Middle East is three times bigger in area and three-and-a-half times larger in population than the Horn of

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<sup>9</sup>Zartman, I. William, *Ripe for Resolution: Conflict and Intervention in Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 94.

<sup>10</sup>Peretz, Don, *The Middle East Today* (Praeger: 1992), 3.



Africa. It is the driest of the world's major regions, but the Middle East contains more than half of the world's known oil reserves.

Some may think that the Middle East is overwhelmingly Arab, but the populations of Israel, Turkey and Iran are not.<sup>11</sup> Turkey is Sunni, while Iran is Shi'ite.<sup>12</sup> Lebanon is partly Christian, but Saudi Arabia is overwhelmingly Muslim, and Israel is Jewish.

The Arab countries have limited their institutional links within the region to units of ethnic affinity in the Arab League. As a result, Turkey and Iran--two Muslim states of the region--are excluded from the Arab League. The other country in the region, Israel, has been isolated and boycotted by the Arabs.

In contrast, while Somalia, Djibouti and the Sudan are not Middle Eastern geographically, and can hardly be considered Arab in ethnic terms, they have been made members of the Arab League. In fact, between 1973-1979, when Africa received \$2,851,400 in Arab aid<sup>13</sup>, much of it went to these countries on the understanding that everyone who is affiliated with Arabic-speaking people is an Arab.<sup>14</sup> How is this to be explained? Could communities that are not ethnically Arab be described as such, or is there some hidden agenda that the Arabs are advancing in the area? What is the Arab interest in

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 12.

<sup>12</sup>Sunni Muslims accept the first four Caliphs, i.e., Abubeker as-Siddiq, Omar ibn al-Khattab, Osman and Ali as the rightful successors of Muhammed. On the other hand, Shi'ites recognize only Ali, Muhammed's son-in-law and cousin, as the legitimate successor to the Prophet. They reject the four Caliphs as well as Sunni legal and political institutions.

<sup>13</sup>Mertz, Robert Anton and MacDonald, Pamela *Arab Aid to Sub-Saharan Africa* (Munich, Grunewald, 1983), 13.

<sup>14</sup>Cleveland, Williams, *The Making of an Arab Nationalist, Ottomanism and Arabism in the life and thought of Sati al-Husri* (Princeton University Press, 1972), 156.

the Horn of Africa, anyway? The Arab interest in the Horn of Africa can be summarized as follows:

1. The enhancement of Arab regional security.
2. The preservation of regional political stability, or conversely, encouragement of change in order to make the region congenial to Arab aspirations.
3. The diplomatic isolation of Israel.
4. Incurring costs on countries opposing this strategy by supporting rebellion.
5. The enhancement of the political and economic powers of the Islamic bloc nations to rally their support for Arab regional interests.
6. The improvement of the spiritual, social, economic and political status of Muslim communities in the region that cooperate with Arab regional strategy.
7. The conversion and reassertion of Islamic Power to serve Arab interests. This is especially clear when one sees the differences between the Iranian attempt to reassert Islamic pride and power as opposed to Arab attempts to reassert Islamic power to serve Arab interests. Arab nationalists themselves put it this way: "We are Arabs before being Muslims, and Muhammad is an Arab before being a prophet...we were Arabs even before the times of Moses, Muhammad, Jesus and Abraham."<sup>15</sup>

In short, we could say that in so far as the Sudan, Somalia and Djibouti are perceived to be serving Arab regional interests, they meet the expanded definition of Pan Arabists. Hence, they are accepted as Arabs and therefore, qualify for membership in the Arab League. In contrast, a country like Ethiopia which has more Muslims and more historical links with the Middle East than any of the states of the Horn of Africa is treated otherwise.

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<sup>15</sup>Haim, Sylvia (ed.), *Arab Nationalism, an Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California, 1962), 35.

## **Ideological Polarization**

If we further examine the region in terms of the aims and conceptions of society as defined by the varied incumbent elite, it is germane to note the following: from 1960-1974, the states which could be described as pro-Western in their political alignments and orientations, included Jordan, Israel, Morocco, Tunisia, Turkey, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. In contrast--Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Libya, South Yemen and the PLO were radical and leaned towards the USSR. In the 1974-1990 period, however, there appeared a dramatic shift in their orientation and alliance patterns. Whereas Egypt abrogated its friendship treaty with the USSR and joined the majority of the western-oriented Middle Eastern states, in contrast, Libya, Iraq, Syria, South Yemen, Algeria and the PLO continued with their earlier affiliation with the USSR. After the Revolution of 1979, Iran abandoned its western alliances and became an extreme exponent of Islamic fundamentalism.

During the same period, developments followed a correspondingly similar pattern in the Horn of Africa. While Ethiopia and Djibouti continued with their western orientations, Sudan and Somalia became left leaning, began to cooperate with the radical Middle Eastern countries, and even signed treaties of friendship with the USSR. Between 1974-1990, however, Ethiopia drastically changed its course and adopted Marxism-Leninism as its guiding philosophy, and also signed treaties of friendship and cooperation with the USSR, Cuba, Libya, and South Yemen. On the other hand, Somalia and the Sudan abandoned their secular radicalism and contrived a strong identity with the conservative Islamic states of the Middle East including Saudi Arabia and Iran.

In the 1960-1974 period, if the radical regimes of the area cooperated with the USSR and Cuba in support of the Eritrean insurrection, it was because

they wanted to undermine the influence of the USA and Israel in Ethiopia and to create the conditions for the eviction of the U. S. communications centre, Kagnew Station, outside Asmara, which collected intelligence from the USSR, from Nasser's Egypt, and from other countries, and beamed to the Pentagon. If, in the 1974-1990 period, the moderate regimes of the area cooperated with the USA, it was to reduce and if possible to eliminate the influence of the USSR in Ethiopia.

Within the Horn of Africa itself, many kinds of conflicts were taking place. These conflicts cannot be mentally grasped or theoretically explained by reference to any single set of actors or factors. It would be pointless to claim that the conflicts were solely, or even primarily, caused by religion or by ethnicity, or by economic exploitation or by external involvement. We can simply say that because the Horn of Africa has very close geographic, historical, cultural, economic and geo-political relations with the majority of the countries of the Middle East, it has been very much affected by developments taking place in that region.

It is not also without reason that most of the countries of the Horn of Africa, i.e., Djibouti, Somalia and the Sudan are members of the Arab League and the Islamic Conference and, therefore, maintain very close diplomatic, political, social, economic and cultural relations. Hence, given geographic proximity and the level of contacts, developments in the domestic politics of any one Middle Eastern state, have had spill over effects on the internal and external affairs of the countries of the Horn of Africa.

What has shaped this pattern is not just the Arab-Israeli conflict, which has naturally divided and factionalized national communities, but also religious affiliations, water conflicts, ideological preferences, and the more complex series of conflicts within the Arab world. the rivalries between

different radical Arab regimes have been reflected in their competing support for local allies in the Horn of Africa. In particular, the left-right conflict within the Arab world has involved as one of its components a split between the majority of the Arab states opposing [for example] the Ethiopian Revolution and the minority who have supported it.<sup>16</sup>

Both the Ethiopians and the Arab states tend to exaggerate the degree to which the politics of the Horn of Africa can be assimilated to those of the Middle East. The Ethiopians do so in order to make the Arabs convenient scapegoats for their failure to solve the Eritrean problem, or to promote internal peace and development. Hence, they see all internal forces opposed to them as foreign “agents,” and direct an accusing finger at the Middle East. On the other hand, the Arabs invariably accuse Ethiopia of working hand in glove with Israel, and made it a convenient scapegoat for their failure to deal with Tel Aviv. By presenting the peoples of the Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti and Eritrea as ethnic “Arabs,” which they are not, the Arabs want to promote their vested interests in the region related to the expansion of Islam, isolation of Israel, controlling the headwaters of the Nile, dominating the Red Sea, and weakening Ethiopia by financing the Eritrean insurrection.<sup>17</sup>

What has been the role of the Eritrean movements in all this? Inspired by the dictum that my enemy’s enemy is my friend, in alliance with the radical regimes, they contributed to the overthrow of Haile Selassie’s government and later, as friends of the moderate regimes, to the dismantling of the socialist structures put in place in Ethiopia with the help of the USSR and the other countries of Eastern Europe.

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<sup>16</sup>Halliday, Fred and Maxine Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution* (London: 1981), 232.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 231.

## CHAPTER I

### The Historiography on Eritrea

#### Review of the Literature

History can become the basis for informed and critical discussion. It can also remain confined to academic circles--powerless to influence society, or be manipulated to promote desired forms of social consciousness.<sup>18</sup>

One of the strongest bonds uniting a large social grouping is awareness by its members of a common history. Without that awareness, men and women would not easily acknowledge the claims on their loyalty of large abstractions. History is probably a stronger force than language in the moulding of national consciousness because it offers one of the most effective means of sustaining a popular sense of national identity.<sup>19</sup>

In the days when only a few individuals could read and write, and political consciousness of the population was not so high, popular memory took shape free from interference. But with increased education and literacy, national identity is no longer taken for granted. The legitimacy of the state, including the established interpretations of history by the mainstream, is more open to challenge now than ever before. History is therefore no longer ministered to authority. It is being enlisted also in the cause of dissent rebellion. If the established history conflicts with the aspirations of other groups, and they want to mobilize effectively, they, too, need the sanction of the past so that "history is on their side."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Tosh, John, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History* (London and New York: Longman, 1982) 2.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>20</sup>Increased political consciousness among the elite of multi-ethnic Third World states and their demands for "distinct" ethnic history is creating instability, low rate of capital accumulation and even national disintegration. In contrast, the foundations of most advanced industrial economies were laid

Historical consciousness and the attitude of a people to the past has often been an important factor in forming political opinions and in shaping the course of events. Indeed, in the recent past, when the fate of peoples was decided at international conferences, including whether they should form their own states or be incorporated into other states, history has often been taken into account. Similarly, in the early 1940s when the people of Ethiopia and Eritrea were stirred to mould their destinies anew, history again became one of the most effective weapons for mobilization and provided a powerful motive for action.

In claiming Eritrea, one of the major reasons that Ethiopia advanced at the time was the question of "common" history. It was also, in part, due to "history" that the United Nations subsequently decided to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia.

In this respect, Aklilou Habte Wolde, the then Minister for Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia, expounded his country's position to the United Nations Commission in 1950 as follows:

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down under non-democratic conditions. This is the case with Britain (1750-1850), much of Western Europe, Germany and Meiji Japan. See C. Tilly, "Reflections on the History of European State-making," in C. Tilly (ed.), *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 3-83.

Moreover, most post-1960 "success" stories of economic growth in Third World countries like Brazil, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and so on, have not occurred under conditions remotely approximating stable democracy: quite the opposite. The premature introduction of democracy may actually hamper development in its early stages. See J. Bhagwati, *The Economics of Under Developed Countries* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1966), 204. This is so, and rightly, because early stages of development require capital accumulation for investment and for building the infrastructure. Democratic processes are likely to curtail the process of capital accumulation in favour of consumption. In historical terms, too, territorial nationalism (USA) as opposed to cultural nationalism (Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, USSR) has proved more durable and truly internationalist than the latter. But what about countries like Ethiopia, Burma (Myanmar), and others, where there was neither growth nor democratic liberty? In the final analysis, democracy and development should be compatible. A slightly lower rate of growth should be an acceptable price to pay for a democratic system. In the long run, it pays.

In the course of your travels in Eritrea and Ethiopia, you have been able to note for yourselves the complete identity of territories and peoples which for thousands of years have been identified under the name of Ethiopia. Notwithstanding the fifty years of Italian regime in Eritrea, you have seen the same peoples—why, Gentlemen, for 4,000 years, Eritrea and Ethiopia have been identical—identical in their origins, identical in their historical development, and identical in the defense of the Ethiopian and Eritrean region against the threat or invasion and of aggrandizement from abroad.<sup>21</sup>

The change of government in Ethiopia in 1974 hardly brought any corresponding changes of attitude regarding Eritrean history. If anything, earlier governmental positions were reiterated and vigorously defended.

Eversince Ethiopia emerged from the distant horizon of time as a body-politic, the area now called Eritrea, was part of Ethiopia. From at least the 5th century B.C. until the 8th century A.D., when the name Ethiopia was identified with the Axumite civilization, the northern part of the country including Eritrea was the hub of that civilization. Ethiopia has never existed without this northern part. Nor has this northern part ever been identified separately from Ethiopia.<sup>22</sup>

To what extent are the above observations historically valid? Have Ethiopia and Eritrea been identical in their historical development for 4,000 years? Could we say honestly that the "strong" links between the Eritrean region and the central Ethiopian government have never been severed? What could be said, for example, of the era of Zemene Mesafint (c. 1769-1855), when there was a complete breakdown of central authority, and when each province acted as a sovereign power?<sup>23</sup> These and other similar questions should be

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<sup>21</sup> *Report of the United Nations Commission for Eritrea, Consultations with the Government of Ethiopia, General Assembly, Official Records--5th Session, Supplement, No. 8 (4/1285), (New York: 1950), 46.*

<sup>22</sup> *Eritrea Then and Now* (Addis Ababa: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Press and Information Department, 1976), 6.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Abir, Mordechai, *Ethiopia: the Era of the Princes, The Challenge of Islam and the Reunification of the Christian Empire 1769-1855* (New York: Frederick Praeger, 1968).



asked. However, to attempt to provide answers to them now would be to preempt the investigation and to render the review of the literature redundant. What would be most useful would be to continue raising such crucial questions and, in the course of the literature review, to point out how different historians have considered them over time.

Politically active Eritreans, however, counter the "common" history thesis by arguing that Eritrea has never been part of Ethiopia. For instance, according to the leader of the Eritrean Bloc for Independence, Ibrahim Sultan:

Eritrea had never been under Ethiopian sovereignty. In Abbasid times, it had formed part of the Caliphate of Baghdad. After Portuguese emigration and Turkish domination, the country had been governed by the Egyptian Khedives. And when the Italians landed at Massawa in 1882 [actually in 1885], they had to fight Egyptian and not Ethiopian troops.<sup>24</sup>

Is it true to say that Eritrea had never been under Ethiopian sovereignty? Was Eritrea part of the Caliphate of Baghdad which flourished from 750-1258 A.D.<sup>25</sup> Eritrea was established as a political entity only in 1890. How could the Abbasids control an Eritrea which did not even exist? Did the Italians fight the Egyptians when they landed at Massawa in 1885, or did Britain make the necessary behind-the-scene arrangements so that authority

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<sup>24</sup>Official Records of the 4th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, First Committee, Political and Security Questions including Regulations of Armaments. Summary Records of meetings 1949, September-December. Note: The Italians actually landed at Massawa in 1885, and not in 1882 as is wrongly claimed by Ibrahim Sultan.

<sup>25</sup>See Kennedy, Hugh, *The Early Abbaid Caliphate: A Political History* (London: Crown Helm, 1981). As a result of attacks on the Arabian ports by pirates from Axum, the Umayyad Caliphate of Abdel Malik (715-717), seized the Dahlack Islands and the Bay of Massawa. Nevertheless, the Axumite Empire did not lose its access to the Red Sea. Arab geographers like Al Yaqube (872) and Yaqut (1229) report that Dahlack and Zeila were Muslim ports but tributary to the Negus of Ethiopia. See, for example, Dombrowski, Amadeus, "The Growth and consolidation of Muslim Power in the Horn of Africa: Some Observations," *Archivio Orientalni* 51 (Prague: 1983), 55-67.

could be peacefully transferred from the Egyptians to the Italians? Suffice it to note that the observations made by the Ethiopians and the Eritreans are political statements and, to say the least, half-truths and distortions.

As J. H. Plumb once noted, warring authorities means warring pasts,<sup>26</sup> Ethiopians and Eritreans have, over the last thirty years, continued to clash about their past. While the Addis Ababa government claimed that the territory was "carved out" of an Ethiopia which had ruled the area for 3,000 to 4,000 years,<sup>27</sup> on the other hand, politically active Eritreans have argued otherwise. The latter maintain that all available documentary evidence about the Axumite Kingdom shows Axum did not comprise all of present-day Eritrea. Nor is it true, they say, that the Abyssinian Kingdom is an "expression", "extension", "growth", or "evolution" of the Axumite Kingdom. They even claim that the two kingdoms occupied different territories at different periods of time.<sup>28</sup>

In as much as Ethiopians stress the continuity of history, Eritreans put the accent on discontinuity. The latter do so in order to lend historical legitimacy to their goal of independence. To that end, they take the position that Ethiopia and Eritrea have had no "common" history and that Ethiopia lacked a strong historical presence in Eritrea. The federation was conceived, they argue, not because of historical proof, but because the Ethiopian version of Eritrea's history fitted the interests of the foreign powers which decided the fate of Eritrea after World War II. They assert that Eritrean nationalism

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<sup>26</sup>Plumb, J. H., *The Death of the Past* (London: MacMillan, 1969), 40.

<sup>27</sup>See "Policy Declaration of the Provisional Military Government of Ethiopia to Solve the Problem in the Administrative Region of Eritrea in a Peaceful Way," *Basic Documents of the Ethiopian Revolution* (Addis Ababa: 1977), 148, Appendix 2.

<sup>28</sup>*In Defense of the Eritrean Revolution* (New York: 1978), 32.

emerged under Italian rule and that the thirty years war of national independence is an "anti-colonial" struggle.

In the absence of a common framework of discourse, both sides had, therefore, resorted to history to prove their conflicting points of view. While one side searched for an answer to an existing problem in the distant past, the other side had dismissed the past and insisted on an immediate solution to the conflict. In the process, to borrow the words of Bernard Lewis, history has been menaced by an attitude which regards the past as another region to be "liberated" by assault, and scholarship as another industry ripe for nationalization.<sup>29</sup>

As we can see, the sanction of the past is sought both by those committed to upholding authority and by those intent on subverting it. And as we will see shortly, while some historians enlist on one side believing that they have a social responsibility to promote the identity of Eritrea, another group reinforces the authority of the Ethiopian state. But the truth, as it is often said, does not reside on one side or the other. It is a crystal of many sides likely to be found in the complex middle than in the simplified extremes.

### **What Do External Sources Say About Eritrean History?**

No one can write on a social or a political subject without developing opinions and perhaps even sentiments about it. Nevertheless, while the scholar can take a position on any issue based on facts and sound analysis, he/she should also be careful not to take a stand that inhibits impartial judgment. The historian, by habit, is an objective reporter, studying the

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<sup>29</sup>Lewis, Bernard and P. M. Holt (ed.), *Historians of the Middle East* (London: 1962), 63. See also by Bernard Lewis, *History--remembered, recovered, invented* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 60-65.

combatants of yesterday, while those of today clash outside his windows. He is bound by a professional commitment—to tally, but not to vote; to touch, but not to feel; or, to feel, but not to act.<sup>30</sup>

The same cannot be said about those who have provided the current historiography on Eritrea. Much of it does not meet the requirements of scholarly objectivity. Politically motivated writing has converted history into a political weapon, and the "historian", has become a warrior at the "front". As a result, the historiography of Eritrea has been bifurcated into the centerist and the historical continuity thesis of the Ethiopians, or a partisan of the cause of Eritrean independence that provides a lawyer-like "scholarly" brief on an adopted cause. A careful examination of the literature reveals the following historiographical tendencies: (1) There are the Traditionists, who consider the pre-colonial history of Eritrea as an integral part of Ethiopian history; (2) The Revisionists, who reject the conclusions of the Traditionists, and who see a distinct Eritrean history; (3) The Neo-Traditionists, who challenge the Revisionists, but who also have some differences with the Traditionists.

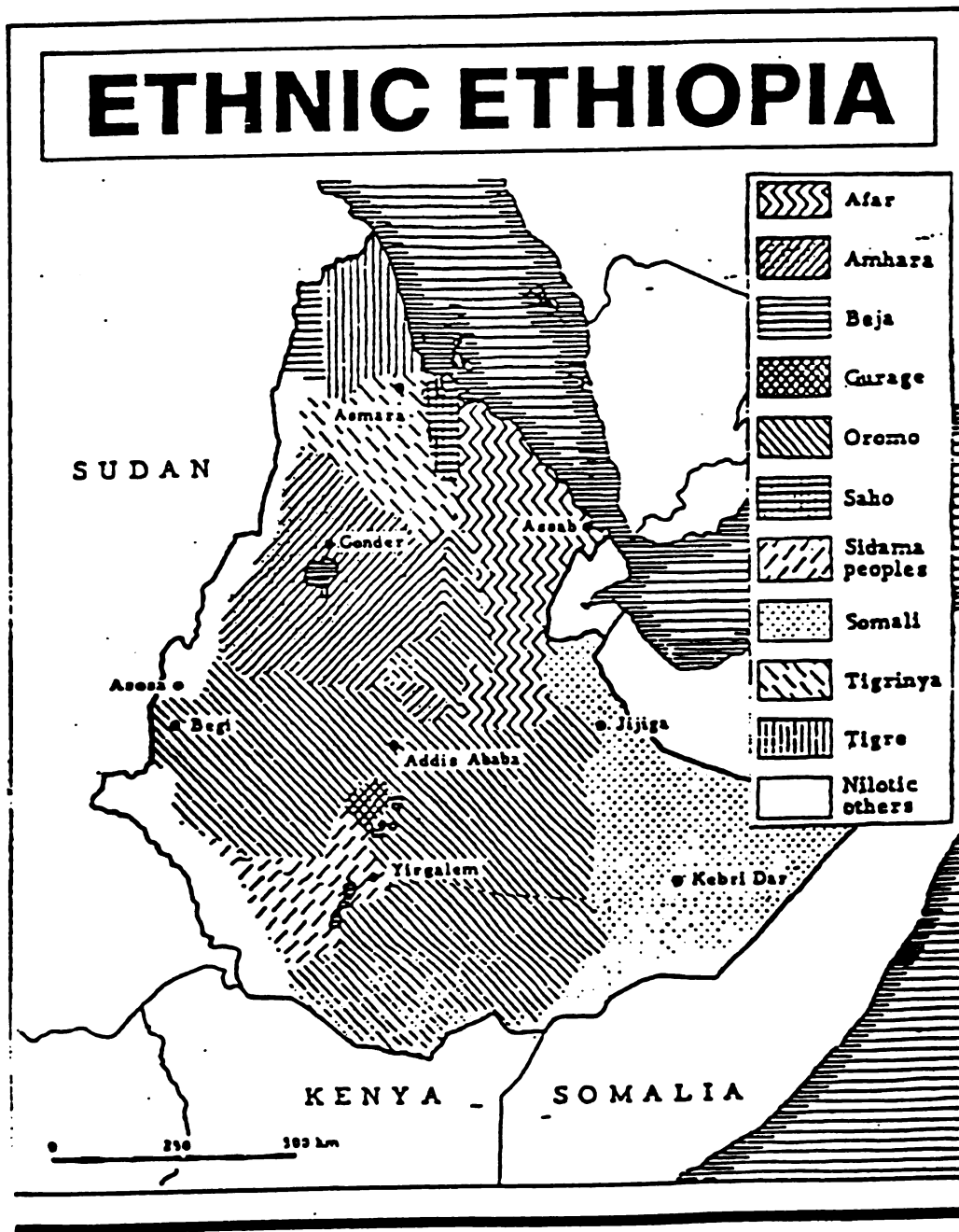
The categorization of the identified tendencies could be questioned on some grounds. One may, for instance, argue that sharp lines of distinction are being drawn between Traditionists and Neo-traditionists, when only hazy ones actually exist. Insofar as some overlapping is bound to occur, and there is, the criticism could be valid. However, a closer examination of specifics does not negate the validity of the generalized categorization. There is nothing to prevent the Traditionists to do what the Neo-traditionists have done, but they

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<sup>30</sup>Zinn, Howard, *The Politics of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 1.

have not. One cannot therefore advance the discussion on pure speculation. Let us then begin with the traditional historiography.

Figure 2. Ethnic Ethiopia



### **Traditional Historiography**

The Ethiopian state has been very closely associated with the writing of history, in the sense that the political elite had an interest in presenting for public consumption a version of history which legitimized their own position in the body politic. As a result, the lives of the leaders and the statesmen are more fully and vividly documented than those of any other category in the society.

By the study of such records, the excavation of buried cities, the decipherment of scripts and languages, and by way of royal chronicles, traditional historians, for whom fascination with the past over-rides all other considerations, have reconstructed Ethiopia's past. They presented history as a narration from king to king and from war to war as a catalogue of the mighty and the strong. Such history neglected the role of the masses in influencing events and overlooked the material conditions of life. Moreover, because of its orientation, traditional Ethiopian history looks backwards. It studies the past and explains how and why something happened in the past, but it rarely links the past with the present, and still less with the future. As a result, it suffers from what Barraclough calls the crisis in "historicism".<sup>31</sup>

As far as Eritrea is concerned, we could say that it has no place in the pre-colonial historiography. Traditional historiography, in fact, treats its history as an integral part of Ethiopian history. Hence, what this study does is to extract that aspect of history most relevant to Eritrea from the established historiography. Since the literature is vast, it has been necessary to be selective, and to review only the works of some recognized historians, who have specialized in the different epoches of the history of Ethiopia as they

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<sup>31</sup> Barraclough, Geoffrey, *Main Trends in History* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1979), 11.

relate to Eritrea. Among such noted scholars are Spencer Trimingham, Zewde Gabre Selassie, Donald Levine, Harold Marcus, Tekeste Negash, and others. For the 1870-1890 period, the accounts and testimonies of such contemporary observers as Gerald Portal and Augustus Wylde have also been reviewed.

### **The Traditional Historians**

Traditional historians rank Ethiopia, along with China, Egypt, and Persia, as one of the oldest civilizations in the world. In that context, they consider "Eritrea" not just a part of Ethiopia, but as a cradle of its civilization, culture and statehood. They affirm that the Red Sea coast of Eritrea formed part of the first Ethiopian civilization centered in Axum--a sophisticated civilization which possessed a complex state organization, a system of writing, a commercial network, and an elaborate military structure. They agree that its outlet to the sea was the Red Sea port of Adulis, and that all external influences, which then shaped Ethiopian history, entered the country through Eritrea. In this regard, they refer to South Arabian immigrants who brought their Semitic culture, language and script--still the basis of the Ethiopian alphabet; Greek civilization and culture; Christianity, Judaism and Islam, all of which entered Ethiopia through Eritrea. They also refer to the archaeological findings in such Eritrean towns as Adulis, Coloe and Metara to prove their points of view.

Furthermore, the traditional historians assert that even the ethnic groups inhabiting Eritrea share the same historical legacy, cultural patterns, religious affiliation, languages and geographic features with the rest of the peoples of Northern Ethiopia. While these historians admit that different parts of Eritrea were controlled by the Ottoman Turks (16th century) and the Egyptians (19th century), they also recognize that Ethiopia never ceased to

claim these territories. They even argue that, had Emperor Menelik ejected the Italians after the Battle of Adowa of 1896, there would have been no Eritrea.

As an example of traditionalist views, let us take Kobishchanov's *Axum* (1979), a recent authoritative work available on the history and culture of the Axumite civilization of Ethiopia. Placing Axum on a par with the great empires of the world of the time, the author quotes the Persian prophet, Mani (216-276 A.D.), who says:

There are four great kingdoms on earth: The first is the Kingdom of Babylon [Mesopotamia] and Persia. The second is the Kingdom of Rome; the third is the Kingdom of the Axumites, and the fourth is the Kingdom of the Chinese.<sup>32</sup>

Having controlled the Red Sea-Indian Ocean trade, says the author, Axum carved out an empire that extended from Nubia to Somalia, and from South Arabia to Southern Ethiopia, and secured total hegemony over the southern half of the Red Sea.<sup>33</sup> Having established that, the author says, at its zenith, Axum was the most powerful state between the Roman Empire and Persia. He contends that Rome asked for Axum's help in its struggle with the Persians; that Rome called upon Axum to protect its ships and the boundaries of Egypt from the inroads of the Beja; that the Beja were conquered by Axum and took part in its overseas expeditions, and so on. The book summarizes seventy-five years of archaeological excavations that were carried out in Axum, specifically in the port city of Adulis (south of present-day Massawa), in Coloe, Melayo, Azbidera, Yeha and Metara. It also includes sixty inscriptions as

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<sup>32</sup>Kobishchanov, M. Juri, *Axum* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1979). 51, 59.

<sup>33</sup>According to the author, the designation "Ethiopia" began to be applied to present-day Ethiopia in 4 A.D.



well as 3 B.C. locally minted gold, silver and bronze coins that were collected from the Akele Guzaie province of present-day Eritrea.

Similarly, Theodore Bent, who carried out archaeological excavations in northern Ethiopia in 1892-1893, analyzed in his, *The Sacred City of the Ethiopians* (1893), the Sabeian, Greek and Geez inscriptions that stand in Adulis, Axum, Coloe, Tokonda, Metara and Yeha. He maintained that Ethiopia's ancient history was only then beginning to unfold, and revealed a vast and powerful commercial empire which might be compared with Egypt, Phoenicia, Greece and Rome.<sup>34</sup>

In *Greater Ethiopia*<sup>35</sup> (1974), Donald Levine examines the circumstances that led to the decline of Axum in the 10th century. However, says the author, to think that the political relevance of Axum terminated with the downfall of the Axumite dynasty is to overlook a fundamental feature of the evolution of the Ethiopian political system, because Axum still serves as a source of political and cultural legitimacy. The other Ethiopian kingdoms which in large measure succeeded Axum, such as Lalibella (c. 1137-1270), Shoa (1270-1559), and Gondar (1632-1868), remained militant exponents of its culture and civilization.

In that context, Levine attempts to answer two fundamental questions: (1) Why did Ethiopia, alone, among the African political entities, remain independent under the onslaught of European expansion? (2) Why should Ethiopia, with its political, religious, and linguistic diversity, be considered a single cultural region? Levine argues that by virtue of a shared national

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<sup>34</sup>Bent, J. Theodore, *The Sacred City of the Ethiopians* (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1893).

<sup>35</sup>Levine, Donald, *Greater Ethiopia, the Evolution of a Multi-ethnic Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974).

heritage, Ethiopia managed to survive the forces of internal disintegration and remain the only part of Africa not colonized by Europeans. Levine analyzes the character of the three major ethnic groups--the Amharas, Tigreans and Oromos, examines the identity struggle of the Ethiopian people, and infers that stability and unity in diversity find expression in "Greater Ethiopia." To arrive at this conclusion, he provides a social evolutionary theory that is based on history, anthropology, psychology and sociology.

While Levine is eloquent in discussing the conditions which contributed to peace and stability, strangely enough, he does not consider the factors of instability. The author does not, therefore, offer us a clue and an understanding of the causes of much unrest in present-day Ethiopia in general, and in Eritrea, in particular. The more so, as Marc Bloch succinctly observes:

The origins of things present, are to be found in things past. For a reality is never better understood than through its causes. Misunderstanding of the present, is the inevitable consequence of ignorance of the past. Likewise, one cannot understand the past, if one is totally ignorant of the present.<sup>36</sup>

Levine points out that the community of languages and religions are priceless assets. However, he fails to penetrate very far into the problems of nationalism, i.e., the parochialization of loyalties across a wide spectrum of values--economic, ethnic, religious, and so on, that have contributed much to present-day instability. There is, therefore, no point in presenting a theory, if there is no attempt to evaluate the evidence on which it is based. It needs to be re-assessed.

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<sup>36</sup>Bloch, Marc, *The Historian's Craft* (New York: Knopf, 1953), 27-43.

In a recent article<sup>37</sup>, Levine recognizes a strong need to provide reliable national, regional and local administrations. But beyond that, his position has hardly changed. He still reiterates that the peoples of Ethiopia are more similar and historically connected than the different nationalities that composed the Soviet Union, that the evidence of their deep affinities is simply overwhelming, that Ethiopians outside the northern highlands need to have their traditions respected and their deprivations acknowledged, but at the same-time says he--the sense in which they belong to a common cultural area needs to be appreciated.

George Lipsky, *Ethiopia: its People, its Society, its Culture* (1962), contends that the concept of kinship as a guide to the grouping of people in Ethiopia is quite misleading. One has to use languages instead, and speak of languages of Semitic, Hamitic, or Nilotic origin. With the decline of Axum and the displacement of populations, Lipsky says that Geez, which had replaced Greek in Axum in the 4th century A.D., was subsequently transformed into Tigre, Tigrigna and Amharic. These languages are mutually unintelligible. If Geez is compared to Latin, it could be said that Tigre--which is spoken in present-day norther and western Eritrea, takes the place of Spanish, and Tigrigna, the language spoken in central Eritrea and in the Ethiopian provinces of Tigray, Gondar and Wollo, can assume the role of Italian, and Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia, can take the place of French. Lipsky observes that the Amharas and Tigreans take great pride in their history, deriving political and social unity from their historic role in the creation of such ancient centres of civilization as Axum, Adulis, Lalibella and Gondar. According to the author:

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<sup>37</sup>See "Greater Ethiopia Reconsidered," *Ethiopian Review*, August 1992.

The bifurcation of the people into Tigris and Amharas has not altered the overlap of values, consciousness of historical relationship, religious affiliation, and social organization. Though often rivals in the past for political supremacy, they have maintained awareness of their common religion, and their descent from common Semitic forbears.<sup>38</sup>

Spencer Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia* (1952), devotes much of the book to the religion of Islam and discusses how the Prophet Mohammed requested the king of Ethiopia (Hebesha) to provide protection and custody to his early followers; how they entered Ethiopia and how, as a result, Mohammed told his followers not to wage a Jihad--a religious war--on "the land of righteousness where no one is wronged." The author focuses his attention on Islamic institutions, on the history of Islam's struggle with Christianity in Ethiopia, and on the general social structure of individual Muslim tribes. According to Trimingham, while Christianity expanded in Ethiopia largely by conquest, Islam did so by peaceful penetration through the efforts of its Muslims propagandists. Though of little learning, the latter nevertheless succeeded in converting tribal chieftains to Islam by force of character and example. Turning to the Ottoman Turks, he describes how Emperor Malak Sagad attempted to eliminate their threat, as they had occupied the Red Sea coast of Ethiopia, and had penetrated inland. In 1578 the emperor defeated them in Tigrai, continued to Debarwa (central Eritrea), broke down their mosque and fortress, proceeded to Massawa and engaged them, but could not succeed in evicting them once and for all from Ethiopia. The book tends to over-emphasize the social, and to underestimate the personal element in Islam.

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<sup>38</sup>Lipsky, George, *Ethiopia: its People, its Society, its Culture* (New Haven: 1962), 5-34.

Though published in 1952, the author also does not seem to be aware of the emancipation of the serfs of western Eritrea by the British in 1948.<sup>39</sup>

Zewde Gabre Selassie, *Yohannes IV of Ethiopia* (1975), examines, among other things, how the Egyptians took over Massawa from the Turks in 1841 and how Ras Woube's protests to Britain and France brought pressure on Mohammed Ali to give up his design to conquer Ethiopia. However, in the days of Emperor Yohannes (1868-1889), the Egyptians had already taken over lowland Eritrea and were attempting to expand to the highlands. In the battles that took place at Gundet in 1875 and Gura in 1876, the Egyptians were routed by Emperor Yohannes and Ras Alula. Alula was subsequently appointed Governor of the Eritrean provinces of Hamassien and Seraie.<sup>40</sup> The governorship of Akele Guzaie was given to Araya Dimtsou in 1886.<sup>41</sup> The appendix contains the correspondences of Yohannes. Of particular interest is the letter dated, 17 February, 1881, to Kaiser Wilhelm I of Germany, in which the emperor mentions all the provinces which later came to be known as

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<sup>39</sup>Trimingham, Spencer, *Islam in Ethiopia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952).

<sup>40</sup>After the death of Emperor Theodore, the most charismatic Ethiopian leader to appear on the scene was Ras Alula (c. 1845-97). Under his brilliant military leadership, the Ethiopians were able to defeat the Sudanese Mahdists at Kufit (1885), the Egyptians at Gura (1875) and Gundet (1876), and the Italians at Dogali (1887). He also fought with great distinction at the Battle of Adowa (1896), in which the Italians were routed. For a commendable study, see Haggai, Erlich, *Ethiopia and Eritrea During the Scramble for Africa: a Political Biography of Ras Alula, 1875-1897*, East Lansing, African Studies Center, Michigan State University; Tel Aviv, Israel: Shiloah Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, (1982).

<sup>41</sup>Araya Dimtsou (c. 1810-89) was from Tigrai. He rebelled against Ras Woube in 1840 and was imprisoned for 15 years. Emperor Theodore gave him command of Tigrai, but he also held high positions under Emperor Yohannes. Araya Dimtsou died in March 1889 while fighting the Sudanese Mahdists.

Eritrea as belonging to Ethiopia, including those which were occupied by Egypt.<sup>42</sup>

This book is a good example of an elitist approach to the writing of history. It argues that, since Yohannes played a key role in strengthening and in unifying Ethiopia on the eve of European imperialism, he should rank as one of the main founders of modern Ethiopia. What the Ethiopian people accomplished under his leadership was considerable. In a political system where power was concentrated in one man, biographies are indispensable to an understanding of the state. However, an undue emphasis on individuals, and interest in the mighty and the powerful, leaves no room for the masses and the common people in history. This is not to deny a role for leaders. In fact, as is often said, an orchestra, even when its individual members are excellent musicians, needs a conductor who imparts rhythm and harmony. Otherwise, it can become cacophony. Any interpretation of history attributing personal responsibility for historical changes to one person alone, as is the case with this work, is an oversimplification. One man alone cannot make all the difference.

In [*Modern Abyssinia* (1901)], Augustus Wylde reports on his involvement in the negotiations between Egypt, Ethiopia and England, which resulted in the Hewett Treaty that was signed at Adowa on June 3, 1884. The Mahdist uprising in the Sudan had put a severe strain on Egypt. As a result, its soldiers were trapped and besieged in that country. Hence, for helping relieve the Egyptians and for providing them safe conduct through Massawa, Egypt agreed to "restore" the Eritrean provinces of Bogos, Keren and Amidab to Ethiopia, while free passage was to be allowed to Ethiopian trade through

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<sup>42</sup>Zewde Gabre Selassie, *Yohannes IV of Ethiopia, A Political Biography* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1975), 259.

Massawa under British protection. The author provides an eye-witness account of how Ras Alula released the Egyptians and how Egypt, in turn, fulfilled all its commitments. However, Massawa was to be a different story. The author contends that Britain betrayed Yohannes and permitted Italy to take over Massawa. Wylde also presents an account of how Ras Alula defeated the Sudanese Mahdists at Kufit in 1885 and the Italians at Dogali near Massawa in 1887. Furthermore, the author recounts that even though Yohannes was threatened by the Menelik and Tekle Haimanot coalition, the emperor led an army of 80,000 men to evict the Italians from Northern Ethiopia. However, because the Mahdists had invaded Gondar, Yohannes changed his plans and went to fight the Sudanese, where he died at the Battle of Metema in 1889.<sup>43</sup>

Gerald Portal, *My Mission to Abyssinia* (1892), provides an account of his experiences in Ethiopia. He delivered Queen Victoria's message informing Yohannes of her desire to reconcile Italy and Ethiopia. Her proposal that Italy be given land around the Red Sea coast outraged Yohannes, who simply denied the right of the Italians or of any foreign government to be at Massawa. He argued that by right of history, Massawa and all the southwestern coast of the Red Sea had for centuries belonged to Ethiopia, and that he had neither the intention nor even the power to alienate any of his country's territory.<sup>44</sup> Yohannes contended that as far back as the 16th century, the superior armament of the Ottoman Turks had driven Ethiopia from the Sea, but that Ethiopia had never given up her rights.<sup>45</sup> After the withdrawal of the Egyptians, he said, "Massawa should revert to its former and rightful owner."

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<sup>43</sup>Wylde, Augustus, *Modern Abyssinia* (London: Methuen, 1901), 39.

<sup>44</sup>Portal, Gerald, *My Mission to Abyssinia* (London: 1892), 15.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 5-175.

Instead, he was being asked to stand by and see Massawa be taken over by Italy.<sup>46</sup> In Portal's views, Ras Alula was even more blunt. He began by exposing the facts of his case with cold logic, and said: I have beaten the Italians once [at Dogali], and I will beat them again. As far as I am concerned, Ethiopia's natural frontier is the [Red] Sea, and that the Italians will get land in Ethiopia only when Alula becomes governor of Rome.<sup>47</sup>

Harold Marcus, *The Life and Times of Menelik II: Ethiopia 1844-1913*, (1975)<sup>48</sup>, examines, among other things, how, in 1869, Assab was sold to an Italian shipping company by a local Sultan and how it was taken over by the Italian government. He describes how the Italians landed in Massawa in 1885 and the circumstances that led to the signing of the Wichale Treaty of 2 May, 1889 between Ethiopia and Italy, in which Emperor Menelik officially ceded to Rome the territory which was to become Eritrea only a year later. According to the author, Article 17 of the Italian version of the Treaty allowed Rome to claim a protectorate over Ethiopia. The Amharic translation, however, permitted no such assertion. The mistranslation did not surface until Menelik received letters from Queen Victoria and Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany in 1890 referring substantive matters to the good offices of Italy. When Menelik discovered that the Italian and Amharic versions of the Treaty were at variance, he abrogated the Treaty, which subsequently led to the Battle of Adowa of 1896 in which the Italians were routed. Nevertheless, Menelik signed the Addis Ababa Treaty of October 20, 1896, which also formally recognized the Italian occupation of Eritrea. The fact that the emperor did not

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<sup>46</sup>Portal, 158.

<sup>47</sup>Portal, 74-90.

<sup>48</sup>Marcus, Harold, *The Life and Times of Menelik II: Ethiopia 1849-1913* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).



attempt to pursue his victory by moving into Eritrea and evicting the Italians still remains a puzzling question to many historians as well as politicians.

Marcus provides some compelling reasons why Menelik could not do that. These include the difficulty of overcoming the fortified positions into which the Italians had retired, and the possibility of Italy mounting a large scale military campaign against Ethiopia (p. 176). However, the subsequent settlement of the Ethio-Italian border which follows the Mareb-Belessa-Muna line, and the payment of five million lire by the Italians in May 1902, as is asserted by Ferdinando Martini, the first Governor of Eritrea (1897-1907),<sup>49</sup> should be worth investigating. Many Eritreans allege that Menelik literally sold a number of villages with all their inhabitants to the Italians.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, as Marcus points out, Menelik may have felt that the incorporation of more Tigres into the empire could strengthen the position of his rival, Ras Mengesha, Yohannes' heir (p. 176).<sup>51</sup> When Menelik ascended the throne he did not declare war on the Italians, but rather on Tigrai, in order to prevent it from becoming too powerful and too much of a threat for the Shoan dynasty. The acquisition of the coastal regions would have stimulated foreign trade and economic growth in the north. Since Shoa lay deep in the south, Menelik might have felt that he would not benefit from such an action. Hence, we could say that by not evicting the Italians from the

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<sup>49</sup>Martini, Ferdinando, *Il Diario Eritreo Di Ferdinando Martini*, vol. II, 300.

<sup>50</sup>See, for example, ELF-PLF Foreign Mission, "Eritrea, a Victim of United Nations Decision and of Ethiopian Aggression," (New York: December 31, 1971), 9-10.

<sup>51</sup>Ras Mengesha Yohannes (1865-1906) was the son of Emperor Yohannes. Before his death in 1889, Yohannes named Mengesha as his successor. But Menelik's quick claim to the throne and his considerable military and political power, negated the position of Mengesha.

north, Menelik placed the interests of Shoa and the dynasty coming from there above the welfare of the Ethiopian state as a whole.

Stephen Longrigg, *A Short History of Eritrea* (1945)<sup>52</sup>, maintains that there are no majorities in Eritrea either in terms of religion or ethnicity. It is a region, he says, where minorities are sharply conscious of the distinctions that set them apart from others, and who have guarded their interests for millennia. In the highlands the bulk of the population are in everyway similar to the inhabitants of Northern Ethiopia. The lowland peoples of Eritrea resemble more or less closely their neighbours over the Sudan border.<sup>53</sup> With regard to the Turks, he contends that the Ottoman penetration of Eritrea corresponded in time with the weakness of the Ethiopian State. He predicts that if the Italians had never landed at Massawa, Eritrea would have been partly as always before, the ill-governed or non-governed northern province of Ethiopia. In his assessment, Longrigg deliberately forgets his government's perfidy. Italy went to Massawa through British invitation. In fact, Massawa, which was conveniently abandoned by the Egyptians under the command of an English officer named Colonel Chermside on 3 February, 1885, was seized a few hours later by an Italian naval officer, named Rear Admiral Caini.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, he observes that Addis Ababa could not overlook the Italo-Ethiopian treaties and frontier demarcations which created Eritrea. The cession to Italy of territory north of the Mareb was not the work of hasty or

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<sup>52</sup>Longrigg, Stephen, *A Short History of Eritrea* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1945). The author was military governor and chief administrator of Eritrea in the 1940s.

<sup>53</sup>See the book review in *Eritrean Daily News*, Sunday, 3 March 1946.

<sup>54</sup>Giglio, C., *L'Italia in Africa*, vol. I, 1958, 376.

dictated treaties. They were free and formal acts of the Ethiopian state, after its victory at Adowa.<sup>55</sup>

G. N. K. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition 1941-52* (1960), is one of the most commendable books written on Eritrea. The author asserts that Italy created Eritrea by an act of surgery: by severing its different peoples from those with whom their past had been linked, and by grafting the amputated remnants to each other under the title of Eritrea. He reasons that Ethiopia could claim to have exercised effective sovereignty on the Plateau before the Italian regime. If its return to the Northern Highlands had been brief and tenuous, Ethiopia nonetheless could argue that its rule had lasted longer than the Egyptians. It might have no precise title to the Eritrean Afar, he says, but as Ethiopia had conquered and absorbed the rest of the Afar country, it seems logical that the Eritrean Afar should be united with their kinsmen in Ethiopia. Similarly, the Baria and Kunama were mainly an offshoot of the larger Nilotic population of western Ethiopia and belonged there. As for the Barka Lowlands and the northern stretch of the Coastal Plain, Trevaskis points out that they had now become so fully integrated with the rest of the country that direct Ethiopian rights in one part of Eritrea implied indirect rights in the other. According to him, the Ethiopian case could also be supported on ethnic grounds. It could be claimed that highland Eritreans were Tigreans and consequently akin to northern Ethiopians. They spoke similar languages and, like them, were mostly Orthodox Christians. Though the Tigray clans in the Northern Highlands and adjacent Lowlands

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<sup>55</sup>Op cit., Longrigg, 169.

were Muslims, it could also be said that many had once been Orthodox Christians and that some still observed Ethiopian customs.<sup>56</sup>

There is also a sense of clairvoyance and vision in Trevaskis. He warns the Ethiopian government not to annex Eritrea because the consequence would be catastrophic. As he views it: the Eritrean Muslims accepted a federal association with Ethiopia very reluctantly. They will be the first to resent undue Ethiopian control over their affairs. They have learned the political value of their Islamic connections. As for the Christian Eritreans, union with Ethiopia had an emotional appeal for them. They supported the Unionist Party because they believed that their interests would be better served under Ethiopian rule. Should there be discontent among them, it is likely to be echoed among the Tigrai and to revive dreams of an Eritrean-Tigrean union. The temptation to rule Eritrea as an Ethiopian province will be great. Should Ethiopia do that, she will risk Eritrean discontent and revolt, which, with foreign support, might well disrupt both Eritrea and Ethiopia. It is to her own interest as well as to Eritrea's that she should ensure that the Federation survives. The future of the Federation, and indeed of the whole Northeast African region is likely to be affected by the cause that Ethiopia takes.<sup>57</sup>

Well-positioned as he was as a British political officer, Trevaskis did study developments in Eritrea at close range. His acute insight and perceptiveness has enabled him to produce a solid study, in which, history moves both backwards and forwards. And when considered in the context of what is going on now, we can conclude that Trevaskis' book is, undoubtedly, one of the best books ever written on Eritrea.

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<sup>56</sup>Trevaskis, G. N. K., *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition, 1941-52* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960).

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 130-131.

*Italian colonialism in Eritrea (1882-1941) Policies, Praxis, and Impact* (1987), by the Eritrean scholar, Tekeste Negash,<sup>58</sup> is an extremely interesting study. It was the author's Ph.D. dissertation, which he converted into a book form and published. Much of its contents are based on research done at the Archivio Storico dell'Africa Italiana, the Archivio Eritrea, and the Archivio Centrale dello Stato. The author maintains that Eritrea was an artificial creation of disparate regions with different historical and ecological characteristics, whose raison d'etre was from the point of view of the Italians, first, to serve as a population pressure valve for southern Italy, and secondly, to facilitate the penetration of Ethiopia.<sup>59</sup> The author reports that, between 1935 and 1941, an astonishing 40% of Eritrea's active male labour force served in the colonial army.<sup>60</sup>

Tekeste also maintains that there was hardly any modern education in Eritrea during the colonial period except at the primary level. As a result, no westernized intelligentsia developed. Hence, there was no "leeway for the emergence of colonial nationalism in Eritrea."<sup>61</sup> What little nationalist sentiment emerged, he says, expressed itself in terms of Ethiopian nationalism and the cause of Ethiopian rather than Eritrean independence. The author points out that, be it under the Italians or the British, Eritreans voiced no articulation of the new imagined community.<sup>62</sup> According to Tekeste, Eritrean

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<sup>58</sup>Tekeste Negash, *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea (1882-1941): Policies, Praxis and Impact* (Uppsala, Sweden: Historiska Institutionen vid Uppsala Universitet genom Carl Gorn Andrea och Rolf Torstendahl, No. 148, 1987).

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 182.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 51.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 162.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 163.

consciousness emerged in the post-1952 period. Before arriving at any conclusion with regard to the present situation, the author proposes that a "scientific investigation be made."<sup>63</sup>

### **The Revisionists**

Historians in general identify trends, analyze causes and consequences and interpret history as a process. They also provide a historical perspective which can inform debate rather than service any particular ideology.

As we have seen, the traditionalists establish historical continuity between Ethiopia and Eritrea. In contrast, the revisionists emphasize discontinuity. This is an important distinction. Revisionist historiography made its appearance very recently. In fact, until the overthrow of the ancien regime, very little research, if any, appeared on Eritrea which questioned the established facts of its Ethiopian identity and the widely accepted generalizations. The question, then, becomes: every time there is a change in the present system through the triumph of one faction over another, or even a change of policy within the ruling elite, should the past be re-written to accord with the requirements of the new order? In any event, revisionist historians argue that several assumptions of traditional historians have been overstated and that such assumptions should be revised in order to compensate for supposed inaccuracies. This outlook, by itself is, positive, insofar as it urges new directions for historical research and induces discussions to be shifted into areas that had not attracted the attention of traditional historians. However, revisionist historians would have made some contribution to knowledge, if they had backed their investigations with data, in the broadest

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<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 183.

sense of the term, rather than limit themselves to producing studies that are little more than book reviews.

The revisionists pay little attention to a scholar's commitment to objectivity. They have the tendency to pass judgments that appear personal, random and arbitrary. Such scholarship can best be described as "advocacy" scholarship.<sup>64</sup> To this group belong Richard Greenfield, David Pool, Richard Sherman, Roy Pateman, and others. For example, to call Roy Pateman's book, *Eritrea: Even the Stones are Burning* (1990), whose facts and figures are entirely based on EPLF sources--sources which go out of their way to falsify historical records, a "scholarly" work, is to dignify it. The author admits that it was written as a tribute to the friendship and inspiration of many committed and persuasive members of the EPLF.<sup>65</sup> He therefore willingly manipulates facts and attempts to re-write history by interpreting the past in a manner that suits the political objectives of the EPLF, but that is also completely at variance with historical records. Needless to say, Pateman's uncritical acceptance of the historical claim of one of the Eritrean movements, i.e., the EPLF, as fact, can only contribute to the proliferation of historical mythology.

Within this category of revisionism, such deficiency is even more pronounced with respect to scholarship by persons from Eritrea, where the distinction between scholarly work and politically motivated writing becomes very slim. Apart from being highly distorted and subjective, it suffers from a

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<sup>64</sup>Advocacy need not necessarily be confined to the court of law. A writer who argues the case of his client is also an advocate. The client could be a government or a political party. He need not also be concerned with arriving at the truth. His task is to present the case of his client in a convincing manner. The writing of such an advocate could be an invaluable source material for the historian, but it certainly is not history.

<sup>65</sup>Pateman, Roy *Eritrea: Even the Stones are Burning* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1990), viii.

general lack of comprehensiveness both in chronology and content and hence, contributes very little to our understanding of the issues. What appears and what passes for history is, in reality, a twilight world of myth and fantasy which may gratify those who invent it, but which has little foundation in fact.

“Invention,” as opposed to the discreet doctoring of the past, has several functions. Here it is meant to remove what is considered unacceptable from the past, and to replace it with something more amenable to the purpose at hand. Being an expression of inner psychological or ideological needs, it distorts facts, asserts new claims, advances new aspirations and even proposes a new identity that is in conflict with the old order.<sup>66</sup>

As Peter Burke puts it succinctly: “To use history as a weapon, in political struggle, is counter-productive. One comes to believe one’s own propaganda, to overdramatize the past, and hence to forget the real complexity of the issues at any time. One comes to idealize one’s own side, and to divide human beings into Us and Them.”<sup>67</sup>

Yohannes Okbazghi’s, *Eritrea--A Pawn in World Politics* (1991), is a study based on a determinedly utilitarian calculus. It is more notable for what

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<sup>66</sup>For a review article that makes a distinction between historiography and mythology, see Patrick Gilkes, “Eritrea: Historiography and Mythology,” *African Affairs, The Journal of the Royal African Society*, 90, no. 361, October 1991. The author argues, and rightly so, that much of the writing on Eritrea has been at the level of the polemic or a product of the “guerrilla groupie.” A surprising number of scholars have taken the EPLF at face value, and its historical claims as fact. The results have impoverished the literature on Eritrea, and have created a distorted national mythology. The EPLF’s own literature has been involved in the process of myth formation for Eritrea for some years. There is an obvious need for it--though it is less acceptable when highjacked in the service of a movement. There is much less excuse when outside observers re-write history in this fashion (p. 625).

<sup>67</sup>Burke, Peter, “People’s History or Total History,” in Raphael Samuel (ed.) *People’s History and Socialist Theory* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 8.



is left out than for what is put in, and what is put in has the studied air of being manufactured to fit a prescribed pattern. There is no history from "inside." The focus is on the external dimensions of the Eritrean conflict. Yet, even in this, the role of the Arabs in organizing, training, arming and financing the Eritrean movements is totally ignored. The author would like his readers to believe that there was an independent and self-governing [Eritrean?] state with defined boundaries even before 1890. Yohannes maintains that [even] the link that southern Eritrea had with Axum ended with the state's collapse and disintegration, that since the downfall of Axum, Ethiopia and Eritrea have had their own independent historical evolution, and that even if the Emperor Yohannes had conquered parts of Eritrea in the 19th century, present-day Ethiopia is not entitled to assert any claim over the whole of Eritrea, and that the 1952 Federation was imposed "conspiratorially" against the wishes of the people.<sup>68</sup>

Although the author claims that Axum's link was only with Southern Eritrea, he admits that, at the zenith of its power, Axum extended as far as Meroe around the vicinity of modern-day Khartoum in the west, and Southern Arabia in the east (p. 26). More specifically, the coastal region from Swakin to the Gulf of Bab-el-Mandeb and beyond to Somalia, incorporating what came to be known as Eritrea, was controlled by Axum.<sup>69</sup> This means that the whole of today's Eritrea was an integral part of Axum. The northern Sahel region was abandoned earlier, but Axum retained much of the rest of today's Eritrea.

The successor Ethiopian state also administered what was called Medri Bahri/Eritrea. For example, Negus Zere Yacob (1434-68) abolished the office of

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<sup>68</sup>Okbazghi, Yohannes, *Eritrea--A Pawn in World Politics* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1991).

<sup>69</sup>Op. cit., Kobischanov, Y., 43, 57-59.

Melake Bahr, "legate to the sea," and replaced it with that of Bahre Negash, "ruler of the sea," and gave the latter authority over the northern provinces of Ethiopia, including the Dahlack Islands of the Red Sea, Massawa, Tigrai, Shire, Hamassien, Akele Guzaie and Seraie. The Bahre Negash became the second highest official in the country. The Bahre Negash who received the 400 Portuguese musketeers and artillerists in Massawa on behalf of the emperor was Yeshaque who came from an important family of Adekans in the Shire region of eastern Tigrai. His father, Ras Dagana, had also occupied the post of Bahre Negash. But during the time of Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim, he had deserted Emperor Libne Dengel and joined the Muslims. Yeshaque remained faithful to the Emperor and had his father's post.<sup>70</sup>

This historical fact is confirmed by Francisco Alvarez, Chaplain of the Portuguese Mission, which visited Ethiopia in the 16th century. He points out that for centuries Medri Bahri (Eritrea) was ruled by the Bahre Negasi, who was a vassal of the "King of Kings" of the Christian kingdom of the Ethiopian highlands, and that to the southwest of the Bay of Massawa was situated the mainland port of Harkiko, which belonged to Christians and to a lord who was called Barangais, i.e., the Bahre Negash.<sup>71</sup> Alvarez's eye-witness account includes the following encounter:

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<sup>70</sup>O.E.S. Crawford (ed.), *Ethiopian Itineraries* (c. 1400-1524), (London: Hakluyt Society, 1958), 43.

<sup>71</sup>See Alvarez, Francisco, *Narrative of the Portuguese Embassy to Abyssinia During the Years 1520-1527*, trans. Lord Stanley of Alderley (New York: Burt Franklin Publishers, 1881). When Negus Minas (1559-1563) tried to cut down his power, Yeshaque rebelled and made common cause with the Turks. He cut all communications between the interior and the coastal provinces, until the central authority of the state was re-established in 1578 by Serse Dengel (1563-1597). See Edward Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 74.

A gentleman from the court of Prester John arrived and the Bahrnagais [Bahre Negash] gave him such a reception that he forgot us. When this gentleman arrived, the Bahrnagais went out of town to receive him at a small hill near the houses; and there went out with him many people, and he was naked from the waist upwards. The gentleman placed himself on the highest spot above the rest, and his first words were: the king sends to salute you. At these words all went with their hand upon ground, which is the courtesy and reverence of this country.<sup>72</sup>

Furthermore, in a lucid and comprehensive book, J. Ludolph listed around thirty principalities and fiefdoms of the Ethiopian Empire. With regard to the 28th principality he wrote: The 28th is Tigre or Tigra, one of the principal kingdoms, and the first as you enter into Ethiopia. The native country of the former kings, who kept their court at Axum--the most noble part of it lies towards the Red Sea, and is called Medri-Bahr, the land of the sea, or a Maritime Province. The governor, Bahr-Negash resides at Dobarwa.<sup>73</sup>

The Ottoman Turks, too, accurately identified Ethiopia and defined it as the area between Swakin and the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb. The Ottomans used the word Habeshistan when referring to the land, and Habesh in reference to the people living in that country. In their accounts, Medri Bahri/Eritrea constituted an integral part of Ethiopia. Even when they occupied Massawa in 1557, the Ottomans recognized it as Ethiopia's historical outlet to the outside world.<sup>74</sup> Others equally confirm that a considerable part of Eritrea was, during the 14th to the 18th centuries, an integral part of the Negus's dominions.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup>Ibid., Alvarez, 8, 52-54.

<sup>73</sup>Ludolph, J., *A New History of Ethiopia*, (London: 1682).

<sup>74</sup>Gengeis Orhonlu, "Turkish Archival Sources on Ethiopia," *International Congress of Ethiopian Studies, 10 April-May 10, 1972*. Academia Nazionale del Lincei, Roma, Anno CCCLXI.

<sup>75</sup>Longrigg, 18.

When James Bruce visited Ethiopia in the 18th century, he described the geographical division of Ethiopia and put together the region between the Red Sea and the Tekezie River as Tigrai. According to him, Masuah (Massawa) was in ancient times one of the principal places of residence of the Bahre Negash, who was the third person in rank in the kingdom. The office was lucrative as well as honourable, as the districts had many valuable productions. When Masuah was taken by the Turks, a basha was appointed here. There is still a Bahre Negash, but his district is small, and his office and dignity insignificant compared with what they used to be.<sup>76</sup>

In 1865, the Ottoman Turks leased Massawa and Swakin<sup>u</sup> to Egypt's Muhammed Ali Pasha. As a result, the ruler of Northern Ethiopia, Woube Haile Mariam, bade the new Pasha remember that the whole coast was Ethiopian. He even sent his general Kokebe to raid the outskirts of Massawa, but in vain.<sup>77</sup> Under Emperor Theodore (1855-1868), Seraie, Hamassien, Akele Guzaie, Habab, Mensa, Baria--the Kunama districts of southwestern Eritrea--were all part of Ethiopia. In fact, Mirach Welde Selassie, Wolde Tsadik Mirach and Dejazmatch Hailu Tewolde Medhin were appointed at different times by Theodore to administer these provinces.<sup>78</sup> By the time the Italians seized what came to be called Eritrea, Emperor Yohannes IV (1868-1889) had completed the reunification of Northern Ethiopia, including the Eritrean lowlands. This reality was recognized by the Anglo-Egyptian-Ethiopian Tripartite Agreement

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<sup>76</sup>Bruce, James, *An Interesting Narration of the Travels of James Bruce into Abyssinia to Discover the Source of the Blue Nile* (Boston: Samual Etheridge, 1798), 169-227.

<sup>77</sup>Longrigg, 86. See also Ghada Talhami, *Swakin<sup>u</sup> and Massawa Under Egyptian Rule, 1865-1885* (University Press of America, 1975), 86.

<sup>78</sup>Rubenson, Sven, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence* (Heinemann, 1976), 209-241. That all the above-mentioned provinces belonged to Ethiopia is also confirmed by the map which appears in the same book on page 216.

of 1884.<sup>79</sup> Hence, and contrary to what Yohannes Okbazghi claims, highland Christian Eritreans have maintained their links with Ethiopia. Indeed, prior to the Italian takeover of the territory, there was no official connection between the different inhabitants of Eritrea, except in their relationship with the local power, the Ethiopian state. The author also claims that Eritrea resisted the advances of Egypt starting from 1840. The use of the name “Eritrea” as a political and administrative concept, even before the Italians created the territory, can only be anachronistic.

With regard to the 1952 federation “that [the author claims] was imposed conspiratorially against the wishes of the people,” the following should also be noted. If there were political parties in Eritrea, which vigorously campaigned for independence or trusteeship, there were also political parties that advocated the cause of union with Ethiopia. In fact, in the British supervised elections of 1952, it was the Unionist Party—a party which campaigned, not for independence, federation or even autonomy but, for unconditional union with Ethiopia, which won most of the seats of the national Assembly.<sup>80</sup> Unionist strength was also revealed on April 29, 1952, when the National Assembly chose for its President, the Secretary General of the Unionist Party, Tedla Bairu, by an overwhelming vote of 49 to 11.<sup>81</sup> Under such circumstances, could one speak of conspiracy? Were the Eritrean people conspiring against themselves? Eritreans moved south to Ethiopia in search of educational, business and employment opportunities. Many worked for the state and

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<sup>79</sup>Zewde Gabre Selassie, 122-151.

<sup>80</sup>Pankhurst, E. Sylvia and Pankhurst, Richard, *Ethiopia and Eritrea, the last phase of the reunion struggle, 1941-1952*. (Woodford Green, Essex: Lalibella House, 1953), 281.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid.

strongly identified with it. Their alienation began with Haile Selassie and accelerated rapidly during the period of the Dergue in which many of them really suffered, but that is no excuse to falsify the historical record.

In his *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea* (1989), Jordan Gebre-Medhin argues that pastoralism and sedentary agriculture was transformed as a result of the capitalist colonization of Eritrea, thus giving birth to a nationalism which subsequently has been subverted and undermined by Ethiopia.<sup>82</sup> Jordan's view of Eritrean history will find little criticism from the EPLF, but will have serious problems with scholars who have studied Eritrea. He writes of the transformation of the peasantry but he is neither specific about the type of peasants, nor analytical. Moreover, if peasant support to the EPLF was so crucial, why could not the 1975 Ethiopian land reform programme win Eritrean peasants to the Dergue? In view of the title of the book, the scant space of thirteen pages devoted to the peasantry makes the title a misnomer. The book is hardly a well-researched and objectively written piece. Far from being balanced, it is subjective and one-sided. In fact, it is more interesting for the fallacy it represents than for its educational value.

Contrary to what is asserted, Eritrea had remained a somnolent little colony which Italy maintained more for the possible invasion of the rest of Ethiopia and for prestige purposes than for any tangible benefit. It neither provided raw materials nor a settlement space for the Italians. Pastoralists remained pastoralists, and sedentary agriculture was hardly changed. No major industries of any consequence were built. It was only in the early 1930s, in preparing the invasion of Ethiopia, that certain support structures were built.

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<sup>82</sup>Jordan Gebre Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea* (Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1989).

Furthermore, Italian racial discrimination assumed the pattern of providing carefully limited educational opportunities for Eritreans, their exclusion from middle and upper levels of the police, judicial and administrative bureaucracies, preclusion of political activity, and denial of development related goods and services. The Italian administration hardly attempted a radical alteration of social and economic structures in the countryside, where most Eritreans lived. In fact, fragmentation along the fault lines of race, religion, vocation, region, and clan left few openings for cooperation in pursuit of any purpose.<sup>83</sup> Under such circumstances, could one speak of the transformation of the territory under the Italians?

The claim of the emergence of Eritrean nationalism is equally misleading. Those who have consulted the Italian archives, recognized Eritrean historians like Tekeste Negash, maintain that Eritrea was an artificial creation of disparate regions with different historical and ecological characteristics<sup>84</sup>, that the colony was made totally subservient to the needs and control of the metropolis, that very few of the inhabitants received modern education, and that there was no leeway for the emergence of colonial nationalism in Eritrea.<sup>85</sup> If the roots of Eritrean nationalism do not predate the colonial period, if society was fragmented along clan lines, and if there was no nationalism in Eritrea to voice and to articulate about the new imagined community, could it be said that Eritrean nationalism was the result of fifty years of Italian rule?<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup>Farer, Tom, *War Clouds on the Horn of Africa, a crisis for Detente* (New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1976), 21.

<sup>84</sup>Tekeste Negash, *Italian Colonialism...*, 182.

<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*, 163.

Such ideas were still far away into the future and did not appear on the Eritrean political landscape. In Eritrea, it was religion that distinguished those who belonged to the group and which marked them from those outside the group. They could speak similar languages, but as Muslims or as Christians, they share different memories of a sacred past, of corporate identity, and a different sense of a common predicament and destiny. Hence, the basic political identity in Eritrea was either Islamic or Pan-Ethiopian Christian. To this day, religion constitutes the essential basis of identity and loyalty.

The Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) is overwhelmingly Muslim. The Muslim religion affects every aspect of human life--religion, philosophy, education, law, culture, commerce, and so on, hence, secularism becomes a difficult venture. On the other hand, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, the EPLF, is Christian dominated, but secular.<sup>87</sup>

As David Korn rightly points out: Eritreans have little in common, [indeed] none of the characteristics that ordinarily underpin a claim to self-determination. The population has no common religion, no common language, and no common ethnic origin. The cement that binds Eritreans together is a common hatred of governments in Addis Ababa, be they monarchical or Marxist Leninist, allied with the West or East. The Eritrean rebellion owes its existence more to the brutal and retrograde methods of the monarchy and its Marxist-Leninist successors than to any other one thing. Cynical exploitation

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<sup>87</sup>See *African Research Bulletin*, 28, no. 10, Oct. 1-31, 1991. How would one explain the on going conflict between the EPLF and the other Eritrean movements? Or between the Ben Amir, the Kunama, the Afars and EPLF? The Afar Revolutionary Democratic Union (ARDU), for instance, declares that it is committed to leading a protracted struggle to liberate Afar territories of the Western Red Sea coast, i.e., the entire Red Sea area from Massawa to Assab from EPLF occupation. What do we conclude from all this?



by foreign governments, seeking to promote their own aims, would come a close second.<sup>88</sup> As a consequence of all of this, Jordan Gebre Medhin needs to re-assess his facts and conclusions.

Bereket Habte Selassie's book, *Conflict and Intervention in the Horn of Africa* (1980)<sup>89</sup>, is an argument for Eritrean independence. He approaches the subject, not with pre-conceived questions, but with pre-conceived answers. As the truism goes, to be a committed nationalist is incompatible with writing a serious history of nationalism. The historian must leave his/her convictions behind when entering the library.<sup>90</sup> Bereket's interpretation of history is subtle, self-serving, and quite misleading. He takes refuge either in historical mythology or in egregious innuendoes. The author maintains that the source of the Eritrean conflict lies in the nature of the Ethiopian empire-state, whose "imperialistic" character cannot change, and that since the 15th century, the Abyssinians were able only to establish a tenuous rule over the Eritrean highlanders because the people stubbornly resisted Abyssinian attempts to rule them (p. 49).

What is the difference between the Eritrean highlanders and those whom he calls Abyssinians? Historians, linguists and anthropologists have discovered none. In fact, the Eritrean highlanders are considered Abyssinians. Moreover, why does the author begin history with the 15th century? What was the situation before that?

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<sup>88</sup>Korn, David A., *Ethiopia, the United States and the Soviet Union* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), 158.

<sup>89</sup>Bereket Habte Selassie, *Conflict and Intervention in the Horn of Africa*. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1980).

<sup>90</sup>Op. cit., Hobsbawn, 12-13.

Even if we take Bereket at his word, there is no evidence to support his contention that the highlanders fiercely resisted what he calls Abyssinian rule. Johannes Kolmodin has produced a thoroughly prepared collection of oral traditions on the history of the highland Eritreans. In the almost three centuries covered by Bereket, there is only a single instance of a conflict raised by Kolmodin pertaining to the allocation of power between the Abyssinian districts of Eritrea and the imperial centre at Gondar.<sup>91</sup>

Centralization or decentralization of the state, would have to be seen in relation to the historical stages of national integration. A politically developing nation typically needs to emphasize integration in order to overcome parochial loyalties that threaten the breakup of the nation. As with all traditional societies, Ethiopian administration was not consciously differentiated from other aspects of governance, including maintenance of law and order, assessment of taxes, raising of armies, and so on. This required the stationing of central officials in the provinces. Given the primitive state of communications, if the provinces were to be effectively controlled, substantial powers had to be delegated to the governors, and this, Bereket seems to overlook.

Emperors Zere Yacob (1434-1468), Gelawdious (1540-1559), Serse Dengel (1563-97), and others, effectively governed much of what later became Eritrea.<sup>92</sup> In the 19th-century, Woube Haile Mariam ruled highland Eritrea, including the hinterland of Massawa, *i.e.*, the Semhar, and even chose the Naib of Harkiko. Wolde Mikael Selomon and his famous mother, Elleni, were

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<sup>91</sup>Kolmodin, Johannes, *Traditions de Tsazzega et Hazzega*, (Tigrigna Text) Rome (1912) French translation, Uppsala, 1915.

<sup>92</sup>See, for example, O.E.S. Crawford (ed.), *Ethiopian Itineraries, c. 1400-1524* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1958).

confirmed to their traditional positions of power in Hamassien by Woube in 1839. When, from 1823 to 1890, the Hazzega and Tsazzega vied for power, both groups had to report their differences to Emperor Theodore and subsequently to Emperor Yohannes. In fact, Wolde Mikael Selomon of Hazzega continued to govern Hamassien and Bogos under Emperor Yohannes. Similarly, Baryaw Gebre Tsadik, who was Deputy Governor of Tigray under Emperor Theodore, was appointed Governor of Hamassien in 1878. Likewise, Kasa Golja, Ras Alula, and Araya Dimtsou all governed the different provinces of Eritrea under Yohannes. Most of the tribes between Massawa and Kasala also paid tribute to Ethiopia.<sup>93</sup> Under such circumstances, could it be argued that the Eritrean highlanders fiercely resisted "Abyssinian" attempts to rule them?

Richard Sherman's book, *Eritrea, the Unfinished Revolution* (1980)<sup>94</sup>, was originally a Ph.D. dissertation, which he converted into a book form and published. Sherman treats the pre-colonial history of Eritrea in the first chapter (pp. 9-13). The authorities for this section are not the established historians that we have reviewed, but propaganda pamphlets produced in 1978 by a group of Eritrean political activists in New York. In such a situation, the seriousness of his scholarship can only be questioned. Even if one must not necessarily have to renounce every nationalist movement as inherently mystified and falsely manipulative, one still needs to maintain a critical relation to the claims of any polemical nationalist discourse.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup>Rubenson, 208-209; See also Ghada H. Talhami, *Swakin and Massawa Under Egyptian Rule, 1865-1885* (University Press of America, 1975), 14; Zewde Gabre Selassie, 272-281; Longrigg, 91-116.

<sup>94</sup>Sherman, Richard, *Eritrea, the Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Praeger, 1980).

<sup>95</sup>Yadav, Alok: "Nationalism and Contemporaneity: Political Economy of Discourse," *Cultural Critique*, no. 26, Winter 1993-1994, 194.

Since Sherman has made himself a warrior at the "front", he is deeply committed to the cause of Eritrean independence and makes no attempt to hide it. To that end, he falsifies and re-writes history to suit his purposes. One should not be surprised therefore to read, "that Axumite civilization was more of an Eritrean history than an Ethiopian one." What is Eritrean, and what is Ethiopian is not explained. But the historical truth is, Axum formed the basis of Ethiopian culture, civilization and statehood. No recognized historian has concluded otherwise.

To lend further weight to his untenable thesis, Sherman claims that European travellers of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries identified an area called Medri Bahri—equivalent to modern Eritrea—as distinct from Ethiopia (p. 9). It is true that they did identify the place. But it is a big mistake to say that Medri Bahri was distinct from Ethiopia. In fact, all the travellers who left their accounts state that it was one of the provinces of Ethiopia. These include: Francisco Alvarez (1520); M. Almeida (1646); James Bruce (1790); and others.

The two cornerstones of Eritrean nationalism, he claims, were (1) the common history of colonial occupation, particularly Italian, and (2) the increasingly repressive measures taken by respective Ethiopian regimes in their attempt to stifle Eritrean nationalism. But what Sherman overlooks is that Italian colonialism did not promote a cause even remotely resembling Eritrean nationalism. If anything, tribal, ethnic and religious animosities were deliberately fostered to prolong colonial oppression. Longrigg and Trevaskis, who provide eye-witness accounts, confirm this assessment. In those days, Eritrean "nationalism" in fact, expressed itself in terms of Ethiopian nationalism. Historians like Tekeste Negash who have studied the Italian archives support this view. If Eritrean nationalism had no roots, it is erroneous to say that increasingly repressive measures were taken by

Ethiopian regimes in order to stifle Eritrean national aspirations. On the contrary, it would have been more accurate to say that the increasingly repressive measures taken by respective Ethiopian regimes have created and promoted what could be described as Eritrean nationalism.

David Pool, *Eritrea, Africa's Longest War* (1980)<sup>96</sup>, has consulted the relevant sources regarding the pre-colonial history of Eritrea. He recognizes that some parts of Eritrea were historically, culturally and economically linked to Ethiopia. But he also argues, and quite rightly, that other regions of Eritrea hardly fell within the sphere of Ethiopian rule (p. 20). Considering the Ottoman and Egyptian presence in Eritrea, what David Pool says is correct. However, the manner with which he interprets the history is slightly in favour of those who seek independence for Eritrea. As noted earlier, what is at stake here is the issue of historical legitimacy, which Ethiopia needs to justify its claim to Eritrea. Eritreans would have to stress historical discontinuity in order to win sympathy and support for their cause. David Pool is on the side of discontinuity. The fact that the Ottoman Turks and Egyptians controlled some parts of Eritrea does not make Eritrea less Ethiopian. Nor is such a claim made by the Egyptians and the Turks themselves. Both attest to Ethiopian presence and claims to the province. In fact, when the Ottomans advanced into the Red Sea in the 16th century and captured Massawa and its hinterland, they called this province Habeshistan, i.e., Habesh<sup>97</sup>, the traditional Arab name for Ethiopia, which Europeans turned into Abyssinia.

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<sup>96</sup>Pool, David, *Eritrea, Africa's Longest War*, Anti-Slavery Society, Human Rights Series, Report No. 3, 1980.

<sup>97</sup>Gengis Orhonlu, "Turkish Archival Sources on Ethiopia," *International Congress of Ethiopian Studies*, 10 April-10 May, 1972, Academia Nazionale del Lincei, Roma, Anno CCCLXI.

*Behind the War in Eritrea*<sup>98</sup> is a collection of papers presented in a symposium organized in 1979 by Bereket Habte Selassie, Richard Greenfield, Basil Davidson, and others. The book is nothing more than a compilation of all sorts of innuendos, distortions and virulent propaganda campaigns in the name of scholarship. The arguments Bereket advances here are similar to those already considered. Hence, rather than repeating them, we will look into what the others have to say.

Richard Greenfield has never been consistent in his scholarship concerning Ethiopia. For example, in his *Ethiopia, A New Political History* (1965)<sup>99</sup>, he asserted that Modern re-united Ethiopia is the logical inheritor of the tradition of ancient Axum (p. 24). However, in Greenfield's latest revelations, that conclusion seems to be placed in doubt. Having observed that the Axumite Empire was a tribute-collecting state (p. 19), and with fluid boundaries, he wonders if "Eritreans" were integrated into that state. But by his own admission in his earlier work, Eritrea was the foundation of that state. To support his untenable thesis, Greenfield refers to a long quotation from the 4th century inscription of Ezana<sup>100</sup>, in which the king had documented his military expeditions in the region. Greenfield interprets the inscription in a distorted manner and wants his readers to believe that "Eritreans" did not accept their status with meek resignation. In doing so, he aims to establish

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<sup>98</sup>Davidson, Basil, and others (eds.), *Behind the War in Eritrea*, Spokesman, 1980.

<sup>99</sup>Greenfield, Richard, *Ethiopia, A New Political History*, Praeger, 1965.

<sup>100</sup>Ezana ascended the throne between A.D. 320 and 325. Inscriptions on the obelisks at Axum detail the kingdom that he ruled, which flourished on both sides of the Red Sea, extending into Semien and Wolkait of present-day Gondar, and parts of present-day Sudan and Somalia. Ezana introduced the title "King of Kings" and, like his predecessors, he minted coins with Greek inscriptions for his external trade. The Geez language became distinct from Sabeian during his reign. He was buried in a rock-hewn church in Axum, still in existence.

historical legitimacy for the present conflict. But strangely enough, the very same inscription he cites contradicts what he wants to advance. It states that Ezana crossed the Tekezze River and destroyed Meroe because its people had committed acts of violence against the people of Hasa and Baria, both of whom are still found in western Eritrea. If Eritreans were not integrated into that state, why should the king defend the Hasa and Baria against Meroe?

### Neo-Traditionist Historiography

Like all professional historians, neo-traditionist historians have as their goals, accuracy and understanding. In this particular case, they also demonstrate the desire to remedy deficiencies in the traditional historiography. Like the traditionist historians, neo-traditionists seriously question the revisionist interpretations of Eritrean history. But, unlike the traditionist historians, the neo-traditionists interpret history in order to address the existing problem.

There is also another question that should be raised. History is not just factual; it can also be invented. It is not just what is preserved in popular memory, but also what has been selected and popularized. A historical myth can be dangerous. It induces misguided attitudes and responses and can stand in the way of the lessons which can be learnt from the past. Ruling groups have always had an interest in promoting mythical pasts, which serve to legitimize their power. In the process, historical facts can sometimes become less important than popular beliefs in shaping the attitudes of people.<sup>101</sup> If the Ethiopian monarchy invented the myth of King Solomon and of the Queen

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<sup>101</sup>Touval, Saadia, *Somali Nationalism, International Politics and the Drive for Unity in the Horn of Africa*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 51.

of Sheba to gain legitimacy, likewise, Eritrean opposition movements have also created their own myth and counter-culture for similar objectives. While traditional historians have succeeded in tracing the origins of the Solomonic myth, revisionist historians have miserably failed to recognize the “history” which Eritrean political movements have invented. In fact, they have contributed to the mythology. This task has been accomplished only by the neo-traditionists. They have succeeded in identifying that part of history which Eritrean political activists have invented to gain legitimacy for the cause they have been advancing. In this respect, Haggai Erlich and Paul Henze may be considered as representatives of the neo-traditionist school.

In his, *The Struggle Over Eritrea (1962-1978)* (1983), Haggai Erlich presents a detailed account and analysis of the internal political dynamics of the Eritrean movements. He examines the ferocity of factional and sub-factional infighting among the insurgents on the one hand, and Ethiopian politics on the other. As such, his book covers both the pre-colonial and post-colonial periods. He maintains that, as a geopolitical concept, Eritrea is barely a century old. He also describes it as an artificial construct of European imperialism, which lacks long standing historical roots as a political unit. The implication of this is clear: Eritrea does not possess the same legitimacy as autonomous political units often do. Having considered the historical, linguistic and cultural ties of Eritreans with neighbouring countries, Erlich establishes that Italy’s impact on Eritrean society was minimal, that Eritrean nationalism is “shallow” and “rootless,” while Ethiopian nationalism is more deeply and historically formed. He observes that what passes for Eritrean nationalism is, in reality, the intense hatred Eritreans had for the Mengistu regime in Addis Ababa. He traces the background of the mishandling of



Eritreans by Addis Ababa to the 1962 period, when Haile Selassie abolished the federal status of Eritrea and made it a mere province of Ethiopia.<sup>102</sup>

Erlich's contention seems to be supported by close observers of the scene. There are those who argue that Eritrean "nationalism" did not exist until after "federation" with Ethiopia, and that the current Eritrean "nationalism" is an offshoot of the violence and repression perpetuated by Ethiopia.<sup>103</sup> There are also those who say that anti-government feeling forced many Eritreans to support the Eritrean Liberation Front. But, faced by the threat of Muslim or Arab dominance in Eritrea--a real possibility--and with a regime in Ethiopia to which they could be more sympathetic, this group would probably swing back the other way. According to such observers, the Eritrean Christians are a pivotal group leaning in some ways to one side and in some to the other, but their long-term connections are with the plateau, and short of very bad management on the Ethiopian side, enough of them should stay loyal to ensure that Eritrea remains part of Ethiopia.<sup>104</sup> Such an observation is still valid, even if it is behind the events. Nevertheless, we should ask how Eritrean nationalism would have accommodated itself to a situation where a democratic government were to come to power in Addis Ababa, which permitted political pluralism, respected human rights, and was committed to restore all the institutions Eritrea had in 1952.

While it could be said that, next to Trevaskis, Erlich's study is perhaps one of the best books on Eritrea, it is not also without errors. For example, he

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<sup>102</sup>Erlich, Haggai, *The Struggle Over Eritrea (1962-1978): War and Revolution in the Horn of Africa* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institute Press, 1983).

<sup>103</sup>Alem Abbay, "The Eritrean Dilemma," *Trans-Africa Forum* (7), 1/1990-91.

<sup>104</sup>Clapham, Christopher, *Conflicts in Africa, Adelphi Paper, No. 93*, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, London (1972).

claims that in the federation, Eritreans did not control finance and commerce. Actually, they controlled commerce, the collection of internal taxes and the budget. Furthermore, he maintains that, from among the countries of the Middle East, the Eritreans found support only from the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (p. 56). But what about the Sudan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq, Kuwait, Algeria, and others?

Paul B. Henze has reviewed nearly all the recent publications of what we call revisionist historians. The following shows in what light he evaluates them:

What we currently have at hand are largely mediocre [works] ranging from the incomplete and inadequate to the tendentious and deceptive. None of it is distinguished by a high level of scholarship. Overstatement, emotionalism, lack of objectivity and erratic sourcing are characteristic features. Even those works which are cast in a traditional academic format are difficult to accept as scholarly. Much that has appeared in book form is the work of people displaying a strong leftist bias, little reading of history, and an inclination to fit events to preconceived notions of good and evil. Few of the authors have had experience in the countries of the region. They use only information that bolsters their biases. They repeat incomplete information and questionable judgements from polemic works that were written in the immediate wake of the Ethiopian Revolution, as if these had been hallowed by the passage of time. Among such authors are Richard Sherman, Bereket Habte Selassie, and others.<sup>105</sup>

Henze contends that culturally, Eritrea has always been part of what Donald Levine has termed, in an anthropological and psychological sense, "Greater Ethiopia." Eritrean history is Ethiopian history for at least the past 2,500 years. No one who studies ancient South Arabian/African cultural and political linkages and known facts about the spread of Christianity and the rise of Islam in the whole Red Sea/Horn region, could conclude otherwise. Axumite

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<sup>105</sup>See his review in: "History and the Horn," in *Problems of Communism*, Jan.-Feb. 1983, vol. XXXII.

civilization, which developed first in what is now Eritrea, and then advanced southward, is the ultimate basis of Ethiopian culture and statehood.

The problem with such an interpretation is that, even in what is described as "Greater Ethiopia," there are distinctions based on language, culture, religion and historical experience. Who is to say that a nation-state cannot be built around such distinctions? Who is to say that such nationalism has no place in Europe, for example, in Scotland, Wales, Ireland, or among the Flemings and Walloons in Belgium? The Eritrean problem is more complex than one is given to understand here.

In any case, Henze criticizes such revisionist historians as Sherman for being one-sided. He admits that there was some real basis for Eritrean dissatisfaction with re-incorporation into Ethiopia (1952-62), but there were also imagined grievances. If there is a case to be made for taking Eritrean "separatism" seriously, this is not the way to make it. He argues that Eritrean discontent was also stoked from outside by the very governments which were supporting the Mengistu regime in Addis Ababa. Specifically, Henze takes to task the USSR, Cuba, the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe and radical Arab governments, for exploiting the Eritrean problem to advance their strategic goals. He dismisses Sherman and the others for being willing or unknowing instruments of Moscow and the Arabs.

Here again, one should see the limitations of the analysis. The governments he mentions may have their own hidden agendas and designs. What is difficult to accept is this: Do people struggle and shed their blood for thirty years, merely to promote the vested interests of the powers that be?

## Conclusion

We have attempted to review the historiography. We have also seen the differences among the historians. What makes history scientific is, in the final analysis, the consensus among the practitioners in the field, i.e., the professional historians themselves. But as far as Eritrean history goes, and as we have shown, there is no consensus of opinion among the historians. Are we then to conclude that Eritrea has no history? Furthermore, the difficulty of reconciling the divergent interpretations of the history has been paralleled by the existing political conflict, thus compounding the confusion. There is, nevertheless, something central to all this that should be raised. When the future of Eritrea was being debated, both at the Paris Peace Conference in 1946 and later at the United Nations, one of the principal reasons that Ethiopia advanced in claiming Eritrea was the question of "common" history. However, present-day Eritreans who, rightly or wrongly, feel that Ethiopia has never treated them fairly, tend to reject any historical links with Ethiopia. They do so in an apparent attempt to give their cause of independence historical legitimacy. This is evidenced from the following:

The principal objective of Amhara feudalists in concocting a non-existent history of 3,000 years, is, the realization of their expansionist ambitions to put [Eritrea] under their dictatorship. [In any case], ancient civilizations that existed in the past, have never been, and cannot be used as a basis for claiming territories in the modern era. If their ancient existence has any value, it belongs to the museum where it may be useful for the study of man and society. To make it the basis of contemporary political relations is, however, outright fascist expansion.<sup>106</sup>

We will not debate the merits or de-merits of this observation. We will not even discuss whether Ethiopia has a history of 3,000 years or not. What is important to note, however, is that, whereas it may be useful for politicians to

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<sup>106</sup>*Liberation*, January-July 1973, Eritreans for Liberation in North America.

interpret history in a way that serves their purposes, historians cannot. The profession itself demands detachment, objectivity and scholarly commitment to the truth.

No doubt, every historian carries his own set of assumptions. He has his own outlook about the data. The writing of history then becomes a dialogue between the historian and his data. Nonetheless, historians have the duty to understand why something happened in the past, and to explain how it happened, but never to pass value judgements. Then only they have justified the craft of their profession. The politician may dismiss ancient history, but the historian cannot. To do so would be to dismiss himself.

As we have seen, the assumptions, interpretations and generalized conclusions of the traditional historians are being challenged by a growing number of historians. In light of this, it appears that the traditional historians may have to re-assess some of their findings.

With regard to revisionists, it can be said that their concerns would help shift research into areas that had not attracted the attention of traditional historians. But, their observations would be more sound and profitable if they were to arrive at conclusions that are based on archaeological and other sources of a primary nature.

The recent past has proved a fertile breeding ground for crude myths that have become powerful because their credibility is not contested by scholars. The uncritical acceptance of the historical claim of the Eritrean political movements as fact can only contribute to the proliferation of historical mythology. A case in point is Roy Pateman's, *Eritrea: Even the Stones are Burning*, to which we referred earlier. The book has been reviewed by Christopher Clapham, and described as "a disgrace to the academic profession" and "a reproach to the distinguished institution [UCLA] to which

the author belongs.”<sup>107</sup> Pateman happens to be an author who gives little thought to a scholar’s commitment to objectivity. He willingly rewrites history to suit the political interests of those who have persuaded him.<sup>108</sup>

The neo-traditionists, too, should not confine themselves to pointing out at the limitations of revisionist historiography. Since their intention is to address a living problem with the help of traditional historiography, dismissing the ELF or the EPLF as mere “separatists” is no explanation, and no solution.

After everything is said and done, let us conclude the chapter with these words: Contemporary history may be too close to the events of this period to achieve sufficient detachment. The limited access to confidential records is also a further handicap. Nevertheless, when the different interpretations, which alert us to the range of possibilities, are integrated into some coherent whole at some future date, and presented as the history of the peoples of the region, the historians would have responded to Barraclough’s appeal for a New History.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup>See the review in *Africa*, 62, no. 1, 1992.

<sup>108</sup>The author tells his readers that the Red Sea port city of Adulis was destroyed by the Ummayyad Caliphate in 640 A.D. (p. 31). Who is the authority on this information? Obviously, those to whom he pays tribute, *ELF, Political Programme* (Second Edition) (The Field, 1977), 17.

<sup>109</sup>Barraclough, Geoffrey, *Main Trends in History* (New York, London: Holmes and Meier, 1978), 205-215.

## CHAPTER II

### Eritrea Under Colonialism

The penetration of capitalist colonialism, affected Eritrea at its foundation, and became the driving force for the disintegration of the traditional social formation. Indeed, pastoralism and sedentary agriculture were transformed as a result of the capitalist colonization of Eritrea, giving birth to a nationalism that subsequently has been subverted and undermined by Ethiopia.<sup>110</sup>

The above observations are derived from classical Marxism which maintains that capitalism is dynamic, that it fosters liberal values, and tends to remake societies all over the world in its own image. Marxism also maintains that colonialism, by its own contradictory logic, i.e., destroyer of pre-capitalist systems, and creator of new progressive ones, would lay down the basis for the emancipation of colonial society, and that the bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all its instruments of production, and by the immensely facilitated means of communication, will draw all, even the most barbarian nations into civilization.<sup>111</sup>

Given that, how valid is the above assertion made regarding Eritrea? Did capitalist colonialism penetrate Eritrea? Did traditional social formations disintegrate as a result of colonialism? Were pastoralism and sedentary agriculture transformed? Did these transformations, if any, give birth to Eritrean nationalism?

While we shall investigate the validity of these assertions in what follows, it should be noted that the rapid incorporation of the so-called Third World into the system that provided Europe political pre-eminence throughout

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<sup>110</sup>Jordan Gebre Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea* (Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1989), 59-67, and 192-194.

<sup>111</sup>Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, 6, Moscow, 1976, 488.

modern times, had much to do with Europe's dependence on the outside world for raw materials, markets, minerals and cheap labour. It affected different regions of the world in different ways and at different times. Although several generalizations can be made about its results, of primary importance economically, however, is the fact that the colonies remained primary producers, with their economies tied up to the demand for raw materials, minerals and cheap manufactured products. The scope for industrialization was very limited. As the domestic market grew, the demand for manufactured goods was met largely by imports. Such a system also deformed and distorted the economies of the colonies, converted them into mere subsidiaries of Western Europe, and prevented them from developing independent national economies. The countries of the so-called Third World, therefore, entered the world market as colonies of the leading European powers without much possibility of autonomous growth.<sup>112</sup>

They were systematically undeveloped by draining them of their resources, by failing to replenish reserves and by deliberately blunting their technological progress. Hence, what was lost by the colonies was gained by Europe. As a result, the colonial powers "developed" their colonies in terms of European needs and "underdeveloped" them in terms of their own requirements.

No doubt, the colonial powers have broken tribal barriers within their colonial boundaries and brought economic unity and national consciousness in their colonies. But on the whole, the modernizing effects of colonialism envisaged by Marx appear to have produced the anti-thesis, *i.e.*, the

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<sup>112</sup>Daniel Kendie, "North East Africa and the World Economy," *Northeast African Studies*, 10, no. 1, (East Lansing, MI: African Studies Center, Michigan State University, 1988).



underdevelopment of the colonized world. Colonialism did not bring the ideas of freedom to the colonial subjects. On the contrary, such ideas were suppressed, because colonialism as a system was and still is totally undemocratic. The colonizers of necessity taught submission and obedience, not the Rights of Man. Moreover, the colonial expansion of Europe was a process of gathering in all forms of wealth and diffusing only the infrastructure needed to obtain further wealth. That Europe bestowed the ideas of the "Enlightenment" including freedom and democracy on the non-European world within the framework of colonialism, can only be a fairytale.<sup>113</sup>

In fact, as Frederick Cooper notes with regard to Africa, the specific problem recent Marxist analysts have posed themselves is not the classic transition of feudalism to capitalism, but its opposite: how does capitalism become dominant in Africa without replicating itself in each instance?<sup>114</sup>

Eritrea is more complex than we are given to understand. Cultural sub-systems in the land are diverse. Language, religion, kinship and occupation are categories that divide different ethnic groups and sub-systems which function at different levels of production. In fact, the cleavages of cultural pluralism are more apparent than class divisions.<sup>115</sup> Under such circumstances, how did colonialism transform Eritrea's pastoralism and sedentary agriculture? Did Italian colonialism break down tribal barriers and promote economic unity? Did it succeed, if at all it did, in transforming a

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<sup>113</sup>Blaut, James, *The National Question: Decolonizing the Theory of Nationalism* (London: Ned Books, Ltd., 1987).

<sup>114</sup>Cooper, Frederick, "Africa and the World Economy," *The African Studies Review*, vol. xxiv, no. 2/3, June/September 1981.

<sup>115</sup>For a detailed exposition of this phenomenon, see Harold, Isaac, *Idols of the Tribe* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

society at different levels of modes of production? Was Italy in a position to export capital? To be able to answer these and similar other questions, we should also examine the various colonial theories, discuss the nature of Italian colonialism and then examine the assertions advanced earlier.

### Theories on Colonial Expansion

European expansion into the non-European world had an earlier and a later phase. Several interpretations have been provided concerning its motives.<sup>116</sup>

John Atkinson Hobson, for example, maintained that the financial interests of the capitalist class governed the imperial engine. According to him, the pressure of capital needing investment outlets arose in part from a mal-distribution of income, low mass consuming power, and monopolistic behaviour. As a result, he says, the need arose for opening up new markets and new investment opportunities in foreign lands. Hobson believes that imperialism, which serves the interests of certain capitalist groups, could be eliminated by social reforms, while still maintaining the capitalist system.<sup>117</sup>

Lenin (1870-1924), on the other hand, argued that imperialism is primarily the monopoly state of the development of capitalism, characterized by the existence of monopolies and finance capital, the export of capital, the formation of international firms and the territorial division of the world by

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<sup>116</sup>To some scholars, the differences between the earlier and later years of European expansion are less significant than the similarities. See, for example, J. Gallagher and R. Robinson, "The Imperialism of Free Trade," *The Economic History Review*, VI (August, 1953), 1-15. While some historians consider the year 1870 (the age of nationalism) as the watershed, others take 1884 (the partition of Africa), and still others reckon 1878 (the Congress of Berlin) as the dividing line.

<sup>117</sup>Hobson, John A., *Imperialism: A Study*, 3rd. ed. (London: Allen and Unwin, 1902, 1948).

the main capitalist powers.”<sup>118</sup> We could question Lenin’s thesis on several grounds.

Capitalism need not necessarily require colonies for its development. Internal income distribution, which results in creating effective demand could take care of the output. The scramble for African colonies, for example, was neither initiated by the biggest capitalist countries, nor did all the major powers participate in it. How is Lenin’s argument to be viewed when it comes to a state, for example, like Russia, which was neither an advanced industrialized country, nor an exporter of capital? Yet, 19th century Russia was a formidable expansionist state. Besides, in countries like France and England, monopolies were hardly present at the time of strong imperialist expansion. Even in the USA, the growth of trusts and cartels long preceded any strong inclination towards imperialist conquests. The universality of the correlation between monopoly capitalism and imperialism is highly questionable.<sup>119</sup>

Joseph Schumpeter (1883-1946),<sup>120</sup> believes that capitalism was inherently a democratizing, individualizing and rationalizing force which channeled potentially aggressive energies in relatively peaceful directions, and that any economic interest in colonial expansion was not necessarily a product of capitalism. It is sustained and conditioned, he says, by the domestic interests of ruling classes who have most to gain from war, and who want to

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<sup>118</sup>Lenin, V.I., *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1917).

<sup>119</sup>See, for example, Herbert Feis, *Europe the World’s Banker, 1870-1914* (New York, 1936). See also Milward A. and S. B. Saul, *The Economic Development of Continental Europe, 1850-1914* (London: 1977).

<sup>120</sup>Schumpeter, Joseph, *Imperialism and Social Classes* (New York: Meridian, 1955), 64-92.

divert the attention of the population from agrarian issues where radical action is required into foreign adventures.

For Rosa Luxemburg (1870-1919),<sup>121</sup> imperialism is a necessary condition for capitalist growth because of the impossibility of continued internal accumulation of capital stemming from the lack of effective demand in society.

Which of these theories describes best Italian colonialism? In order to determine that, let us briefly discuss the conditions of Italy during the period under consideration. It was only in the closing decades of the 19th century that a policy of colonial imperialism, of political and economic expansion was adopted by Italy. Indeed, when the protracted disunity, which long had rendered Italy a political cycloper finally ended in 1870, Rome began to look across the sea for economic and territorial aggrandizement.<sup>122</sup> It was felt that an imperialist policy would increase Italian prestige, satisfy the extreme nationalists, divert attention from pressing problems at home, and quite simply enrich the nation by finding markets to export and, raw materials to support deficiencies at home.<sup>123</sup> However, because Italy was the last to enter the contest of the great powers of the day for colonies, Rome found itself cramped in Europe and lacked room to expand.<sup>124</sup> In fact, by the time Italy woke up from her stupor, most of the juicy parts of Africa had been carved off by Belgium, Portugal, Britain, France and Germany.

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<sup>121</sup>Luxemburg, Rosa, *The Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1913, 1964).

<sup>122</sup>Irma Taddia, *L'Eritrea - Clonia, 1890-1952: Paesaggi, Strutture, unomini del colonialismo* (Milano: Franco Angelit Libri, 1986). See also Ridley, F. A., *Mussolini Over Africa* (London: Wishart Books, Ltd., 1935), 43-44.

<sup>123</sup>Smith, Denis Mack, *Mussolini's Roman Empire* (Oxford, 1975), 32.

<sup>124</sup>Op. cit., Ridley, *Mussolini...*, 43.

Italy's possible expansion in North Africa was nipped in the bud by the French occupation of Tunis in 1881, and by the British occupation of Egypt a year later. Since Italy was robbed, so to say, of its "natural" field of expansion, Rome had to look in the direction of the Red Sea in order to gobble up the last morsel of Africa, and take what others had not yet appropriated.<sup>125</sup> Even if there was some room for expansion here, the truth is, Italy had no accumulated capital to employ in colonial ventures.<sup>126</sup>

In fact, as Antonio Gramsci argued, Italian imperialism was without any economic or financial basis:

The still immature Italy not only had no capital to export, but had to have a recourse to foreign capital for its own pressing needs.<sup>127</sup> The southern peasant wanted land, and Crispi (the Italian Prime Minister)<sup>128</sup> conjured up the mirage of colonial lands to be exploited in order to sidetrack some internal issues of a political and economic nature.<sup>129</sup>

Viewed from the Leninist definition of imperialism, therefore, Italian colonial expansion was non-imperialist. Insofar as any Italian economic interest in colonial expansion was not necessarily a product of capitalism, and to the extent that it was undertaken to divert the attention of the population from pressing internal matters including agrarian problems, it appears that Schumpeter's views, rather than those of Lenin or Rosa Luxemburg, provide a greater allowance to the study of Italian colonialism.

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<sup>125</sup>Gay, H. Nelson, *Strenuous Italy: Solving A Perilous Problem* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1927), 122.

<sup>126</sup>*Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>127</sup>Gramsci, Antonio, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, edited and translated by Quinton Hoare and G. N. Smith, (London, 1978), 68.

<sup>128</sup>*Ibid.*, 67-68.

<sup>129</sup>*Ibid.*

Far from being a geographical extension of the metropolitan state, and therefore, a powerful instrument of political domination,<sup>130</sup> Italian colonialism could only create a weak colonial state. Geoffrey Kay describes such a state as one that had a typically precarious sovereignty, constantly strapped for resources, plagued by poor communications and inadequate information, and possessing limited coercive force. It emerged as a facade of power sustained by a delicate game of bluff and wit, combining exhortation and threat with the co-optation and accommodation of indigenous social forces. Rather than being the agent of change, such a state feared the consequences of change emanating from social forces over which it had little effective control.<sup>131</sup>

#### **The Historical Background to the Creation of Eritrea**

The imperialist struggle over Ethiopia in the 19th and 20th centuries involved three European powers--Britain, France and Italy, each of which had its own design. Nevertheless, the British and the Italians had a deeper stake than the French in undermining and devaluing Ethiopian nationalism.

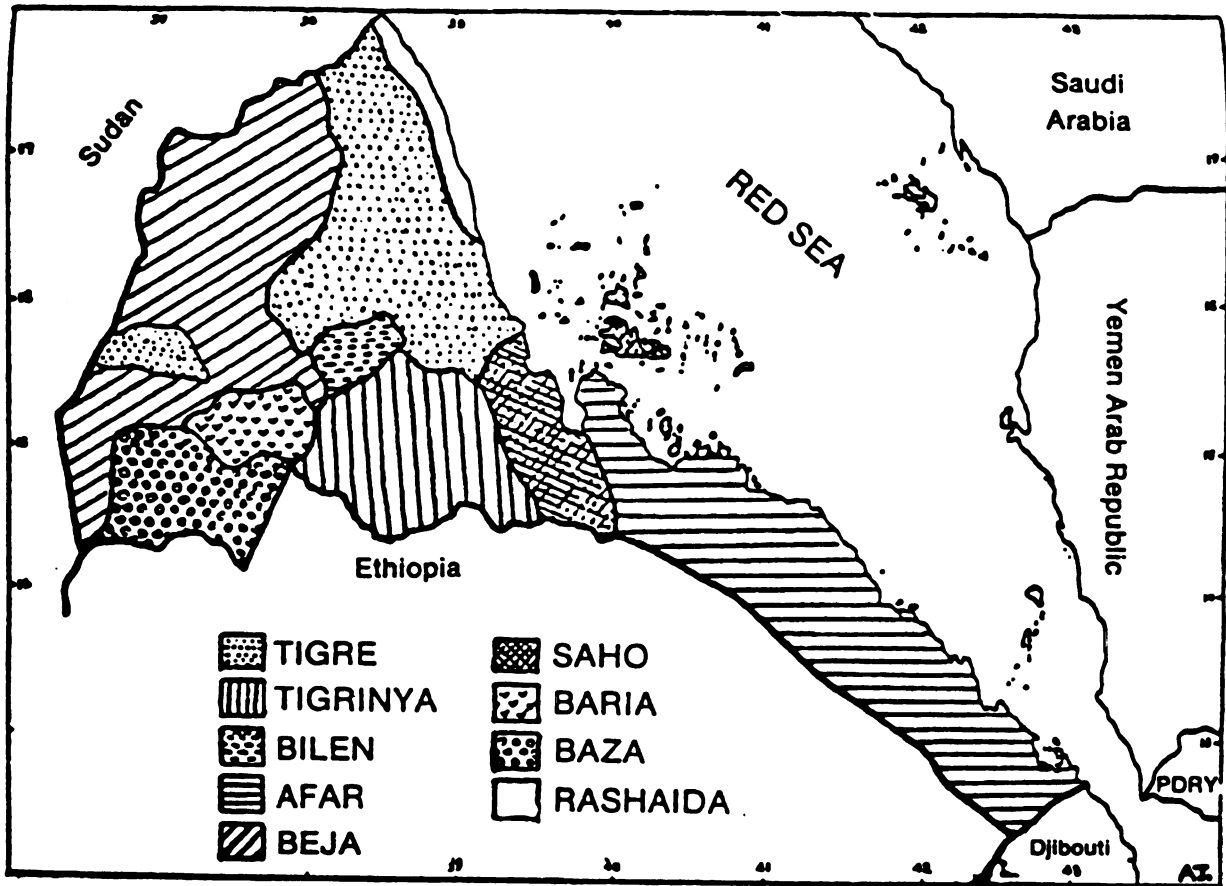
There was the British fear of the French desire to dominate Africa from Dakar to Djibouti. The French in turn strongly resented Britain's long cherished dream of connecting Cairo to the Cape. In such a set-up, the British felt the Italians to be less formidable rivals than the French. As a result, London turned to Rome for an alliance against the concerted French policy of expansion, which had the maximum diplomatic, if not material support of the

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<sup>130</sup>Mamdani, Mahmoud provides an interesting view. See his *Politics and Class Formation in Uganda* (London, 1976), 142-3.

<sup>131</sup>Kay, Geoffrey: *The Political Economy of Colonialism in Ghana*. (London, 1972), 9.

Figure 3. Nationalities of Eritrea



Russians, whose interests in Africa at the time were compatible with those of France.

Thinking that Britain will be guided by Christian solidarity, Ethiopian Emperor Theodore had written a letter to Queen Victoria in 1862, requesting assistance against the Ottoman Turks who had occupied Ethiopian territory. The Ottoman invasion of Ethiopia was, however, of little concern to Britain. If anything, London had a deep interest in strengthening its relations with Istanbul as a valuable ally against Russia.

In their reluctance not to get involved in the dispute between the Ottomans and the Ethiopians, the British left Theodore's letter unanswered, which deeply offended the Ethiopian monarch, resulting in the imprisonment of a large number of Europeans in Ethiopia. In order to rescue the European captives, Queen Victoria dispatched 50,000 soldiers under Napier which crushed the Ethiopian army leading to the emperor's suicide. The consequence of this episode on Ethiopia's peace and progress was enormous. It hindered the process of state formation and considerably delayed the country's need for reunification.

Some years later, Britain discovered that it needed the assistance of Ethiopia to rescue Egyptians and Europeans who were cut off in the Sudan as a result of the Mahdist revolution. Rear-Admiral Hewett was therefore dispatched to Adowa to negotiate with Emperor Yohannes. The Ethiopian monarch expressed his willingness to cooperate, but demanded the return of Ethiopian provinces like Keren which were occupied by Egypt. He also asked for Ethiopian control of the port of Massawa. On June 3, 1884, a treaty involving Britain, Egypt and Ethiopia was signed at Adowa. Its preamble stated



that it bound not only the contracting parties, but also their “heirs and successors.”<sup>132</sup>

Yohannes kept his part of the bargain and helped relieve the besieged garrison. But in so far as Britain was concerned, the treaty was to be of a remarkably short duration because Ethiopia was no longer of any use to London. What was even worse, Yohannes fought the Mahdists at the behest of Britain, but when they attacked Ethiopia in revenge, there was little support or even token sympathy for Ethiopia on the part of the British. Gondar was looted and ravaged and Yohannes was killed in battle in 1889, leading, once again, to the collapse of the Ethiopian state.

In order to safeguard British imperial interests in Northeast Africa, London was committed to countenance Italian colonial ambitions in Ethiopia. This became the cornerstone of British policy which was subsequently enshrined in the separate agreements signed with Italy in 1891 and 1894.<sup>133</sup> It is against this background that we can now consider the creation of Eritrea and its establishment as an Italian colony.

Eritrea appeared on the world map only in 1890, when the Italians established it as their first colony in Africa, and christened it with the old Greco/Roman name for the Red Sea—Erythraeum Mare. Indeed, as Trevaskis pertinently observed:

Italy created Eritrea by an act of surgery, by severing its different peoples<sup>134</sup> from those with whom their past had been

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<sup>132</sup>See the text of the Treaty in Hertslet, *The Map of Africa By Treaty*, vol. II, (London: Frank Cass and Co., 1967), 422-423.

<sup>133</sup>See Hertslet, vol. III, 946-951.

<sup>134</sup>The nine ethnic groups which were severed from those with whom their past had been linked, are the Afars, Beja, Bilen, Kunama, Nara, Rashaida, Saho, Tigre, and Tigreans. They speak different languages, possess different religions and are conscious of their separate identities.

linked, and by grafting the amputated remnants to each other, under the title of Eritrea.<sup>135</sup>

The widely diverse ethnic groups share in many ways nothing more in common than the fact that they happened to fall within the boundaries of a territory that the Italians decided to call Eritrea. They led a disjointed existence which varied in nature not only from one group to another, but within the same national group from one historical period to the other. How was this achieved? A Lazarist missionary named Giuseppe Sapeto, acting as the agent of the Rubattino Shipping Company, bought the Red Sea port of Assab for 8,000 MT dollars from a local chief, named Hassan ben Ahmed Ibrahim, on November 15, 1869. The territory comprised between Mount Ganga and Cape Lumah was sold to Sapeto by Hassan-ben-Ahmed and Ibrahim-ben-Ahmed Sultans of Assab.<sup>136</sup> Even if the transaction had the tacit approval of the Italian Government, nothing came of the port until the 1880s, when diplomatic negotiations were conducted between Italy and the Ethiopian province of Shoa over the possibility of using Assab as a port for import/export trade. In 1882, the year in which France took over Tunisia, the Italian Government bought the Rubattino Company's possessions and claims in Assab.<sup>137</sup> No sooner had the government done that than Rome discovered that the acquisition of the

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<sup>135</sup>The name, Eritrea, is of classical origin, derived from the Mare Erythraeum of the Romans. *Erythras* (Greek) means red. See, Trevaskis, 10-11.

<sup>136</sup>See Hertslet, E., *The Map ...*, 446.

<sup>137</sup>See the Convention of 15 May 1888, between Danakil Chiefs and Rubattino Co. for the cession of Senmabar, Assab Bay and the Coast, *Ibid.*, Hertslet, *The Map...*, 446-447. Assab became an Italian colony by the Law of July 5, 1882. See Roland R. De Marco, *The Italianization of African Natives, Government Native Education in the Italian Colonies, 1890-1937* (New York: Bureau of Publications, Columbia University, 1943), xii.

port had no rationale without the occupation of the interior, and hence, the need to extend Rome's influence into the hinterland.

Italy, therefore, expanded its colonial possessions in the area further by occupying the Red Sea port of Massawa in 1885. This task was accomplished largely through British diplomatic and technical support.<sup>138</sup> The takeover of Massawa by the Italians was perceived by the Ethiopian state as a manifestation of British guile, subterfuge and perfidy, and as a violation of the Hewett Treaty of June 3, 1884.<sup>139</sup> Why did Britain act this way?

Competition between the European colonial powers was a familiar feature of the late 19th century. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1868 had given the Red Sea a new strategical importance. In inviting Italy to take over the Red Sea port of Massawa, Britain was encouraging Italy's colonial ambitions with a view to using it as a counter-weight to France, which had already taken over Djibouti and was threatening British interests in the area. Therefore, three months after the ratification of the Hewett treaty, Lord Granville sounded Rome's Ambassador to London about an eventual Italian occupation of Massawa, which he did not want to leave to the barbarians (read Ethiopians), or to a rival power (read France).<sup>140</sup> The only voice raised in protest was that of Robert Napier, who spoke in the House of Lords regretting Britain's breach of faith to Ethiopia and warning of its consequences.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>138</sup>The occupation of the area by Italy is fully documented by Angelo del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale*, vol. I (Milano, 1976), 33-49.

<sup>139</sup>For relieving the besieged Egyptian garrisons in the Sudan, it was agreed that Bogos, Amidab and Senhit would be transferred to Ethiopia, accompanied with the withdrawal of Egyptian troops from these territories. Ethiopia was also promised free transit trade through Massawa.

<sup>140</sup>See Sven Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence* (Norwich: Fletcher and Son Ltd., 1976), 379-380. See also Harold Marcus, *Menelik...*, 78.

<sup>141</sup>Sir Robert Napier (1810-1890) was the Commander of the 50,000 strong British military expedition of 1868 to Ethiopia. Its objective was to rescue the

A. B. Wylde, a sometime British Vice Counsel for the Red Sea had the following to say:

Look at our behaviour to King Johannes from any point of view and it will not show one ray of honesty...it is one of our worst bits of business out of many we have been guilty of in Africa. England made use of King Johannes as long as he was of any service, and then threw him over the tender mercies of Italy who went to Massawa under our auspices with the intention of taking territory that belonged to our ally, and allowed them to destroy and break all the promises England had solemnly made to King Johannes after he had faithfully carried out his part of the agreement. The fact is not known to the British public and I wish it was not true for our credit's sake; but unfortunately it is, and it reads like one of the vilest bits of treachery that has been perpetrated in Africa or India in the eighteenth century.<sup>142</sup>

The Italians gradually extended their possessions over the hinterland of Massawa. After a temporary set-back in 1887 when Ras Alula, Governor of what was soon to become Eritrea, destroyed the Italian garrison at Dogali near Massawa, they soon recovered and could even occupy Kasala for the British.<sup>143</sup>

The Italians successfully exploited the internal conditions in Ethiopia, supporting Emperor Yohannes' rival and successor, Menelik, so as to gain in him a sympathetic ally. In 1889, they concluded the Treaty of Wuchalle with Menelik—a Treaty which recognized Italy's territorial claims in what became Eritrea. The interpretation of Article 17 of that treaty led to a rift. Italy interpreted the Treaty as giving it the southern boundaries of present-day

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European captives imprisoned by Emperor Theodore. For the details of the expedition, see his, *Abyssinia and Theodore* (London: 1869).

<sup>142</sup>Op. cit., Wylde, *Modern Abyssinia...*, 39.

<sup>143</sup>Smith, Denis Mack, *Italy: A Modern History* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1959), 185.

Eritrea and even claimed that Ethiopia had willingly become an Italian protectorate.<sup>144</sup>

As advocated by *Il Diritto*:

Italy must be ready. The year 1885 will decide her fate as a great power. It is necessary to feel the responsibility of the new era; to become again strong men afraid of nothing, with the sacred love of the fatherland, of all Italy, in our hearts, as we were from 1859-1860, from Palestro to Marsala, from Milazzo to Volturno.<sup>145</sup>

The Italians were extremely belligerent and aggressive. This was so because it was taken as an elementary axiom of Euclid that European military science could always dispose of any number of coloured warriors. The defeat of a white army on a colonial battlefield was regarded as a breach of an elementary law of nature. Yet, it never occurred to the Italians that the same kind of nationalistic pride which drove them to expansion and conquest, might also inspire others to defend themselves.

Apart from the Ethiopian people, Menelik had the support of the Russians and the French. After all, Italy was invited by the British to take over Massawa in order to serve as a counterweight to France. France was aware of that, and Menelik utilized that knowledge to his best advantage. Among other things, in return for a supply of mules for their Madagascar expedition, the French supplied him with artillery and firearms.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>144</sup>The Italo-Ethiopian Treaty of 2 May 1889 defines the boundary between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Article XVII of the Treaty reads: "His Majesty the King of Kings of Ethiopia consents to avail himself of the Italian Government for any negotiations which he may enter into with the other Powers or Governments. (Per tutte le trattazioni di affari che avesse con altre potenze o governi). See Hertslet, *The Map of ...*, 454-455. The Italians understood this clause as giving them rights of a protectorate over Ethiopia. Menelik argued that consent can be withdrawn and is in no way binding.

<sup>145</sup>*Il Diritto*, 1 January 1885, as quoted by George Martelli, [in] *Italy Against the World* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1937), 15-16.

<sup>146</sup>Op. cit., Ridley, *Mussolini...*, 48.

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The much expected war began and culminated with the disastrous defeat of the Italians at Adowa in 1896. Italian imperialism was knocked down on its head. As the *Spectator* of March 7, 1896 observed: "The Italians have suffered a great disaster, greater than has ever occurred in modern times to white men in Africa. Adowa was the bloodiest of all colonial battles."<sup>147</sup>

Indeed, it was the greatest defeat ever experienced by a European imperialist power in Africa prior to Abdel Kherim's great victory over the Spanish in 1921. The Adowa disaster brought Italy's first colonial essay to a tragic close. It was a merited defeat for a second class power which had become puffed up with vain and grandiose ambition because it accepted war as a test of its nationhood.

Italy sued for peace—and a peace treaty was signed in Addis Ababa in 1896. One can hardly imagine that any of the great colonial powers would so easily have relinquished their prey after a single defeat, however severe. The fact that Rome did so, proved conclusively that Italy had not yet been welded into an aggressive imperialist power, prompting Bismarck to dismiss it contemptuously as a country with a large appetite but with poor teeth.<sup>148</sup> After all, imperialism can only be prosecuted by an imperialist power.

Nevertheless, the frontiers were further defined by a Franco-Italian Convention of the 24th of January 1900, fixing the frontier between French Somaliland and the Italian possessions at Raheita, and also by various other agreements with Ethiopia and Britain. A Tripartite Agreement between Italy, Ethiopia and Britain, dated the 15th of May 1902, placed the territory of the

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<sup>147</sup>*The Spectator*, 7 March 1896. The Battle of Adowa is adequately covered by Wylde and Berkley.

<sup>148</sup>Smith, Denis Mack, *Italy: A Modern History...*, p. 181.

Kunama tribe, on the north bank of the Setit River, within Eritrea.<sup>149</sup> Prior to that, much of the territory was part of Gondar Province. The Convention of the 16th of May 1908 settled the Ethiopian--Eritrean frontier. The boundary was fixed at 60 kms from the coast.<sup>150</sup>

Eritrea, Italy's first colony, was not in itself of much significance. The total population was less than half a million, of whom half were Christian farmers and the rest Muslim pastoralists. The Christians mostly lived in the highlands which projected north from the Ethiopian plateau. They shared a language with Ethiopians in Tigre, and throughout the colonial period, a sense of continuing attachment to Ethiopia was kept alive by the Orthodox clergy. There was also much continuity in land tenure and local government.<sup>151</sup>

It was a period of unrest and dissension in the country--a period which enabled the Italians to conceive of a political scheme in order to deal with Ethiopia. There were two aspects to the strategy. The first scheme centered on encouraging centrifugal tendencies, and on promoting the power and influence of provincial chiefs and arming them to undermine and destabilize the centre. The Italians called this strategy *politica tigrinia*. The other strategy was aimed at promoting their political, economic and other interests through the central government by using the emperors. They called this scheme *politica sciona*. Shoa and Tigray were rivals. If the former could be won over to friendship, the latter, which was nearer and more dangerous, could easily be managed, or so the Italians thought. Italy thus designed to play

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<sup>149</sup>Op. cit., Hertslet, *The Map...*, 422-423.

<sup>150</sup>Op. cit., Hertslet, *The Map of Africa*. See also *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1910), 747.

<sup>151</sup>*The Cambridge History of Africa*, vol. 7, from 1905-1940 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 724-725.



the role which France had taken so often in setting on Scotland against England. But Rome was dealing with someone more astute than the Stuarts. Tigrai and Shoa were united in a common front against Italy.<sup>152</sup> Mussolini's decision in 1932 for instance, in favour of *politica tigrina*, and the ensuing subversive activity the Italians conducted in Ethiopia from Eritrea, became a contributory cause to the Italo-Ethiopian War (1936-1941). As we will see in the following chapters, in varying degrees of success or failure, apart from the Italians, the British, French, Americans and Russians have used one or the other strategy in their dealings with Ethiopia. The policy pursued by the British in Ethiopia especially after evicting the Italians from that country in 1941, for instance, was a continuation of Italian *politica tigrina*.<sup>153</sup>

#### **Italian Colonialism in Practice**

It was never Italian policy to develop Eritrea's few assets. Rome had looked on Eritrea as an outlet for settling an immigrant population from southern Italy and as a clearing house from which Italian manufactured goods could be distributed to Ethiopia, the Sudan and Arabia, in exchange for the raw materials needed by Italian industry. Other Italian objectives included using Eritrea as a base for conducting military operations for the conquest of Ethiopia, and also exploiting it as a source of colonial soldiers.<sup>154</sup>

Despite the objectives, however, until the 1930s, Italian colonialism made little change in Eritrea. No attempt was made to accomplish any large-

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<sup>152</sup>Op. cit., Matielli, *Italy Against...*, 17.

<sup>153</sup>British control of almost all peripheral territories, including Tigrai, Eritrea, Somaliland, Somalia and others, became the prime target of Ethiopian suspicions in 1941. It also explains why Haile Selassie made it a point to raise the problem with President Franklin Roosevelt in 1945.

<sup>154</sup>See Trevaskis, 29-36. See also Longrigg, 132.

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scale alteration of socio-economic patterns in the rural areas where most Eritreans lived. Unless a rural area was of some strategic or economic importance, the Italians generally ignored it.<sup>155</sup> There was no place for any Eritrean development scheme which might compete with Italian industry or prejudice Italy's export trade. About 4,000 Italians settled in the cultivable areas of the territory, and some light industry developed, but on the whole, there was no large-scale development of resources. The colony depended heavily on subsidies from Italy.<sup>156</sup>

To claim that Eritrea gained democratic traditions during its colonization, which did not exist even in Italy, that the people had acquired superior skills, or that the territory was transformed is, to say the least, absurd. Prior to Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia, Eritrea had remained a somnolent little colony. It was neither a provider of raw materials, nor a settlement area for Italians. The highlands contributed relatively little to the colonial economy. In fact, for many years Eritrea had to import grain from Ethiopia.<sup>157</sup> The lowlands remained a domain for nomadic pastoralism. Hence, nomadic pastoralism and traditional agriculture, which engaged most of the Eritrean population, could not have been transformed in just a few years.<sup>158</sup>

How did Italy manage such a state of affairs for some fifty years (1890-1941), especially when Eritrea's exports paid for only 50% of its imports?<sup>159</sup> G. Mondaini, one of the very few knowledgeable veteran colonial officers, says

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<sup>155</sup>Op. cit., Sherman, Richard, *Eritrea: The Unfinished Revolution...*, 15.

<sup>156</sup>*Ibid.*, 725.

<sup>157</sup>Op. cit., *The Cambridge History of Africa*, 725.

<sup>158</sup>*The Horn of Africa: A Strategic Survey*. (New York: International Security Council, 1989).

<sup>159</sup>Op. cit., Trevaskis, 42.

that more than any other colonial power, Italy succeeded in exercising its rule without disturbing and undermining Eritrean's social, economic and political structures.<sup>160</sup> Tekeste Negash also has arrived at a similar conclusion: the prime concern of Italy was the control of social and economic changes in Eritrea in such a manner that conflict between the interests of Italy and those of the Eritreans did not become unmanageable. The way Italy controlled the situation, he says, was through education and native policies.<sup>161</sup>

### Native Policy

According to Ferdinando Martini, Governor of Eritrea (1897-1907): "The business of colonialism is absolute domination of the colonized in the interest of the colonizer, and that exercising economic, political and military domination over the colonized should be done at an acceptable cost."<sup>162</sup> Perhaps speaking for many Italians, Professor Lidio Cipriani, the anthropologist, also argued: The purpose of colonialism was to rule rather than to prepare the Africans for autonomy.<sup>163</sup>

True to that pledge, the Italians took advantage of the religious, regional, ethnic and tribal differences in order to perpetuate their rule with the least cost.<sup>164</sup> They also attempted to mobilize local ethnic and religious

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<sup>160</sup>Modaini, G.: "La Politica Indigena," *Aspetti dell' Azione Italiana in Africa* (Florence: atti del convegno di studi coloniali, 1946), 91.

<sup>161</sup>Tekeste Negash, a promising Eritrean scholar, has consulted the Italian archives. I did not have such an opportunity. I have therefore relied on his book for some of the information that comes from Italian primary sources. See *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea, 1882-1941* (Uppsala, 1987).

<sup>162</sup>*Archivio Centrale di Stato (Roma) Carta Martini*, busta 4: Martini to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Asmara, 26.4.1901; as quoted by Tekeste, 68-69.

<sup>163</sup>*Ibid.*, Tekeste, 71.

<sup>164</sup>*Op. cit.*, Sherman, 14.

interests in order to weaken the hegemony of the Ethiopian state, encouraged Islam at the expense of Orthodox Christianity, and, to the rudimentary extent that a non-participant political structure permitted, they presented themselves as the protectors of formerly subject peoples.<sup>165</sup>

If we examine Italian native policy, we will see that it passed through three distinct phases: The first, lasting from 1897-1908, consisted of mostly peaceful interactions between Italians and Eritreans. The Eritrean administrative budget, which has never been free from external subsidy anyway, was allocated an annual budget of six million lire during this period.<sup>166</sup> With such a small budget, Governor Ferdinando Martini, despite his own racist views, had to court Eritreans very carefully to avoid outbreaks of violence which would have to be put down with force. The second period (1908-1932), could be described as being “predominantly paternalistic.” Eritrean participation in colonial administrative matters was restricted to areas of social organization designed simply to continue colonial rule.<sup>167</sup> During the third stage of colonialism (1932-1941), the Italians asserted a dominance over the Eritreans which can be characterized as moving towards apartheid. One example we could provide for this is a 1938 law which declared all inter-racial marriages null and void.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>165</sup>Op. cit., *The Cambridge History...*, 461.

<sup>166</sup>Ibid., 98.

<sup>167</sup>Ibid., 101.

<sup>168</sup>Ibid., 109.

### The Administrative Mechanism

The highland Tigreans were settled agriculturalists and were organized in village communities each composed of a varying number of extended families. Most of these families were the original occupants and, therefore, owners of the land. They were known as *restengna*, while the families which immigrated later and became their tenants were the *makalai ailet*. Both groups enjoyed the same rights of user in the land, but only the *restengna* had a right to a voice in the management of the village. Domestically, the village was administered by committees of elders representing the *restengna* families. Governmentally, it was in the charge of a headman or chief, who, by tradition, was invariably appointed from a particular family of *restengna* by the central government.

For administrative purposes the Eritrean highlands were divided into districts and sub-districts, which were historically administered on behalf of the Ethiopian emperors by hereditary chiefs or officers known as *feresengna*, or left to fend for themselves.<sup>169</sup> The Italians, however, introduced uniformity in the highlands by putting chiefs in charge of all sub-districts and appointing their own nominees, who were not always chosen from the traditional chiefly families. They also appointed their own village headmen often ignoring the rights of the families from which such nominations were traditionally made.<sup>170</sup>

On the other hand, in the eastern and western lowlands of Eritrea, where nomadic pastoralism prevailed, the tribe was the unit of government recognition. Here, the Italians accepted the plain facts of tribal grouping,

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<sup>169</sup>Op. cit., Trevaskis, 11-17.

<sup>170</sup>Ibid., 13.

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both social and geographic. Existing social divisions between serfs and aristocrats were reinforced and strengthened. The Italians had merely to recognize, to grade and to formalize the existing reality. The status of each tribe was determined, the headman accorded his rank and salary, and charged with his responsibilities.<sup>171</sup> The traditional elite was thus employed to rule on behalf of the colonial state.<sup>172</sup>

### **The Administrative Structure**

Italian native policy aimed to preserve traditional institutions and structures in both the Christian highlands and in the Muslim lowlands and to utilize them to consolidate colonial rule. In this respect, traditional chiefs who were dominant in their own districts, and who were willing to collaborate and to serve as administrators were favoured. Those chiefs who were suspected of rebellion were either eliminated or detained. For example, between August 1889 and December 1890, a number of chiefs, together with some eight hundred of their followers were killed.<sup>173</sup>

The colony was divided into seven administrative divisions known as Commissariati--Hamassien, Seraie, Akele Guzaie, Keren, Assab, Massawa and Agordat. These, in turn, were sub-divided into smaller units, or Residenze, and entrusted to the care of District Officers, Residenti. Prior to colonization, for instance, the districts of Hamassien, Seraie and Akele Guzaie constituted a single administrative unit. However, and for reasons we will discuss shortly,

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<sup>171</sup>Op. cit., Longrigg, 135. See also Trimingham, 167-168. In chiefless communities, the Italians created chiefs.

<sup>172</sup>In 1912, for instance, there were seventy appointments and promotions. By 1918, the number of promotions had increased to three hundred twenty, out of which sixty-six were chiefs. See Tekeste, (*Italian Colonialism...*), 98-104.

<sup>173</sup>Op. cit., Tekeste. See also Longrigg, 132-136.



Figure 4. Africa Orientale



the unitary structure was abolished, and the districts were divided into three small units. Horizontal structures, which traditionally permitted consultation between chiefs in matters of public administration and security were abolished. Instead, vertical chains of hierarchical lines of communication were created. Native chiefs came under the district officer. The district officer, in turn, was made answerable to the Civil Affairs Office in Asmara. Such an administrative structure effectively served the Italian need for direct control and closer supervision.<sup>174</sup>

But acquaintance with the art of self-government was purposely withheld from the Eritrean people. This was made clear in *Razza e Impero* (*Race and Empire*), an official Italian publication of the time:

The Government offices must be for the natives a mysterious place, where the white man (Italian) officiates as at an altar, and the documents there must appear to be a sacred character, which the natives must not touch. In the presence of these instruments of civilization, they must feel the distance between them and us.<sup>175</sup>

After conquering Ethiopia, the Italians incorporated Eritrea with Tigray and placed both regions under one administrative structure. This was done in order to encourage regional affinities and to undermine loyalties to the Ethiopian state.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>174</sup>Op. cit., Trevaskis, 26.

<sup>175</sup>As quoted by Homer Smith, "Big Four Inquiry Commission Reports that None of Italy's Former Colonies Ready for Self-Government," *The Ethiopian Herald*, 16 August 1948.

<sup>176</sup>Op. cit., *The Cambridge History...*, 736.

## Land Policy

Since the settlement of an immigrant Italian population in Eritrea was one of the objectives of the state, the government began to confiscate land. All land below 350 meters in the eastern lowlands, and below 850 meters in the highlands, was declared state land. Some forty percent of Eritrea's agricultural land was, therefore, confiscated for the specific purpose of settling an immigrant population, and for ensuring a steady supply of raw materials for metropolitan industry. To that end, an office for the settlement of colonists was established in 1892. Within a year, some 483,000 acres of land, i.e., nearly one-fifth of the arable land in Eritrea was expropriated, and the process of settling Italian peasants had started.<sup>177</sup>

For example, in 1892, a group of twenty-nine men and seventeen women were brought from Southern Italy and settled in Seraie province. Since the policy of expropriation and eviction was extremely unpopular, no sooner had the Seraie settlement taken place, than a series of rebellions rocked highland Eritrea. Farmers who were evicted and deprived of their lands demanded an end to Italian colonialism in general and to the confiscation of land in particular. Bahta Hagos was the first to denounce the Italians.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>177</sup>*FPCI, Report on Eritrea* (1948), 37. See also S. F. Nadel: "Land Tenure on the Eritrean Plateau," *Africa*, 16.1 January: 1-21 and 16/2: 99-108 (1946).

<sup>178</sup>Bahta Hagos was perhaps the most prominent collaborator with Italian colonialism. He started his independent activities in 1875, with an act of rebellion that was provoked by a blood feud in defense of his family's honour. He took to the bush and for over ten years lived as a shifta brigand, preying on caravans. The presence of the Italians provided him with a chance for political advancement. In 1889 he converted from Orthodox Christianity to Roman Catholicism--an act which had the effect of truly pleasing the Italians. He led a series of irregular troops--bandas to help the Italians establish themselves in highland Eritrea. As a result, he was awarded with the task of administering his native province, Akele Guzaie. Eventually, he revolted and became a prominent leader of the resistance against Italian rule.

By the standards of most Eritreans, Bahta Hagos was a privileged man. He occupied a high post and lived well, when many could merely eke out a simple existence. Why did he revolt? What did the Italians do against him? Control of land was the basis of power, which his community was losing to the Italians. Being a witness to what the Italians were doing, it seems that he was marking time with which he could do something dramatic against them in the hope of being vindicated and accepted by his community. Such an opportunity came when the Italians expropriated land and resorted to mass eviction. He immediately started to correspond with Emperor Menelik.

The series of uprisings led by Bahta Hagos in 1894, and subsequently, the state of war that existed between Ethiopia and Italy ended the idea of turning Eritrea into a settlement colony.<sup>179</sup> The Italian Law, which was revised in 1926, essentially recognized the native customary laws governing land ownership.<sup>180</sup>

Nevertheless, specific areas were still converted into crown lands for the purpose of constructing airfields, roads, railways, and for developing plantation agriculture, and for the production of raw materials.<sup>181</sup> In the lowlands, tribal lands were declared state property. These included all lands below 350 meters, in the eastern lowlands and below 850 meters in the western lowlands.<sup>182</sup> However, the nomads continued with their traditional ways of grazing their livestock.

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<sup>179</sup>Tekeste Negash (*Italian Colonialism...*), 33-35.

<sup>180</sup>Four Power Commission of Investigation (148), 37.

<sup>181</sup>One serious consequence of Italian land policy was the immigration of some 200,000 Eritreans to Ethiopia (1890-1937). See *Year Book of the United Nations* (New York: Columbia University Press, in cooperation with the U. N., 1950), 365.

<sup>182</sup>*Ibid.*, 37. See also S. F. Nadel, (1946) "Land Tenure on the Eritrean Plateau," *Africa*, 16/1 January: 1-21 and 16/2, 99-108.

The next policy that the Italians tried to implement was to use Eritrea as a source of raw materials. This policy was successful because most of the Italian capital which was invested in the colony was in the import and export business rather than in production. In 1900, for example, Eritrea exported 2.8 million lire worth of products.<sup>183</sup>

Italian colonists and agricultural firms were being encouraged to seek concessions in the lowlands, where coffee, tobacco, sisal, cotton and other crops were cultivated. As a result, landless peasants, alienated tribal chiefs, serfs and tenants began to drift into the towns. How did the Italians attempt to solve the problem of unemployment?

Between 1900-1930, Italy invested 100 million lire in building the communications infrastructure in Eritrea. The major objective of this construction was to facilitate military mobility in the conquest of Ethiopia.<sup>184</sup> In other words, the rationale of this policy was political and military rather than economic.<sup>185</sup> To that end, a vast network of all weather roads, totaling 1,176 kms, was constructed.<sup>186</sup> In 1937, for instance, road construction alone absorbed 43,720 Eritreans.<sup>187</sup> The 354 kms long Massawa-Asmara-Agorat railway was also completed in 1922.<sup>188</sup> Modern airports were built at Asmara

<sup>183</sup>Op. cit., Tekeste, p. 40. Michel Perret provides an interesting account of the fascist period. See "L'Erythree, Le Fascisme et la Crise," *Modern Ethiopia*, Proceedings of the 5th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Nice, 19-22 December 1977, Rotterdam: A.A. Balkania, 351-375.

<sup>184</sup>Trevaskis, 55.

<sup>185</sup>Op. cit., *The Cambridge History...*, 737.

<sup>186</sup>Longrigg, 135.

<sup>187</sup>Op. cit., *FRCI* (1948), App. 72.

<sup>188</sup>Tekeste Negash (*Italian Colonialism...*), 43.

and Gura. The ports of Massawa and Assab were also considerably expanded between 1928 and 1933.<sup>189</sup> Between 1935 and 1941, military installations, public buildings, workshops, depots, warehouses, shops, flats and villas were rapidly built.<sup>190</sup> During harvest season, concession farms such as the Tessenai plantation employed 10,000 Eritreans in 1933 and 25,000 in 1940. Such projects, however, did not contribute to the emergence of a stabilized Eritrean working class.<sup>191</sup>

Another area which opened employment opportunities for the Eritreans was the army where they became low-paid mercenaries to fight in Italy's colonial adventures in Libya, Somaliland and Ethiopia. To be sure, the colonial army had approximately forty percent of the labour force of Eritrea in its ranks.<sup>192</sup> During Italy's preparation to invade Ethiopia, for example, 65,000 Eritreans were mobilized to serve in the colonial army.<sup>193</sup> Beyond that, unemployed workers and landless peasants continued to migrate in thousands to Ethiopia to escape conscription as semi-elected village heads had to provide regular quotas of conscript labour at miserable wages.<sup>194</sup>

During the Italian period, some processing industries were established, including a factory that turned sea shells into buttons. There were also fishing firms and mining companies. The major Italian industrial activities

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<sup>189</sup>Op. cit., Tekeste, 40.

<sup>190</sup>Op. cit., Sherman, 15.

<sup>191</sup>See *FPCI Report* (1948), App. 37.

<sup>192</sup>Op. cit., Tekeste, *Italian Colonialism...*, 51.

<sup>193</sup>Pankhurst, Richard, (1972) "Italian and 'Native' Labour During the Italian Fascist Occupation of Ethiopia, 1935-41," *Ghana Social Science Journal* 2/2 November 42-74; See also De Bono, Emilio, *Anno XIII, the Conquest of an Empire* (London: The Cressent Press, 1937).

<sup>194</sup>Op. cit., *The Cambridge...*, 736.

which emerged in the 1930s, however, were basically war-oriented. Even in these, the Eritrean was essentially a source of cheap labour. The less significant Italian enterprises were largely small service-oriented enterprises such as hotels and restaurants, in which some Eritreans were employed.<sup>195</sup>

During the British Military occupation of Eritrea, especially during the early war years (1943-1945), a variety of industries based on import substitution were established. These included factories which produced beer, matches, buttons, soap, leather shoes, boots, glass wares and so forth. In 1944-45, there were 1,610 business enterprises in Eritrea employing 26,954 Eritreans and 5,609 Italians.<sup>196</sup> When the war came to an end, however, many of these industries were closed and the workers laid off. By 1947, the number of principal industries was reduced to 116, employing only 3,538 Eritreans and 509 Italians.<sup>197</sup> After Italy's defeat and the collapse of the war economy, most of the ex-soldiers returned to subsistence agriculture. The workers and labourers, too, were instantly unemployed when the artificial war economy was over. As Martin Moore, the correspondent of the Daily Telegraph noted:

Public development, artificially inflated when Eritrea became first the springboard for the conquest of Ethiopia, and then the gateway to Italy's new Africa, has stopped. It can never be resumed on the old scale. The country must settle down to a marginal existence, drawn chiefly from strong fields and scanty pasturage.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>195</sup>Fiorette, M. *Ufficio Eritreo dell'Economia* (1937) Elenco Alfabetico degli esercizi Commercio Industria ecc. nel Territorio, 1-5 and 10, Asmara, Topographia Ditte.

<sup>196</sup>FPCI, *Report on Eritrea*, I (New York, 1948), 60.

<sup>197</sup>*Ibid.*, App. 71.

<sup>198</sup>Moore, Martin, "Italy's Oldest Colony May go to Abyssinia," *The Daily Telegraph*, 13 May 1947.

In business, too, the Eritreans were marginal. Let alone under the Italians, even under the British, when applicants sought licenses to run a transport service, start charcoal and firewood business, sell milk or manufacture cheese, preference was usually given to Italians who had more capital and greater technical experience than the Eritreans.<sup>199</sup> Likewise, the import and export trade business remained the exclusive domain of foreigners.<sup>200</sup>

According to the Four Power Commission of Investigation, the representation of indigenous business in the Eritrean Chamber of Commerce was no more than two percent. In point of fact, there was only one Eritrean trading company at the national level.<sup>201</sup> Businessmen like Salah Ahmed Kekia in Massawa, Negash Sefah in Ghinda, and Hassa Alawi El Safi in Dankalia, were simple wholesale distributors.

The Italians may be given some credit for building a beautiful city like Asmara, that has been described by an acute observer in the following manner:

Asmara, with its cathedral, town hall, terraces and porticoes, its streets crowded with strollers, its civic pride, simple piety and love of pageantry, is a real Italian town. It gives one the impression that it was built and perfected down to the last detail in Apulia and wafted over the sea to Africa where it came down like a meteorite and landed intact on this particular spot.<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>199</sup>Four Power Commission of Investigation, *Report on Eritrea*, 56.

<sup>200</sup>FPCI (1948), App. 114.

<sup>201</sup>British Eritrea Territorial Authority (1942-47) *1-2 District Officer's Book, Massawa*.

<sup>202</sup>Quoted in Del Boca, Angelo, *The Ethiopian War, 1935-1941*, (trans.) by P. D. Cummins (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1969), 17-18.



One does not have to go very far from Asmara, however, to realize how Eritreans really lived under the Italians. One would have to visit only the native quarters within the city such as Acria, Aba Shawl, Edaga Arbi and Geza Berhanu, where economic misery, illiteracy, and lack of rudimentary housing, electricity and modern sanitation facilities prevailed, to see the wretched living conditions of Eritreans.<sup>203</sup>

Pietro Badoglio, who knew Eritrea intimately well, provides the following account: "The colony of Eritrea, small and poor, with scanty resources and limited possibilities, has led a wretched poverty-stricken existence, even in the military sense since 1896."<sup>204</sup>

Where, then, was the transformation of the Eritrean society? The following tables, which provide the essential facts concerning land and land use, agricultural farms and concessions, industrial activities, employment opportunities, and the value of Eritrea's trade (1923-1932), are all self-evident and do not require any elaboration. There was no transformation of the Eritrean economy. If anything, it remained backward with exports covering only some 50% of the value of Eritrea's meager imports.<sup>205</sup> The British policy of quality control was equally detrimental to local business whose economic power to compete with foreign business large or small, had already been significantly weakened.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>203</sup>Pankhursts, Sylvia and Richard, *Ethiopia and Eritrea, The Last Phase of the Reunion Struggle, 1941-1952* (Woodford Green: Lalibella House, 1953), 267-272.

<sup>204</sup>Badoglio, Peitro, *The War in Abyssinia* (London: Methuen Publishers, 1937), 4. Pietro Badoglio (1871-1950), was an Italian general. He served as a lieutenant in the unsuccessful Ethiopian campaign of 1896. Appointed chief of the general staff in 1925, he commanded the Italian forces in the 1935-36 invasion of Ethiopia.

<sup>205</sup>Trevaskis, 42.

<sup>206</sup>*Eritrean Gazette*, 15 Sept. 1942 and vol. 10, 1949.

TABLE I.

Types of Land, 1947<sup>^</sup>

	Acres	Percent
Cultivated land	640,000	2.6
Forest and scrub	3,500,000	11.1
Pasture	23,000,000	74.6
Mineral areas	55,000	.6
Wasteland	3,522,000	11.1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>30,720,000</b>	<b>100.0</b>

TABLE II.

Agricultural Farms and Concessions  
run by Italians in 1932.<sup>^</sup>

Types of Property	Area	No. Holders	Acres
Private	Highlands	114	8,457
	Eastern Slopes	14	3,035
	Eastern/Western Lowlands	14	165
Concession	Highlands	8	3,020
	Eastern Slopes	5	272
	Lowlands	7	886
Agricultural Center at Tessene		1	7,407
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>163</b>	<b>23,242</b>

<sup>^</sup> Four Power Commission of Investigation, *Report on Eritrea*, Vol. 1, New York, United Nations, 1948, p. 37.

<sup>F</sup> *Annuario Delle Colonie Italiane*, 1934, p. 34.

**TABLE III.<sup>c</sup>**  
**Industrial Activities (1939)**

Industrial Firms	No.	Invested Capital (Lira)
Construction	383	500,000,000
Motor-transport	846	1,518,500,000
Mechanical engineering	227	15,000,000
Beer, ice, malt	25	6,000,000
Chemicals	18	4,100,000
Mills	269	30,000,000
Building materials	241	53,000,000
Timber and furniture	96	3,000,000
Theatre	51	40,500,000
Printing	13	8,000,000
Tanning	7	1,000,000
Textiles	3	3,000,000
Electricity	19	16,000,000
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2,198</b>	<b>2,198,100,000</b>

<sup>c</sup> Memorandum on the Economic and Financial Situation of the Italian Territories in Africa, Rome, *Tipografia Del Senato Del Dott. G. Bardi*, July, 1946, p. 51.

TABLE IV.<sup>D</sup>  
 Adult Male Occupation in Asmara 1947

Occupation	Number Employed
Taxi drivers	8
Shopkeepers and traders	1,748
Artisans	253
Goldsmiths	44
Beer shops	168
Liquor licenses	171
Buggy owners and buggy drivers	140
Hawkers, shoeblacks, etc.	86
Public scribes	13
Bicycle and car repairers	19
Public baths	1
Cartage contractors	123
Commission agents	7
British Military Administration - clerks & messengers	2,439
Municipality clerks and messengers	30
Police, prisoners, municipal and commissariato guards, etc.	1,163
British Military Administration - labourers	514
Municipal labourers	121
Army labourers	600
Town cleansing - casual labourers	300
Menial employees in shops and business	4,200
Industrial and agricultural employees	3,900
Domestic servants	4,200
Unemployed	6,062
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>27,060</b>

<sup>D</sup> FPCI, *Report on Eritrea*, New York, United Nations, 1948, Appendix 6.

TABLE V.

Value of Maritime Import/Export Trade  
(in thousands of Lira)

Year	Imports	Exports	Total	Excess-Imports Over Exports
1923	106,294	40,395	146,689	65,899
1924	146,129	87,902	234,031	58,227
1925	203,453	119,463	322,916	83,990
1926	171,790	97,852	269,642	73,938
1927	201,536	81,566	283,102	119,970
1928	195,627	93,717	289,344	101,910
1929	207,504	72,499	280,003	135,005
1930	176,815	76,279	253,094	100,536
1931	186,825	69,063	255,888	117,762
1932	173,035	59,194	232,229	113,841

### Education

Prior to the Italian conquest of Eritrea, Koranic schools which used Arabic and church schools that provided education in Geez, Tigrigna and Amharic flourished. There were also missionary schools which were mostly built in Eritrea in the 1890-1897 period.<sup>207</sup> Education for the "natives" was avoided like a plague. What mattered most was induced docility. It was believed that an educated populace would become politically conscious and struggle against colonial rule. Hence, the best means of ensuring colonial control of the society was to keep the population ignorant and uninformed.

To be sure, Ferdinando Martini, the first Governor of Eritrea, rejected education for Eritreans on the grounds that, "educated natives would complicate colonial rule."<sup>208</sup>

<sup>207</sup>Op. cit., Tekeste Negash, (*Italian Colonialism...*), 66-75.

<sup>208</sup>ASMAI, Ps 33/1 file 10, July 5, 1910 as quoted by Tekeste Negash.

The same policy was reiterated in 1910, when D. S. Giulliano, the Foreign Minister, addressed the Italian Chamber of Deputies in the following manner:

The Eritrean had an infantile mentality. One has to be careful not to create some moral and mental imbalances through education. Italy should [also] avoid the problems the British were facing in India as a result of their educational policy.<sup>209</sup>

It is germane to note that as early as 1835, Thomas Macaulay had recommended an educational system for India which would create a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.<sup>210</sup>

Even before the Italian period, Christian missionaries had developed a strong interest in promoting education among the population and such activities continued until 1931, when Eritreans were excluded from government secondary schools.<sup>211</sup> A year later, all Swedish and American missionaries were refused entry, and the remaining Swedes were expelled.<sup>212</sup> By this time, there were some 2,000 Eritreans in state elementary schools and another 950 in Catholic schools and seminaries. Those who wished to continue their education, or to seek careers other than as interpreters or junior clerks, looked at Addis Ababa.<sup>213</sup> To crown it all, when the fascist educational system was introduced in 1932, Andrea Festa, the superintendent for schools, proclaimed:

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<sup>209</sup>See Tekeste Negash.

<sup>210</sup> Smith, D. Eugene, *India as a Secular State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 337-338.

<sup>211</sup> *The Cambridge History of Africa*, vol. 7, 1905-1940 (ed.) A. D. Roberts, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 724-26.

<sup>212</sup>*Ibid.*, 726.

<sup>213</sup>*Ibid.*

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The Eritrean child ought to know something of our civilization in order to make him a conscious propagandist among the families who live far away inland. And through our educational policy, the native would know of Italy, her glories and her ancient history in order to become a conscious militant behind the shadow of our flag.<sup>214</sup>

The Fascist regime considered that education for natives would simply **turn** them into "misfits." Elementary schools taught only hygiene, crafts and **agriculture** and for the rest concentrated on the indoctrination of future **askari**. To further the policy of dividing the population, Koranic schools were **opened**. Above the lower grades, education was restructured to the training of **interpreters** and courses about Italy for elementary school teachers.<sup>215</sup>

The same theme was emphasized and re-iterated by the Director of **Education**:

By the end of the fourth year, the Eritrean student should be able to speak our language moderately well. He should know the four arithmetical operations within normal limits, and of history, he should know only the names of those who made Italy great.<sup>216</sup>

The goal of fascist education was, therefore, designed to make the native a **useful** instrument of Italy. Elementary hygiene, respect for the Duce, **respect** for Italy, with a future career in the colonial army, that was what **mattered**.<sup>217</sup> Hence, the educated Eritrean functioned primarily as an **interpreter** or clerk, mediating between the colonial state and the people. He **was instructed** to believe that Italy was the fatherland of Eritreans, that the **destiny** of Eritrea becoming a wonderful land was linked to Italy--the

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<sup>214</sup>Op. cit., Tekeste, 71.

<sup>215</sup>Op. cit., *Cambridge History...*, 737.

<sup>216</sup>Trevaskis, 33.

<sup>217</sup>Four Power Commission of Investigation, *Report on Eritrea*, vol. I, 1948, 69.





strongest country in the world--and that it was a duty to salute Italy as a living and beneficial mother.<sup>218</sup>

In their fifty years of colonial rule, therefore, the Italians opened only twenty-four primary schools, and never allowed education to proceed beyond the fourth grade--an academic standard that is normally attained by a ten-year old.<sup>219</sup> Colonial policy also forbade the formation of trade unions and political parties.<sup>220</sup>

### **Racism**

Since the arrival of the Italians, there was racial tension in Eritrea. The situation became worse with the coming to power of Benitto Mussolini. A "master race" propaganda campaign, borrowed freely from Nazi Germany was introduced, and in June 1937, an Italian decree made marriage between Eritreans and Italians an indictable offense.<sup>221</sup> Fascism at home and racism in the colonies became the order of the day. Alazar Tesfa Michael, a prominent Eritrean journalist of the time had the following to say:

For fifty years of grief and pain we were forced to bear the Italian yoke. We were forced to fight for the Italians in Ethiopia, Libya and Somaliland. In public buses, Eritrean passengers were never allowed to sit with Italians. In all Eritrean hospitals, rooms were reserved for Italians. Eritreans were never permitted to use them, even if they had the money.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>218</sup>Op. cit., Tekeste, *Italian Colonialism...*, 75.

<sup>219</sup>Trevaskis, 50-51.

<sup>220</sup>Op. cit., Longrigg, 132-142.

<sup>221</sup>Russell, Warren Howe, *Black Africa from the Colonial Era to Modern Times* (New York: 1966), vol. II, Chapter x, 139-40. Despite the racial laws which forbade conjugal union between Italians and natives, strange as it may sound, in 1941 alone, there were 25,000 half-castes in Eritrea.

<sup>222</sup>Alazar Tesfa Michael, "Eritrea Today," *The Ethiopian Herald*, 19 August 1946.

Alazar had other interesting things to say about the misdeeds of the Italians in Eritrea:

Before the Italians began their invasion of Ethiopia, an Italian was killed by an unknown person at Barentu, in Western Eritrea. Signor Bonetti, cashier of the Regional Commissariat in Asmara, and Signor Barnabai, Secretary of the General Federation of Fascists, and also President of the High Court of Eritrea, went together to Barentu to investigate the murder. On their arrival there, they summoned an Eritrean whom they suspected of being in the crime and wanted to force a confession from him. They compelled him to sit naked in boiling oil during the whole of their interrogation. Despite their cruel torture, the Eritrean did not falter in declaring himself innocent. As a result of the torture, he died four days later.<sup>223</sup>

Little at first, but vigorously in Fascist days of 'race purity,' the colour-bar was enforced. Natives were reminded, specifically and everywhere, of their inferiority in their own country. The municipalities excluded them from all participation. In the central government hierarchy they had no part and were, after fifty years, no nearer to acquiring any. They could at best aspire to be low-paid clerks or orderlies. Training possibilities aimed at participation in government, or an administrative scheme which could lead to such a role, were nonexistent. There were to be, in perpetuity, rulers and the passive ruled.<sup>224</sup>

### **The Eviction of the Italians and British Takeover**

Many Eritrean soldiers fighting for Fascism in Ethiopia had steadily abandoned their positions and had joined the Ethiopian patriots. The resistance against Italian Fascism was gaining momentum. Even if the Ethiopian partisans had not been able to free the country unaided, they had

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<sup>223</sup>Op. cit., The Ethiopian Herald, 19 August 1946.

<sup>224</sup>Op. cit., Longrigg, 135.

compelled the Italians to retain massive forces. By 1940, these comprised 90,000 Italians, and perhaps more than 100,000 Africans. Between 1935 and 1941, the Italians had lost 5,000 dead and more than 9,000 wounded. They were finally evicted with the aid and support of the British army, which subsequently took over Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somaliland, and Somalia.<sup>225</sup>

On 3 September 1943, Italy pulled out of world War II by signing an armistice with the Big Four Powers. Article 23 of the Peace Treaty contained the following provisions:

1. Italy agreed to renounce all right and title to all her former colonies in Africa, including Eritrea.
2. That the fate of the former Italian colonies will be taken by the USA, the USSR, France and Britain within a year of the coming into force of the treaty; and
3. That if the Four Powers were unable to agree, the matter will be taken over by the United Nations.<sup>226</sup>

### **The British Military Administration in Eritrea**

The British occupied Eritrea in 1941 and controlled it for the next eleven years.<sup>227</sup> They had two major objectives: 1) to use Eritrea as a springboard for military operations against the Axis Powers; and 2) to create a strong British sphere of influence in Northeast Africa.

With regard to the first objective, we could say that since their primary aim was the prosecution of the war, their only interest in Eritrea was in using

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<sup>225</sup> Alberto Sbacchi, "The price of empire: towards an enumeration of Italian casualties in Ethiopia, 1935-40," *Ethiopianist Notes* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University, 1978), 2, 2, 39.

<sup>226</sup> *United States Statutes at Large*, 1947, vol. 61, Part 2 (Washington, D. C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1948), 1382.

<sup>227</sup> Trevaskis provides a fair account of the British period in Eritrea.

its facilities for the war effort. For this reason, they were in favour of the status quo in order to save on manpower and to reduce expenses. Hence, the British maintained the Italian system of administration with only minimal changes. Italian officials and police officers were retained in their former positions. Although the British removed the formal colour bar, they did little to alter the social structure of Italian hegemony in Eritrea.<sup>228</sup> Even disputes between Italians and Eritreans were heard before Italian judges, where Italian colonial law was applied.

According to Alazar Tesfa Michael:

When the British triumphantly entered Eritrea, thousands of Eritreans received them by waving the Ethiopian flag. Yet, almost everything in Eritrea was left for the Italians who run finance, the police and the judiciary.<sup>229</sup>

In the Eritrean highlands, the British maintained the privileges of the Italians, upheld Italian laws and institutions, gave them priority in employment, confirmed the alienation of land effected during the Italian period, and confiscated more farm land, which was transferred to the Italians. In fact, the Italians were granted a further 10,000 acres of land in addition to the 70,000 acres they had already acquired. The shortage of land was most acute in the highlands, where the population of 388,000 was squeezed on a bare 440,000 acres of cultivable land.<sup>230</sup> According to the Four Power Commission of Investigation, the total number of Italian land owners in 1947 was 538, and they held 12% of the total cultivated land.<sup>231</sup> Since the peasantry in the

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<sup>228</sup>Op. cit., Sherman, 16-20.

<sup>229</sup>*The Ethiopian Herald*, 2 September 1946.

<sup>230</sup>Trevaskis, 54.

<sup>231</sup>Four Power Commission of Investigation, 1948, App. 31.

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highlands was more sedentary than the population in the lowlands, it was effectively taxed to help finance administrative expenses.

The result of this policy was increased impoverishment of the peasantry, intense hatred and resentment of the Europeans--be they Italians or British. All those Eritreans who had to leave their jobs because Italy had lost the war, the demobilized soldiers, landless peasants, the frustrated petite bourgeoisie, the unemployed workers--were all absorbed into the general pattern of poverty of the Eritrean highlands.

In contrast, the Muslims in the lowlands were less adversely affected by British policy. On the contrary, the British liberated the serfs of Western and Northern Eritrea from the oppression of their aristocratic masters, and left them in peace.<sup>232</sup> When the Rabita El Islamiya was established in 1946 in the Eritrean lowlands, it was favourably treated by the British because it advocated the continuation of British rule in Eritrea.

The British did not see Eritrea as a viable nation. Besides being geographically divided, they argued that it was composed of various nationalities and political groups and was so poor in natural resources, that it was not economically viable. It was short of water, they said, and of cultivable land, with the result that its agricultural productivity was at a low level. It still had to import annually 12,500 tons, or one-eighth of its annual requirements of cereals. It had a small export industry, employing only 24,000 people. There were some mines, but these employed only 3,200 people in 1947. consequently, the deficit in Eritrea's trading balance exceeded £1,600,000 or rather more than the territory's total export trade. This lack of resources meant a considerable budgetary deficit of £500,000, excluding the cost of military

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<sup>232</sup>Trevaskis, 69-76.

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forces for maintaining peace and security.<sup>233</sup> British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin was even more blunt. He described Eritrea as an entirely artificial entity which cannot stand by itself.<sup>234</sup> The British conceived of a policy to divide Eritrean Muslims and Christians, in order to partition the territory between Ethiopia and the Sudan. Such a solution, they said, would allow the highland Christian Eritreans to join their kinsmen in Ethiopia, and the Muslim tribes of northern and western Eritrea would join the Sudan.<sup>235</sup> We should note that the Sudan itself was under a joint Anglo-Egyptian condominium.

In proposing this scheme, the British claimed that they were motivated by humanitarian considerations. If that was so, they should have proposed that Eastern Sudan be incorporated into western Eritrea for cultural, demographic and other reasons. The truth is, they were moved by self-serving considerations.

The idea of partitioning Eritrea should also be viewed in relation to "Greater Somaliland"--a policy advanced by British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin in the 1940s aimed at uniting Somalis in Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, British Somaliland and Italian Somaliland under British administration.<sup>236</sup> Ethiopia was supposed to give up the Ogaden in favour of "Greater Somaliland"

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<sup>233</sup> *Year Book of the United Nations* (New York: Published by Columbia University Press in Cooperation with the United Nations, 1950), 365.

<sup>234</sup> As quoted by the *Ethiopian Herald*, 16 August 1948. Ernest Bevin (1881-1951) was a prominent British trade union leader, who was Minister of Labour in World War II and Foreign Minister in 1945-51.

<sup>235</sup> The best advocate of this policy option was Brigadier S. H. Longrigg, Chief Administrator of Eritrea from 1942-44. See his *Brief History of Eritrea*, 168-175.

<sup>236</sup> See Drysdale, C. John, *The Somali Dispute* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1964). Even though the book presents the Mogadisho version of the dispute, the section dealing with Bevin's proposal is accurately reported.

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and receive a "reward" on Eritrea. In case Haile Selassie lost the message, the British had a different idea. While the south-eastern portion of Eritrea including the port of Assab, could be ceded to Ethiopia, the Christian highlands, together with Massawa and the Saho, could merge with the Ethiopian province of Tigray and form "Greater Tigray," and be affiliated to Ethiopia under British protection.

Hence, as a basis for the strategic re-arrangement of the whole region, the British promoted Tigreanism. In order to politicize Eritrea's ethnic and religious groups for this purpose, they encouraged the rapid development of the press and even political parties.<sup>237</sup> The Allied Powers had decided to dispatch a fact-finding mission to Eritrea in 1946. In what appears to be the fulfillment of a planned prophesy, the political parties that emerged in Eritrea in the 1940s, were based either on religion or ethnicity. For example, the Eritrean Muslim League--a movement solely organized on religion--grew out of an organization which originally intended to liberate the serfs of western and northern Eritrea from the oppression of their aristocratic masters--the Natabs. The Eritrean highlanders mostly joined the Unionist Party which advocated unconditional union with Ethiopia. Its members were largely Christian. However, Christian support for union with Ethiopia was offset by the historic rivalry between the northern Ethiopian province of Tigray and Shoa. This ambivalence was embodied by the Christian Eritreans of the Liberal Progressive Party, who wanted an independent Eritrea, ideally in association with the Tigray province of Ethiopia.<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>237</sup>Cumming, D.C., "The Disposal of Eritrea," *Middle East Journal*, 1953.

<sup>238</sup>Op. cit., *The Cambridge History...*, vol. 8, 465.

But to the shock and horror of the British, only a small group of Eritreans were fascinated with the idea of "Greater Tigrai." As we will see in another chapter, even the Liberal Progressive Party--a party in which the British had invested considerably, changed its name and programme, became the Liberal Unionist Party and started to work for joining Ethiopia. Haile Selassie succeeded in giving the British a dose of their own medicine. When they failed to outwit him, they simply denounced him as "the greatest intriguer of all intriguers."<sup>239</sup> One may find the characterization amusing because it is like the pot calling the kettle black.

The difficulty of administering half of Eritrea from Khartoum led White Hall to consider transferring the whole of Eritrea to Ethiopia. Such a gesture might mute Addis Ababa's complaints about the return of Italy to Somalia, and it might be manipulated to induce the Imperial Government to permit the construction of a Lake Tana dam, vital to the expansion of irrigated cotton land in the Sudan's Ghezira region.<sup>240</sup>

Perhaps the biggest impact of the British in Eritrea was in the field of education. They helped to develop an educational system on a much more extensive basis than had the Italians. By 1947, for example, there were 59 elementary schools, one middle school and one Teacher Training College.<sup>241</sup> By 1950, the number of elementary schools had increased to 74, catering to some 8,000 students.<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>239</sup>As cited by Haggai Erlich. See his, *Ethiopia the Challenge of Independence*, 212.

<sup>240</sup>Spencer, *Ethiopia at Bay...*, 261-279.

<sup>241</sup>Trevaskis, 33-34.

<sup>242</sup>*A Handbook on Eritrea*, The British Information Service, Eritrea, 1950.

### The Economic Situation

With regard to economic development, we should note that such activity as did exist was mainly spurred by the war effort. The British encouraged the local manufacture of certain consumer goods to supply the Middle East because imports could not be sent from Europe. In the 1941-45 period, the British in conjunction with the Americans, had constructed an airplane assembly plant at Gura, a naval base at Massawa, a repair and maintenance centre for airplanes at Asmara, and so on. In 1942 the USA had taken over Radio Marina, an Italian facility outside Asmara, which functioned as a relay station, forwarding messages to and from naval vessels, and as part of a global network that gathered and beamed intelligence information to the Pentagon.<sup>243</sup> Together with mining, transportation and public utilities, these projects opened up employment opportunities for 38,000 Eritreans and 19,000 Italians.<sup>244</sup> But these workers did not belong to any trade union because the trade union movement was non-existent. It was only in 1952 that the Eritrean General Union of Labour Syndicates was established for the first time in the history of Eritrea.<sup>245</sup>

The British Administration dismantled entire enterprises in Eritrea in 1945 and sold them to such countries as Egypt, Pakistan, Malta and Yemen. These included, an ice factory, twenty radio stations, three hundred railway wagons, a cement factory that was capable of producing 1,000 tons of cement

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<sup>243</sup>Marcus, Harold, *Ethiopia, Great Britain and the USA, 1941-1974* (Los Angeles: University Press, 1983), 83.

<sup>244</sup>Op. cit., Sherman, 18.

<sup>245</sup>Leonard, Richard, "European Colonization and the Socio-Economic Integration of Eritrea," in the *Eritrean Case, Proceedings of the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal of the International League for the Rights and Liberation of Peoples* (Milan: 1980), 79.

daily, a potash factory and a salt factory. Moreover, in what Pankhurst aptly describes as “senseless vandalism” and “a hideous sabotage,” seventy-five buildings were simply demolished in Massawa.<sup>246</sup>

Since the four major powers, i.e., the USA, USSR, U.K. and France had agreed jointly to determine the future of the former Italian colonies including Eritrea, a Four Power Commission of Investigation (FPCI) visited Eritrea and submitted its report in May 1948. The Four Powers could not subsequently come into an agreement, and as they had agreed, they submitted the whole problem to the United Nations. The U.N., in turn, established the United Nations Commission for Eritrea, composed of Burma, Guatemala, Norway, Pakistan and South Africa. The commission visited Eritrea and submitted its report on June 28, 1949.<sup>247</sup>

### Conclusion

Eritrea’s first Governor Ferdinando Martini, as we said, had declared that the business of colonialism is absolute domination of the colonized in the interest of the colonized. In keeping with that pledge, Italian policy strived to preserve and not to transform Eritrean social and economic structures.

If it had never been Italian policy to develop Eritrea’s few assets,<sup>248</sup> if, under the Italians, Eritrea had never been self-supporting, but has always depended on subsidy from Rome,<sup>249</sup> if its exports never paid for its imports,

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<sup>246</sup>Pankhurst, Sylvia E., and Pankhurst, Richard, *Ethiopia and Eritrea, the Last Phase of the Reunion Struggle, 1941-52* (1952), 257-266.

<sup>247</sup>The details of these events are presented in the appropriate chapters.

<sup>248</sup>Trevaskis, 36.

<sup>249</sup>Erlich, Haggai, *Ethiopia and the Challenge of Independence* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1986), 68.

and if the labour force did not permanently break its ties to the land, it is erroneous to claim that Eritrea was transformed by colonialism. The more so, when, as has been demonstrated, that Eritrea has never been a settler colony, and that there was never a large scale expropriation of land.

According to the Report of FPCI, the total cultivable land in Eritrea, largely in the highlands, was only 2.6% in 1947.<sup>250</sup> Given the amount of land alienation by the Italian colonists, *i.e.*, one percent of the available land, and the quality of the technology of the time, it is difficult to see how Eritrean agriculture could have been transformed. Even commercial agriculture, negligible as it was, could not have seriously affected the feudal social structure of Eritrea. In fact, when Nadel wrote his study on the land tenure pattern of the Eritrean highlands in 1946, the feudal land tenure system was still intact.<sup>251</sup>

With regard to Jordan's second observation, *i.e.*, the emergence of Eritrean nationalism, Martin Moore, the correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* observed in 1947: The Eritrean horizon is bounded by the tribe or the village community. He does not know what he wants, and he would accept any regime which did not disturb the quiet tenor of his way.<sup>252</sup>

The same view is shared by an Eritrean scholar, Tesfatsion Medhane: He maintains that a sense of Eritrean patriotism transcending regional, tribal, and religious boundaries was very weak on the part of all social groups in the country.<sup>253</sup> The Four Power Commission of Investigation had also reported in

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<sup>250</sup>FPCI, *Report on Eritrea*, vol. I, (New York: United Nations, 1948), 37.

<sup>251</sup>Nadel, S. F., "Land Tenure on the Eritrean Plateau," *Africa*, 16/1 January: 1-21 and 16/2, 1946, 99-108.

<sup>252</sup>Moore, Martin, "Italy's Oldest Colony May go to Abyssinia," *The Daily Telegraph*, 13 May 1947.

<sup>253</sup>Tesfatsion Medhane, *Eritrea, Dynamics of a National Question*, 10.

1948 that Eritrea was split into two camps and that political thought in each, was, conditioned by religion.<sup>254</sup> The U. N. Commission for Eritrea, as we will see, also submitted a similar report.

The Eritrean scholar, Tekeste Negash, has concluded that what might be described as Eritrean nationalism expressed itself in terms of Ethiopian nationalism. Such a conclusion can also be supported by documentary evidence. As early as 1947, Tedla Bairu, the Secretary General of the Unionist Party of Eritrea, noted: We Eritreans are not foreigners with regard to Ethiopia. All persons with common sense recognize this.<sup>255</sup>

Tekeste's conclusion is also confirmed by Dejazmatch Beyene Baraki, President of the Unionist Party of Eritrea:

We, Ethiopians beyond the Mereb river, throughout our long separation from our Motherland, under foreign yoke, have never relaxed our spiritual struggle and our burning desire to rejoin the Motherland.<sup>256</sup>

Finally, there is Lloyd Ellingson's conclusion: He contends that as a result of the Italian colonial experience, Eritrea was a land where people's appreciation of political and social problems did not go beyond the interests of their families or clans, and where cultural differences, and the influence of religion [was] a predominant factor in the development of political trends.<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>254</sup>Report of FPCI, Report on Eritrea, vol. I, (New York: United Nations, 1948), 69.

<sup>255</sup>See Tedla Bairu's "Letter to the Editor," *The Eritrean Daily News*, 22 May 1947.

<sup>256</sup>*The Ethiopian Herald*, 16 January 1950.

<sup>257</sup>Ellingson, Lloyd, "Eritrea, Separatism and Irredentism, 1941-1985," unpublished, History Ph.D. dissertation (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1986).



The Italians played off Christians against Muslims, highlanders against lowlanders, one ethnic group against the other. The British, too, played the same game, the objective of both being the advancement of colonial interests. Under such conditions, how could anything resembling Eritrean nationalism emerge?

Given the fact of the division of Eritrea along ethnic, geographic, religious and linguistic lines, the resilience of irredentism among Eritrean highlanders, was such that they were actively engaged in the politics of unity between Eritrea and Ethiopia. And what is significant is that, if after four decades of decolonization, Eritrea's social, economic and political structures still retain their pre-colonial set-up, could one speak of the transformation of Eritrea under colonialism?

Ethnic identifications in Eritrea have been layered, then reinforced by class, occupational and ideological identifications, all of which, at least potentially, have had political implications. The Muslim/Christian distinction for instance, has tended to coincide with socio-economic divisions, particularly, between land owners, generally Christians, and landless nomads or peasants, generally Muslims.<sup>258</sup>

For Eritrean Muslims, religion was the apparent catalyst and symbol of political mobilization, and yet it was its temporal objective dimension that mattered. It was also the fact that Muslims lacked access to the Ethiopian state and consequently suffered economic and social disadvantages that galvanized them into opposition to Ethiopian rule through Eritrean Christians.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>258</sup>Op. cit., Suhrke, Satri, 128.

<sup>259</sup>Op. cit., Markakis, 144.

In a situation where ethnicity and religion still play a critical role, it is misleading to attempt a single analytical explanation, or to use stereotyped models that have no theoretical insight. The eagerness to employ the precepts of a theory without being aware of its implications can only be dangerous. The model Jordan employs cannot be considered as a conceptual response to empirically established research, but as forcing Eritrean conditions to fit the models, in a mechanically deterministic manner. It seems, indeed, that a more genuine and meaningful intellectual investigation needs to be done.

## CHAPTER III

### The Major Causes of the Internal Conflicts in Eritrea

#### Theories of Ethnicity and Nationalism

All social theory tends to be shaped or constrained by the society which produces it. In the 19th century, for example, history was assigned to study Europe and the European world, whereas anthropology was relegated to concentrate its efforts to the study of the non-European world. As a result of this strange arrangement, and because of what could perhaps be described as academic narcissicism, theories of the state and nationalism have become Eurocentric--*i.e.*, the idea and practice of placing Europe at the centre of one's world view. But the European experience has not necessarily been the universal experience of the non-European world.

In trying to study the Eritrean situation, we will present some essential theories. But we will also see the fundamental inadequacy of the theories themselves. With the possible exception of theories advanced by Clifford Geertz, Eric Hobsbawn, Partha Chatterjee, and Ernest Gellner, the theories have no relevance to Eritrean conditions.

We should also note that Eritrean history is strongly externalized, because the internal dynamics of the society have rarely been a feature of the public record. As if the Eritrean people have played no role in deciding the fate of their country in the 1940s and 1950s, even Eritrean political parties have been presented as the internal expression of foreign powers. By portraying themselves as victims of foreign conspiracy and intrigue, present day Eritrean politicians themselves have helped to encourage such an attitude to prevail. It is this approach--an approach--which denies any kind of historicity to the Eritrean people that has often characterized the frame of

analysis of the Eritrean political scene. The aim of this chapter is to shed some light on the internal dynamics of the Eritrean society, to identify the major internal actors on the stage, and to ascertain the pattern of conflict from within.

According to Daniel Patrick Moynihan, ethnic strife has been the mainspring of 20th century history. The root cause of this problem, he says, is Woodrow Wilson's Declaration on "Self-determination of Peoples," which has often resulted in minorities fighting to fix nation-state boundaries around themselves, or to obtain self-determination for themselves in order to deny it to others. To minimize the possibilities of the Declaration from being utilized to promote renegade statehood, Moynihan proposes the following: avoiding ethnic preferences, promoting economic growth, tolerating diversity and de-emphasizing the nation-state in so far as it is a regressive force which restricts labor mobility, restrains trade and discourages innovation.<sup>260</sup>

To be sure, self-determination is a doctrine which postulates the right of a group of people who consider themselves separate and distinct from others, to determine for themselves the state in which they will live, and the form of government they will have. The doctrine has been used as a justification for rebellious secession, and as an invitation to an on-going political fragmentation. The doctrine has already progressed to the point of creating mini-states.<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>260</sup>Moynihan, P. Daniel, *Pandemonium: Ethnicity in International Politics* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 107-126.

<sup>261</sup>Terms like country, nation and the state are commonly misleading. "Country," has geographical connotations. "Nation" involves a socio-cultural perception, and the "state" expresses the legal organization of society. For Hegel, "nation" and "state" were roughly synonymous.

By invoking the principle of self-determination<sup>262</sup>, the Eritreans fought a war of “national liberation,” and have now declared their independence from Ethiopia. However, no sooner was the independence declaration made public, than Issaiyas Afewerki, the Secretary General of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) announced:

The Provisional Government of Eritrea will not allow political parties to form along ethnic, religious or clan lines. Otherwise, we would splinter apart along household lines.<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>262</sup>President Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924) helped promote peace in Europe by declaring in 1918 that nations have a right to constitute independent states and to establish their own governments. For a study that critically analyzes Wilson and the United States at the Versailles Peace Conference, see Bailey, Thomas Andrew, *Wilson and the Peace Makers, Combining Woodrow Wilson and the Great Betrayal*, (New York: MacMillan Co., 1947). In the 1919 peace settlement, the doctrine was instrumental in establishing the independence of countries like Albania, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Yugoslavia.

The Soviet system, too, had its own brand of self-determination. For Stalin, “a nation is not a racial or tribal, but a historically constituted community of people,” (Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and the Colonial Question*, 2nd ed., 1936, 5). Such a nation, he says, can demand the right to independence. However, Lenin argued that demands for self-determination and democracy are not absolute, they are a ‘particle’ of the general democratic ‘world’ movement. In individual concrete cases, a particle may contradict the whole; if it does then it must be rejected. (Lenin: *Marx, Engles, Marxism*, 1934, 47). The principle of self-determination became part of international legal and diplomatic norms as it related to the global political process that led to the decolonization of the non-European world. Indeed, the United Nations Declaration on the Granting of Independence to colonial countries and peoples maintains that: All peoples have the right to self-determination; by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development. Whether Ethiopia one of the sponsors of U.N. General Assembly Resolution 1514 (xv) 1960, (*Official Records of the U.N. General Assembly, 15th Session, Plenary Meetings, vol. 2, New York, 1960, pp. 981-987*), could be considered a colonialist state, or whether the Eritrean people, who once freely expressed their desire to rejoin Ethiopia, could be considered victims of “Ethiopian colonialism,” as has been alleged by the EPLF, or whether Eritrea with nine different nationalities could be considered a nation should not concern us here.

<sup>263</sup>Pamela Jennifer, “Eritreans Cast Votes for Independence,” *The Washington Post*, 24 April 1993. There is a supreme irony in all this. Although Eritrea is in many ways a microcosm of Ethiopia, the EPLF did its level best to encourage and support the development of ethnic based political movements in Ethiopia. When it comes to Eritrea, however, the EPLF refuses to accept the legitimacy of ethnicity and ethnic movements. The fundamental reason that compelled the leaders of the EPLF to sponsor such ethnic movements in Ethiopia as the Oromo

Eritrea's nine ethnic groups--Afars, Bilen, Ben Amir, Kunama, Nara, Rashaida, Saho/Asawrta, Tigre and Tigray-Tigrigne--have no common identity. They speak different languages and are evenly divided between Christians and Muslims. They are also conscious of their differences. In fact, they have much in common with their neighbours than with themselves. Not even collective oppression under colonial rule produced any unifying Eritrean nationalism. Religious and ethnic differences were exploited for the colonial purpose of divide and rule. Hence, only the particularism of the ethnic groups prevailed. The political parties which emerged in Eritrea in the 1940s, could only reflect this reality. They were almost all formed on ethnic and religious lines. If Eritrea disintegrates on ethnic lines at some future date, it should be noted that, in part, it would be because the policy of ethnic bantustanization to which Ethiopia is being subjected to by the regime in power, has rubbed off.<sup>264</sup> How is this to be explained?

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Liberation Front and most significantly, the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF), which is now in power in Addis Ababa, is simple. If Ethiopia remained stable and united, Eritrea's chances of gaining its independence and consolidating it, would be slim. Hence, Pan-Ethiopian nationalism would have to be countered, undermined and devalued by sponsoring ethnic nationalism. The TPLF regime now in power in Addis Ababa, is doing exactly what the EPLF wants, i.e., the continued destabilization of Ethiopia. It is busy deliberately fostering ethnic consciousness throughout Ethiopia. To believe that Eritrea will remain immune to the strife, tension and instability that surrounds it, is not to be realistic. See Yewoyane Talak Seira, *Observations of former TPLF members, Abraham Yayeh and Gebre Medhin Araya on the political objectives of the TPLF*, Addis Ababa, January 1989.

<sup>264</sup>See *Report of the Four Power Commission* (London, 1948), Appendices, 159-173.

### **Ethnicity, Nationalism and the State**

Ethnicity should be seen as a strong attachment for any group of people who set themselves apart, and who are set apart from other groups with whom they interact, in terms of some distinctive criteria which could be linguistic, racial, cultural, or a circumscribed land base.<sup>265</sup> In contrast to classes which divide or unify people horizontally on the basis of economic factors, ethnic identities divide or unify people vertically. Thus, ethnicity cuts across socio-economic and class differences and draws members from all strata of the population.<sup>266</sup>

On the other hand, nationalism is difficult to explain. What is it that drives nationalists to fight for a place of their own, and to do so against overwhelming odds? Despite the immense influence nationalism enjoys all over the world, why is plausible theory about it conspicuously meagre?<sup>267</sup> It is maintained that in many ways, it is easier to “grasp” nationalism, the ideological movement, than nations, the organizational cultures.”<sup>268</sup> Nationalism can be intensified by common racial, linguistic, historical and

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<sup>265</sup>When it goes to the extreme, ethnicity can turn into ethno-centrism--the tendency to use the norms and values of one's own culture as a basis for judging others. When individuals are born and raised in a culture which is the only one accessible to them, they lack the exposure to other cultural perspectives. As a result, they tend to take their own for granted. Such ethno-centrism encourages group solidarity. But it also discourages assimilation into other groups, contributes to irrational prejudice, and encourages hostility and contempt towards outsiders.

<sup>266</sup>See Slonim, Maureen, *Children, Culture and Ethnicity: evaluating and understanding the impact* (New York: Garland Pub., 1991); See also, Ingham, Kenneth, *Politics in Modern Africa: the uneven tribal dimensions* (London; New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>267</sup>Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London; New York: Verso, 1991), 3.

<sup>268</sup>Smith, D. Anthony, *The Ethnic Origin of Nations* (London: Blackwell, 1987), 2.

religious ties. It can be used to promote solidarity and a sense of belongingness, but it can also be used to promote hostility, divisiveness, tension and war between nations. Here, we could pose a question: Since ethnicity can do all these, how does it differ from nationalism? Nationalism accepts the state rather than the ethnic group as the ultimate arbiter of human affairs. That is the major difference.

Within nationalism itself, there can be several brands. For example, if there is the nationalism of a people displaying pride of place and independent status, there is also the nationalism of the colonized, the oppressed and the humiliated. If there is the nationalism of a people for independence through secession, there is also the nationalism of those who seek to prevent that secession. Even unevenness in development can lead to envy and frustration over unfulfilled expectations, and ultimately emerge as a nationalist ideology.

Eurocentric scholarship contends that the idea of nationalism first developed in Northwestern Europe towards the end of the 18th century, and then with the increase of European influence, it spread throughout the world.<sup>269</sup> While Rousseau (1712-1776) is credited for being the father of territorial nationalism, Herder (1744-1803), Fichte (1762-1814), and Hegel (1770-1831) are recognized as the pioneers of cultural nationalism.

The implication of Eurocentric diffusionism is that social evolution in general occurs first in Europe and then spreads to the rest of the world, that Europe has progressive qualities sadly lacking in other societies, and that it should be natural to believe that Europe was more advanced and progressing more rapidly than the non-European world.

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<sup>269</sup>See for example, A. Smith, *Theories of Nationalism* (1971); K. Deutsch, *Nationalism and its Alternatives* (1969); E. Gellner, *Thought and Change* (1964); E. Kedourie, *Nationalism in Asia and Africa* (1970); Hans Kohn, *Nationalism in the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 2nd ed. (1968).



In such a set-up, even colonial expansion of Europe was described as “the civilizing mission,” not a process of diffusing the needed infrastructure for gathering wealth. The climax of the fairy tale is the story of how Europe bestowed “the Enlightenment” on the non-European world within the framework of colonialism. How was this done? We are told that Europe gave “birth” to the idea that people should govern themselves—an idea that is still the root of nationalism. The diffusion of this idea gave rise to nationalism in the non-European world. As a result, colonies became “nationalistic” and developed independence movements. This was made possible, it is said, not because the inhabitants were oppressed and exploited, but because the European colonial rulers brought the “Enlightenment.” To believe that Europe was more advanced at each epoch in world history, or that it was progressing more rapidly than the non-European world, is simply off the mark. The truth is, Europe was no further along in social evolution than Africa or Asia prior to 1492.<sup>270</sup>

There is something that is fundamentally wrong in a theory which claims that a country cannot be considered a nation, until it is fully developed by capitalism. The fact is, China, Egypt, India, Persia, Ethiopia, Vietnam, Songhai, and others were nations for long historical periods. Contrary to the claims of Eurocentricists, there are those who argue that nationalism first emerged in the New World.<sup>271</sup> The American Declaration of Independence of 1776 was a nationalistic manifestation. In fact, half a century after writing *The Declaration* and shortly before his death, Thomas Jefferson had expressed the wish that *The Declaration* will arouse many to struggle for self-

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<sup>270</sup>Blaut, M. James, *The National Question: Decolonizing the Theory of Nationalism* (London; New York: Zed Books, Ltd., 1987), 30-31.

<sup>271</sup>Op. cit., Anderson, *Imagined...*, 191.

government. Freedom fighters like Simon Bolivar (1783-1830) and San Martin (1778-1850), who were in part inspired by the American Declaration of Independence of 1776, were instrumental in the liberation of much of South America from Spain--a country with which they shared language, religion and common descent.<sup>272</sup>

But according to Hans Kohn, nationalism which arose in the 18th century in the Age of the Enlightenment in Western Europe, was predominantly a political movement to limit governmental power and to secure civic rights. Its purpose was to create a liberal and rational civil society representing the middle class and the philosophy of John Locke. When after the Napoleonic wars, nationalism penetrated to other lands--to Central and Eastern Europe or to Spain and Ireland--it came to lands which were in political ideas and social structure less advanced than the modern west. While English and American nationalism was, in its origin, connected with the concepts of individual liberty and represented nations firmly constituted in their political life, the new nationalism, not rooted in a similar political and social reality, lacked self-assurance. Its inferiority complex was often compensated by over-emphasis.<sup>273</sup>

Likewise, Anthony Smith, considered by many as the foremost writer in English in this field, makes a distinction between western and eastern nationalism:

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<sup>272</sup>Compared to Germany and Italy, which were politically united in 1870, Haiti had gained its independence in 1806, Venezuela in 1811, and Mexico in 1813.

<sup>273</sup>Kohn, Hans, *Nationalism, Its Meaning and History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955; rev. ed., 1965), 29-30. Kohn, who died in 1971, was widely acknowledged as the central figure in the academic study of nationalism in the world. He wrote some thirty books.

Historic territory, legal-political community, legal-political equality of members, and common civic culture and ideology: these are the components of the standard, western model of the nation.<sup>274</sup>

With regard to nationalism in Eastern Europe and Asia, he says:

Genealogy and presumed descent ties, popular mobilization, vernacular languages, customs and traditions: these are the elements of an alternative, ethnic conception of the nation, one that mirrored the very different route of "nation transformation" travelled by many communities in Eastern Europe and Asia.<sup>275</sup>

Even if we assume that what appears above is valid, there is nothing to indicate that nationalism originated in Europe, or that non-European nationalisms are not entitled to the same claims of political sovereignty and internal autonomy as European states.

In any event, towards the end of the 18th century, European nationalism asserted the right of each European nation to govern itself. A consciousness of national differences had, however, existed even in the Middle Ages. The Hundred Years War (1338-1453), between Britain and France, for example, could be interpreted, in part, as a national struggle between the French and the English. By the end of the 15th century, inchoate nation-states remained little more than a centrally unified tangle of local languages and customs. Political cohesion came through a centralizing absolutism rather than by any sustained or spontaneous popular feeling.

The model for spontaneous popular nationalism was provided by the French nation in arms in the 1790s. French armies under Napoleon provoked the same kind of reaction in many parts of Europe. In 1806, for example, when

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<sup>274</sup>Smith, Anthony, *The Ethnic Revival* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>275</sup>*Ibid.*

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Napoleon conquered Prussia at Jena, the latter had to pay indemnity to France.<sup>276</sup> German intellectuals like Fichte were burnished in the humiliation of Prussia. Therefore, they worked out a theory of the nation, whose ramifications extended from a folk spirit expressed in songs and fairy tales, to a metaphysic of the place of nations in the progress of the human spirit.<sup>277</sup>

Marxists, however, do not take nationalism seriously. In fact, they regard it as a bourgeois stage of political evolution, associated with the creation of a national market economy, and a viable bourgeois class. To be sure, classical Marxism maintained that modern capitalism is erasing national differences, absorbing minorities in the national states which contain them, assimilating immigrant workers into the host nationalities, and overall, blending all nations together into an international capitalist world in which neither the bourgeoisie, nor the proletariat would be seriously divided by nationality.<sup>278</sup> How Marxism explains the present upheaval of nationalism the world over is outside the scope of this study.

There are also sociologists like Snyder Louis, who interpret nationalism as a modern secular religion, a response to the uneven diffusion of

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<sup>276</sup>Ironic as it may sound, when Germany defeated France, in 1871, Bismarck imposed on France the precise equivalent of the indemnity of five milliard francs which Napoleon had imposed on Prussia in 1806. See J. P. Talor, *Bismarck: The Man and the Statesman* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), 132.

<sup>277</sup>See Fichte, J. G., *Address to the German Nation* (Chicago: Open Court, 1922). For Fichte, men have no rights without the state—the ideal state being “the closed state” with separate nationality and laws, and separate in its industry and wealth with a cordon drawn round it.

<sup>278</sup>Marx and Engles, *Collected Works*, vol. 6, 489.

industrialism, and as an expression of the need for a new sense of political identity to replace traditional allegiances.<sup>279</sup>

There are situations outside Europe, where nationalism was also deliberately encouraged by western colonial authorities, who played part of the population against the other, in order to strengthen their control.<sup>280</sup>

The dilemma of underdevelopment could be converted into nationalism when it is 'refracted' into a society in the most 'advanced' part of the new national middle class,<sup>281</sup> where unevenness of development can stimulate an irrational attitude--resulting in envy, rage, and frustration over unfulfilled expectations. This irrational outburst seizes upon the idea of nationalism and emerges as a nationalist ideology.<sup>282</sup>

In both the European and non-European worlds, the intelligentsia have played an important role in the rise of nationalist movements. In fact, it could even be said that nationalism has always been a major preoccupation of intellectuals. Among other thing, they provided the historial, philosophical, ethnographic and even the geographical basis of the new nationalism, and invited the masses into history, and made sure that the invitation card was written in a language the masses understood.<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>279</sup>Louis, Snyder L., *The Meaning of Nationalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1954), 82-85.

<sup>280</sup>On the issue of ethnic and country nationalisms in Africa, see Donald Rothchild and Victor Olorunsola (eds.), *The State vs. Ethnic Claims* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1983).

<sup>281</sup>*Ibid.*, Nairn, 100-117.

<sup>282</sup>*Ibid.*, Nairn, 100-117.

<sup>283</sup>*Op. cit.*, Nairn, *The Break-up...*, 340.

For an effective nationalism to succeed, the intelligentsia requires a proletariat. Their fates, however, diverge after the achievement of national independence. For the intelligentsia independence means very good jobs and the creation of a national unit whose frontiers are in effect, closed to foreign talent, a magnificent job monopoly for themselves. For the proletarians, on the other hand, independence brings, in the short run, disillusionment. The hardships are not removed. In fact, they are likely to be increased by the drive for rapid development.<sup>284</sup> If a section of the intelligentsia feels alienated, it will not hesitate to take power by mobilizing the necessary mass support by means of ideological trickery for the creation of a secessionist state.<sup>285</sup>

Benedict Anderson argues that “nationalism” and “nations” are inventions, whether of rulers or intellectuals. They are images of an identity that does not “really” exist. In his view, nationalism should not be automatically linked to self-consciously held political ideologies. Rather, he says, it should be seen as having more in common with the larger cultural systems that preceded it. Societies have always been held together by more than physical coercion. The population of the former world-empires consisted of ‘imagined communities’ integrated by religious ideology. In these religious ‘imagined communities’, a sacred language operated as a medium for creating a whole cosmology in which the people could play their part.

From the Christendom of feudal Europe, the early modern world-system inherited a religion that was fragmenting. In 17th-century Europe, tens of thousands of people fought and died for their religion. In 20th-century

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<sup>284</sup>Gellner, Ernest, *Thought and Change* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), 169-170.

<sup>285</sup>Op. cit., Nairn, 335-59.

Europe, millions of people fought and died for their country. The idea of the nation had replaced religion as the cultural system within which people could find their identity. The measure of the change was such that it had become 'normal' for German Protestants to fight English Protestants and German Catholics to fight French Catholics. Religion was no longer the basis of the people's "imagined communities". It had been superseded in its cultural role by nations. Furthermore, says Anderson, this new force of imagined community was made possible by the convergence of capitalism with the impact of print technology on Europe's diversity of languages. The latter ensured that the communities would be inherently limited in scope, and provide a feeling of community in time and space.<sup>286</sup>

Partha Chatterjee, among others, counters Anderson's thesis by arguing that the historical experience of nationalism in Europe and America should not be treated as part of the universal history of the modern world. In the non-European world, he says, anti-colonial nationalism created the material and the spiritual world. While the material domain has been dominated by the west, and its accomplishments carefully studied and replicated, there is the spiritual domain, which bears the "essential" marks of cultural identity, and where the distinctness of one's spiritual culture forms a fundamental feature of anti-colonial nationalism in Africa and Asia.<sup>287</sup> He argues that centered on the spiritual domain and based on native institutions and social values that have not been captured, nationalism can be built in the non-European world.

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<sup>286</sup>See Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, New York: Verso, 1991).

<sup>287</sup>Chatterjee, Partha, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Post-Colonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 4-7.



For Clifford Geertz, the central problem for many people in “developing” countries is that the primordial group is the unit with which they identify, through which their values and beliefs are transmitted, and which, in a very real sense, makes life meaningful to them. At times, indeed, the primordial group is the terminal one, representing the major unit of socially-legitimate and effective authority. Thus primordial groups in developing countries may sometimes stand for “totalities of life.”<sup>288</sup> But this observation may also be equally valid for the Western world. How else are we to explain the conflicts in Quebec, Ireland, Corsica, Brittany, or among the Basques? It appears that every nationalism contains civic and ethnic elements in different forms and in varying degrees. The sociological features that are often taken to be characteristic of the “developing” countries are, upon closer examination, characteristics also of the “developed.”

For Mikesell<sup>289</sup>, Iceland is the only authentic example of a true nation state, because it is made up of people with a national identity, a common culture, language, race, and territory. All other states have a degree of mixed

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<sup>288</sup>Geertz, Clifford, ed., “Primordial Sentiments and Civil Societies in the New States,” in *Old Societies and New States, the Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa* (New York: The Free Press of Glencove, 1963), 152-157.

<sup>289</sup>Mikesell, M.W., 'The Myth of the Nation-State,' *Journal of Geography*, 1983, vol. 82, 257-260. The state possesses sovereignty. This sovereignty amounts to nothing less than supreme coercive power within a territory. The state gives orders to all and receives orders from none inside its recognized boundaries. Invasions by a foreign power or internal insurgency aiming at creating a new state are violations of a state's sovereignty. If not rejected, the state no longer has a monopoly of coercion in its territory and faces extinction.

Often times, the state is taken to mean the government. According to Harold Laski, government can be interpreted as the major agent of the state and exists to carry out the day to day business of the state. Governments are short-term mechanisms for administering the long-term purposes of the state. Hence, every state is served by a continual succession of governments. Governments only represent the state, they cannot replace it. A government is not a sovereign body: opposition to the government is a vital activity at the very heart of democracy; opposition to the state is treason. See Harold Laski, *The State in Theory and Practice* (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1935), 21-23.

populations that makes their credentials as nation-states questionable, hence, the potential for conflicts. The fact that ethnic differences exist within a state cannot by themselves be a sufficient reason for ethnic conflicts to occur. Conflicts can consistently occur even in societies like Somalia where no marked linguistic, religious, or ethnic differences exist. In contrast, many multi-ethnic and multi-religious states like Singapore, Thailand, Switzerland, and Malaysia hold together. How can this be explained?

There are situations where the state grew "organically" out of history by a political and economic process. Such a society need not necessarily be identified with one ethnic group to qualify as a state. Nielsson<sup>290</sup> is prepared to accept as nation-states those in which over sixty percent of the population are from one ethnic group. Zimbabwe and Nicaragua could be mentioned as examples.

There is also what Tom Nairn calls "nationalism from above."<sup>291</sup> This theory emphasizes the role of the bourgeoisie in nationalist movements, which commenced during the rise of the bourgeoisie in Europe in the 19th century. Once this class had consolidated its hold on the state, the need for new nationalisms would simply disappear.

However, such a theory does not explain why nationalism has now emerged in such places as Corsica, Navarre, Brittany, Alsace or Catalonia. How do we explain for the continued primordialism about which John Stewart Mill (1806-1873) wrote more than one hundred years ago: Nobody can suppose that

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<sup>290</sup>Nielsson, G.P., "States and Nation-Groups: A Global Taxonomy," (in) E.A. Tiryakian and R. Rogowski (eds.), *New Nationalisms of the Developed West* (London: Allen and Unwin Co., 1985).

<sup>291</sup>Nairn, Tom, *The Break-up of Britain: Crisis and New-Nationalism* (London: NLB, 1977), 306-328. The author argues that nationalist forces in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland (among Protestants), are rising to success and are breaking up Britain.

it is not more beneficial to a Breton or a Basque of French Navarre to be a member of the French nationality, admitted on equal terms to all the privileges of French citizenship, sharing the advantage of French protection and the dignity and prestige of French power than to sulk on his own rocks, the half savage relic of past times, revolving in his own little mental orbit, without participation or interest in the general movement of the world.<sup>292</sup>

In fact, what we are witnessing today is the crumbling of localized ethnic identities. Hence, when for instance, the Sikhs in the Punjab demand independence for their Khalistan, they are only echoing the aspirations of countless peoples around the world including Native Americans, Palestinians, the Inuits, Croats, Scots, Irish, Slovaks, Bretons, Flemings, and so on.

There is also a type of nationalism which emerged as a reaction to the uneven economic development of 19th-century Europe, which Gellner prefers to call "compensatory reaction." According to him, Western Europe was more developed than Eastern or Central Europe. Unable to compete with the West,<sup>293</sup> Central Europe developed strategies for survival to prevent its peripheralization. The Zollverein--the German custom's union of 1843, was conceived as a means to bring about political union by economic methods, and as a strategy to catching up with the West. Local capitalists had to emphasize cultural affinity and ethnic solidarity in order to encourage economic nationalism.<sup>294</sup> In other words, nationalism emerged as an outcome of a crisis of identity born of an unsatisfactory encounter with external powers, and as a

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<sup>292</sup>Mill, John Stewart, *On Representative Government: Three Essays*, (ed.) Richard Wollheim, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 385.

<sup>293</sup>Gellner, Ernest, *Thought and Change* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964), 165-171.

<sup>294</sup>Gellner, Ernest, *Nations and Nationalisms* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 123-134.

collective psychic compensation for social and economic inadequacy. However, such nationalism could not be truly conservative and prevent progress at the same time. A 'medieval' Germany or Italy would be no match for a modern Britain or France. They had to borrow the salient features of modernization in order to catch up.

On the other hand, Eric Hobsbawm provides what could perhaps be described as an insightful and illuminating study. For him, nationalism, i.e., the struggle to create the nation-state was rational in the 19th century when the rise of capitalism called for the creation of nation states. But today capitalism no longer needs the nation state. As a result, he says, nationalism has become irrational, atavistic and a reactionary force without a future. He also dismisses mini-states as frivolous.

Moreover, Hobsbawm contends that no satisfactory criteria can be discovered as to which one of the many human collectivities should be utilized to understand nationalism, and that such criteria as languages and common territory, he says, are themselves fuzzy and ambiguous. They can change and shift in time. Development in the modern world economy generates vast population movements. As a result, it constantly undermines ethnic-linguistic homogeneity. Since all aspects of cultural pluralism and transmission are constantly in a state of flux, the resultant effect is that each group and society itself continually evolves or changes. In the process, some groups are assimilated, others form, and still others grow larger. Hobsbawm equally questions the utility of what is called "national consciousness" because the great majority of the masses, especially workers and peasants, are the last to be affected by it.<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>295</sup>Hobsbawm, Eric J, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 5-13.

What about ethnic groups? For the anthropologist Frederick Barth,<sup>296</sup> ethnic groups possess certain boundaries which define their group in opposition to other groups. These boundaries, however, are fluid, and it is possible for people to cross them both ways. In other words, categorical ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of mobility, contact and information, but do entail social processes of exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete categories are maintained despite changing participation and membership in the course of individual life histories.

Crawford Young argues that ethnicity in the developing world differs from nationalism in its lack of ideological elaboration and in the absence of any serious aspiration to the total autonomy required of nationalism.<sup>297</sup>

On the other hand, Clifford Geertz characterizes ethnic groups as “possible self-standing, maximal social units, as candidates for nationhood.”<sup>298</sup> A similar interpretation is provided by Harold Issacs.<sup>299</sup>

In contrast, Cynthia H. Enloe is more difficult to categorize. She views ethnic groups as potential nationalities<sup>300</sup>, and ethnicity as “not primarily ideological or political; rather as cultural and social.”<sup>301</sup> The term

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<sup>296</sup>Barth, Frederick (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (London: Allen & Unwins, 1969).

<sup>297</sup>Young, Crawford, *Politics of Cultural Pluralism* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), 72.

<sup>298</sup>Geertz, Clifford (ed.) in “The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States,” (New York: Free Press, 1963), 111.

<sup>299</sup>Issacs, Harold, *Idols of the Tribe: Group Identity and Political Change* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 171-204.

<sup>300</sup>Enloe, Cynthia H., *Ethnic Conflict and Political Development* (Boston: Little Brown, 1973), 12-13.

<sup>301</sup>*Ibid.*, 222.

“nationality” is characterized specifically as a long standing communal identity. Ethnic groups referred to as “nationalities” usually are made up of relative newcomers.<sup>302</sup>

Ethnic nationalism finds its justification in the supposed sharing of history, language and culture among members of a group. In reality, ethnic nationalism is often no less arbitrary, and in many cases no older than the nationalism of independence movements. Kikuyu nationalism in Kenya or Zulu nationalism in South Africa, for example, also developed from the encounter between Africans and Europeans. In some cases, ethnic nationalism was even deliberately encouraged and manipulated by the colonial authorities, playing part of the population against another in order to strengthen their control.<sup>303</sup>

The intelligentsia have played an important role in the rise of nationalist movements by giving them a degree of respectability they hardly deserved. In 19th-century Europe, intellectuals, for instance, were able to provide the historical, philosophical, ethnographic and even geographical basis of the new nationalisms. As Nairn puts it, the dilemma of underdevelopment can become nationalism when it is ‘refracted’ into a society in the most ‘advanced’ part of the new national middle class.<sup>304</sup> In much of the non-European world, the “intelligentia,” as opposed to the intellectuals have utilized similar strategies to achieve nominal independence from colonial rule. Such intelligentia is alienated from its own society by the very

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<sup>302</sup>Ibid., 24.

<sup>303</sup>On the issue of ethnic and country nationalisms in Africa, see Donald Rothchild and Victor Olorunsola (eds.), *The State vs. Ethnic Claims* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1983).

<sup>304</sup>Op. cit., Nairn, *The Break Up of...*, 100-117.

fact of its education--a mark of 'Third World' societies. For an effective nationalism, both an intelligentsia and a proletariat is required. Their fates diverge after the achievement of national independence.<sup>305</sup>

Since the idea of an independent Scotland, Wales or Brittany seems far-fetched, it may appear that national self-determination applies for overseas colonies and not for western societies.<sup>306</sup> However, the truth behind the relative stability of the west is not because the ideal of the nation-state has been realized. Rather, any stability reflects the power of the status quo in the inter-state system. It appears that it is the realism of power-politics and not the idealism of national self-determination that matters.<sup>307</sup>

In the African continent, ethnic self-determination manifests itself in two forms: demands for separate sovereignty expressed by a cultural community within an existing territorial entity, or claims for reunification by a group partitioned among two or more states. Such claims, it was held, were irredeemably contaminated as retrograde vehicles for undermining African independence. The stress was on sovereignty, territorial integrity and on the inviolability of state frontiers. However, the uncertain international political climate and changes in the concept of a modern state, will have a tremendous

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<sup>305</sup>Op. cit., Gellner, *Thought and Change*, 169-170.

<sup>306</sup>Knight, D.B., *Identity and Territory: Geographical Perspectives on Nationalism and Regionalism*, *Annals*, [Association of American Geographers], vol. 72, 1982, 514-31.

<sup>307</sup>Op. cit., Nairn, 306-363. The Association of American Geographers predicts that Scotland will gain its independence from Britain, that Italy will divide in half, that Brittany will split from France, that Belgium will disintegrate into the new states of Wollonia and Flanders, that India will lose the Punjab and part of Kashmir, that Brazil will break up into three autonomous pieces, while Mexico will separate into four or more distinct pieces. See *The Detroit News*, Sunday, 30 August 1992.

impact on Africa, not least because of the disintegration of countries like the USSR, Somalia, Ethiopia, the Sudan, Yugoslavia and others.

### **Eritrea: the land and its people**

Eritrea covers an area of 50,000 square miles and has a population of some 3.2 million. The ecology of the country and its topography are diverse, ranging from cool and temperate highlands to hot desert plains and from volcanic wilderness to bushy plains. The lowlands of Eritrea, which constitute seventy-five percent of the land surface, and where some forty-four percent of the population lives, are arid, sparsely populated, and support a population that is mostly Muslim and nomadic. These consist of the Barka, the Sahel, Senhit, Dankalia and the Semhar. On the other hand, the highlands of Eritrea where some fifty-six percent of the population lives, constitute one fourth of the land surface. These include Hamassien, Seraie and Akele Guzaie. As agriculturalists, the inhabitants of these highlands lead a relatively better life, and are mostly Christians.

The ecological and physical conditions of the country have largely determined the character of its inhabitants. The distinction between settled village dwellers on the plateau, and pastoral semi-nomad or nomad in the lowlands, is not the only one to which the structure of Eritrea gave rise. The two climates have also had the further result of restricting migration by the highlanders to the fringes of the plateau as their outward limit.<sup>308</sup>

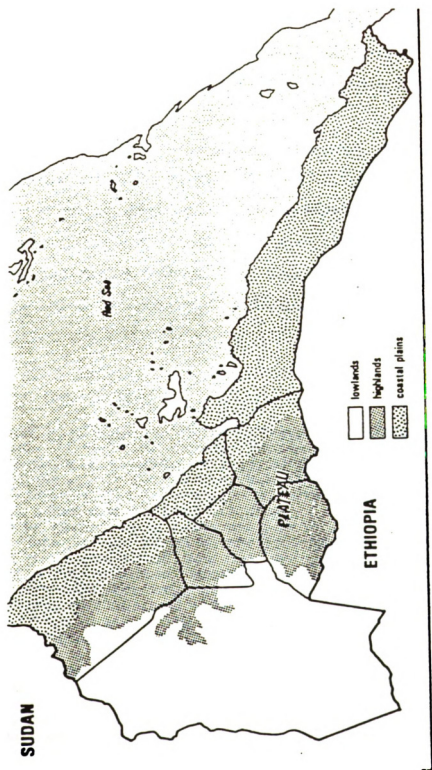
The physical heterogeneity is equally matched by the mosaic diversity of the cultural and ethnic groups which inhabit Eritrea. They can be socially identified and set apart by others and themselves on the basis of their

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<sup>308</sup>Nadel, S. F., *The Races and Tribes of Eritrea*. See also Op. cit., Longrigg, *Short History of...*, 27-28.



Figure 5. Eritrea: Physical Regions



different religions, traditions, ways of life and social organizations. They are not in any accepted sense a single people but a conglomerate of different communities, which are themselves in most cases akin by culture and blood to their neighbours in Ethiopia, Djibouti and the Sudan.<sup>309</sup> While some are Christians<sup>310</sup> others are Muslims, and not a few are pagan. These ethnic groups have little in common with each other but the accident of their residence in Eritrea.<sup>311</sup>

### **Eritrea's Central Plateau Region**

The central plateau region is the northward extension of the Ethiopian Highlands and is some 6,000-8,000 feet above sea level. Generally cold, windswept and dry, it comprises the three provinces of Akele Guzaie, Hamassien, and Seraie. The Barka, Anseba and Mareb rivers which flow into

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<sup>309</sup> Op. cit., Trevaskis, 11-17.

<sup>310</sup> Most of the inhabitants of Eritrea were originally Christians. According to Trimmingham, the reasons which caused the Christian tribes of Eritrea to join Islam were much more complex and almost all the following factors entered in. In the first place, there is a general tendency for nomad tribes to accept Islam once it is presented to them because of the territorial freedom of its worship not tied to a fixed church building and priesthood, and because it makes so few demands for change in their habits and mode of life. Further, conditions in Northern Ethiopia were extremely unsettled during the last two centuries. Christian tribes were cut off from their own main Christian tradition and neglected by their priesthood. many also absorbed Muslim vassals into their social structure who soon came to outnumber the Christian master class. But above all, they were influenced by Muslim trading relations, by 'holy' families like the Ad Shaikh and Mirghani, and later by Egyptian political influence. Op. cit., Trimmingham, *Islam in...*, 17 and 150.

<sup>311</sup> Many of these groups are extensions of their ethnic kin in Ethiopia. Their cultural and other links with Ethiopia goes back to the days of Axum, but was strengthened in the 13th and 14th centuries. In the north, Ethiopian power extended as far as Massawa and the Sudan plain, including the nomadic Tigre and Beja tribes of the Sahel and upper Barka. The southern provinces included Wollamo, the Sidama kingdoms and Bale. Op. cit., Trimmingham, 78.

the Sudan through Western Eritrea have their sources in this plateau. Annual rainfall averages between 16" and 24", and vegetation is sparse.<sup>312</sup>

The Tigreans constitute the majority in the region. They speak Tigrigna and are overwhelmingly Orthodox Christians. Tigrigna speakers also form fringe settlements in the Agordat, Massawa and in the southern part of Keren. The great majority of Tigrigna speakers, however, are to be found in Ethiopia, particularly in the province of Tigrai, whose boundaries can be roughly defined as situated north of a line from Lake Ashangi to the Tekezzie River.<sup>313</sup>

Their common Ethiopic dialect of Tigrigna, their Ethiopian culture, and above all the loyalty of the overwhelming majority of the Tigreans to the Orthodox Church provide a cultural solidarity as between Ethiopian and Eritrean Tigreans and culturally link them closely with the other Ethiopians. The influence of the Orthodox Church over the lives and behaviour of the Eritrean Tigreans cannot be overstated. To some extent, it accounts for the severe intolerance of the Christians for the Jeberti—an Islamized Amhara and Tigrean community which follows the dervish orders of Malikiyya, Hanafiyya and Shafiyya. It is found scattered throughout the highlands. The Jeberti are denied any rights in land, treated as social outcasts, and live as traders and craftsmen.<sup>314</sup>

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<sup>312</sup>*Report of the United Nations Commission for Eritrea, General Assembly, Official Records, 5th Session, Supplement No. 8 (A/1285) (Lake Success, New York: 1950), 9.*

<sup>313</sup>Tucker, A.N. and M. Bryan, *The Non-Bantu Languages of North-Eastern Africa* (London: 1950). See also Edward Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians* (London: 1960), 21.

<sup>314</sup>The conversion of the Jeberti to Islam may date from the early days of the Muslim Sultanates in eastern Shoa, between the ninth and the thirteenth centuries. See: J.S. Trimingham, *Islam in..*, (London: 1952), 58-60, 150-151. See also Op. cit., Trevaskis, *Eritrea..*, 13.

### The Eastern Lowlands

The central Eritrean highlands fall off steeply to the east, where Massawa and the surrounding area, together with the Zula Peninsula and Dankalia, formed the Red Sea administrative province--a dry, torrid and scantily populated region. It represented twenty-two percent of the total area of the country, but contained less than twelve percent of the population of Eritrea.<sup>315</sup>

The area between Massawa and Assab including the Buri peninsula, Thio, Mersa Fatma and Beilul, is inhabited by the Afar, who also make up 50% of the population of neighbouring Djibouti. Afars are also found in the Ethiopian provinces of Tigrai, Wollo, Shoa, and Harrar. They are an Afro-Asiatic ethnic group divided into two main categories: (1) the Asamara--or the "Red Men," who trace their origin to conquerors from the Ethiopian plateau and who are regarded as the superior caste; (2) the Adomara--or "the White Men," who are regarded as an inferior stock. The Afars were converted to Islam in the 14th century. Many of them were recruited into the army of Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim Al Ghazi (1506-1543) and played a leading role in the Muslim conquest of the Ethiopian Highlands (1526-34). Mostly nomadic herdsmen, they closely resemble the Saho.<sup>316</sup>

The Saho consist of the Asawerta and the Meni-Fere<sup>317</sup>. They live in both Eritrea and Tigrai. Those in Eritrea are found in the Semhar and in Akele

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<sup>315</sup>Op. cit., *Report of the U.N. Commission for Eritrea*, 9.

<sup>316</sup>Lewis, I.M., *Peoples of the Horn of Africa: Somali, Afar and Saho* (London: International African Institute, 1955), 155-176. See also Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff, *Djibouti and the Horn of Africa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968), 24.

<sup>317</sup>The Meni-Fere have two legends about their ancestry: (a) that they derive from "mena" of the royal Ethiopian stock, and (b), that they are descended of the Prophet Muhammed--a claim that emerged after they were converted to Islam. See also Bender, Marvin L (ed.) "Introduction," [in] *Non-Semitic*

Guzaie and are identical to those in the Agame region of Tigrai. The Saho are primarily Muslim. Nevertheless, one Saho group, the Erub in Eastern Tigrai's Agame province, are Christians. The largest Asawerta group were nominally Christians under Emperor Zere Yacob (1434-1468), but now they are Muslims. The great fragility of their conditions of life explains a tradition of banditry and, hence, an easy incorporation in the Italian colonial army.

The Rashaida are a community of nomadic pastoralists who specialize in camel breeding and in subsistence agriculture. They graze their livestock in the desert pastures of the Red Sea and cultivate sorghum during the rainy season. The Rashaida emigrated from the Arabian Peninsula to the Sudan in 1865, and speak a distinctive, northwest Arabian dialect. During the chaos of the Mahdist period in the Sudan, many of them moved to Eritrea, where they are found to this day.

### Central Highlands

The Bilen occupy the portion of the Eritrean plateau, the northern part of which drains into the Anseba—a tributary of the Barka. They migrated into the Rora region of Eritrea in the 13th-century, when the Agew Dynasty of Lasta in Wollo, collapsed under Amhara pressure. Indeed, the peoples of the central highlands around Keren such as the Bet Asghedi, Mensa<sup>318</sup>, Bet Jak and the Bilen are all descendants of migrants from the Ethiopian provinces of Tigrai, Wollo, Gondar and Gojjam who settled in the region at different periods. They still speak Agew—a language which is widely spoken by their kinsmen in the Ethiopian provinces.

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*Languages of Ethiopia* (ed.) M.L. Bender, *Monograph No. 5*, (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University African Studies Center, 1976),12.

<sup>318</sup>Op. cit., Trimmingham, *Islam ...*, 165.

Although in the 1840s, the Bilen were Christians, they had neither churches, nor priests. In fact, in an attempt to save themselves from the depredations of Egypt and the Ben Amir, they took on the protective coloration of Muslims in the 19th century. In 1850, Ilyas Bey, the Egyptian Governor of Kasala Province reached an agreement with the Ben Amir and they made a joint raid on the Bilen, which nevertheless, failed. During the turn of the 19th century, the *Tabot*--a block of wood on which the Ten Commandments are inscribed--had been hidden by the priest in a cave in order to save it from falling into the hands of their enemies, especially the Egyptians. When he was able to return to claim it, he found it destroyed by white ants. Its loss meant inability to carry out the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion. Left without such safeguards, the Mensa and others were open to the penetration of Islam.<sup>319</sup> Having nothing to hope from the otherwise preoccupied Ethiopian leaders, the Bilen began to change their religion in the hope that this would save them from the raids of Egypt and the Ben Amir. Today, at least three-fourths of them are Muslims, and the rest are Roman Catholics. They are agriculturalists and have a social system which keeps women debased.<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>319</sup>Op. cit., Trimingham, *Islam ...*, 162-163. Plowden, who visited the area in the 1840s, notes: The Hababs have become Mohammedans within the last one hundred years, and all, save the last generation, bear Christian names. They have changed their faith through the gradual and now entire abandonment of the country by the Abyssinian chiefs. See Walter C. Plowden, *Travels in Abyssinia and the Gall country, with an account of a Mission to Ras Ali in 1848* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1868), 15.

<sup>320</sup>The Mensa were independent until the reign of Emperor Fasiledes (1632-67) when they became more or less dependent upon the emperor and the Kentibai, who was invested with the symbolic golden bracelet, robe, cap, sword, and tribal drum. But with the decline of the Ethiopian monarchy, they came more and more under the influence of local chieftains. (Trimingham, 162).

### **The Western and Northern Highlands**

The Ben Amir live scattered over the western lowlands of the Agordat province of Eritrea. They spread southwards to the Mareb (Gash) and Setit rivers, and up to the chain of mountains stretching north between the Barka and the Anseba valleys. In 5 B.C., Herodotus referred to them as “Blemmyes.” Still an important branch of the Beja federation, they retain physical characteristics and customs described centuries ago. The Eritrean Ben Amir have more affinity with their compatriots in the Sudan, than with the any other ethnic group in Eritrea.

Arab sources record the formation of the Ben Amir as a tribal federation during the expansion of the Fung of Sennar in the 16th century. Their genealogical traditions converge with this period of Fung history, which also witnessed the emergence of an aristocratic class of Beja known as Belew, who, in the course of time, came to dominate other populations of Beja and Tigre speakers.<sup>321</sup> It is to Amir ibn Kunnu that all Ben Amir in both Eritrea and the Sudan ascribe their descent, and to whom the tribal federation, with its seventeen clans attributes both its name and its existence.<sup>322</sup>

The Tigre inhabit the eastern, northern and western lowlands of Eritrea and the Dahlack islands. Tigre means “serf”, which is what they were: the Muslim vassals of Bet Asgede (The House of Asgede). In the 19th century, their rulers adopted the language of their subjects as well as their religion, but kept

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<sup>321</sup>As noted in an earlier chapter, Tigre, Tigrigna, Harrari, Gurage and Amharic—all descend from Geez. Today, Tigre and Tigrigna are two distinct languages, mutually unintelligible. While Tigrigna is spoken in the Ethiopian province of Tigray and in highland Eritrea, Tigre is spoken by the Ben Amir, the Tigre, Bet Asgede, and others. See Trimmingham, *Islam...*, 155-157. See also Edward Ullendorff, *The Semitic Languages of Ethiopia* (London: 1955), 18.

<sup>322</sup>Nadel, S.F., “Notes on Ben Amir Society,” *Sudan Notes and Records*, 26, no. 3, 51-94.

them as serfs. The Bet Asgede is made up of three autonomous groups--the Habad, Ad Tekles and Ad Tamaryam, and south of them, the settled agriculturalists of the Marya, Bait Juk and Mensa. All have Christian names, which reveals their former religion.<sup>323</sup> They are primarily nomadic herdsmen, except for the Ad Tekles, who have settled in the Keren area.<sup>324</sup>

The ruling aristocrats (Natab<sup>h</sup>) claim property rights over all the tribal lands. Serfs may work land only as tenants of their masters. The serfs are permanently bound to their masters and cannot change their allegiance without their master's permission. The serfs do all the menial duties, like the herding of animals, the milking of cows or, in groups which practice agriculture, working on land. Finally, the serf is bound to make certain gifts, often of a ceremonial and symbolic nature, to his masters, either on the occasion of tribal feasts or at harvest time, or whenever he slaughters a beast from his herd.<sup>325</sup> On the other hand, an aristocrat's duties towards his serfs included providing food, clothing and protection, equipping the serf with livestock, that becomes his private property and presenting gifts for funerals or weddings.<sup>326</sup> Each serf family pays its Natab an annual due in money, which, during the period of Italian rule of Eritrea, was fixed at seven lira.<sup>327</sup>

As vassal people of the Fung Kingdom, the Ben Amir were only nominally Muslim in belief. They became devout Muslims during the first half

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<sup>323</sup>The Bet Asgede and Mensa were originally Christians. They adopted Islam in the 19th century principally in consequence of Ethiopian incursions against them led by Ras Woube Haile Mariam (reigned 1830-1854) and the loss of their *Tabot*.

<sup>324</sup>Op. cit., Trimmingham, *Islam...*, 159.

<sup>325</sup>Op. cit., Nadel, S.F., *Races and Tribes of Eritrea*, 13.

<sup>326</sup>Nadel, "Notes on Ben Amir...", 74-76.

<sup>327</sup>*Ibid.*, 319.



of the 19th century, when Osman al-Mirghani and his sons began preaching among them. The Eritrean Ben Amir are represented in the Beja Congress--a political organization designed to promote the regional interests of the Beja peoples of Eastern Sudan.

The Baria live in the Barentu area on the Sudan border, from where they may have moved around the 13th century. The Kunama, too, who are called "Bazen," also inhabit this region. They are more numerous than the Baria. Both have been decimated by Egyptian and Ethiopian raids for slaves. They are sedentary agriculturalists living in settled villages, and both had a matrilineal descent system before the Baria were forcefully Islamized in 1856. Today, one-third of the Kunama are Christians, and the Baria remain Muslims.

### **The Religious Conflict**

The fact that members of a community confess two different religions should not be a source of conflict. The problem comes, however, when religion is utilized for the domination of one group by the other. Islam and Christianity have shared a long history in Ethiopia. To its adherents, Islam is the true "faith", which must tolerate no rivals. It still remains strongly militant. But this does not mean that Christianity has been a shining example of universal peace and harmony. It has had its period of militancy and intolerance. The Muslim/Christian confrontation in Ethiopia, is fully treated in the relevant chapter.<sup>328</sup> If Christianity has been Ethiopia's state religion, Islam has been the natural religion of dissidence. A period of difficulty for

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<sup>328</sup>For more information one could refer to the following. Apart from Trimingham's monumental study, see also Cerulli, "L'Islam Etiopico," in *L'Islam di ieri e di Oggi*, Rome 1971; Hussein Ahmed, "The Historiography of Islam in Ethiopia," *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 1992, 15-46; *The Cambridge History of Africa*, vol. IV, (Cambridge, 1975), 537-577; Abraham Demoz, "Muslims and Islam in Ethiopian Literature," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 1972, 1-12.

the Muslims was considered as one of opportunity for Christians and vice versa.

Sultan Salah-ad-Din (1137-1193), or Saladin, as he is known in the West, had granted the Ethiopians a chapel in the Holy Sepulcher as well as a status in the grotto of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Yet, it was difficult to convince Ethiopian Christians that Islam was not out to get them. Their hostility was strengthened with the Jihad of Ahmed Gragne Ibn Ibrahim (1506-1543) and the conflicts of the 16th century with the Ottoman Turks, in which Christian Ethiopians were exterminated. Islam was unable to accept Ethiopia as a neighbour and as a partner in commercial and cultural relations. The country was condemned to isolation as *dar-al-hiyad*. Thereafter, any Muslim threat to Christian Ethiopians could only herald the Gragne syndrome. The trauma of the 16th century left a legacy of Islam as being a one-dimensional existential enemy. Indeed, because Ethiopian Muslims had fully collaborated with Gragne, they were considered a fifth column. Christians began to wear a blue neck cord, the *mateb*, to distinguish themselves from Muslims, and were forbidden to eat from the same table with Muslims. Even worse, it was claimed: "the sky has no pillars and Muslims have no land."

In 1647, when Emperor Fasiledes allied himself with Yemen and the Ottomans against the Portuguese, the number of new converts to Islam had reached alarming proportions.<sup>329</sup> Yohannes I (1667-1682) was the first to go on the offensive. He called a Council in Gondar, where it was decreed that Muslims must not commingle with Christians, except when it came to trade and commerce. Otherwise, Muslims were debarred from holding high offices, from owning land or from engaging in agriculture. Those Muslims who aspired to

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<sup>329</sup>Donzel, E. Van, *A Yemenite Embassy to Ethiopia, 1647-1649* (Stuttgart, 1986).

high offices, had to convert to Christianity. Such a decree had serious consequences for Muslims in the country in general including present day Eritrea.<sup>330</sup>

The Egyptian conquest of certain parts of north-western Ethiopia in the 19th-century including Metema, Algena, Ali Ghidir and Sabderat had serious results. The monastery which Lij Kassa--the future Emperor Theodore (1820-1868) had attended in his youth--was pillaged on one occasion by the invading Egyptians. The event installed in him a life long spirit of anti-Muslim feeling and made him remain an impeccable foe of Islam. A series of Egyptian raids for example, were organized from Kasala against the isolated Christian tribes of the Bilen in the Keren area. The conquests caused much bitterness and accentuated religious hatred because many churches were defiled by the Egyptians. In 1864 the Emperor ordered mass Christianization of Muslims, and proclaimed a decree demanding that Ethiopian Muslims either convert to Christianity or be expelled from the country. To that end, bloody reprisals were brought upon collaborating tribes in Keren and the Barka lowlands who favoured the Egyptians, thus alienating the population and helping to increase further Islamic and Egyptian influence.<sup>331</sup> As noted earlier, what helped the spread of Islam further was the general tendency for nomadic tribes to accept Islam once it is presented to them because of the territorial freedom of its worship, as it is not tied to a fixed church building and priesthood, and because it makes so few demands for change in their habits and mode of life.<sup>332</sup> Another reason which helped the expansion of Islam was

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<sup>330</sup>Coulbeaux, J. B., *Histoire Politique et religieuse d'Abyssinia*, Paris, 1929.

<sup>331</sup>Op. cit., Trimmingham, *Islam...*, 114-116.

<sup>332</sup>*Ibid.*, 150.

the widely held belief that since Islam forbids the enslavement of Muslims, conversion to that religion was considered as the best preventive measure.

Likewise, in 1878, Emperor Yohannes launched an edict demanding that all Ethiopian Muslims convert to Christianity. The details of the Sudanese Mahdist invasion of Ethiopia are outside the scope of this section as they are treated elsewhere. But nevertheless, it should be noted that Ethiopians were warned by the Mahdist leaders with such words as: If you do not accept Islam, we shall kill you, destroy your homes and make your children orphans. One source quotes Yohannes as saying:

I shall avenge the blood of Ethiopia. Gagne Islamized Ethiopia by force, fire and the sword. All this land used to be a Christian land until Gagne ruined it. Now let all believe in the name of Jesus Christ. Be Baptized. If you wish to live in peace preserving your belongings, become Christians, thereby you will govern in this land and inherit in this world and the one to come.<sup>333</sup>

By 1880, some 50,000 Jebertis and half a million Oromos had been baptized.<sup>334</sup> This policy imposed on many communities difficult conditions. Some immigrated to the Sudan or Egypt, others simply revolted.<sup>335</sup> In 1883, Muslims in Seraie, Hamassien and Gondar obtained permission to remain in the country.<sup>336</sup> But, the damage was done. Even if the decree was abolished in 1889, Muslims were still forbidden to build mosques in certain parts of the country. They were also unable to obtain important political offices or high status in Ethiopian society, despite relevant qualifications. In the military, too,

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<sup>333</sup>Caulk, R.A., "Religion and State in Nineteenth Century Ethiopia," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, vol. x, No. 1, 1972, 23-41.

<sup>334</sup>Op. cit., Trimmingham, 123.

<sup>335</sup>Ibid., 120.

<sup>336</sup>Op. cit., Zewde Gebre Selassie, *Yohannes IV...* See also Trimmingham, S., *The Christian Church and Missions in Ethiopia* (World Dominion Press, 1950), 58.

no Muslim ever attained the rank of a general until 1974, and in provincial appointments, generally in predominantly Muslim areas, they would be deputies or advisers to Christian officials. In effect, the traditional definition of the Ethiopian nationality, excluded non-Christians from participation in the affairs of the state. It also barred them from appointment to high office.<sup>337</sup> Equal rights to civil and military rank for any native of Ethiopia were written into the 1931 constitution, but social prejudice kept Muslims inferior in the power structure at least until the 1974 Revolution. For historical reasons, their status in Eritrea was no different. Thanks to the Ethiopian Revolution, for the first time in Ethiopian history, a Muslim was appointed a Vice-President and also a Deputy Prime Minister. Even more important, the Sharia legal system which had existed for the last seventy years was reiterated. The gesture was certainly dictated by pragmatic politics aimed at accommodating the Muslims.

The Jeberti, the Muslim minority in highland Eritrea, have often been objects of persecution. They were excluded from land ownership and state administration. Anti-infidel sentiments against them were not uncommon. The highland Eritrean traditional folk saying that “the sky has no pillar and the Muslim has no land,” signifies the Tigrean and Amhara perception of the Muslims.<sup>338</sup> For the Jeberti, even conversion to Christianity could not save them from the stigma of having been Muslims. They are still denounced in Eritrea as Christians by day and Muslims by night.<sup>339</sup>

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<sup>337</sup>Markakis, John, *Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Polity* (Oxford: 1974), 66. Muslims have had their own courts and schools and in predominantly Muslim regions, some of them held important positions. But on the whole, they were not equal to Christians.

<sup>338</sup>Quoted in Richard Pankhurst, “Status, Division of labour and Employment in 19th Century and 20th Century Ethiopia,” *Ethnological Society Bulletin*, 1:23 (Addis Ababa, Haile Selassie University, 1961).

<sup>339</sup>*Ibid*, 25.

Christian intolerance is equally matched by Muslim bigotry. The Jeberti who live in Massawa and highland Eritrea are considered as "little Christians" by their Muslim co-religionists either because their mother tongue is Tigrigna, or because they had adopted some customs of their Christian neighbours in their daily life.

The Italian and British presence in Eritrea did not help conditions to improve. If anything, both favoured Islam and undermined the Orthodox Church because the latter was considered a custodian of Ethiopian nationalism, and therefore, a serious obstacle to their colonial designs. The result of this was the wide-spread Christian/Muslim confrontation of the 1940s and 1950s, which has left a bitter legacy.

To make matters worse, Islamic fundamentalism is now on the resurgence in the area. There is the rapidly growing Mujahedeen of the Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement (EIJM), which has made Christians the target of its fury. Islamic fundamentalists can only revive a dormant Muslim phobia among Christians in Ethiopia, including Eritrea. More ominous for regional peace has become Sudan's Iranian dominated fundamentalist Islamic junta, whose subversive activities could destabilize Eritrea in a Muslim/Christian confrontation, and eventually to disintegrate it.

### **The Land Question**

Another cause of conflict in Eritrea has always been the question of land ownership. The Christian highlands have been relatively overcrowded because they are cool, well-watered and fertile. Over time, because the land-man ratio was not favourable, the peasantry either had to expand or to starve. The spacious and thinly populated lands of the Muslim tribes beckoned invitingly. Any mass migration to these lowland prairies was precluded by the

Christian highlanders distaste for the intense summer heat and their fear of malaria. Hence, expansion took two forms: herds and flocks were dispatched in increasing numbers to the lowlands during the summer, when the land on the plateau was under cultivation. Secondly, when much of the land fringing the plateau was either occupied or claimed by neighbouring highland Christian villagers, expansion to the lowlands became inevitable. As a consequence, the highlanders came rapidly into conflict with the two largest Muslim tribes—the Saho in the east, and the Ben Amir in the west.<sup>340</sup> Indeed, the Saho pastoralists have always been locked in a bloody feud with their Christian highland neighbours over scarce pasture lands.<sup>341</sup> There have also been traditional Ben Amir and Baria raids against the Christian highlanders and the Kunama.<sup>342</sup>

Neither the Italians nor the British promoted peace and harmony among the Eritreans. In fact because of the imperatives of colonialism, the policy of divide and rule was reinforced on the existing social structure, and on a population which was diverse in terms of history, language, culture and religion. Tigrigna, Tigre, Arabic, Afar and Saho speakers, farmers and pastoralists, Christian highlanders and Muslim lowlanders were divided in order to advance the interest of colonialism. Britain, which administered Eritrea after the Italian defeat in 1941, had found the population so diverse that it had even suggested partition, giving the highlands to Ethiopia, and the lowlands to the Sudan, on the assumption that the populations of the two areas

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<sup>340</sup>Op. cit., Trevaskis, 55.

<sup>341</sup>Markakis, John, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 116.

<sup>342</sup>Ibid.

had more in common with those of the neighbouring countries than with each other.<sup>343</sup>

Indeed, as the Eritrean political scientist, Mesfin Araya, observed: citizenship was defined primarily by attachment to one's parochial cultural community rather than to the Eritrean nation-state.<sup>344</sup> Not even collective oppression under colonial rule for over half a century had produced any unifying nationalist tradition within Eritrea. For Mesfin Araya, Eritrean nationalism is, at best, only a tendency.<sup>345</sup>

The Italian regime had concealed the fundamental conflict of culture among the Eritrean communities. It had the effect of anesthetizing the passions dividing them and had sustained a lie of Eritrean unity. In the 1940s fighting between the Christian villagers of the Hamassien and Seraie and the Muslim Ben Amir broke out and assumed an ugly ferocity. There was also strife between the Kunama and their neighbours, between Christians and Muslims in Seraie, where with the help of the Ben Amir and the Saho, the Muslims gave a good account of themselves and between the Muslim Saho and their Christian neighbours in Akele Gozaie.<sup>346</sup> In Asmara, the violent fighting that broke out between Christians and Muslims persisted for five days and resulted in a long casualty list of dead and wounded.<sup>347</sup> In Western Eritrea, five Muslims were tied up and beheaded with swords by Christian

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<sup>343</sup>Trevaskis, 69-70.

<sup>344</sup>Mesfin Araya, "The Eritrean Question," *Ethiopian Review* (Los Angeles: January 1993).

<sup>345</sup>Mesfin Araya, "Reflections on Eritrean Nationalism," *Proceedings, First International Conference on the Horn of Africa*, 17 May 1986, (New York: The New School for Social Research).

<sup>346</sup>Trevaskis, 109.

<sup>347</sup>*Ibid.*, Trevaskis, 96.



Eritreans, and large numbers of livestock belonging to the Muslims tribes were looted.<sup>348</sup> It is against this background that we can now discuss the emergence of political parties in Eritrea.

### **Emergence of Political Parties in Eritrea<sup>349</sup>**

The first political party to emerge on the scene was the Unionist Party of Eritrea. It appeared as early as 1941 as Mahber Fekri Hagar Eretra--the Society of the Love of the Land of Eritrea--and largely functioned under the leadership of Gebre Meskel Woldu and Tedla Bairu<sup>350</sup>. In 1946, when the British legalized political parties, the Unionist Party held elections. While the Presidency consisted of Ras Kidane Mariam Gebre-Meskel (Honourary

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<sup>348</sup>Op. cit., Trevaskis, 91.

<sup>349</sup>Lloyd Ellingson has carried out an interesting study on the subject. However, it does have serious flaws especially regarding the Unionist Party. See "The Emergence of Political Parties in Eritrea, 1941-1950," *Journal of African History* 18 (1977), 261-81.

<sup>350</sup>Tedla Bairu was born on March 27, 1914 in Kharnishim, near Asmara. He had his early education at the Swedish Evangelical Mission in Asmara. In 1933, he went to Florence, Italy for advanced studies. Upon his return in 1934, for the next six years he taught in a number of schools in Eritrea and Ethiopia. In the process, he inspired a generation of Eritreans to dedicate themselves to the lofty ideals of Ethiopian nationalism and to the goals of Ethio-Eritrean reunion. In all this, Tedla Bairu was following in the footsteps of his illustrious father, Bairu Ogbit, who was totally committed to Eritrea's independence from Italian colonialism and to its union with Ethiopia. Bairu Ogbit went to the extent of providing vital military information to the Ethiopian authorities about Italian troop build-up in Eritrea out of his own free will, and constantly urged young Eritreans to flee to Ethiopia and to join the resistance. Between May 1941 and August 1946, Tedla Bairu served as Assistant Civil Service Officer in Asmara, only to resign his post to lead the Unionist Party as its Secretary-General. In 1950, he became the first President of the Eritrean Parliament and two years later, he was elected Chief Executive. In 1955, he resigned his post in protest against Addis Ababa's undue interference in purely Eritrean domestic matters. He served as Ambassador to Sweden (1955-1960), and as a Senator (1960-1965). Subsequently, he joined the ELF. From 1970 until his death in 1981, he devoted much of his time to scholarly work. See the next chapter for the background of the other Eritrean politicians.

President), Beyene Baraki (President), and Saleh Ahmed Kekia (Vice-President), the Central Committee included Demsas Wolde Michael (Hamassien), Misgina Gebre-Egzie (Hamassien), Arabi Salem (Seraie); Gebre Meskel Woldu (Akele Guzaie), Tsegaye Teferrie (Akele Guzaie); Zerome Kifle (Akele Guzaie), Araya Wassie (Keren), Ibrahim Sultan (Keren), Mohahmed Omar Kadi (Massawa), Yasin Jemil (Massawa), and Wolde Ab Wolde Mariam (Seraie). Tedla Bairu<sup>351</sup> became Secretary General of the Party, while Said Ahmed Hayote, Taha Adem and Hargot Abaie served as Deputy Secretary General, Treasurer and Vice Treasurer, respectively.<sup>352</sup>

The Unionists argued that Italy had 'stolen' Eritrea from Ethiopia, and that on the grounds of historical, cultural, religious, geographical and economic connections with Ethiopia, it should be 'returned' to the latter immediately. According to Trevaskis<sup>353</sup>, "at the close of 1946, the Unionist Party appeared to be unchallengeable."<sup>354</sup> It was the largest party in Eritrea,<sup>355</sup> and most of its members were Christians.

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<sup>351</sup>For his background, see next chapter.

<sup>352</sup>*The Eritrean Weekly News*, 8 March 1947. The Unionists maintained that their Party was established in 1941, and there is considerable evidence to support the contention, some of which appears in the next chapter. From 1941-1946, the Party was led by Gebre Meskel Woldu.

<sup>353</sup>Trevaskis held various administrative posts between 1943 and 1955 in Assab, Seraie and the Western province. He was also a member of the British Delegation to the FPCI and acted as British Liaison Officer to the U.N. Commission in Eritrea in 1950.

<sup>354</sup>Op. cit., Trevaskis, *Eritrea...*, 69.

<sup>355</sup> The Party claimed a membership of 729,193. This figure is 33% higher than the estimate of the Four Power Commission of Investigation. See *FPC Report*, Appendix 20, I.

### **The Muslim League (Rabita Islamia)**

In December 1946, Ibrahim Sultan<sup>356</sup> called a meeting in Keren of Muslim leaders to discuss the future of Eritrea, out of which emerged the Muslim League, drawing its membership from the heavily Muslim areas of the Western Province, Massawa and the Red Sea districts. Ibrahim Sultan and Said Abubaker El Mirghani<sup>357</sup> became the leaders. The former, as we have seen, was a member of the Central Committee of the Unionist Party. Why did he leave that party and organize the Muslim League?

Ibrahim Sultan was primarily interested in emancipating the serfs of the Western Province from the crushing burden of paying tithes to their aristocratic masters, the Natab.<sup>358</sup> Ibrahim Sultan's change of direction could be explained in terms of the fact that some Ben Amir feudal chiefs like Kentiba Osman Hidad of the Sahel, who opposed the emancipation of the serfs had joined the Unionist Party. He felt that the task of emancipating the serfs would be facilitated by organizing a party that would oppose feudal chiefs.

As Roland Marchal argues, the primary aim of the Muslim League in 1946 was directed specifically to a social conflict affecting most of the Eritrean Muslim societies, i.e., the contradiction between Tigre and Shumagelle, or the serf and aristocratic groups. This link was so deep that we may reasonably inquire if, ever, there occurred an ambiguity: the serfs preferred independence in order to achieve a quicker end to their oppression by their

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<sup>356</sup>For Ibrahim Sultan's background, see next chapter.

<sup>357</sup>For El Mirghani's background, see next chapter.

<sup>358</sup>As we have seen the serfs were Tigre of the Western Province, who were bound to the Natab families and clans by the Ben Amir tribe by monetary and service obligations.

masters, rather than for the desire of establishing a state.<sup>359</sup> Nevertheless, when in 1946, the British permitted the Eritreans to create political parties, the political tendencies were organized on tribal, clan and confessional bases--rather than on political programmes--a reflection of the objective conditions of the Eritrea of the time.

### The Other Parties

A struggle for power among the leaders of the Muslim League caused a split, and a rival faction named the Muslim League of the Western Province emerged under the leadership of Sheik Ali Reddai.<sup>360</sup> It demanded the secession of the western lowlands from the rest of Eritrea and subsequently to become a British trusteeship. In the spring of 1947, another splinter group from the Muslim League left the original party and established the Independent Muslim League of Massawa/the National Muslim Party of Massawa.<sup>361</sup> Osman Adam Berg, its Secretary General, claimed that Eritrea was not ready to receive "freedom and independence." Instead, he proposed a British Trusteeship for a period of ten years, to be followed by complete independence.<sup>362</sup> A third predominantly Muslim group, the New Eritrea Pro-Italy Party also emerged in 1947 and favoured an Italian trusteeship.<sup>363</sup>

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<sup>359</sup>Marchal Roland, "Birth, Development and Crisis of the Muslim League in Eritrea: 1947-1952," *North East African Studies*, forthcoming. The Muslim League claimed 731,764 members who were overwhelmingly Muslims. This figure is 48% higher than the estimate of the FPCI. See Appendix 20,10, FPCI.

<sup>360</sup>Trevaskis, 70-71.

<sup>361</sup>Four Power Commission, Appendix 107, 2, and App. 116.

<sup>362</sup>*Ibid.*, App. 20, 10, App. 116.

<sup>363</sup>*Ibid.*, Appendix 20, I. It was largely financed by the Italians.

The predominantly Christian Party, the Eritrean Liberal Progressive Party, or better known as the party of 'Eritrea for Eritreans', which at first opposed union with Ethiopia, was established in February 1948. It was led by such personalities as Ras Tesema Asmerom, Seyoum Maasho, Wolde Ab Wolde Mariam and Abraha Tesema. Apart from Eritrean independence, this party also felt that all Tigrigna speakers, including those in Ethiopia, should once again be united as before October 26, 1896, when Eritrea's boundary with Ethiopia was demarcated. It also advocated the annexation of the territory inhabited by the Habab, the Ben Amir, and the Beja of the Sudan to Eritrea. These tribes had been divided by the Convention of March 1890.<sup>364</sup> Eventually, the Liberal Progressive Party changed its name into the Liberal Unionist Party and began to advocate a policy of conditional union with Ethiopia. There was also the Pro-Italy Party, which received official sanction on September 29, 1947. The most active opponent of the Unionist Party was, however, the Muslim League.

A substantial majority of the Muslim lowlanders had rallied behind the Muslim League, opposing any idea of unity with Ethiopia. Nevertheless, because of ethnic parochialism, political rivalry and feelings of regionalism, there was no unity of purpose between and among its members. As a result, the Muslim League split into several factions. Its offshoot in the Barka Lowlands, which called itself the Muslim League of the Western Province, at first advocated independence for Eritrea under British Trusteeship, but, eventually, because of conflicts with the leaders of the Muslim League, it allied

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<sup>364</sup>Perhaps because Ras Tesema Asmerom had family relations with Emperor Yohannes IV, the party advocated Tigrai-Eritrean union. See: FPC Report , Appendix 20, 7. Although Ras Tesema led this party, its most active member was Wolde Ab Wolde Mariam, the deputy editor of the British financed newspaper, the *Eritrea Weekly News*. See next chapter for the backgrounds of the leaders of LPP.

itself with the Unionists. The other offshoot of the Muslim League which operated in the Semhar, received assurances from the Ethiopian Government that Addis Ababa will respect the cultural traditions of the people of Semhar. It, therefore, became the Independent Muslim League of Massawa and, with its 60,000 members, began to entertain the idea of conditional union with Ethiopia.<sup>365</sup>

The elections to the Representative Assembly, the first ever held in Eritrea, took place on 25 and 26 March 1952. As noted earlier, the results were as follows: The Unionist Party, 32; the Muslim League, 18; the Muslim League of the Western Province, 14; the Independent Muslim League, 1; the National Party, 1.<sup>366</sup>

In the elections of 1952, through an alliance with the 14 members of the Muslim League of the Western Province, the 32 Unionist members dominated the 68 seat Assembly.<sup>367</sup> The Representative Assembly considered the U. N. draft constitution during forty meetings, which took place between 12 May and 10 July 1952. On 14 May, it unanimously adopted article 1 concerning the adoption and ratification of the Federal Act. During the next two months, each article of the draft constitution, as explained personally by the U. N. Commissioner, was considered.<sup>368</sup>

When the Ethio-Eritrean federation was put in place in 1952, Eritrea enjoyed its own democratic government, composed of an elected Assembly with full legislative powers over domestic affairs. On the other hand, defense,

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<sup>365</sup>*The Ethiopian Herald*, 10 October 1949.

<sup>366</sup>*The Year Book of the United Nations*, 1952, 262.

<sup>367</sup>Markakis, John, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 93.

<sup>368</sup>*Year Book of the United Nations*, 1952, 262.

foreign relations, currency and finance, inter-state commerce and communications were federal responsibilities. The Assembly appointed a chief executive, who, in turn, appointed the heads of government departments. Civil rights were fully protected and political freedom was guaranteed.<sup>369</sup>

While Tedla Bairu, the Secretary General of the Unionist Party became the first Chief Executive of Eritrea, Sheik Ali Redai<sup>370</sup>, the leader of the Muslim League of the Western Province became President of the Eritrean Parliament. Mohammed Said Feki Ali, another member of the Muslim League of the Western Province, was made Home Secretary, while Mohammed Nur Hassan Naib of the Independent Muslim League of Massawa took over the Social Affairs Ministry.

Personalities mean a lot in Eritrean politics, and Wolde Ab Wolde Mariam was one of the many important Eritrean political leaders. There is a considerable distortion about the circumstances which forced him to leave Eritrea and to seek refuge elsewhere. We need to clarify the facts of the situation.

When the Liberal Progressive Party became the Liberal Unionist Party and committed itself to union with Ethiopia, it did so with some conditions. It demanded autonomy for Eritrea, the use of Eritrean languages and safeguards for its culture. Wolde Ab left the LPP and formed the Independent Eritrea United to Ethiopia Party, which advocated independence for Eritrea to be followed by unity with Ethiopia.<sup>371</sup> He himself failed to win his election to the

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<sup>369</sup>*United Nations General Assembly, Official Records, 7th Session, Supplement no. 15, 1952.*

<sup>370</sup>*Ibid.*, 93. Ali Redai represented the Ben Amir of the western region, who have close ties with the Bejas of neighbouring Sudan. The leadership of the Western Province was inhibited from seeking union with the Sudan because of clan conflicts which prevailed at the time on both sides of the border.

<sup>371</sup>*Op. cit.*, Markakis, *National and ...*, 67.

Assembly. For sometime he also served as President of the Eritrean Trade Unions. But in 1953, Wolde Ab talked to Andargatchew Messaie, Haile Selassie's son-in-law, and Personal Representative to Eritrea. He requested that he be permitted to travel to Egypt. According to an informant, the following is what actually transpired in the meeting:

Andargatchew was very much disturbed and wanted to know why Wolde Ab wanted to go to Egypt, and why he did not want to serve in any capacity of his choice. In response, Wolde Ab complained about some people (presumably Tedla Bairu) who questioned his patriotism and commitment to Ethiopia, and that if he went abroad, the opportunity would help him to restore his health. In the process, he said, he could vindicate himself from the series of false accusations being hurled against him. When Tedla Bairu and Asfeha Wolde Michael (Andargatchew's Deputy) were consulted, they strongly advised against Wolde Ab going abroad. Andargatchew listened to the counsel and dismissed it suspecting that it emanated from personal grudges. He brought a Bible and made Wolde Ab swear that he would not lift a finger against Ethiopia. Wolde Ab did that, received his passport and left. Three months later, there he was, in Egypt--advising Nasser on how to trim the Emperor's wings and enjoying the facilities of Radio Cairo, where he launched his campaign for Eritrea's independence.<sup>372</sup>

There was also the lack of tolerance on the part of Tedla Bairu, who was unable to be magnanimous towards his political adversaries. He constantly harassed them. Several assassination attempts were made on Wolde Ab Wolde Mariam. Many believe that Tedla Bairu was behind it. As a result, Wolde Ab fled to Egypt in 1953. The same year, Dejach Abraha Tesemma, the son of Ras Tesema Asberom, one of the founders of the Liberal Progressive Party, was

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<sup>372</sup>Private and confidential information conveyed to the author on 12 March 1982 in Addis Ababa, by a highly placed former member of the Unionist Party of Eritrea.



arrested, for no other reason than he had the audacity to run against Tedla Bairu in the elections of 1952.<sup>373</sup>

Then there was Ibrahim Sultan, who, with the support of the Italians, had united all the political parties opposing union with Ethiopia and reorganized them as the Independence Bloc. Wolde Ab Wolde Mariam had become his deputy. Ibrahim Sultan appeared disappointed and disillusioned when he failed to become Eritrea's first Prime Minister. His Italian connections did indeed contribute to his downfall. He was also accused of insulting a Sudanese diplomat and was sentenced to prison for one year. The court, however, placed him on probation for three years, making him ineligible to run for re-election in the Second Assembly.<sup>374</sup> Reduced to silence under the threat of a one-year-imprisonment, Ibrahim Sultan's rivalry with Tedla Bairu had led him to unusual alliances.<sup>375</sup>

There were many Eritreans who wanted to be well rewarded for the services they rendered to the Unionist cause. But the extremely limited resources dictated otherwise. The demand to create a stable government meant having a working relationship with the opposition. The result of both realities could only alienate a good number of Unionists. There was also the Muslim fear of coming under an increasingly Christian dominated government. In point of fact, the Muslim League resented the alliance of the Muslim League of the Western Province with the Unionist Party.

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<sup>373</sup>It was widely held that Abraha Tesema had a good chance to win the 1955 election. Since Tedla Bairu did not want to take any chances, he arrested Abraha under fabricated charges.

<sup>374</sup>Richey to State Department, 777A.00/8-1056, 10 August 1956.

<sup>375</sup>Markakis, *National and Class...*, 110.

Tedla Bairu served as Chief Executive only for a few years (1952-1955). Much controversy surrounds the circumstances which led to his resignation. The testimony of a highly placed government functionary, which has been confirmed by former members of the Assembly, is as follows:

Ali Redai served as President of the Assembly (1952-1955). In those years, the Supreme Court and the High Court were run by the British. Even the Attorney-General, the Chief of the Police and his deputy were British nationals. The Mayor of Asmara was an Italian. In any case, forty parliamentarians initiated a bill proposing the replacement of the foreigners by Eritreans. Because of his pro-British attitudes, Ali Redai blocked the move. This led into another demand for the replacement of Ali Redai, Tedla Bairu's loyal supporter. To forestall any move, Tedla Bairu suspended the Parliament for twenty days. When members of the Assembly returned to their seats after twenty days, Tedla Bairu again suspended the Assembly for another twenty days.

As a result, in March 1955, ten members of the Assembly, i.e., five Muslims and five Christians, including Ibrahim Sultan, Idris Muhammed Adem, Dimitros Gebre Mariam, Kadi Musa, and others went to Addis Ababa to complain to Emperor Haile Selassie, as he was the custodian of the federation. They accused Tedla Bairu of dictatorial tendencies, of suspending the Assembly and of preventing them from carrying out their duties. The Chief Executive who went to the meeting two days later, had no convincing argument other than complaining of "anarchy" and "chaos". Having been informed by the Emperor that "parliament was supreme," in April 1955 the Deputies returned to Asmara. Subsequently, Ali Redai resigned to become adviser to the Emperor's representative. He was replaced by Idris Muhammed Adem. Four months later, Tedla Bairu also resigned and was replaced by Asfeha Wolde Michael.<sup>376</sup>

Ever since the Muslim League of the Western Province ceded from the major party, i.e., the Muslim League, and made deals with the Unionists, Ali Redai's role in all this was not forgotten. Because members of the Muslim League were trying to oust Ali Redai from his newly acquired position, the members of the Muslim League of the Western Province retaliated and succeeded in removing Idris Muhammed Adem. He was replaced by one of his

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<sup>376</sup>Personal and confidential information conveyed to the author on 16 January 1983 in Asmara, Eritrea, by a former Unionist Party member.

bitter rivals, Hamid Faraj. Idris Muhammed Adem and Ibrahim Sultan, subsequently lost their seats in the Assembly. The latter wrote to Andargatchew Messai and Asfha Wolde Michael complaining of the intimidation to which he was being subjected.<sup>377</sup> By 1959, both found themselves in Egypt.

### **The Creation of the Eritrean Liberation Front**

Founded in Port Sudan three years before Eritrea's federal status was abolished, the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) was one of the earliest political organizations which aimed at changing the federal arrangement with Ethiopia. Indeed, a group known as *Mahber Shewate*<sup>378</sup> and *Haraka Tahrir Eritrea*<sup>379</sup> operated in the Christian highlands and the Muslim lowlands respectively on behalf of the ELM, the objective being Eritrean independence. However, both had no organizational links.<sup>380</sup> Meanwhile, Eritrea's debilitating political atmosphere had driven many Eritreans into exile, most particularly, to Egypt.

For reasons of ethnic parochialism and political rivalry, the exiles did not strengthen the ELM. Instead, some of them created the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in 1959 in Cairo, Egypt.<sup>381</sup> The new organization undermined the

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<sup>377</sup>EPA, File U2 1168, vol. 1. Ibrahim Sultan to Andargatchew Mesaie, Asmara, 26 June 1958.

<sup>378</sup>In Tigrigna, Mahber Shewate means Association of Seven. This was so because members were organized in cells of seven people. EPA, File U2/77, vol. I.

<sup>379</sup>In Arabic, Haraka Tahrir Eritrea means the Eritrean Liberation Movement.

<sup>380</sup>Bereket H. Selassie, *Conflict and Intervention in the Horn of Africa* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1980), 61-62.

<sup>381</sup>Sheth, V.S., "Eritrea's struggle for Independence: Internal and External Dimensions," *International Studies--Journal of the School of International Studies*, 24, no. 1, Jan-March 1987.

peaceful intention of the ELM, and championed the cause of Eritrean independence through armed uprising. When the ELM sent a force of some 950 men from the Sudan to start its own struggle, that force was simply wiped out by the ELF in the Sahel.<sup>382</sup>

The principal figures in the ELF, Idris Muhammed Adem<sup>383</sup>, Ibrahim Sultan, Osman Saleh Sabbe<sup>384</sup> and Idris Gelawdis<sup>385</sup> were extremists who preached sectarian Muslim goals. Their rallying cry was "Jihad" (holy war), and their secular ideology was Pan-Arabism.<sup>386</sup> They presented the Eritrean

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<sup>382</sup>Markakis, *National and Class...*, 109, 283.

<sup>383</sup>Idris Muhammed Adem belonged to the Ben Amir tribe and was born in Agordat in 1918. He completed his secondary school education in Gedarif, Sudan. Having served the Diglal of the Ben Amir as a Private Secretary, he joined the British Military Administration as a clerk. One of the leading figures of the Muslim League of the Western Province, he became President of the Eritrean Assembly in 1955.

<sup>384</sup>Osman Saleh Sabbe was one of the most astute politicians the Eritrean guerrilla movement created. Born in Harkiko near Massawa, he was sponsored as a protege by Saleh Ahmed Kekia—a well-known Eritrean Unionist and a rich businessman in Addis Ababa. Thanks to an Ethiopian government scholarship, Osman trained as a teacher in Addis Ababa's Patriot's School (1950-1955). He had a good command of Tigrigna, Tigre, Arabic, English, Amharic and Italian. Arrested for his political activities in 1958 in Harkiko, where he was a school teacher, by 1960 he was in Saudi Arabia where he met both Ibrahim Sultan and Idris Muhammed Adem. Although invited to join them in Egypt, he went to Mogadishu instead, and spent a year where he helped organize the Eritrea-Somali Friendship Association. Married to the sister of the former Foreign Minister of Syria, Khaddim Abdel Halim, it was largely through Osman's efforts that nearly all the Eritrean political movements were organized to liberate Eritrea from Ethiopia. Since he was widely recognized in the Arab world, it was through him that funds were also raised for the movements. Osman died in Cairo, Egypt in 1987. See AFP Paris in English, 27 July 1986, FBIS, 26 July 1986. *ELF Sixteen Years of Armed Struggle* (Beirut, Lebanon: ELF Information Center, 1977) Kuwait in English FBIS, 16 December 1985, R1.

<sup>385</sup>Idris Gelawdios, a Bilen by birth, studied law at the University of Cairo, Egypt. He served as deputy to Idris Muhammed Adem. He became the top military leader of the ELF. He led an ELF delegation to Prague in 1968, where the author met him and had a long discussion with him.

<sup>386</sup>Harnet, I.I., *Eritreans for Liberation in North America*, (March 1973) vol. II, No. 3.

cause as a Muslim struggle against Christian oppressors, or to use the words of Osman Saleh Sabbe, "to bring an end to the ill-treatment of Muslims in the hands of the infidel."<sup>387</sup> They stressed that Haile Selassie was a Christian despot and that most of the Eritrean Christians favoured union with Ethiopia.<sup>388</sup> In a press conference in Damascus, Syria, Idris Muhammed Adem claimed that because Eritrea was totally Arab, the ELF, which championed Muslim resistance to Christian domination and persecution, should be supported by the Arab world.<sup>389</sup>

Idris Muhammed Adem in particular was deeply distrustful of Christians, whom he held responsible for delivering Eritrea into Haile Selassie's hands. Such a simplistic and reductionist view overlooked the fact that a considerable number of Muslims supported the Unionist cause. Nevertheless, the leaders of the ELF continued to agitate for Eritrean independence, distributed literature that fanned separatist sentiment, incited strikes and demonstrations and called for the violent overthrow of Haile Selassie's government.

The ELF claims that the first shots against the Ethiopian presence in Eritrea were fired on September 1, 1961, by Hamid Idris Awate.<sup>390</sup> When they

<sup>387</sup>I.P.A. U1/251, 1953-1960.

<sup>388</sup>Tesfasion Medhanie, *Eritrea: Dynamics of a National Question* (Amsterdam: B.R. Brener, 1986), 28.

<sup>389</sup>Idris Muhammed Adem, Press Conference, Damascus, 28 Feb./1967: E.P.A., File 34.

<sup>390</sup>Awate was a Baria, a down-trodden ethnic group inhabiting the Barentu area. He was sent by the Italians for military training to Italy and had served in the Italian army. In 1948, he had killed Sudanese police officers who were pursuing him. He, therefore, accepted an amnesty in 1951 and was living in peace. If he led a band of malcontents some years later, it was because they resisted the granting of agricultural concessions to Christians in traditional Muslim areas.

were fired, Ethiopian security forces immediately began to round-up potential rebels. Idris Awate, who had been a traditional brigand, took to the bush in order to escape arrest. With a handful of his followers, he clashed with pursuing police at Amba Adal in the Barka lowlands. It is this background that surrounds the myth of Idris Awate and the fame the ELF has bestowed on him as the herald of the Eritrean uprising.<sup>391</sup>

The invention aside, the truth is, the rebellion started with thirteen men who were armed with old Italian rifles.<sup>392</sup> Yet, even after three years of struggle, by 1964, the number of the guerrillas had increased to a mere one hundred. Despite that, the rebellion managed to sustain itself largely through banditry.<sup>393</sup>

Support for the rebellion was limited to the Muslim areas of Eritrea. With no Christian backing whatsoever, the Muslim Ben Amir provided the power base for the ELF. Since its leaders were very limited in outlook, they were pre-occupied with parochialism and power struggles.<sup>394</sup> Ibrahim Sultan was, as we noted earlier, the leader of the Muslim League. His leadership was wrecked partly because of his flirtation with the Italians, and partly because of the withdrawal of the Muslim League of the Western Province and the Independent Muslim League of Massawa from the mother party in which Idris Muhammed Adem had a hand. In Egypt, when Ibrahim Sultan started being assertive and attempted to challenge the leadership of Idris Muhammed Adem,

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<sup>391</sup>Markakis, *Class and...*, 108.

<sup>392</sup>Osman Saleh Sabbe, *The History of Eritrea* (trans.) (Beirut: 1977), 249-250; see also EPA, File U3/24.

<sup>393</sup>J. Boyer Bell, "Endemic Insurgency and International Order--the Eritrean Experience," *Orbis*, vol. 18, 1974.

<sup>394</sup>Markakis, *Class...*, 110.

the latter unceremoniously reduced him to size by keeping him away from any position of leadership and influence within the ELF. Ibrahim Sultan, in turn, deprived the ELF of the support of many of his followers in the Sahel and the Keren areas.

Nor was Wolde Ab Wolde Mariam excited about the whole affair. Being a Christian, he was very much alienated in a movement that was largely inspired by Islam. Since he dreamed of a Tigrai-Tigrigna state, the ELF with its strong identification with the Arab and Muslim world, was the least appealing to him. The ELF leaders in turn considered him more of a liability than as an asset. As early as 1962, the Saudi Arabian authorities had informed him that they support the Muslims and not the Christians in Eritrea. To make matters worse, Wolde Ab was even forbidden from entering Arab countries, except Egypt.<sup>395</sup>

Osman Saleh Sabbe, too, had his difficulties. Coming as he did from the Massawa area, he was a minority in an ELF political arena largely dominated by the Ben Amir of Western Eritrea. To counter the entrenched Ben Amir leadership, Osman helped to bring thirty Eritreans to Damascus--natives of the Massawa area, including Muhammed Ramadan Nur. They had been studying in Cairo.<sup>396</sup> It appears that he was preparing the ground to rally the eastern lowlanders in order to challenge the western lowlanders headed by Idris Muhammed Adem. Idris Gelawdios thought that the struggle between the various leaders could strengthen his position.

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<sup>395</sup>Cited in Fred Halliday, "The Fighting in Eritrea," *New Left Review*, 67 (May-June 1971), 65.

<sup>396</sup>Muhammed Abu al-Qasim Hamad, *Al-Ab'ad al-duwaliyya li-ma'arakat, Irtirya*, (Beirut, 1974), 165-166.

The wrangles, quarrels and bickerings of the leadership, subsequently rubbed off on the rank and file fighters, who were soon to be divided on ethnic and other lines. Although a few Christians had begun to join the ELF, ethnic, religious and regional differences were so accentuated that it was no longer possible to keep the ELF guerrillas under one command. Misunderstandings and mistrust, coupled with abuse of authority on the part of the regional leaders and commanders, led to divisions among the fighters.<sup>397</sup>

In 1965, therefore, the ELF adopted an Algerian model and established five military zones in order to organize the fighting along ethnic lines.<sup>398</sup> The first zone, the Barka, was commanded by Mohammed Diani, a Ben Amir, a one time soldier in the Sudanese army. Another veteran of the Sudanese army, Omar Azaz, a Bilen, was made commander of the second zone, the Senhit. Abdel Kherim Ahmed, a Saho, who studied theology at Al-Ahzar University in Cairo before going to Syria for military training, was appointed commander of the third zone, comprising the Asawrta/Saho area. The influential Mohammed Ali Omero, a native of the Red Sea region, was assigned to Semhar. He, too, studied in Cairo before going to Syria. One can see the hand of Idris Gelawdios in these appointments, and of his attempt to promote his friends from his school years in Egypt. A fifth zone led by Woldai Kahsay was created to appease the Christian guerrillas because they became increasingly reluctant to cooperate with Muslim fighters in the other zones.

As Eastern Eritreans of the Red Sea region began to liberate themselves from the domination and manipulation of the Western Eritreans, *i.e.*, the Ben

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<sup>397</sup>ELF, *Sixteen Years of Armed Struggle*, ELF Foreign Information Center, Beirut, Lebanon, 1977.

<sup>398</sup>Richard Sherman, *Eritrea, the Unfinished...*, 43.



Amir, Christian Eritreans started identifying with the easterners.<sup>399</sup> As if the religious problem was not enough, ethnicity and regionalism were brought into the picture to complicate matters. As early as 1964 the Ben Amir guerillas from Agordat had, for instance, demanded the expulsion of Marya, Bilen and Saho guerrillas. Conditions had deteriorated to such an extent that whenever the guerrillas confronted the Ethiopian army, instead of uniting and supporting each other, they would rejoice at the defeat of one another.<sup>400</sup>

In June 1965, Osman Saleh Sabbe had shipped two plane loads of arms from Syria to the Sudan. His aim was to smuggle the arms to the Massawa area and to start anti-Ethiopian government military activities there. The Sudanese Government learned about the weapons and notified the Ethiopian Government.

Utterly dismayed and beleaguered, the General Command called a meeting with a view to prepare conditions for a national congress. In a move designed to mollify the Christians, Herui Tedla<sup>401</sup> was named chairman of the preparatory committee. In June 1967, Herui's father--Tedla Bairu<sup>402</sup> defected

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<sup>399</sup>John Markakis, *National and ...*, 113-120.

<sup>400</sup>EPLF, *The National Democratic Programme* (1977), 11.

<sup>401</sup>Herouye Tedla, the son of Dejach Tedla Bairu, was born in Eritrea on March 24, 1940. After completing his early studies at the Lutheran School in Asmara, he attended Tefferi Makonnen Secondary School (1954-1958), and Haile Selassie University (1959-1963), graduating with a B. A. in Political Science. Herui also did some graduate studies at the London School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), and at the University of Stockholm. He served the Ethiopian student movement in several leadership capacities, where he refined his debating and oratorical skills. He is fluent in Tigrigna, Amharic, English, Arabic, Italian and Swedish. In 1969 he met an ELF delegation in Damascus, where he was recruited and joined the movement. He served as Chairman of the Adobha Conference (1975); Deputy Chairman of the Revolutionary Council of the ELF, and led the ELF offensive against the Ethiopian army at the outskirts of Asmara in 1974. The same year, when the EPLF fought a pitched battle against the ELF, Herui negotiated a truce with Issaiyas Afewerki and Ibrahim Toteel.

<sup>402</sup>*The Washington Post*, 30 April 1967; Op. cit., ABIR, 194.

from Ethiopia and joined the ELF. He was made Vice President of the Supreme Council, with Idris Muhammed Adem as President. However, the propaganda value of his defection and his radio broadcasts from Damascus was offset by the role he played in creating disunity within the ELF leadership.

Whatever the General Command conceived, and however much it was dismayed by developments within its ranks, the Christian elements were also busy debating the need for reform in the movement itself. Among such elements was Issaiyas Afewerki.<sup>403</sup>

According to the faction which was soon to call itself the EPLF, most of the external support of the ELF came from the "reactionary" Arab states. The majority of the armed combatants in the ELF were Muslims of peasant or nomadic origin operating in the overwhelmingly Muslim areas of the Methit. The leadership of the ELF was also made up of peasant chieftains and

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<sup>403</sup>Issaiyas Afewerki, the current head of state of Eritrea, was born in Tselot not far from Asmara in 1944. On his mother's side, he comes from Adwa, in Ethiopia's Tigray province. His father, a native of Hamassien, was a staunch member of the Unionist Party, who worked as a high functionary in the Ethiopian Tobacco Monopoly. His uncle, Dejazmatch Solomon Abraham was Governor of Ethiopia's Wollo province, where he presided over the human catastrophe of 1973-74. Issaiyas attended Prince Makonnen Secondary School in Asmara, and in 1966, joined the Faculty of Engineering of Addis Ababa University. A year later, he left the University and joined the ELF, which in turn sent him to China in 1967 for military training by means of a passport acquired from Somalia. Upon his return, Issaiyas was made Political Commissar in Akele Guzaie and served under Abraham Tewolde. However, because he was disgruntled with the Muslim/Christian confrontation within the ELF, he escaped from Eritrea and went into hiding in Tigray and subsequently into the Sahel. When Abraham was killed in mysterious circumstances, he took over the leadership of the ELF's Christian elements in the highlands. Thanks to Saleh Sabbe, the Issaiyas group was introduced as a progressive movement to the South Yemen leadership of Abdul Fatah Ismail and, through Yemen, to the USSR and Cuba. Thereafter, Syria, Iraq and Libya began to provide moral and material support for this group. For very many years, Issaiyas served as Deputy Secretary General of the EPLF. When Somalia went to war with Ethiopia in 1977-78, Issaiyas Afewerki signed an agreement with Ahmed Suleiman (Dewelle) of the NSF of Somalia in which both agreed to open war against Ethiopia simultaneously.

“reactionary” petite bourgeois intellectuals, who unleashed a vicious anti-Christian propaganda and the physical elimination of all combatants suspected of either supporting or sympathizing with the demands for change in the structure and ideology of the ELF. Repeated efforts to bring about change resulted only in more treachery, assassinations and arbitrary jailings.<sup>404</sup>

Many Christian fighters were slaughtered by their Muslim "comrades" in the ELF, and, by 1967, a significant number of them had defected to the Ethiopian government. Regional and tribal conflicts among the Muslims had also intensified. The most acute of these was between the Semhar group led by Osman Saleh Sabe and the Barka group led by Idris Muhammed Adem.<sup>405</sup> As early as August 1967, some twenty-seven Christian Eritrean guerrillas gave themselves up in Seraie to the Ethiopian authorities.<sup>406</sup> On August 24, 1967 even Woldai Kahsaie, the Commander of the Fifth Zone, handed himself into the Ethiopian Consulate in Kassala along with nineteen of his men.<sup>407</sup> In March 1970, Kidane Kiflu and Woldai Gedai, two important leaders of the Christian group were executed in Kassala by the ELF,<sup>408</sup> and as many as fifty Christian fighters were also massacred by the same front in Sembere.<sup>409</sup>

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<sup>404</sup>Harnet, *Eritreans for Liberation in North America*, III, no. 3, March 1973, p.3.

<sup>405</sup>Tesfa Tsion Medhine (*Eritrea...*), 29. See also Jim Paul, "Struggle in the Horn: A Survey," *MERIP*, 7, no. 9 (Nov. 1977), 4.

<sup>406</sup>*Ethiopia* (A weekly Amharic Newspaper), Asmara, August 27, 1967. See also Graham Taylor's, "Ethiopia's Rebellion," *Africa Report*, Dec. 1969.

<sup>407</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>408</sup>*Africa Confidential II*, 24 Nov. 1970. See also Zewde Gabre Selassie, *Ethiopia and Eritrea in the Context of the Red Sea and Africa*, (Washington, D. C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, March 1970), 112.

<sup>409</sup>*Ibid.*, Zewde Gabre Selassie, 12.

To crown it all, the Christians accused the ELF leadership of ostracizing them as kafirs and of attacking them as an enemy. They also denounced the Muslims for looting the property of those whom they professed to liberate, for stirring long dead grudges among some of the ethnic groups, and preaching that the Christian highlanders were their enemies, for plundering the Christian highlands, and for acquiring huge capital which they invested in construction and transportation industries in the Sudan.<sup>410</sup>

The execution of some three hundred Christian recruits in March 1970 on the alleged grounds of being agents of the Ethiopian government, the killing of Kidane Kinfu and Woldai Gidai on account of being active Christian cadres, only made matters worse. While some of the Christians joined Osman Sabbe, others either gave themselves up to the Ethiopian Government or drifted into Akele Guzaie to join the Christian guerrillas. Woldai Kahsai, the commander of the 5th zone was in Kassala, when his deputy, Osman Hishall summarily executed twenty seven guerrillas, all of them Christians.<sup>411</sup>

In September 1968, three divisions of the ELF had met at Anseba, where a partial union was created.<sup>412</sup> In August 1969, the Adobha Conference took place. The possibilities of how to correct the mistakes of the past and how to bring about national unity between the fighters was considered. A General Command consisting of thirty-eight members was created,<sup>413</sup> but, the process

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<sup>410</sup>Harnet, I.I., *Eritreans for Liberation in North America, ELFNA*, (March 1973), 11-15.

<sup>411</sup>Op. cit., Markakis, *National and ...*, 122.

<sup>412</sup>ELF, *Sixteen Years of Armed Struggle* (Beirut, Lebanon: ELF Foreign Information Center, 1977).

<sup>413</sup>ELF Foreign Information Center (Beirut, Lebanon: 1977). See also *Eritrea: General Facts*, Information Branch, Foreign Relations, Central Bureau, EPLF, 1989.

of merging the guerrilla forces was halted because of the confusion. By coordinating his efforts with Ibrahim Sultan, Osman Saleh Sabbe managed to discredit the ELF leadership headed by Idris Muhammed Adem. Subsequently, Osman created his own organization and opened an office in Khartoum, where he began to welcome dissidents defecting from the ELF.<sup>414</sup> Ali Omaro was made field commander of Osman's organization and opened a front in eastern Eritrea.<sup>415</sup>

Meanwhile, the Christian elements re-grouped themselves and issued what they called "Nehenan Elamanan," i.e., We and Our Objectives. They explained why they were opposed to the ELF leadership and why they were forming their own organization.<sup>416</sup> The Third group to break with the ELF in 1971 was the "Obel group." Because its power base was in the Barka lowlands, this group demonstrated to everyone that the ELF leadership had no monopoly of the region.<sup>417</sup>

The fact that the ELF had its Congress from October 14, 1971 to Nov. 12, 1971, and elected Idris Muhammed Adem and Herui Tedla Bairu chairman and vice-chairman, respectively, did not alter the reality of the situation. As pointed out earlier, the General Command, consisting of thirty-eight members had been created. However, its attempt to establish hegemony was challenged by Osman Saleh Sabbe, who convened a meeting in Beirut in February 1972 of the three groups which had left the ELF. It resulted in the creation of what

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<sup>414</sup>Markakis, *National and ...*, 126.

<sup>415</sup>Ibid.

<sup>416</sup>Ibid.

<sup>417</sup>Ibid.

came to be known as the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF).<sup>418</sup> While Osman Saleh Sabbe devoted much of his energy and time to the external questions facing the struggle, Issaiyas Afewerki and Ramadan Muhammed Nur<sup>419</sup> coordinated the fighting internally. As the brutality of the Ethiopian army drove more and more Eritreans to the cause of the guerrillas, with the passage of time, differences between the ELF and the EPLF became more acute and pronounced. In May 1975, Ahmed Nasser took over the ELF leadership.<sup>420</sup>

The relative strength of the rival fronts began to change as a result of the rising tide of the Ethiopian Revolution. Thanks to new recruits and its centralized command structure, towards the end of the 1970s, the EPLF was clearly on the ascendance. It had established its control in numerous towns and large villages in the northern highlands and in the central plateau of Eritrea. In areas controlled by the EPLF, religion was disassociated from education in sharp cultural contrast with the programme of the ELF. There were some Muslims in the EPLF leadership, but they were mainly from the east. The western lowlands remained the stronghold of the ELF.

There ensued a series of clashes between the ELF and EPLF, which some observers attribute to personal ambitions and hatreds between the rival

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<sup>418</sup>Vanguard, EPLF, 1 (January 1973); See also *Africa Contemporary Record*, 1972-1973.

<sup>419</sup>Ramadan Muhammed Nur comes from a ruling clan in Massawa. He owns a large number of houses and livestock in the Harkiko area. For many years, he served as Secretary General of the EPLF. With a view to help lift the military pressure from Eritrea and to split the weight of the Ethiopian army and to force it to fight several engagements simultaneously, he and Afewerki helped train guerrilla fighters for the TPLF, EPRP and the OLF. Subsequent to Eritrea's independence, he was appointed deputy to Issaias Afewerki, but ostensibly resigned for health reasons.

<sup>420</sup>Ahmed Nasser is a Saho. After completing his secondary school studies in Cairo, he had military training in Syria. Under his leadership, the ELF had strong links with the USSR and Iraq.

leadership groups. But the truth is, there were and still are more fundamental factors including ideology, sectarian and ethnic cleavages and foreign involvement in the conflict.

Some observers claim that the struggle between the ELF and the EPLF is basically a Christian vs. Muslim conflict. Others say that the root cause of the conflict lies in the contradictions manifested in the various ethnic groups in Eritrea. Still others contend that the conflict is an inevitable consequence of the contradiction between a "reactionary" line followed by the ELF and a "progressive" one advanced by the EPLF. The critical element in the conflict lies in the attempt of the various factions to dominate society. The material basis of this struggle is the uneven development of the Eritrean economy, where the capitalist sector is more developed in the Christian highlands than in the Muslim inhabited lowlands. Almost all industrial and monetary activity is concentrated in the highlands. In contrast, the lowlands have stagnated outside the capitalist sector. Hence, whatever form it takes, the struggle between the various Eritrean movements has to consider this reality and the various attempts to monopolize state power against a background of conflicts based on religion, land, and ethnicity.

Moreover, the ELF continues to be closely linked with the Arab world and struggles to build a society and culture based on Islamic values and the Arabic language. Eritrean Muslims, especially the intelligentsia, strongly identify with the Arab world, whose economic and political support they believe essential to the maintenance of Eritrean independence in the shadow of Ethiopia.

In contrast, the EPLF perceives a close relationship with a reformed Ethiopia as indispensable to the future peace and prosperity of Eritrea. It regards the Arab connection as artificial, even dangerous, because it

highlights religion and cultivates links with expansionist Arab regimes. Rejecting Arabic, the EPLF promotes Tigrigna. While the EPLF suspects that the ELF would rely on the Arabs to impose its own perception of Eritrean identity, the ELF, likewise, believes that the EPLF would do the same with the help of Ethiopia. It is such conflicting perceptions of this identity that have become the main obstacles to Eritrean unity.<sup>421</sup> But are there also other differences?

According to Teclai Ghebre-Mariam, a former Central Committee member of the EPLF, and chief of its Security Department (Halewa Sewra), one cannot tell what the EPLF has as its guiding philosophy. Sometimes—he says—it pretends to be Marxist-Leninist, at other times Marxist, and, occasionally, it drops these masks and stands with Arab reaction. But in reality, it is led by an opportunistic petite bourgeois clique which feeds its innocent victims with extreme chauvinism and narrow nationalism.<sup>422</sup>

The above assessment confirms the fact that in the earlier period, the EPLF leadership got rid of a considerable number of “leftists” and radical Eritreans. Many of them were veterans of the Ethiopian student movement. They had struggled for greater democracy within the EPLF, and for a united front of the exploited classes in Ethiopia so that the struggle should be seen primarily as one of class rather than of ethnicity. Petros Solomon and Sebat Ephreim used to entertain this idea.<sup>423</sup>

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<sup>421</sup>Markais, *National and Class Conflict...*, 142-145.

<sup>422</sup>“An interview with Teclai Ghebre-Mariam,” *Heritage: The African Quarterly of Arts and Letters*, Lagos/Nigeria, vol. I, 1982.

<sup>423</sup>Petros Solomon is now the Minister for Foreign Affairs. Sebat Ephreim is now Minister for Public Health. Both of them studied at Addis Ababa University. They were members of the radical Menka group.



It is often said that the Eritreans enjoyed fighting one another as much as fighting the Ethiopian army, and that the contradictions and animosities between the two movements are epitomized by Abdella Idris, the agile ELF military commander, and the sly Issaiyas Afewerki, who is now the Secretary General of the EPLF and the President of Eritrea. The two men symbolize the conflicts between Muslims and Christians, lowlanders and highlanders, settled agriculturalists and sedentary nomads, leftists and traditionalists, and so on.

Because of ethnic, ideological and religious differences, in February 1972, a bloody civil war broke out between the EPLF and the ELF--a war unleashed two decades ago, but still continuing to this day one way or the other. In 1973 alone, some 1,000 Eritreans were killed as a result of such fighting. The Christian and leftist elements within ELF began to join the EPLF. On July 15, 1977, for example, through the orders of the ELF military commander, Abdella Idris, the ELF attacked 190-200 of its own fighters who were camped at Agordat. This was done to discourage any ELF member from joining the EPLF. Some one hundred were killed, seventy were captured, while twenty escaped to the EPLF. Similarly, on 17 July 1977, the ELF attacked its own companies No. 161 and 159. Out of one hundred forty fighters, five were killed, four injured, and seven captured. The rest escaped to the EPLF. In the summer of 1977, over 1,200 so-called Fallul<sup>424</sup> joined the EPLF.<sup>425</sup>

Initiated by the Abdulla Idris faction of the ELF, in March 1981, fighting again broke out between the ELF and the EPLF, in which the former had a

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<sup>424</sup>Fallul means anarchist. The word can also mean literally a rebel, or one who is not subservient to traditional authority.

<sup>425</sup>Duggan, John, "A First Hand Report on a Visit to Eritrea," 41. Mimeo, ND. He was the only foreign observer to visit all the important Eritrean movements, i.e., the ELF, the EPLF and Osman Saleh Sabbe's PLF. He provides an interesting account, a copy of which is with the author.

considerable set back.<sup>426</sup> The TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front), sent three brigades to help the EPLF in the civil war. Weakened and victimized by the concerted attack from the EPLF and TPLF, the defeated ELF fighters, numbering around 6,500 in all by then, were forced into the Sudan and disarmed there. The ELF subsequently split into several fragments.<sup>427</sup>

We should note that most of the 1,500 radical ELF leftists who joined the EPLF were killed in Massawa fighting the Ethiopian army from December 1977 to January 1978. These radical leftists and veteran Marxists had led the struggle for inner party democracy within the EPLF. It appears that because their presence was considered a threat to the dictatorial tendencies of the EPLF leadership which called them Menka,<sup>428</sup> they were deliberately placed at the forefront, where they were massacred in the conventional war tactics employed by the EPLF. The attempt to eliminate the left had, however, started earlier. For example, among those Marxist intellectuals who were directly killed by the EPLF leadership in 1975 were first and foremost, the charismatic Yohannes Sebhatu, Dr. Russom, Tareke Yehedego, Tesfa Kidane, Habte Selassie, Aberash Melkie, Dehab Tesfa Tsion, Debesai Ghebre Selassie, Afewerki Tecklou

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<sup>426</sup>*The Indian Ocean Newsletter*, 28 June 1986.

<sup>427</sup>The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was primarily organized, trained and armed by the EPLF to help the latter fight the ELF and subsequently the military government in Addis Ababa.

<sup>428</sup>Menka literally means a bat. But in the political jargon of the movement, it was a political tendency within the EPLF. It signified those individuals who conducted their political affairs under the cover of darkness. The above intellectuals who all studied at Addis Ababa University were among the leaders of the opposition. They were truly interested in reforming the EPLF and transforming it into a progressive liberation movement for all of Ethiopia. To that end, they openly condemned the sectarian political line advanced by Issaiyas Afewerki. See Melaku Tegegne, "Eritrea: Problems of the Nationalist Movement," *Proceedings of the 4th International Conference in the Horn of Africa--Conditions for the Possibility of Peace in the Horn of Africa*, (New York: City College of New York, the City University of New York, 1989), 47.

and most significant, Muse Tesfa Michael. They were put on trial in June 1974 and executed by the orders of Issaiyas Afewerki in August 1975. For instance, Muse Tesfa Michael, who studied at Addis Ababa University, was a gifted orator and a skilled dialectician. He was in the fifth zone in 1967, but surrendered to the Ethiopian Embassy in Khartoum in 1968 and then joined the EPLF in the Sahel some years later, hoping to reform the movement.<sup>429</sup>

Since then, the ELF has been bedeviled by factions. For example, the Eritrean Liberation Front Unified Organization is composed of the ELF-Revolutionary Command of Abdel Khadir Jelani and the ELF-People's Liberation Forces of Osman Sahleh Sabbe.<sup>430</sup> The ELF-UO was formed following the Saudi sponsored Jeddah accord, with the aim of bringing together all the Eritrean resistance fighters not in the EPLF.<sup>431</sup> The organization which calls itself the ELF-Central Command, is now led by Omar Mohammed Al Burj, who replaced Osman Sabbe, who died in Cairo on April 5, 1987.<sup>432</sup>

John D. Duggan, an American physician who spent some time with all the guerrilla movements in Eritrea, summarizes his views this way:

With the exception of the EPLF, the fighters in all the other fronts were free to discuss critically their organizations. But there was something wrong with the EPLF, which has a long bloody history of internal repression. While the fighters in the other fronts were free to critically discuss their own organizations, the all pervasive background of controlled information and the lack of internal democracy in the EPLF [is obvious]. When journalists came from a country like Saudi

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<sup>429</sup>"Interview, Teclai G.M." (in) *Heritage: The African Quarterly of Arts and Letters*, vol. I, Lagos (Nigeria: 1982), 11-19.

<sup>430</sup>*AFP Paris* (English) 27 July 1986, FBIS, 26 July 1986.

<sup>431</sup>*Indian Ocean Newsletter*, 2 August 1986.

<sup>432</sup>*Indian Ocean Newsletter*, 14 April 1987.

Arabia, the EPLF guides would hide all the Marxist books, and all would carry copies of the Koran, and the guests would be taken only to the lowland Muslim areas of Eritrea, in an effort to make Eritrea appear as an Arab country. When leftist journalists came, they were given a different tour. So too with liberal and conservative journalists from the west. All were shown only what the EPLF believed they wanted to see. All felt that there was something basically wrong with an organization that was deceptive, and where fighters can be arrested at night and disappear. When I left the EPLF zone and got back to Port Sudan, I felt as though I had just gotten out of prison.<sup>433</sup>

The ELF-PLF personnel seemed older. They were about ninety-eight percent Muslims from the lowlands. No restrictions on movements were encountered. The areas under its control were well-administered and had good clinics.<sup>434</sup>

Addis Ababa's Arab allies like South Yemen and Libya had consistently urged a negotiated settlement to the fighting. The ELF-RC, *i.e.*, the faction led by Abdella Idris, had, accordingly, taken the initiative to negotiate with the Dergue demanding that a separate autonomy be provided for the Ben Amir of the Barka lowlands. They claimed that they had nothing to do with the EPLF.<sup>435</sup>

Indeed, in 1988, to the annoyance of the EPLF, representatives from the main five parts of the Eritrean lowlands--Al Gash Setit, Barka, Keren, the Sahel and the Red Sea met and decided to have talks with Addis Ababa without preconditions.<sup>436</sup> The first meeting was held in New Delhi. Ibrahim Siraj, Head of the External Office of the Eritrean Lowlanders Organization (ELO), led

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<sup>433</sup>Op. cit., John Duggan, *A First Hand Report...*, 13-30.

<sup>434</sup>Ibid., Duggan, *A First Hand Report...*, 21-25.

<sup>435</sup>*The Indian Ocean Newsletter*, 28 June 1986.

<sup>436</sup>The leaders of the five parts included: Abdella Idris (ELF); Ahmed Muhammed Nasser (ELF-UO); Omar Said Muhammed Al Bourj (ELF-UO); Muhammed Saeed (ELF-PLF); and Abdul Quadir Jilani (ELF-National Command).

the Eritrean side, while the Ethiopian party was led by Moges Habte Mariam, the Ambassador to Saudi Arabia. To the shock and horror of the EPLF, the Eritrean side called for granting autonomy for the lowlanders within the framework of Ethiopian sovereignty. The proposal was well received and taken to Addis Ababa where a meeting was arranged with former President Mengistu Haile Mariam. In December of the same year, the scheme of regional autonomy for the lowlands was officially announced by the Ethiopian Government and the objective of setting up an administrative and military presence in that part of Eritrea was discussed in order to ensure security and stability.<sup>437</sup>

In contrast, Ali Qadi, the representative of the Eritrean Liberation Front--United Organization to Morocco and Senegal, argued that the idea of dividing Eritrea into Muslim and Christian areas was unacceptable. He rejected self-rule as proposed by Addis Ababa. Qadi noted that the Soviet model based on the establishment of various republics within a unified country might be acceptable to the Eritreans.<sup>438</sup>

### **The EPLF/TPLF Alliance**

In 1972-1973, a group of Tigreans had created a clandestine association, known as Mahber Politicka, or a political association, which shortly came to be known as the Tigray Liberation Front. Its members were trained and armed by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF).<sup>439</sup> Shortly thereafter, well-known

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<sup>437</sup>The separate autonomy was intended for some 750,000 lowlanders. See *The Guardian* (London), 11 January 1989. See also "Eritrean Group Favours Peaceful Settlement," *Arab News*, 15, no. 44, 10 January 1990.

<sup>438</sup>Muhammed Ibrahim, "Eritreans to seek European Economic Community Mediation in Dispute," *Arab News*, 11 March 1989.

<sup>439</sup>Kahsay Berhe, "The National Movement in Tigray: Myths and Realities," February 1991, an unpublished study by a one-time TPLF functionary.

individuals within the EPLF became actively involved in organizing what was to become the Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF). Melesse Teckle, a student activist who attended the Adwa Mission School, and later Addis Ababa University, was recruited very early for this purpose by Petros Solomon—who was the EPLF chief of security.<sup>440</sup> Likewise, Wolde Selassie Negga (Sebhat Negga), Atakilt Tsehaye (Abaie Tsehaye), Aregawe Berhe (Berihun), Gebre Selassie Araya (Esseye), Legessie Zenawie (Melesse Zenawie), and others were all recruited at that time.<sup>441</sup> Sebhat Ephreim, who was later to become the Chief of Staff of the EPLF, spent a considerable time in organizing the TPLF.<sup>442</sup>

The EPLF provided the necessary military training and the arms. In fact, Meharie Haile, otherwise known as Mussie Baraki, a long time EPLF operative, became a member of the Central Committee of the TPLF and its real military commander.<sup>443</sup> While the members of the TLF described the ELF as a democratic organization, they portrayed the EPLF as a sectarian organization which did not stand for the interests of all Eritreans. The involvement of both Eritrean movements in the establishment of two organizations in Tigray had an ulterior motive. Since both Eritrean movements were at logger-heads with one another, there was the military need to enlist allies. The military

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<sup>440</sup>Yewoyane Talak Seira, *Confessions and Observations made by two former members of the TPLF-Abraham Yayeh and Ghebre Medhin Araya*, Addis Ababa, Tir 1982-January 1989.

<sup>441</sup>Ibid., 101. After Melesse Teckle was executed by the Dergue for bombing the Addis Ababa City Hall and Wabi Shibelle Hotel in 1976, his name became Legesse Zenawies' *non de guerre*.

<sup>442</sup>Ibid., 57, 96. Sebhat Ephreim studied at Addis Ababa University. He worked up through the rank and file of the EPLF army until he started to function as a sort of chief of staff.

<sup>443</sup>Op. cit., *The National Movement....* See also Op. cit., *Yewoyane Talak Seira*, 49, 96.

imperative to split the Ethiopian army, which the Eritrean movements were battling, and to diffuse its energy and field of operations should be considered as another motive.

Whether inspired by unbridled opportunism or induced to say so, the TPLF echoed the EPLF position and began to present the Eritrean conflict as a colonial question. Like its mentor, the TPLF also presented its own cause as a struggle against what it called Ethiopian colonialism. But strangely enough, even if the Amharas were identified with Ethiopian colonialism, very few of them lived in Tigrai. Those who ran the provincial machinery, the judiciary, the civil service and the police force were Tigreans. The administration was run by Tigreans from top to bottom. No Amhara community had any economic or social dominance in Tigrai.<sup>444</sup> Since Tigrai had no surplus production to talk of in any sector, even the administrative budget of Tigrai was directly subsidized by the central government in Addis Ababa. Yet, the TPLF presented the problem of Tigrai as a colonial question.

Having liquidated its rival, *i.e.*, the TLF, the TPLF announced that it was fighting for the independence of Tigrai from Ethiopia, and for creating the "Democratic Republic of Tigrai."<sup>445</sup> Like its EPLF mentor which decimated the Menka movement, the TPLF also declared war on Tigrean patriots and intellectuals who strongly identified with Ethiopian nationalism. Those who were purged from the TPLF and summarily executed included: Memhir Dawit (Adigrat), Tekle Hawaz (Adwa), Ukubagzie Beyene (Axum), Asbeha Dagneu (Adwa), Mengesha Belaie (Shire), Mulugetta Abraham (Endertta), Almaz Asfaw (Mekelle), Kidane Ghirma (Mekelle), and others.<sup>446</sup>

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<sup>444</sup>Op. cit., *The National Movement in Tigrai...*, 8.

<sup>445</sup>*Manifesto of the TPLF*, 1976, Tigrigna edition, 18.

<sup>446</sup>*Yewoyane Talak Seira*, 52.

The relations between the two movements grew rapidly because the EPLF had trained, organized and successfully penetrated the leadership of the TPLF. It is argued by Abraham Yayeh and Ghebre Medhin Araya that the TPLF has agreed to transfer Tigrean lands "claimed" by the EPLF to Eritrean jurisdiction. The lands include Badmo, Deddibit, Shiraro, Wohaden, Mentebteb, Adi Hagerai, Adi Nebrere, Adi Quala, Asaye and Zale Ambessa.<sup>447</sup> The agreement to this effect was signed by Sebhat Ephreim and Petros Solomon on behalf of the EPLF, and by Abaye Tsehai and Melesse Zenawie, on behalf of the TPLF.<sup>448</sup>

In turn, it is aimed that Tigrai would annex on flimsy grounds, the provinces of Setit Humera, Tselemt, Wolkait and Tsegede from Gondar, and Raya, Kobo and all the land as far as Lake Ashege from Wollo.<sup>449</sup> The TPLF objective of wanting to annex almost half of Gondar and one-quarter of Wollo has no historical, ethnic, or linguistic basis. It is in part conceived as a compensatory move in case the EPLF takes over the above mentioned territories from Tigrai, and in part, as a means of undermining the Amharas by depriving them of rich agricultural areas which were annually contributing more than \$300 million to the economy.

The ELF was beaten as a military organization in Eritrea, largely through the cooperation of the EPLF and the TPLF. In many of the TPLF's military encounters with the Ethiopian army, the EPLF supported the TPLF, and vice-versa. On February 19, 1987, for example, EPLF forces participated

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<sup>447</sup>Op. cit., *Yewoyane Talak Seira...*, 101.

<sup>448</sup>Ibid., 115.

<sup>449</sup>Ibid., 65.



with the TPLF at Enda Selassie, Tigray.<sup>450</sup> Likewise, the TPLF fought in Eritrea in support of the EPLF, including the Red Star Campaign of 1982, in which many Tigrean fighters simply perished.<sup>451</sup>

When the TPLF issued its political programme of independence, the EPLF strongly criticized the TPLF position. It saw no grounds for struggling for Tigrean independence,<sup>452</sup> because an independent Tigray would complicate matters, especially if it were to be linked with Eritrea. It would change the demographic balance and make the Muslims in Eritrea an insignificant minority--something to which the neighbouring Muslim countries would not acquiesce. Nevertheless, the TPLF performed magnificently and delivered its promises by helping the EPLF defeat the ELF and push it out of Eritrea.

Indeed, as the Tigrean Alem Abbay, a close observer of the scene, noted:

The price the Tigreans paid for Eritrea remains unappreciated. It would not be too difficult to imagine the course of the Eritrean revolution had the ELF not been pushed out of Eritrea. When the EPLF was pinned down by Mengistu's army in Nakfa, the Tigrean fighters arrived for its rescue twice. During the "Red Star Campaign" (1982), for instance, Tigreans fought in Nakfa on the Eritrean side for nine months. Furthermore, without the supreme sacrifice of the Tigreans, the demand for Eritrean independence would have been little more than a bargaining chip for a negotiated settlement. Surprisingly, the Tigrean factor is neither acknowledged nor appreciated among some Eritreans.<sup>453</sup>

Eritrean Muslims even now wonder why the EPLF is still maintaining a strategic alliance with the non-Eritrean TPLF at the expense of Eritrean

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<sup>450</sup>TPLF Press Release, 22 Feb. 1989, in *Horn of Africa Bulletin*, 1, no. 2, March 1989.

<sup>451</sup>Op. cit., *Yewoyane Talak...*, 92.

<sup>452</sup>Op. cit., Kahsay Berhe, "The National Movement...."

<sup>453</sup>Alem Abbay, "Unappreciated Gift Horse in the Mouth," *The Ethiopian Times*, March/April, 1, no. 02, 1993.

Muslims. They wonder why a foreign movement--the TPLF--was invited to invade Eritrea and collaborate with the EPLF and destroy the ELF--the first Eritrean Liberation Front. They also wonder why the EPLF is waging war against all Arabic-speaking Muslim organizations, while maintaining a special relationship with the Christian Tigrigna-speaking TPLF.<sup>454</sup>

By foreign elements the author meant the TPLF. Obviously, the interference of the Arab countries in the Eritrean conflict would not be considered an interference, in so far as it is in support of the ELF and internal to Islam. Such a mind frame can only make co-existence between the followers of the two religions very taxing and difficult.

Over the last several years, two major wars were fought between the ELF and the EPLF. The first (1972-1974) was a draw. The second (1981-1982), resulted in an EPLF victory, which was made possible with the military support of the TPLF. Since then, the EPLF has been able to consolidate its gains and even to negotiate with the Ethiopian Government which had contemptuously dismissed it as an organization of mercenaries and paid agents.

Despite this, the dominant position of the EPLF is not without challengers. Even at a time when the movement opened direct negotiations with the Ethiopian Government through the good offices of former U. S. President Jimmy Carter, the ELF had warned: "We hold America responsible for any adverse repercussions that may result from the Ethio-EPLF talks. Unilateral negotiation between Ethiopia and the EPLF would not solve the problem, but would only complicate matters."<sup>455</sup>

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<sup>454</sup>See the letter to the editor by Abu Jihad Seiful Islam in *Arab News*, 18 April 1990. No doubt, the letter appears under a pseudo-name. But it conveys how strongly the Eritrean Muslims feel about the Christian-dominated EPLF.

<sup>455</sup>*Arab News*, 21 August 1981.

As may be expected, the ELF has now resurfaced. Four of the old factions of this movement, traditionally supported by the Muslim peoples of Eritrea, have formed the ELF-United Organization under Omar Said Muhammed Al Bourj. Since the EPLF has assumed the role of a government in Eritrea to the exclusion of all other political tendencies, the United Organizations are challenging the EPLF.<sup>456</sup>

Indeed, Muhammed Al Bourj himself contends that the EPLF alone does not represent the Eritrean people, and that because it is aware of this, it has launched an armed offensive across Sudan's border against five other Eritrean groups, and that the EPLF's minority position should not be taken to reflect the general Eritrean position.<sup>457</sup>

### **Eritrea's Independence**

Meanwhile, the Government of Mengistu Haile Mariam fell from power and was replaced by a movement which calls itself the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), in which the TPLF plays a dominant role. With the fall of Asmara, the EPLF also took over Eritrea and began to explore the possibilities of approaching the United Nations to get involved in determining Eritrea's future by means of a referendum. If the U. N. were to agree to lend its weight and prestige to supervising such a referendum, it would serve two purposes: First, the outcome of the referendum will be seen as an expression of the will of the people. Secondly, it would gain legitimacy for the EPLF and international recognition for Eritrea.

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<sup>456</sup>*The Indian Ocean Newsletter*, 18 January 1992.

<sup>457</sup>*Arab News*, 9 May 1991. See also *Arab News* 9/3/89.

But the U. N. had already disposed of the Eritrean problem almost forty years ago. Its involvement now in the Eritrean situation could only be interpreted as a violation of the cardinal principles on which the organization itself was established: respect for the independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity of member states and non-interference in their internal affairs.<sup>458</sup> The U. N. has never accepted the principle of secession of a part of a member state. In fact, as former Secretary General of the United Nations, U Thant, once remarked, the world body spent over \$500 million in the Congo to prevent the secession of Katanga.<sup>459</sup>

Following the June 1991 London Conference of Ethiopian opposition movements, which was chaired by U. S. Under Secretary of State for African Affairs, Herman Cohen, the Conference on Peace and Democracy took place in Addis Ababa from 1 July to 5 July 1991. This conference assembled some Ethiopian political movements sympathetic to the EPLF, and formally recognized the right of the Eritrean people to determine its political future by an internationally supervised referendum.<sup>460</sup>

As a result, violation of the cardinal principles of the U. N. could not be considered a problem because the TPLF allies of the EPLF were in power in Addis Ababa. Indeed, in a letter dated December 13, 1991, the President of the

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<sup>458</sup>Chapter I, Art. 1, ii of the U. N. Charter includes among the purposes of the U. N. "respect for the principle of self-determination of peoples." Article 2, iv defends the "territorial integrity or political independence of any state." See Articles 2(1); 2(4); 2(7) of the United Nations Charter. See also U. N. General Assembly Resolution 1514(xv), 2131(xx)abd. 2625(xxv) on self-determination.

<sup>459</sup>*United Nations Monthly Chronicle*, February 1970, 35-37. See also Crawford Young, "Self-determination, Territorial Integrity, and the African State System," in Francis Deng and I. William Zartman, (eds.), *Conflict Resolution in Africa* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1991), 720-34.

<sup>460</sup>*Request to the United Nations to Observe the Referendum Process in Eritrea. Report of the Secretary-General*, 47th Session, Agenda Item 97(b), Res. A/47/544, 19 October 1992.

Transitional Government of Ethiopia, Melesse Zenawie wrote to the Secretary General of the U. N.:

The future status of Eritrea should be decided by the Eritean people in a referendum. Both the Transitional Government of Ethiopia and the Provisional Government of Eritrea have registered their commitment to respect the results of the referendum in Eritrea as the genuine choice of the people concerned in an exercise of self-determination. The Transitional Government of Ethiopia wishes to bring to your attention the need to initiate appropriate measures to enable the U. N. to play this role and to supervise the referendum.<sup>461</sup>

Such a crucial and critical letter was designed to help the EPLF.<sup>462</sup> What was most astonishing, was that the Eritrean people were never given real political choices such as independence, federation, confederation and autonomy which the EPLF had long advocated. When the moment of truth arrived, it shelved its own proposals. Subsequently, U. N. Secretary General

Boutros Ghali wrote to Samir Shihabi, President of the General Assembly:

I am dispatching a technical team to gather information for the preparation of a report to be submitted to the General Assembly of possible involvement by the U. N. in the Eritrean referendum.<sup>463</sup>

After the authorities in Ethiopia requested direct U. N. involvement to verify the referendum in Eritrea, the U. N. decided to get involved. Hence, in the referendum which took place from 23 April to 25 April 1993, it was

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<sup>461</sup>The absence of opposition to a referendum on independence on the part of the new government in Ethiopia was a key factor in the international community's acceptance of the principle of Eritrean independence. This will go a long way to prove how strong the relations between the EPLF and the TPLF are, and how much influence the EPLF has over the TPLF. The more so, when it was pointed out earlier that the original leaders of the TPLF were individuals of Eritrean origin in whom the EPLF had considerably invested.

<sup>462</sup>See David Pool, "Eritrean Independence: The Legacy of the Dergue and the Politics of Reconstruction," *African Affairs* (1992, 1993), 389-402.

<sup>463</sup>See Report of the U. N. Secretary General, 47th Session, Agenda item 97(b) 47/114.

reported that 98.5% of the registered voters supported Eritrea's independence.<sup>464</sup>

Here we could raise some questions: What mandate did the Transitional Government of Ethiopia and the Provisional Government of Eritrea have to initiate the referendum? Neither the regime in Addis Ababa nor the one in Asmara is democratically elected by the people to be trusted with such a responsibility. Even if the referendum is to be seen as an "expression" of the will of the people, its legal status is dubious in so far as it is a product of an unelected and self-appointed government in Ethiopia, on whom much depended on its initiative and acceptance of the situation.

Besides, five of the most important opposition parties, who, together represent at least half of the population of Eritrea, were not involved in the referendum process and its outcome. Apart from the exclusion of the other parties, those who were allowed to vote were only given one option—vote for independence or nothing. A popularly elected future Ethiopian Government that stands for Ethiopian sovereignty and is committed to its territorial integrity, may, and on good legal grounds, raise the issue of Eritrea afresh.<sup>465</sup>

Eritrea's independence has also shattered the time-worn notion that geographical borders inherited from the former colonial powers were unalterable in Africa. Indeed, a dangerous precedent has been established for the African Continent. There is already anxiety in those African countries like Somalia, Sudan, Angola, Cameroon, Zaire, Mali, Senegal, South Africa, and others, that are themselves facing separatist movements.

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<sup>464</sup>U. N. General Assembly, 47th Session, 3rd Committee, Agenda item 97(b), Res. A/C.3/47/L.20.

<sup>465</sup>Mesfin Araya, "Union vs. Separation: the Eritrean Referendum," *Ethiopian Review*, 3, no. 4, April 1993.

The leaders of the Eritrean opposition argue that the unrealistic ambition of the EPLF to prevail in Eritrea is quite unattainable, that the Eritrean people did not sacrifice themselves in the thirty-year war for some abstract notion of independence, but for democracy, peace and prosperity, and that the dream of the EPLF to become the sole legitimate representative of the Eritrean people has been shattered by the presence of other organizations.<sup>466</sup> The ELF-RC of Ahmed Nasser has strongly protested the arrest of twenty-six of its members in Ethiopia. While nine of them were arrested in Addis Ababa, seventeen of them were detained in Tigre province by the regime in Ethiopia.<sup>467</sup>

More ominous for the EPLF, and indeed, for regional peace and security is the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism and the existence of the fundamentalist Islamic junta in the Sudan, where training camps have been established with the help of Iran for the expressed use of the Mujahedeen.<sup>468</sup> In fact, in April 1991, leading Islamic politicians and intellectuals from fifty-five countries and three continents had met in the Sudan to draft a common strategy for the establishment of Muslim states in their respective lands. The Islamic Resistance Movement ( Hamas), Hezbollah, and the Islamic Jihad Movement, all champion violence, terrorism and Holy War "to rid Muslims of the un-Islamic governments" elsewhere.<sup>469</sup>

The recent bombing of the World Trade Center in New York City, the civil war in the Sudan between Muslims and Christians, terrorist attacks by

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<sup>466</sup>*Arab News*, 12 May 1990.

<sup>467</sup>*The Indian Ocean Newsletter*, May 14, 1994.

<sup>468</sup>Judith Miller, "The Challenge of Radical Islam," *Foreign Affairs*, Spring 1993.

<sup>469</sup>*Ibid.*

radical Muslim groups in Egypt, the popularity of Islamic parties in Algeria and Tunisia, the instability of the newly independent Central Asian republics, the struggle of the Sheite in Lebanon for power, Iran's pursuit of economic and political influence in the Persian Gulf, all this and more, does not augur well for peace and stability.<sup>470</sup> Should the Muslim onslaught continue, the Copts of Egypt, Christian Eritreans and Ethiopians and the non-Arabized Africans of Southern Sudan will face annihilation.

Perhaps, more ominous for the EPLF is the emergence of Mujahedeen of the Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement (EIJM), which was launched on 30 November 1988. It claims to represent itself as an extension of the Eritrean Muslim People's jihad since the fall of the Islamic Caliphate.<sup>471</sup> According to the leader of the movement, there is an American-Zionist plan to isolate Eritrea from Arabs and turn Eritreans against Arab strategies in the Red Sea<sup>472</sup>, that the EPLF is struggling to retain the glory of Christianity in Ethiopia<sup>473</sup>, that it attempts to combat the Arabic language and drive it out of government institutions, and to impose the Tigrigna language as a sole official language in Eritrea, in order to weaken Islamic awareness and to threaten Islamic and Arab culture.<sup>474</sup>

Now that the Cold War is over and the hegemonic presence of the major world powers in Northeast Africa considerably diminished, fundamentalist

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<sup>470</sup>Leon T. Hadar, "Fanning the Fear of Islam," *Foreign Affairs*, Spring 1993.

<sup>471</sup>*Amman Al-Ribat* (Arabic), 9 June 1993, 11.

<sup>472</sup>*Arab News*, 12 May 1990.

<sup>473</sup>Muhammed Al-Sabhani, *EPLF, between Christian Objectives and the Aggressive Practices against Muslims in Eritrea*. Forward by Sheikh Abu Nawal, 1 June 1991. The Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement, Information Office.

<sup>474</sup>Op. cit., *Amman Al-Ribat*, 11.



Islam is busy jockeying to fill the vacancy--something which does not augur well for the peace and security of the countries of the region, including Eritrea.

Confronted by hostile forces which loom on all sides, and perhaps pushed into desperation, Issaias Afewerki proposed to Ethiopia, common security and defence, common currency, dual nationality to the citizens of both countries, and economic cooperation leading into more integration. However, the proposal did not go well with his Ethiopian critics. They repeatedly asked: If the EPLF's objective is more integration with Ethiopia, why disintegrate what had already been integrated?

Moreover, the Islamic Jihad Movement considers Afewerki's proposal as unrealistic. In fact, It contends that the EPLF is nothing but an extension of the Unionist Party of Eritrea of the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>475</sup> Given such irreconcilable contradictions, how could internal peace and stability be maintained in Eritrea?

What could we conclude from what has transpired? Obviously, Eritrea is faced with multiple problems--ethnic, religious, economic, political, and so on. In so far as the great majority of the masses are the last to be affected by national consciousness and nationalism, we could agree with Hobsbawn. In that respect, Eritrean nationalism should be interpreted as the preoccupation of the elite, *i.e.*, the EPLF, which in the words of Nairn has provided the historical, philosophical, ethnographic and geographical basis of Eritrean nationalism.

We could also agree with Ernest Gellner who maintains that the intelligentsia mobilize the proletariat in the anti-colonial struggle. But once

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<sup>475</sup> *Al-Hayah* (Arabic), London, 29 April 1993, 6.

independence is achieved, the intelligentsia create a magnificent job monopoly for themselves and neglect the proletariat, which, in turn, is disillusioned. Such an interpretation is equally valid for Eritrea.

Chatterjee's contention that the spiritual domain bears the essential marks of cultural identity and the distinctness of one's spiritual culture forms a fundamental feature of anti-colonial nationalism, is also valid for Eritrea. In fact, it was to preserve this identity that Eritreans struggled for a long time against colonialism, and it is also around such an identity that a genuine nationalism could be built. However, in a situation where one ethnic group/nationality replaces the former colonial power and attempts to impose its cultural values and institutions on others, as is the case with today's Eritrea, conflict has not been far away.

In so far as the primordial group is the unit with which the new states identify, and through which their values and beliefs are transmitted, one can also agree with Geertz. His theory on primordialism can be used to study the Eritrean society. Indeed, when Issaias Afewerki says that Eritrea will disintegrate if the people are allowed to form political parties along ethnic and religious lines, he touches a sensitive chord. It shows the unit with which most people identify. There is also unevenness of development which has led to envy and frustration in the lowlands over unfulfilled expectations. We could, therefore, agree with Mesfin Araya, the Eritrean Political Scientist, who concludes that citizenship was defined by attachment to one's parochial commitments rather than to the Eritrean nation-state.

## CHAPTER IV

### The Root Causes of the Ethio-Eritrean Conflict

Over the last several years, much has been written about the Eritrean conflict, but interpretations about its causes vary. For Haggai Erlich<sup>476</sup>, for example, the Eritrean conflict is an outcome of internal dynamics and of external attempts to Arabize the Red Sea. For Richard Sherman,<sup>477</sup> and David Pool<sup>478</sup>, however, the origin of the conflict was the violation of Eritrea's federal status—a status which they claim, was promoted, not by the concerned parties, but by the Western powers for the advancement of their strategic goals in the region.

Such an interpretation does not go deep enough into the root causes of the conflict. It disregards, for instance, the implication of the fact that Tigray and Shoa<sup>479</sup> have been traditional rivals for supremacy in Ethiopian politics. It overlooks also the willing role played by Menelik II in the creation of Italian Eritrea, and the bitter hostility that has left among the inhabitants, who felt betrayed by an emperor whose duty it was to defend them. The cruel treatment which some of them received from the same emperor for enlisting in the Italian colonial army and for fighting against Ethiopia at the Battle of

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<sup>476</sup>Erlich, Haggai, *The Struggle Over Eritrea (1962-1978)* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institute Press, 1983).

<sup>477</sup>Sherman, Richard, *Eritrea, the Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1980).

<sup>478</sup>Pool, David, *Eritrea, Africa's Longest War*, Anti-Slavery Society, (London: Calverts Press, 1979).

<sup>479</sup>Tigray, the northern Ethiopian province, has been Ethiopia's long time political centre. Many of the important provinces of present-day Eritrea were also administratively united with Tigray. Shoa became the political centre with the ascendance of Menelik in 1889.

Adowa in 1896, has also left a deep legacy of resentment to a Shoan-centered Ethiopian leadership. For all these and other reasons, therefore, even if the violation of Eritrea's federal status constitutes an important cause of the conflict, tracing the root causes of the conflict to the period of the federation has an element of superficiality in it. Discussing the conflict without some knowledge of the nature of the Ethiopian state, would also make one's effort mechanical and unscientific. ✓

Politically active Eritreans assembled in the EPLF claim that, in 1952, there was an unequivocal demand for independence on the part of the Eritrean people. Despite this, they say, the United Nations imposed on Eritrea a federation with Haile Selassie's Ethiopia<sup>480</sup>, not because of historical proofs, but because the Ethiopian version of Eritrea's history fitted the strategic needs of the foreign powers in the area who decided the fate of Eritrea after World War II.

The same interpretation--an interpretation that is central to this chapter--has also been reiterated most recently by an Eritrean political activist--Jordan Gebre Medhin. He maintains that, in the 1940s, Eritreans abhorred any formal links with Ethiopia, that less than twenty percent of Eritreans wanted unity with Ethiopia, that the United Nations sponsored referendum was internationally instigated by the United States, and that the Unionist Party imposed by Ethiopia had insignificant popular support in Eritrea.<sup>481</sup>

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<sup>480</sup>*Harnet/Liberation*, published monthly by Eritreans for Liberation in North America, II, no. 2, February 1973, 15.

<sup>481</sup>Jordan Gebre Medhin, "Eritreans for Independence: Majority Politics of the 1940s," *Ethiopian Review*, 3, no. 2, February 1993.

The role played by the Four Power Commission of Investigation, as well as of the United Nations, and the referendum carried out in Eritrea are covered in the next chapter. There is no need to go into the details here, except perhaps to refer to the events now and then.

The tendency to put the blame on external sources who allegedly promoted the idea of Ethio-Eritrean federation is a recurrent theme in much of the literature. What about the local actors--the Eritreans and the Ethiopians? Were the Eritreans, for instance, simple victims of forces that they could not influence, or did they play a role? If royal absolutism is incompatible with representative government, did the Ethiopians accept the idea of federation because they believed in it, or as a temporary arrangement that could pave the way for larger designs later? If the historical facts are, as they have been presented by Jordan Gebre Medhin, one could say that a grave injustice has been committed on the Eritrean people. But, in reality, his interpretation is problematic and shows little concern for historical facts and accuracy in presenting them. History is deliberately distorted or misrepresented, and important facts are either completely ignored or twisted to serve the purposes of the author. Such an interpretation cannot go unchallenged.

In this chapter we will be primarily concerned with the Eritreans and the Ethiopians, and in examining the role both played in either advancing the cause of unity, or in drifting apart. We shall search for answers to the following questions: Were there unequivocal demands for self-determination and independence on the part of the Eritrea people in the 1940s? Did Eritreans abhor any formal links with Ethiopia? Was the Unionist Party insignificant? We will also look at the Ethio-Eritrean federation and examine how its demise contributed to strengthen the established historical memory about Menelik

and how it aggravated the conflict. Let us first examine the nature of the Ethiopian state itself, since it is central to everything we will consider.

### The Ethiopian State

A comprehensive study of the traditional Ethiopian state is sadly lacking, as demonstrated by the thinness of the literature.<sup>482</sup> Understanding the state is urgent, in view of the fact that as a result of the 1974 revolution, the same state simply collapsed without the least resistance, that the nobility, considered to be the most powerful class in the country, simply vanished from the scene, and that neither crown nor church was found necessary for the construction of the new state. All these reasons should serve as a further justification for the study of that state. Our ignorance could perhaps be bridged by studying the state in the different phases of Ethiopian history.

The traditional Ethiopian state of Menelik and Haile Selassie was an autocratic and an absolutist state. Its power was never limited by any agency internal to itself. In fact, all power was vested in one man--the emperor--who was not just the symbol of the state, but as Clapham rightly points out, the state

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<sup>482</sup>Among the standard works are: Margaret Perham's *The Government of Ethiopia* (Northwestern University Press, 1948); Leonard Mosley's *Haile Selassie: The Conquering Lion* (London, 1964); Christopher Clapham's *Haile Selassie's Government* (New York, 1969); Richard Greenfield's *Ethiopia, A New Political History* (New York, Praeger, 1965); Robert Hess's *Ethiopia, the Modernization of Autocracy* (Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 1970); Peter Schwab's *Decision Making in Ethiopia* (Rutherford, Teaneck, 1972); Taddese Tamrat's *Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527* (Oxford University Press, 1972); John Markakis's *Ethiopia, Anatomy of a Traditional Polity* (Addis Ababa, Oxford University Press, 1974); Patrick Gilkes' *The Dying Lion: Feudalism and Modernization in Ethiopia* (London, Julian Friedmann Pub., 1975); and Addis Hiwot's *Ethiopia from Autocracy to Revolution* (London, R.A.P.E., 1975).

While Clapham, Gilkes and Markakis describe the Ethiopian state as "traditional" or as "feudal autocracy," Mosley termed it as "paternalism." On the other hand, Robert Hess prefers to describe it as "constitutionalized absolutism."

itself<sup>483</sup>, i.e., *L'etat c'est moi*. It meant his person, his private staff and his patrimony. The emperor could, if he wanted to, legislate at will. He could create, reform or abolish institutions. He could declare war or peace, and also dispose of state revenues and state properties as he saw fit.

Emperor  
&  
State  
=  
Same  
Corpus

In such a set-up, royal absolutism held unquestioned supremacy over all classes. It was never an arbitrator between contending social forces, because such forces did not exist, nor was it an instrument of a resurgent nobility, as Perry Anderson would argue.<sup>484</sup> The nobility of the Ethiopian state of Haile Selassie's reign was effectively shorn of its power and reduced to a subordinate status very early.<sup>485</sup> From its very inception, Ethiopian absolutism had to separate and distance itself from its traditional class base, and to exercise control over the nobility in order to be able to reconstruct the unitary state.

Under such circumstances, the content of absolutism had more in common with modern-day post colonial states than with post-medieval monarchies of either Western or Eastern Europe. However, both in form and outward appearance—royal power, aristocratic privileges, legitimacy based on the mythology of King Solomon and Queen of Sheba, pomp and ceremony at court—the Ethiopian state was largely traditional.

Under Menelik and Haile Selassie, the state increasingly strove to bring a certain uniformity to all Ethiopian provinces and regions, regardless of the

<sup>483</sup>Clapham argues that the "imperial system" meant the emperor, and that he, and he alone, constituted the state. See Chapter 3 of *Haile Selassie's Government*.

<sup>484</sup>Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London: NLB, 1974). For Anderson, the hallmark of feudalism is fragmentation of power; see 147-153, and 229-245.

<sup>485</sup>For the struggle between monarchy and aristocracy in Ethiopia, see Mordechai Abir, *Ethiopia: The Era of the Princes*, (New York: Praeger, 1968).

sentiments of those who were subject to its authority. In effect, centralization was based less on the coming together of all Ethiopia's components in a common melting-pot, than on their common submission to the pre-eminence of the province of Shoa.<sup>486</sup> Traditionally, for example, the power of the provinces of Ethiopia derived from their ability to retain a portion of the surplus by minimizing tribute transfers to the central government. Money and payments in kind retained locally were used to build constituencies.<sup>487</sup>

However, under Menelik and Haile Selassie, the central government proceeded with a calculated policy of eroding the traditional autonomy of the provinces not only by appointing Shoan officials loyal to the imperial court, but also by weakening the local elite's economic base and by insisting that it yield the surplus to the centre. As a result, the loss of local autonomy contributed to the impoverishment of provinces like Wollo,<sup>488</sup> and, therefore, to increasing dependency on the central government. Provinces such as Tigrai, Keffa, Wollega, Gondar, Harrar and others that were once dynamic, were administratively and economically brought to their knees and politically marginalized.<sup>489</sup>

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<sup>486</sup>For the core-periphery relation, see *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia, Essays in History and Social Anthropology*, Donald Dunham and Wendy James (eds.), (Cambridge: 1986). See also Rene Lefort: *Ethiopia, An Heretical Revolution?*, trans. by A. M. Barrett (London: 1983).

<sup>487</sup>See James McCann, *From Poverty to Famine in Northeast Ethiopia: A Rural History, 1900-1935* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1987).

<sup>488</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>489</sup>In the thirty-three years after the liberation of the country from the forces of Italian fascism, *i. e.*, from 1941-1974, in the province of Gondar alone, not a single leader from that province was appointed to be its Governor. All appointees were from Shoa. They included Asrate Kassa (1942-44); (1952-56); Imru Haile Selassie (1944-1945); Andargatchew Messaie (1947-1952); Merid Mengesha (1956-1958); Kifle Daddi (1958-1964); Amha Abera (1964-1968); and Tamrat Yegezu (1968-1974).



In most countries, the general historical pattern of centralization has been a necessary prelude to modernization. But in the case of Ethiopia, and especially for Haile Selassie, centralization answered the need for consolidation of his authority and aided the emperor in his efforts to augment the powers of the crown at the expense of local leaders. If he sponsored modernization, the emperor did so, not for the purpose of broadening civil and political rights, but simply as a means of enhancing his power.<sup>490</sup>

Ethiopian absolutism, no doubt, marked a progressive advance over earlier forms of state. It brought centralization of the structure of power which, in turn, brought to an end the fragmentation of political authority. It justified the building up of a modern, professional standing army replacing the rag-tag mass levies controlled by regional war-lords. It also meant the elaboration of a uniform, centrally administered fiscal and tax system, which laid down the groundwork for the rationalization of the economy, and the setting up of a similar administrative and judicial practice throughout the country, which by itself was not bad. But because everything was decided at the centre, local initiative was killed and the decision-making process made cumbersome and inefficient.

Ethiopia, therefore, ceased to be a country in which semi-autonomous regions co-existed within the larger framework of imperial authority. Instead, it became a state with a single centre of power and a single sovereign government, with Shoa serving as a focal point of activity.<sup>491</sup> In 1935, for instance, the Shoan elite occupied forty-three of the fifty-two most important

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<sup>490</sup>Spencer, John, "Haile Selassie: Triumph and Tragedy," *ORBIS*, 18, no. 4, Winter 1975, 1129-52.

<sup>491</sup>McCann, James, *From Poverty to Famine in Northeast Ethiopia: A Rural History 1900-1935* (Philadelphia: University Press, Pennsylvania, 1987), 19.

positions in the central government. From 1941-1966, however, the proportion of Shoans occupying senior official positions decreased to sixty-two percent of the total.<sup>492</sup>

For nearly two thousand years, Ethiopians in general, and northerners, in particular, shared a common belief system which combined a sense of affiliation to a state which dominated the whole region. Ethiopia's military triumph over its foreign adversaries of the 19th century, including the Sudanese, Egyptians, and Italians, resulted in making the Ethiopians confident about their state, and therefore, became complacent. They saw no need to reform and to modernize the state.

However, between 1896 and 1936, Italy carried out the necessary reforms and succeeded in building the industrial base of its economy. When it attacked Ethiopia in 1936, it did so with modern weapons produced by Italian industry—airplanes, tanks, rockets, machine guns, mustard gas, and so on. On the other hand, Ethiopia had remained at a standstill. The weapons it used to defend itself in 1936 were not much different from those utilized forty years earlier. The course of the war and its outcome therefore left the feeling that the country was badly beaten for its cultural, industrial, military and political backwardness. Indeed, it was popularly held by modernizing intellectuals that Ethiopia was allowed to lag too far behind the advanced nations of the West. Repeated foreign invasions, lack of smooth transition of power, incessant civil wars, isolation from the rest of the world, and other factors which kept the country backward were all blamed.

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<sup>492</sup>Clapham, Christopher, *Haile Selassie's Government*, 75-77.

Defeats in war generally contribute to undermine existing political authority and state control, and provide a stimulus for change.<sup>493</sup> The Italian defeat imparted a severe blow to Ethiopia's pride and serene image of its strength. It revealed the country's inferiority in many critical areas and created a crisis for the Ethiopian state. As soon as Haile Selassie regained his throne in 1941, he had every reason to institute modernizing reforms.

Haile Selassie had to establish a modern bureaucracy and armed forces. And in order to keep himself in power, he had to use both the army and the bureaucracy, and hence, to reinforce imperial centralism. But unfortunately, the modernization of the bureaucratic apparatus and the army was not accompanied by political and economic modernization of the country as a whole. The bureaucracy and the military continued to help strengthen the medieval concept of royal absolutism.<sup>494</sup> That is why, as we will see soon, Eritrean autonomy and representative democracy became incompatible with medieval autocracy and royal absolutism.

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<sup>493</sup>For example, in Russia the emancipation of the serfs was a direct result of its defeat at the Crimean War of 1856. Likewise, the establishment of the Duma can be linked to Russia's defeat by Japan in 1905. Similarly, nearly all the "revolutionary" changes put in place by the Soviet State after 1917 were a consequence of Russia's defeat by Germany in World War I. For a comparative analysis, see Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979). The author argues that the state itself was the principal agent in causing the great upheavals in France, Russia, and China. Pre-revolutionary state institutions in those societies proved unable to accommodate the social or military pressures bearing down upon them; their own incapacity, much more than the power of revolutionaries, was the cause of their demise. See p. 284.

<sup>494</sup>Erlich, Haggai: "Tigrean Nationalism, British Involvement and Haile Selassie's Emerging Absolutism: Northern Ethiopia, 1941-43." *Asian and African Studies* 15, 1981, 216.

## The Historical Roots of the Ethio-Eritrean Conflict

Prior to 1890, there was no territory known as Eritrea. In fact, the most important provinces of present-day Eritrea, including Hamassien, Seraie and Akele Guzaie, were part and parcel of the northern Ethiopian province of Tigrai.<sup>495</sup>

Tigrai's ambition to acquire political power was finally achieved in 1872-1889, when Emperor Yohannes made Mekelle the centre of Ethiopian political power, but a power that was constantly sabotaged and undermined by King Menelik of Shoa, who collaborated with the Egyptians, the Italians, and the Mahdist enemies of Yohannes' state.<sup>496</sup>

Between the Battle of Adowa of 1896 and Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia in 1936, twenty major battles were fought on Tigrean soil<sup>497</sup>, with all their attendant consequences. For example, the majority of the 50,000-100,000 peasant warriors who devastated the Egyptians at the Battles of Gura and Gundet (1875-1876) were mostly Northern Ethiopians, including Tigreans. They also formed the rank and file of Ras Alula's army which defeated the Italians at Dogali (1887), and which also released the besieged Egyptian garrisons at Kufit, Galabat and Kassala (1885-1889). Moreover, of the 80,000 soldiers who marched to Metema under the leadership of Emperor Yohannes,

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<sup>495</sup>This is confirmed by Plowden, who, as early as 1848, observes: "The principal sub-divisions of Tigrai consist of Hamassien, Seraie, Akele Guzaie, Agame, Adi Abo, Enderta, Shire, Shilawa, Tembien and Wajirat." Plowden, T. C., *Travels in Abyssinia and the Galla Country with an Account of a Mission to Ras Ali in 1848* (London: 1868), 39.

<sup>496</sup>Menelik's intrigues are well documented by Harold Marcus. See his *The Life and Times of Menelik II*.

<sup>497</sup>Martini, F., *Li Diario Eritreo*, 1-4 (Florence: 1946); C. Zoli, *Chronache Etiopiche* (Rome: n.d.) and *Etiopia d'Oggi* (Rome: 1935); Luca dei Sabelli, *Storia di Abissinia*, 4, (Rome: 1938).

where the emperor was killed fighting the Sudanese Mahdists, the northern component was considerable.<sup>498</sup>

After the untimely death of Emperor Yohannes, internal hegemony, which for centuries had been in the north, was transferred to Menelik's Shoa. Unforgiving of his intrigues against Yohannes, the Tigreans continued to dismiss him as a usurper of power from the legitimate heirs of the late emperor. In subsequent years, Tigray was reduced to a mere semi-autonomous buffer region that Shoa dominated.<sup>499</sup>

As soon as Menelik consolidated power, he raided the district of Hawzien near Adowa and plundered it for grain. When, in 1895, he marched into Tigray with 100,000 soldiers to fight the Italians, provisioning became a very serious problem. After his soldiers had exhausted their personal supplies, Menelik was forced to send foraging parties further afield. As a result, his army fed itself from Tigrean food supplies, leaving grain and seed stocks empty, and oxen that were kept for plowing were slaughtered. This was followed by seven years of famine, and it took over a decade for agricultural production to recover to its normal level.<sup>500</sup> The failure of the Ethiopian state to provide adequate compensation for all sacrifices Tigray made in the 19th century to defend Ethiopia from foreign aggression, seems to be one of the root causes of the conflict.

<sup>498</sup>See Zewde Gebre Selassie, *Yohannes IV...*, 204-206.

<sup>499</sup>Erlich, Haggai, "Tigrean Politics 1930-1935 and the Approaching Italo-Ethiopian War," *Sixth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* (Tel Aviv: 14-17 April 1980).

<sup>500</sup>Caulk, R.A., "Armies as Predators: Soldiers and Peasants in Ethiopia, c. 1850-1935," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, II, no. 3 (1978), 460.

## The Creation of Eritrea

That Menelik “traded” Eritrea and its inhabitants to the Italians to ensure his title and crown has been discussed in detail in an earlier chapter. Here it is enough to point out that when news of the death of Yohannes reached him, Menelik informed Umberto, the King of Italy, that he would like Italian soldiers to occupy Asmara, in order to discourage the imperial pretensions of Ras Mengesha, Yohannes’ son. To be sure, he said, “God will give me the throne that for many years I have had the right to have.”<sup>501</sup> In return for his recognition as a sovereign of all Ethiopia, and for military and ammunition promises, Menelik gave the Italians carte blanche to occupy a sizable part of the Eritrean plateau, including Asmara, Ras Alula’s capital.<sup>502</sup>

On May 2, 1889, he signed the Treaty of Wuchale in which he officially ceded parts of Hamassien and Akele Guzarie to the Italians and agreed on the set-up of the borders of the new colony which came to be known as Eritrea on January 1, 1890.<sup>503</sup> Interpretations of certain clauses of the treaty led to the Battle of Adowa. But even after the Italian defeat, Menelik never pursued his advantage to chase the Italians out of Eritrea. On the contrary, he signed the Addis Ababa Treaty of October 20, 1896, which re-affirmed Italian hegemony in Eritrea and recognized the Mareb-Belessa-Muna boundary as the frontier between Eritrea and Ethiopia.<sup>504</sup> Even though the agreement was reached on

<sup>501</sup>Menelik/Umberto, AA, 26 March 1889, LV, 15, as quoted by Chris Prouty (in) *Empress Taytu and Menelik II: Ethiopia 1833-1910* (Trenton: The Red Sea Press, 1986).

<sup>502</sup>Tekle, Amare, *The Creation of the Ethio-Eritrean Federation: A Case Study in Post-War International Relations (1945-1950)*. An unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, (Denver, CO: University of Denver, 1964), 57-58.

<sup>503</sup>Rubenson, Sven, *Wichale XVII: The attempt to establish a protectorate over Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa: Haile Selassie University, 1964), 16-20.

<sup>504</sup>Marcus, *Menelik*, 119-21, 123-9.

paper, Menelik accepted the border preferred by Italy in July 1900 for which Italy had to pay five million lire.<sup>505</sup> Today, Menelik is blamed for giving away Eritrea to the Italians<sup>506</sup>, and for having not evicted them from the land Ethiopians still consider part of their historical heritage. For this, Menelik is accused of placing the interest of Shoa and his dynasty above the security and welfare of the entire Ethiopian people.

Conte Salimbeni, a major Italian figure at Menelik's court, had interesting things to say. He refers in his diary to the criticism made by the Tigreans of the Emperor for having sold part of his kingdom in exchange for arms, money and aid.<sup>507</sup> They label him, he said, a "coward", a "traitor" and a "peasant".<sup>508</sup> Even his wife, the Empress Taytu, criticized him for ceding territories to the Italians, contrary to the example of the Emperor Yohannes, who had died a heroic death before yielding an inch of his land<sup>509</sup>--a criticism which also came from Gondar, Gojjam, Tigray and elsewhere, and which seemed to embarrass him. Evidence of this is given in a letter he wrote

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<sup>505</sup>Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale* 1:754, 762. "A subsequent adjustment of the border on 15 May 1902 included the desired Kunama area within Eritrea. The sum of money was calculated as the capitalized value of the tribute from the provinces which have fallen under foreign rule [Italian]." Richard Pankhurst, "Tribute, taxation and government revenue in 19th century and early 20th century Ethiopia," *JES* 5:2 (1967) 3:106. Thalers in the amount of 10,000 to Ras Makonnen and 50,000 to Ras Wele are on record.

<sup>506</sup>Levine, Donald, *Wax and Gold* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 142.

<sup>507</sup>C. Zaghi (ed.), *Crispi e Menelich nel Diario Inedito Del Conte Augusto Salimbeni* (Turin, 1956).

<sup>508</sup>*Ibid*, 12-13.

<sup>509</sup>*Ibid*, 110, 131, 150. See also C. Prouty, *Empress Taytu and Menelik II: Ethiopia 1883-1910* (London: 1986), 74-99.

to Umberto, King of Italy, dated September 20, 1889, in which he mentioned the hostility of his subjects and the provincial chiefs.<sup>510</sup>

But no criticism would be more devastating to Menelik than that of Blatta Gebre Egziabeher.<sup>511</sup> For this admirable Eritrean intellectual of his time, Ethiopia was not just a geographical expression. It was also a historical, cultural and political identity. Perhaps he was speaking for many Eritreans when he wrote to Menelik:

Your Majesty, you are making Ethiopia disappear from the boundaries where it was--the Ethiopia that King Tewodros and King Yohannes had protected--making it prosper. May God have mercy on their souls. Your Majesty, you completely cut off half of Ethiopia's limbs, and what is even worse, you are like Nero, King of Rome, who killed his mother and struck his mother's womb, tearing it into small pieces in order to examine and see how the place was where he stayed before being born. You sold your Mother Ethiopia. It is not from today that you started, but before King Yohannes died, making friends with white foreigners. It is you who let them enter and occupy our country. If you sell Mother Ethiopia for money, we will know that you reduced it to ruin. Your name will be written from generation to generation, and will be in every history book. But half of us, writing it, will curse you, saying: Second Judas Iscariot, King, fond of money, selling his Mother Ethiopia for gold. May the days of his reign be halved.<sup>512</sup>

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<sup>510</sup>Quoted in Rossetti, *Storia Diplomatica*, 81.

<sup>511</sup>Blatta Gebre Egziabeher Gila Mariam (c. 1860-1914) was born in Tseada Kristian, a few miles west of Asmara. Educated at Debre Bizen and Asmara, he had a good command of Geez, Tigrigna, Amharic, Arabic, and Italian. He joined the Italian administration in his homeland in July 1889, accompanied a series of Italian missions to Menelik and Ras Makonnen as a chief interpreter and, as a result, had access to delicate information from both sides. The Italians found compromising correspondence that was going on between him and the Ethiopian authorities of the time. Found guilty, he was put to prison in Naples, then in Nocera near Assab. He considered himself an Ethiopian residing in that part of Ethiopia, under foreign rule, i.e., Eritrea. For the details of his background, see Takeste Negash, *No medicine for the bite of a white snake: Notes on nationalism and resistance in Eritrea, 1890-1940* (Uppsala 1986).

<sup>512</sup>Blatta's letter to Menelik is available in *Archivio Eritrea*, Pacco 293, Serie II, 11 *Documenti compromettenti inviate al R. commissario civile dell' Eritrea*, Asmara 4 Agosto 1899, Allegato 11. See also Irma Taddia, "Ethiopian Source Material and Colonial Rule in the 19th Century, The Letter to Menelik (1899)" by Blatta Gebre Egziabeher, *Northeast African Studies* (forthcoming).



Blatta Gebre Egziabeher's bitter words were more or less repeated by Haile Mariam Redda, the leader of the Woyane Movement of Tigray in 1943. Besides attacking the Shoan rulers of Ethiopia for having viciously disparaged the Tigreans as unpatriotic, he accused them for conspiring and bargaining Tigrean lands to foreigners--no doubt, a reference to Eritrea. While glorifying the reign of Emperor Yohannes IV, he belittles the Shoan rulers as inept, corrupt, and feudal intriguers.<sup>513</sup>

But as far as Eritrea is concerned, even when Menelik had the possibility to evict the Italians from there completely, he never considered that option. The apology for Menelik has always been that his soldiers were running short of essential provisions. However, Ras Alula had requested to follow the Italians in hot pursuit and evict them--a request that was flatly rejected. Augustus Wylde, who provides an eye-witness account of the event, maintained that had Ras Alula been allowed to advance with his and part of Ras Mengesha's force, there is no doubt that the whole of the Hamassien Plateau and the Bogos province would have fallen into the hands of the Ethiopians. The exceptions would have been the fortified positions of Adi-Ugri, Asmara and Keren.<sup>514</sup> This bitter truth, may be the other root cause of the Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict.

Another unhappy episode which many Eritreans still recall is the cruelty with which Menelik treated the Eritrean prisoners of war. Italy had 17,700 soldiers at Adawa, of whom 10, 596 were Italians and some 7,100 were

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<sup>513</sup>Gebru Tareke, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest--Peasant Revolts in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 116.

<sup>514</sup>Wylde, Augustus, *Modern Abyssinia* (London: 1901), 212.

*askaris* (Eritrean/native soldiers). At Adowa alone, while 261 Italian officers, 2,918 non-commissioned officers and 2,000 Askaris—which is a total of 5,179—were killed during the fighting, 1,865 Italians and 1,000 Askaris were taken prisoner.<sup>515</sup> Some were also killed or wounded in Mekelle, Enda Yesus and other places. Since Rome paid some ten million lire—a sum considered sufficient to cover their maintenance costs—the Italian prisoners of war, including Pietro Badoglio and the 25-year-old Emilio De Bono were given safe conduct and expatriated to their homeland, but the Askaris met a different fate.<sup>516</sup> Both Badoglio and De Bono went back to Ethiopia in the 1930s as Supreme Commanders of the Italian army.

According to Augustus Wylde, the Eritrean Askaris were tried by a council of war, and the traditional sentence of mutilation was passed and approved by Menelik. The sentence of mutilation, that is, the cutting off of the right hand and the left foot, was the customary punishment for the offenses of theft, sacrilege and treason, of which many of these men were judged to be clearly guilty. But strict orders were given not to harm the white captives. There were many Muslim soldiers in Italian employ. The harsh way in which they were treated has made the whole Mohammedan population of the north lasting enemies to King Menelik and to the Abyssinian Christians of the south, and, no doubt, in the future they will have their revenge.<sup>517</sup>

Berkeley, too, confirms what Wylde had reported: many native soldiers were turned loose after having had their right hand and left foot cut off by

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<sup>515</sup>Berkeley, G. H., *The Campaign of Adowa and the Rise of Menelik* (London: Constable and Co., 1902), 345-348.

<sup>516</sup>Berkeley, 356.

<sup>517</sup>Wylde, 213.

Menelik's command—a fact that will live in history to his disgrace.<sup>518</sup> This bitter legacy may also be considered as another cause of the Ethio-Eritrean conflict.

### Italian Colonialism

Let us now examine the conditions of Eritrea under colonialism. As pointed out in an earlier chapter, after making Eritrea their first African colony, the Italians confiscated forty percent of its agricultural land for the purpose of settling an immigrant population from southern Italy, and created the conditions for the immigration some 200,000 Eritreans to Ethiopia over a period of fifty years (1890-1940). They detained or eliminated chiefs who were suspected of rebellion, used Eritreans as low-paid mercenaries to fight in their colonial adventures, and practiced a colonial system of slavery based on apartheid and racism.

They did build Eritrea's economic infrastructure, much of which was accomplished during the fascist period largely to facilitate military mobility for the conquest of Ethiopia. The establishment of plantation agriculture, and some manufacturing and processing industries, resulted in the emergence of a working class. But because the Italian authorities forbade the formation of trade unions, the working class was never organized.

Similarly, the emerging petite bourgeoisie was unable to acquire political experience, either in organizational matters, or in political struggle, because colonial policy forbade the establishment of political parties. In their fifty years of colonial rule, the Italians only opened twenty-four primary

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<sup>518</sup>Berkeley, 345-348.

schools, and never allowed education to proceed beyond the fourth grade—an academic standard which is normally attained by a ten-year-old.

Orthodox Islam was provided official recognition. Mosques were built and Qadis were appointed over various districts to help deal with matters coming under the Sharia. Even when fascism came to power, in 1922 in Italy, the policy was hardly changed. Indeed, as Mussolini said in Tripoli in 1937:

Fascist Italy intends to guarantee the Muslim peoples of Libya and Ethiopia peace, justice, prosperity, respect for the laws of the Prophet, and wishes moreover to manifest its sympathy with Islam and the Muslims of the entire world.<sup>519</sup>

In contrast to Islam, Italian policy aimed at weakening the influence of the Ethiopian Orthodox church, since it was bound up with the Ethiopian nationalist spirit. Hence, rather than arouse resistance through overt persecution, they tried to undermine it. One way of doing so was to dispossess the church of its land holdings.

The emperors of Ethiopia have always styled themselves “protectors of the faith.” The church in Eritrea, therefore, looked in the direction of Addis Ababa for protection, and continued to serve as a custodian of Ethiopian nationalism. It provided cultural solidarity and exercised a powerful moral and spiritual influence over people’s lives and behaviours. As we will see shortly, in the 1940s, when Eritrea’s future was being discussed, the Christian elements were organized under the leadership of the Unionist Party. They had not forgotten the way their church was treated by the Italians. Hence, they vehemently opposed Italy, and gave expression to their anti-Italian feelings of resentment through organized terror.

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<sup>519</sup>Trimingham, 137.

The British, who took over from the Italians, had, among other things, opened seventy-four schools, abolished the colour bar that had existed under the Italians, emancipated a large number of serfs in the lowlands of western Eritrea and legalized trade unions and political parties. However, they did little to alter the structure of Italian hegemony in Eritrea. If anything, the British continued the Italian system with minimal changes. Even disputes between Italians and Eritreans were heard before Italian judges, where Italian colonial law was applied. The British, like the Italians, played off one group against the other, with the result that anything resembling Eritrean nationalism was unable to emerge. The appreciation of Eritreans of their political and social problems never went beyond the interests of families or clans. Cultural differences and the influence of religion remained a dominant factor in the development of political trends.<sup>520</sup>

#### **Continued Attachment to Ethiopia**

Even when Eritrea was under the Italians and the British, Eritreans were attached to Ethiopia. Bahta Hagos, whose career we discussed in an earlier chapter, was the first to denounce the Italians. In fact, on December 14, 1896, he gathered a force of 2,000 men and issued a call for resistance.<sup>521</sup> In his own words, "The Italians curse us. They seize our land. Let us drive them out and be our own masters."<sup>522</sup>

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<sup>520</sup>Ellingston, S. Lloyd, *Eritrea—Separatism and Irredentism 1941-1985*. An unpubl. Ph.D. Dissertation, (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University, 1986).

<sup>521</sup>Tekeste Negash, *Italian Colonialism*, 124.

<sup>522</sup>*Ibid.*, 124-125.

However, in September 1894, an Italian agent in Addis Ababa discovered that Bahta Hagos had been in correspondence with Emperor Menelik since 1893.<sup>523</sup> Aware of the fact that Lieutenant Sanguinetti, the Italian Governor of Akele Guzaie had received such a report, before some action could be taken against him by the Governor, Bahta Hagos literally threw the Italian official to the ground and, sitting on his chest, he taunted Sanguinetti: "You with the eyes of a cat, hair of a monkey, and with white lips; you donkey of the sea who have come having crossed seven rivers; do you not know that the Ethiopian Empire is superior to Italy?"<sup>524</sup>

Bahta Hagos died while fighting the Italians. But others continued the struggle. These include: Nuri Ahmed, a veteran fighter who asked the permission of Ras Makonnen, the future Emperor Haile Selassie's father, who was then Governor of Tigray, to assassinate Ferdinando Martini. The request was politely and perhaps wisely discouraged. Blatta Gebre Egziabher, Kentiba Gila Michael, Aberra, Bahta's son, Gebre Medhin Hagos, and many others resisted Italian colonialism.<sup>525</sup>

If, what Jordan says were true, and if Eritreans had no attachment to Ethiopia, why did Blatta Gebre Egziabher accuse Menelik of selling "Mother Ethiopia" for money, or of "making her disappear" from its historic boundaries? Why did Bahta Hagos correspond with Menelik, or express his faith in Ethiopia and in its "superiority" to Italy? Why did Nuri Ahmed ask permission from Ras Makonnen in order to kill the Italian Governor of Eritrea,

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<sup>523</sup>Caulk, Richard, "Black Snake, White Snake: Bahta Hagos and his revolt against Italian overrule in Eritrea," 1984, (in) *Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa* (ed.) (London: Donald Crummey, James Currey Ltd. and Heinemann 1988), 279.

<sup>524</sup>*Ibid.*, 301.

<sup>525</sup>Tekeste Negash, *Italian Colonialism*, 123.

Ferdinando Martini? And why would 200,000 Eritreans emigrate to Ethiopia over a period of fifty years? Let us continue and examine the evidence further.

### **Reinforcing the Resistance**

By using Eritrea and Somaliland as bases for military operations, Italy invaded and occupied Ethiopia (1936-1941). Of its 466,000 strong army of conquest, 358,000 were Italians and 108,000 colonials. Of these, while some 60,000 were from Eritrea, the rest came from Libya and Somalia.<sup>526</sup> By the end of 1936, however, some 3,000 Eritreans defected from the Italian army and joined the resistance to fight against the Italian presence in Ethiopia.<sup>527</sup> The motive of their defection was that they wanted to fight for their country and their king.<sup>528</sup> The Eritreans were known for their uncompromising stand against the Italians<sup>529</sup>, and against the legitimacy of Italian rule over Ethiopia. Ras Desta Damtew (1892-1937), who was the Ethiopian commander-in-chief of the military forces in southern Ethiopia, had a large group of Eritrean patriots who harassed the Italians in a series of guerrilla actions, and who carried out devastating attacks on them, until he was captured and executed in 1937.

Likewise, they fought under Ras Imru in southwestern Ethiopia. When Ras Imru surrendered, though encircled, the Eritrean fighters burst out and succeeded to a man and joined the forces of Dejach Wolde Mariam. Eritreans

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<sup>526</sup>*Governo Generale dell' Africa Orientale Italianan, Il primo anno dell' impero*, vol. 1 (Addis Ababa: 1938), 44.

<sup>527</sup>Del Boca, *Gli Italiana*, Volume 2, 415, 514-516.

<sup>528</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>529</sup>F. G. Busta 40, file 33, Castagna to Graziani, 22 October 1937.

also fought under Amoraw Woubneh, “the eagle” in Gondar, and under Dejach Mengesha Jembere in Gojjam. In Tigray, Eritreans were active under Dejach Abaie, Mesfin Redda and Dejach Gebre Hiwot. Due to their knowledge of modern armaments and Italian military tactics, the Eritrean patriots functioned as a sort of select corps within the Ethiopian resistance movement.

For example, let us take the case of Belaie Haile Ab, whose family left Akele Guzaie and settled in Ethiopia in 1896. In 1929 Belaie was only fourteen. He graduated from the Holetta Military Academy in 1936, and soon was leading the graduates of the academy, including Mulugetta Bulli, Mengistu Newaye, Kebede Gebre and others against the Italians. All of them were later to play distinguished roles in the country. Mulugetta Bulli helped establish the Ethiopian army after the war, negotiated the 1952 Ethio-USA military agreement, represented Ethiopia in Moscow in 1953 at Stalin’s funeral, and served as chief of staff of the armed forces. He was killed in 1960 in a *coup d’etat* organized by Mengistu Newaye, the Commander of the Imperial Body Guard, who was opposed by Kebede Gebre. The latter was Chief of Staff in 1960. Some years later, he became Commanding Officer of the U.N. troops in the Congo.

Belaie personally burned grounded Italian war planes in Wollega. When the Italians managed to capture him, they dropped him from an airplane 10,000 feet high.<sup>530</sup> Likewise, Gabriel Edmondo was another patriotic Eritrean from Keren who, along with his family, had settled in Somalia in the 1920s. He managed to collect vital military information regarding Italian troop build-up in Somalia, and had it delivered to the concerned Ethiopian authorities in Addis Ababa in 1935. For reasons that need not preoccupy us

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<sup>530</sup>See Greenfield, Richard, *Ethiopia: A New Political History* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965), 235-245.



here, the documents ended up in the hands of the Italian authorities, who cabled Mogadishu to round up all Ethiopians whose names had the initials, G. E. Eventually, Gabriel Edmondo was captured, tortured, and put into prison, only to be released when the British army entered Mogadishu in 1941.

Similarly, on April 19, 1937 an attempt was made on the life of Italian Viceroy Rodolfo Graziani in Addis Ababa. The attempt was made by two Eritreans, Abraha Deboch and Moges Asgedom, who had taken an oath of loyalty administered by the vice-prior of the Monastery of Debre Libanos.<sup>531</sup> As a result, forty Italian officials were wounded, some seriously, including Graziani.

Furthermore, in 1937, when an imperial ceremony was being held in Rome to commemorate the first anniversary of the occupation of Addis Ababa, the following happened. An Eritrean youth, aged twenty-one, named Zeraie Deress, had been sent to Rome to present some captured Ethiopian trophies, including a sword, to certain high officials at a function attended by both Mussolini and the King of Italy. Zeraie Deress did not know that he would have to present these in a public place where he could become an object of ridicule. In the middle of the parade, his eyes lighted on the captured gold Lion of Judah, which the Italians had removed from its stand near the Addis Ababa railway station. Identifying himself with Ethiopia's shame, he knelt to pray. Two policemen tried to remove him, but he turned furiously upon them, drew the ceremonial sword and killed five fascist officials before he, in his turn, was brought down by gunfire. Seriously wounded, he died in an Italian prison some years later.<sup>532</sup>

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<sup>531</sup>F. G., Busta 41-42, *Olivieri to Graziani*. Relazione riasuntica circ l'attentato del 19.2 1937, 19 April 1937.

<sup>532</sup>*Ethiopian Observer*, III, no. 9, October 1959.

Lorenzo Tazaz (1900-1947)<sup>533</sup>, the agile Eritrean who, in 1924, traveled to Ethiopia from his homeland, was another selfless Ethiopian patriot. He was sent to the University Montpelier, in France, by Haile Selassie to complete his studies. Subsequently, he served Ethiopia with distinction. He drafted Haile Selassie's historic appeal of 1936 to the League of Nations, became Ethiopia's Permanent Delegate to that world body, made several secret trips to Italian-occupied Ethiopia, delivered Haile Selassie's messages to the leaders of the resistance, mediated their disputes, distributed arms at critical and strategic spots, established an Ethiopian intelligence office in Khartoum headed by Gebre Meskel Habte Mariam<sup>534</sup>, another distinguished Eritrean, about whom we will have more to say later, and left for Europe. Eventually he became Ethiopia's Foreign Minister.

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<sup>533</sup>For his early background and for the distinguished role he played during the war, see Daniel Kendie, "Dr. Lorenzo Tazaz and the Italo-Ethiopian War (1935-1941)," *Ethiopian Review*, 1, no. 5, (Los Angeles: May 1991), and 2, no. 6, June 1991. He was Ethiopia's Foreign Minister (1941-42); Minister of Posts, Telegraphs and Telephones (1942-43); President of the Chamber of Deputies (1943-44); Minister of Plenipotency and Envoy Extraordinary to the USSR (1944-46). He presented an Ethiopian shield to President Kalinin as a tribute to the heroic defense of Stalingrad, and received on behalf of Ethiopia a sword as a token of the reciprocal friendly relations between the two countries. Other Eritreans who left their homeland and who were sent to complete their studies abroad under government scholarship included Ephrem Tewolde Medhin, Dr. Ambaye Wolde Mariam and Dawit Ukubagzie. Dawit became the Deputy Foreign Minister in 1958-1960. For more about Lorenzo, see also Angelo del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale*, vol. I, Dall'Unita alla Marcia su Roma, Bari, Laterzo, 1976, 97, 189, 246, 691; vol. II: *La Conquista dell'Impero* (1979); 336-339; vol. III (1982), *La Caduta dell'Impero*, 27-28. As a delegate to the Paris Peace Conference in 1946, Lorenzo Tazaz played a distinguished role. He was awarded the highest honour of Ethiopia, which he justly deserved.

<sup>534</sup>Born in 1908, Gebre Meskel Habte Mariam was from Zban Huna, Seraie, Eritrea. He completed his studies in engineering, at the University of Paris in 1928. Before moving to the Sudan, he saw action serving under Ras Imru in South Western Ethiopia as a radio man. His technical knowledge of radio communications was put at the disposal of the resistance, including the training of Ethiopian radio operators in Cairo, Egypt. See Mockler, 202-203. He was also in charge of the Ethiopian Intelligence Office in the Sudan that Lorenzo established. In the 1940s he was editor of the *Voice of Eritrea*, which demanded Eritrea's unification with Ethiopia.

When, at the beginning of 1941, the British allowed Haile Selassie to enter Ethiopia and engage the Italians, he immediately asked for the battalion of trained Eritreans which had deserted from the Italian army in 1936, but which was kept in internment in Kenya. Lorenzo went there and read them Haile Selassie's invitation requesting them to join the resistance. They all responded with wild cries of delight.<sup>535</sup> In fact, when Haile Selassie moved from the Sudan to liberate Ethiopia from fascist Italy, over fifty percent of his small army was composed of Eritrean patriots.<sup>536</sup>

The British Royal Air force effectively utilized Haile Selassie's military mobilization orders and patriotic appeals in the propaganda warfare against the Italians. The following statement for instance, was dropped by British aircraft in the Kassala-Tesenaie-Sabderat area:

And you, the people of Hamassien, of Akele Guzaie, of Seraie, of Ben Amir, of Habab and of Mensah, whether you are on this side or the other side of the Mareb, join in the struggle at the side of your Ethiopian brothers. I have come to restore the independence of my country, including Eritrea, whose people will henceforth dwell under the Ethiopian flag.<sup>537</sup>

Eritreans in Kassala, for instance, were seen to kiss the seal, press it to their foreheads and weep.<sup>538</sup> In other developments, the reading of such Ethiopian newspapers as *Banderachin/Our Flag*, had led to an increase in the desertion of Eritreans, particularly from the eastern front, where the Italians

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<sup>535</sup>Steer, G. L., *Sealed and Delivered: A Book on the Abyssinian Campaign* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Limited, 1942), 102-103.

<sup>536</sup>Pankhurst, Richard, "The Ethiopian Patriots," 102. See also G. Steer, *Sealed and Delivered*, p. 26.

<sup>537</sup>First Decree of the Emperor Haile Selassie given on 8 July 1940. See the full text in G. Steer, App. B.

<sup>538</sup>Sanford, Christine, *The Lion of Judah Hath Prevailed* (London: J. N. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1955), 33.

were now massing their forces. The death penalty was given up because many people were reading *Banderachin*.<sup>539</sup> At long last, when the Ethiopian army moved to evict the Italians from Ethiopia, of the many distinguished military officers who led the army, two of them, Eyassu Mengesha<sup>540</sup> and Aman Michael Andom, were Ethiopians of Eritrean origin.

Haile Selassie re-assumed his imperial role in May 1941. But he was neither authoritative nor apparent. The British were everywhere and acting as if Ethiopia were a colony.<sup>541</sup> Even the naming of seven ministers by Haile Selassie deeply irritated General Sir Philip Mitchell, an ex-colonial governor, who was charged with directing an "Occupied Enemy Territory Administration."<sup>542</sup> The Emperor and the other Ethiopian officials were instructed to agree to abide in all important matters, internal and external, touching the government of the country, by the advice tendered to them by His Majesty' Government in the United Kingdom. Taxation, expenditures and communications were all under British control as well as jurisdiction over foreigners. The Emperor was kept under strict surveillance. Even his private correspondence was censored.<sup>543</sup>

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<sup>539</sup>Steer, G., *Sealed and Delivered*, 102.

<sup>540</sup>General Eyassu, who graduated from the St. Cyr Military Academy in France, served as Chief of Staff of the Ethiopian Armed Forces in the early 1960s. he also served as Commander in Chief of the United Nations Troops in the Congo. After the Dergue took power, he led the London-based opposition Ethiopian Democratic Union. General Aman Andom, who became Ethiopia's Head of State in 1974, had a brilliant military career. More about him will appear elsewhere in the following pages.

<sup>541</sup>Marcus, Harold, *Ethiopia, Great Britain, and the United States, 1941-1974: The Politics of Empire* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1983), 9.

<sup>542</sup>Mitchel, Sir Philip, *African Afterthoughts* (London: 1954), 204.

<sup>543</sup>*Haile Selassie I, My Life and Ethiopia's Progress*, vol. II, 173 (ed.) Harold Marcus, Michigan State University Press (forthcoming). See also Spencer,

Haile Selassie knew that the British had every intention to administer Ethiopia as a mandate. They took all the military equipment captured in the country arguing that it should not be left for blacks. They controlled the entire state revenue to the extent that the emperor could not pay normal salaries. The British divided Tigrai into two, and appointed Haile Selassie Gugssa, the notorious collaborator with Italian Fascism to govern half of Tigrai. They fomented disturbances in Gojjam, Harrar and the Ogaden, and wanted to create a greater Tigrai by uniting Eritrea with the Ethiopian province of Tigrai, under British protection.<sup>544</sup>

Summer Wells, U. S. Under Secretary of State reported to President Franklin Roosevelt that there have been various indications that the British Government intended to seize the present opportunity for establishing what would be tantamount to a protectorate over Abyssinia.<sup>545</sup>

It was actually after Haile Selassie met Franklin Roosevelt in 1945 at Great Bitter Lake of the Suez Canal, that he managed to extricate himself from British domination. Prior to that, for all practical purposes, Ethiopia was a British protectorate.<sup>546</sup>

Before we proceed into other matters, we should again raise some relevant questions. If what Jordan says about Eritrean-Ethiopian relation and particularly his contention that Eritreans abhorred any links with Ethiopia were valid, why did 3,000 Eritreans, who were on active duty, defect from the

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John, *Ethiopia at Bay: A Personal Account of the Haile Selassie Years* (Michigan Reference Publications, 1984), 96.

<sup>544</sup>Howe, Robert (the British Minister in Addis Ababa) to Eden, Addis Ababa, 4 March 1943, FO 371/35633 as quoted by Marcus, *ibid.*, 22.

<sup>545</sup>Wells to Roosevelt, 24 July 1942, SD 884.001 Selassie.

<sup>546</sup>Spencer, 97.

Italian army and join the resistance? Why did Abraha Deboch and Mogess Asgedom want to assassinate Graziani and his officials in Addis Ababa? Why did Lorenzo Tazaz, Ephreim Tewolde Medhin and Dr. Ambaye--just to name a few--serve Ethiopia with such distinction? Why should Eritreans in Kassala pick up Haile Selassie's Decree in 1941--kiss the seal, press it to their foreheads and weep? And why should Eritreans join the Ethiopian liberation army in 1941 and make up 50 percent of it? Let us continue to examine further evidence to see if there is any validity to what Jordan contends. In the process, we will also investigate if the Unionist Party was insignificant, and if it was imposed on the Eritrean people by Ethiopia.

#### **The Situation in Eritrea in the 1940s**

According to Sylvia and Richard Pankhurst, the Unionist Party was established in April 1941, by young Eritreans who had kept in touch with the Ethiopian Motherland. They produced the first documented address to the British authorities dated December 12, 1941, in which they denounce Italian colonialism and recall the years when Eritreans were made to fight for Italy against their Motherland.<sup>547</sup>

My own investigation has led me to conclude that the Unionist Party was actually founded on May 5, 1941--the day Haile Selassie entered his capital city of Addis Ababa, five years after his exile to Britain. On that day, forty-eight prominent Eritreans met at the Asmara residence of Mohammed Aberra Hagos,<sup>548</sup> to exchange views and ideas about the future of Eritrea. "Now that

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<sup>547</sup>Sylvia and Richard Pankhurst, *Ethiopia and Eritrea: The Last Phase of the Reunion Struggle 1941-1952* (Essex: Woodford Green, 1953), 61-77.

<sup>548</sup>Private and confidential information gathered in Asmara, Eritrea on November 23, 1982.

Ethiopia is free," they said, "what about Eritrea?" The forty-eight Eritreans who attended the meeting included: Abdel Khadir Kebire<sup>549</sup>, Arabi Salem (Seraie), Salah Ahmed Kekia (Massawa), Gebre Meskel Woldu (Akele Guzaie), Yasin Jemil (Massawa), Demsas Wolde Michael (Hamassien), Ibrahim Sultan (Sahel), Omar Khadi (Massawa/Zula), Abune Marcos (Akele Guzaie), Harregot Abaie (Asmara), Dejach Hagos Gebre (Asmara), Wolde Ab Wolde Mariam (Seraie), Beyene Baraki (Hamassien)<sup>550</sup>, Tesgaye Tefferi (Akele Guzaie), Misgina Gebre Egzie (Asmara), as well as others.

The meeting, whose objective became unconditional union with Ethiopia, established the Unionist Party of Eritrea. It elected Gebre Meskel Woldu<sup>551</sup> as its first chairman, and five Muslims and five Christians to its Central Committee. In 1943, the party organized women and youth branches. Three years later, when the British legalized political parties, a second meeting took place at Bete Georgis in Asmara.

The second meeting was attended by more people, and included those who had ideas other than unity with Ethiopia. In addition to those who

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<sup>549</sup>Kebire's family had come from Tembien, Tigray and had settled in Dankalia in the days of Emperor Yohannes. Though a founder of the Unionist Party, for reasons to be explained later, when he left the Unionists and joined the El Rabita Party and became its president, he was shot down in Asmara in March 1949 by an unknown assassin.

<sup>550</sup>Beyenne Braki: Dejatch; born, Amba Dero (1887); son of Ras Beraki Bechit; completed course of Study at Swedish Evangelical School of Asmara; received title of 'Chief of the Rione' of Asmara from Ita. govt., a position held until 1947, at which time he became pres. of Unionist Party and took over from Gebre Meskel Woldu.

<sup>551</sup>Gebre Meskel Woldu (1908-1960) was from Akurur, Segeniete in Akele Guzaie. He was Secretary of the Asmara Native Council. British intelligence describes him as "a fanatical young man who may well become a serious embarrassment in the future" (the Pankhursts, p. 72). A highly principled man, he lived in the Sudan for many years. A prolific writer and a devoted Unionist, for some years he served as President of the High Court in Asmara. He died in conditions of extreme poverty.

established the Unionist Party, those who came to this meeting included: Kentiba Osman Hidad (Sahel), Tedla Bairu (Hamassien), Ras Kidane Mariam<sup>552</sup> (Seraie), Idris Legium (Keren), Georgeo Habtit (Akele Guzaie), Laine Kidane Mariam (Seraie), and Kidane Habte (Keren).

In many ways, the second meeting became a watershed in the political history of Eritrea. In addition to those like Tedla Bairu<sup>553</sup>, who advocated unconditional union with Ethiopia, there were also those, like Wolde Ab Wolde Mariam,<sup>554</sup> who proposed conditional union with Ethiopia, or those like Ibrahim Sultan, who now wanted complete independence for Eritrea. The bitter dispute between Tedla Bairu and Wolde Ab provided the pretext for the latter to leave the Unionist Party and organize another party. The following provides what transpired between Wolde Ab Wolde Mariam and Tedla Bairu, when the later took the floor and asked:

Ato Wolde Ab, where do you come from?

Answer: 'I am originally from Axum, Tigrai, but I was born in Seraie and lived all my life in Eritrea.'

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<sup>552</sup>Ras Kidane Mariam, the Unionist veteran, fought against the Italians under Ras Alula at Dogali in 1887. He told the Four Power Commission of Investigation that he lost his brother at Adowa in 1896.

<sup>553</sup>Founding member of *Eritrean Weekly News*: founder and director of weekly, *Ethiopia* (5 My 47); among principal founder of Mahabar Fegri Hagar Ertrea; attended 3rd, 4th, and 5th sessions of UNGA. See *Chi e ? dell' Eritrea*, 280.

<sup>554</sup>Wolde Ab Wolde Mariam: born in Seraie on 27 April 1908. Received a teaching diploma from the Swedish Evangelical School of Asmara (1931); taught at S. E. School in Arentu (1931-35); Director of the same school (1936-41); Assistant, Banco di Roma, Addis Ababa (1941); Deputy Editor, *Eritrean Weekly News* (1942-48); organized a meeting of irredentist and separatist leaders, Asmara (1946); suffered seven assassination attempts (1947-53); delegate of the Independent Bloc, 4th Session, U. N. Gen. Ass. (1949). Published: (1) manual, "Fidel Tigrignes" (1932), manual on soil erosion for Agr. Dept., BMA (1948); translated the Eritrean constitution; see *Chi e ? dell' Eritrea*, 291a.



'In that case,' said Tedla Bairu, 'why don't you leave us alone? You have no business in a meeting exclusively meant for Eritreans. Since you are from Tigray, and Tigray is in Ethiopia, go back to where you belong.'<sup>555</sup>

At that, Wolde Ab bitterly attacked Tedla Bairu and said:

'If you consider me--a Tigrean, a foreigner in Eritrean politics--how could you accept the Amharas?' Even somebody coming from Chad, if he identifies himself with Eritrea, and feels that he is an Eritrean, there is nothing to prevent him from participating in Eritrean politics.'<sup>556</sup>

Having said that, Wolde Ab walked out of the meeting and established his own party.

Wolde Ab was very conscious of the backward political state of affairs of Ethiopia and had argued in favour of conditional union, leaving internal autonomy for Eritrea. Since no agreement was reached, Wolde Ab, therefore, joined the Liberal Progressive Party, which was backed by the British, and whose political programme was the union of Eritrea and Tigray as an autonomous state under some form of British administration.<sup>557</sup>

The Muslims began to organize themselves in Massawa and, hence, those in the Western Province followed suit. But as we can see, the division along religious lines came only in 1946. Before that, both Muslims and Christians were in the Unionist Party. As a result of that division, the following parties emerged: The Muslim League of the Western Province; The Independent Muslim League; The liberal Progressive Party; The Independent Eritrea United to Ethiopia Party; The Intellectual Association of Eritreans;<sup>558</sup> and so on. In

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<sup>555</sup>Private and confidential information gathered in Asmara, on 23 November 1982.

<sup>556</sup>Ibid., The sarcastic reference to Chad was designed to remind Tedla Bairu of his alleged Chadian ethnic links.

<sup>557</sup>Trevaskis, 65.

<sup>558</sup>For further reading, see Trevaskis, 46-102.

what follows, we will briefly discuss the political programmes of the important Eritrean parties.

### **The Unionist Party**

Immediately after Bete Georgis, the Unionist Party elected Gebre Meskel Woldu, President, Salah Ahmed Kekia, Vice-President, Tedla Bairu, Secretary General, Arabi Salem, Treasurer, and Misgina Gebre Egzie, Press and Information Officer.<sup>559</sup> In subsequent years, The Unionist Party became the best organized party in Eritrea.<sup>560</sup> People in all sorts of trades and professions, including those serving the administration, became members. The outstanding example in this respect was the Eritrean Police Force, whose rank and file joined the movement en masse.<sup>561</sup>

The Four Power Commission of Investigation characterized the Unionist Party not only as the most active, but also as the most militant party in Eritrea, some of whose young members participated in terrorist activities.<sup>562</sup> It claimed a membership of 729,193 in Eritrea, and 195,000 in Ethiopia. Even if its power base was highland Christian Eritrea, one-third of its members were Muslims.<sup>563</sup> Its declared policy consisted of unconditional union with Ethiopia, and a rejection of any form of foreign trusteeship. Naturally, it had

<sup>559</sup>Private, protected and confidential information gathered in Asmara, Eritrea on 23 November 1982.

<sup>560</sup>U. N. General Assembly, Official Records: 5th Session, Supplement No. 7a (A/1313), 1950.

<sup>561</sup>Amare Tekle, 71.

<sup>562</sup>Four Power Commission of Investigation, Report on Eritrea, Chapter IV, 13 (reprinted) 10 March 1959.

<sup>563</sup>Four Power Commission of Investigation, 13-87.

the support and complete backing of the Ethiopian Government. It appealed to the Orthodox Church, which had always been the traditional bearer of Ethiopian nationalism to mobilize the peasantry. As a result, as early as 1942, every Orthodox priest in Eritrea could have been considered a propagandist for unity with Ethiopia.<sup>564</sup> The Unionist Party effectively used the resentment of highland Eritreans to land alienation under the British and the Italians. When necessary, it could also resort to systematic terror, about which we shall have more to say later. In less than six years, therefore, the leaders created an efficient party machine, which had branch offices in all major Eritrean towns. The party paper was called *Ethiopia*.

Moreover, the 200,000 Eritreans in Ethiopia were either organized members or sympathizers with the unionist cause. Their association, the Patriotic Association of Eritrea and Ethiopia, was established on 26 February 1944, and had its own newspaper, *The Voice of Eritrea*. It was edited by Gebre Meskel Habte Mariam, from Seraie.<sup>565</sup> The Association also had branch offices in Mogadisho and Asmara. Some 8,000 of its members demonstrated in front of the legations of the USSR, USA, Britain and France in Addis Ababa in 1946, demanding unconditional union of Eritrea with Ethiopia.<sup>566</sup>

Likewise, on 15 June 1946, Gebre Meskel Woldu sent the following cable to the Paris Peace Conference:

Our country, Eritrea, is historically, ethnically, and geographically an integral part of Ethiopia. The unanimous and

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<sup>564</sup>Sherman, 18.

<sup>565</sup>Gebre Meskel Habte Mariam was the President of the Association in the early 1940s. Later, Kifle Egzie Yihidego, a judge in the High Court of Ethiopia, became its President. *The Ethiopian Herald*, 8 July 1950.

<sup>566</sup>Trevaskis, 62.

sole desire of our people is to be unconditionally united to our motherland, Ethiopia.<sup>567</sup>

In February 1950, the Patriotic Association submitted a memorandum to the United Nations Commission of Inquiry which visited Eritrea, saying:

Eritrea, the area of our origin, is the northern portion of the northern province of Ethiopia and the ancient radiating centre of our cultural and administrative unity. Since the days of Axumite glory of the Ethiopian Empire, it has always been Ethiopian. It was occupied by Italy between 1885 and 1895 by a chain of military aggressions and diplomatic plots, and styled by them for the first time in 1895 as Eritrea. The future interest of our people can only be perceived and obtained by themselves in their ancient unity with Ethiopia.<sup>568</sup>

In Eritrea itself, the Unionist Party claimed the support of the overwhelming majority of the people. In a testimony to the United Nations, as early as 1949, Tedla Bairu reiterated to the General Assembly:

The Unionist Party was prepared that a plebiscite should take place in Eritrea with a view to putting to a test the true and real aspirations of the people of Eritrea.<sup>569</sup>

This position was also confirmed by the majority of the members of U. N.

Commission for Eritrea:

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<sup>567</sup>Pankhurst, E. Sylvia and R. Pankhurst, *Ethiopia and Eritrea: The Last Phase of the Reunion Struggle, 1941-1951* (Essex: Woodford Green, 1953), 122.

<sup>568</sup>Asefha Wolde Michael, who was elected President of the Association on 2 July 1950, submitted the memorandum to the U. N. Commission. Asefha was born in 1914 in Akele Guzaie, educated at San Michele, Segeneiti; entered Italian Colonial Service (1932); taken by the Italians to Rome, he translated many of the documents the fascists had taken from Ethiopia (1936-39); subsequently, he served as Chief Treasurer in Gondar (1941); Wollo (1942); Secretary General, Tigray (1945); Director General, State Domains (1947-49); Director General, Mining Department (1949-50); Director General, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1950); Deputy to Haile Selassie's Representative in Eritrea (1952-55); replaced Tedla Bairu as Chief Administrator, Eritrea (1955-62); subsequently, he served as Minister of Justice, Ambassador to Bonn, Germany.

<sup>569</sup>Officials Records of the 4th Session of the U. N. General Assembly, First Committee, Political and Security Questions: Summary records of meetings, 20 September-6 December 1949, Lake Success, NY, 73.

That the Unionist movement in the highlands has many of the characteristics of an expanding popular movement....It reflects the fact that the Tigrigna speaking Copts, undoubtedly, consider themselves as Ethiopians. The salute 'Ethiopia,' [is there] all along the highways in Southern Eritrea. Such results cannot be produced by transporting large bodies of adherents from one place to another.<sup>570</sup>

Yet, in spite of all this, the cause of the Unionist Party was not without substantial opposition in Eritrea. But before we shift the discussion into other areas, we might as well state that the Unionist Party was a spontaneous manifestation of a significant sector of the Eritrean society for unity with Ethiopia. When this party was being organized, the British controlled Eritrea, and Ethiopia was a de facto protectorate in which Haile Selassie had an authority that was marginal. It is therefore erroneous to say as Jordan does, that the Unionist Party was imposed on the Eritrean people by Ethiopia.

### **The Muslim League**

The man behind the Muslim Movement in Eritrea was Ibrahim Sultan,<sup>571</sup> considered by many as one of the greatest orators in Eritrea. It is to

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<sup>570</sup>The Report of the Commission for Eritrea, Official Records, 5th Session, U. N. General Assembly, Supplement, no. 8 [A/1285], Lake Success, NY, 1950.

<sup>571</sup>Ibrahim Sultan was born in Keren on 23 March 1909 and comes from the lowest caste of the Ben Amir. He studied at a Koranic school in Keren; received a diploma from the School of Arts and Crafts, Salvago Raggi, Keren; ceaselessly struggled to emancipate his people from the cast system and the domination of the Natab and Beit Aseged. Served as head of sect. on Muslim affairs under Director of Political Affairs in Italian Administration (15 February-31 March 1941); served in Native Affairs branch (up to 1943); founded a cheese factory in Tesennai, working as the manager up to 1945. He was also among the principal founders of the Unionist Party in 1941, which he left to found the Muslim League in 1946. When the Four Power Commission of Investigation visited Eritrea a year later, he represented his party. He was also very active in the debates at the U. N. Ibrahim Sultan went along with the Italians and formed the Independence Bloc, of which he became Secretary General. He won the 1952 elections and became a member of the Assembly, but lost in 1956. He was convinced that because Ethiopian Muslims were treated like second-class citizens, joining Ethiopia would in no way be in the interest of Eritrean

be recalled that he was one of the founders of the Unionist Party of Eritrea. When many Christians within that party insisted on unconditional union with Ethiopia, he left the Unionists. His view was that Ethiopia was governed by an absolute monarchy, surrounded by feudal lords who controlled a country in which Muslims were treated as second-class citizens.<sup>572</sup> He, therefore, invited all Muslim communities to send their representatives to a meeting in Keren on 4 December 1946 to discuss Eritrea's future, which subsequently led to the establishment of the Muslim League.<sup>573</sup> Seyid Bubakr bin Othman Al Mirghani, leader of the Eritrean branch of the Tariqa Khatmina sect, became President, while Ibrahim Sultan was elected Secretary General of the party. The Muslim League boasted a membership of 731,764 persons,<sup>574</sup> most of whom were concentrated in the lowlands of Eritrea. The party strongly opposed any form of association with Ethiopia.

After Keren, further discussion on Eritrea's future was left for a meeting of 21 January 1947. Between the two meetings, however, opinion amongst the various Muslim groups was divided along ethnic and regional lines. It led to the establishment of the Muslim League of the Western Province and the Independent Muslim League. Nevertheless, the majority in the Muslim League favoured independence. If that was not possible, they were prepared to accept some sort of a British trusteeship for a fixed period, leading to independence.

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Muslims. Eventually, he left for Egypt (1957), and became active in the establishment of ELF. See *Chi e ? dee' Eritrea*, 168.

<sup>572</sup>Official Records of the 4th Session of the General Assembly, First Committee, Summary Records, 1949, 64-66.

<sup>573</sup>Trevaskis, 74.

<sup>574</sup>Report of the Four Power Commission, 14.

### The Liberal Progressive Party

In 1947, the Liberal Progressive Party took root in Akele Guzaie--a province which had suffered least from land alienation. The party was anti-Ethiopian and pro-British.<sup>575</sup> Although it was led by Tesema Asberom,<sup>576</sup> whom the British elevated to the rank of Ras, the highest titular rank in the Ethiopian hierarchy, the brain behind the movement was his son, Abraha, whom the British described as a "man of outstanding qualities and intelligence."<sup>577</sup> Perhaps because of the family's blood connection with Emperor Yohannes, whose home province was Tigrai, or because the party had British sympathy, its programme centered on the creation of a United Tigrai-Eritrean state under British protection. Melles Andom, who was later to serve

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<sup>575</sup>Trevaskis, 62.

<sup>576</sup>Tesema Asberom: ras (17 Feb 1944); born, Maaraba, Akkele Guzai (1870); descendent of Dekki Akkele; fought at Adwa (1896); chief of districts of Egghela Hames, Robra and Dekki Admocom (from 1930); conciliator between Christians and Muslims in his districts (judge in conciliation between 5 Christian dists. of Seraie and 13 Muslim tribes of Assaorta, 1951); pres., Native Court, Akkele Guzai (from 1947); pres. of Erit. Bloc for Ind. and later of Democratic Front; elected rep. in Erit. Assembly for Tzanadegle, Haddegtii, Dekki Digna, and Sageneiti (26 Mr 52); visited Itlay (1925 and 1931); named azmatch (1900), dejatch (1903), dejatch baal negarit (1940); resigned from Erit. Assembly (1952). See *Chi e ? dell' Eritrea*, 281.

<sup>577</sup>Abraha Tesemma: born, Akkele Guzai (18 April 1901; son of Ras Tesemma Asberom; completed a course of study at the Scu. de' Agricoltura "San Giorgia" in Adi Ugri (1912-16); studied Geez and Amharic; district chief of the Haddegti (1918-29); counsellor for Native Affairs in Eritrea, retaining title of District Chief (1936-My 1940); after British occupation continued as Dist. Ch. (1941-N. 1948); assist. to the Political Sec. for Pol. Affs. of the BMA/BA (De 1948-My 1950); counsellor for same office (Je 1950-Mr 1952); Sec. for Internal Affs. of the Dept. of Eritrean Affs. of the BA (Ap 1952-Sp 1952); member of the Native Court of Sageneiti (1942-48); pres. of the Special Court of Conciliation between the Orthodox of the highlands and the Muslims of the western lowlands at Keren (Fb 1949-Sp 1952); won a bronze medal (1927) and a silver (1937) in agriculture; studied extensively Italian and traditional painting; Fitarari (1919); Azmatch (1935); member of the colonial calvary order, Star of Italy (1938); member of the Order of the British Empire (1951). See *Chi e ? dell' Eritrea*, 3ab.

Haile Selassie as a distinguished diplomat, provided the following eye-witness account:

Colonel Pratt, the British Consul General in Aden who was eloquent in Arabic, arrived at Asmara with his translator, Melles Andom. They proceeded to Mekelle, the capital of Tigray province, to meet the Governor, Ras Seyoum Mengesha. Colonel Pratt submitted a plan to Ras Seyoum, urging him to revolt against the so-called Amhara domination. Assuring the Ras, he stressed that all the expenses in the propagation of the war effort, would be covered by Britain besides other necessary war materials. In his last bid, the Colonel claimed that the separation of Tigray from Ethiopia would not last more than a year and that the Ras would be appointed King of the "Allowoha-Mellash", meaning Tigray and Eritrea together. With his heart grieved about the "Mekelle Market Massacre" a few months before, the idea was rejected by the Ras, although the Colonel had promised the Ras, compensation for the loss.<sup>578</sup>

It was under such conditions that Haile Selassie functioned, and under such circumstances that he has been maliciously accused of financing the creation of pro-Ethiopian political parties in Eritrea. In any event, the Liberal Progressive Party had 53,500 members, who were mostly Christians. Until the formation of the Muslim League in 1946, it could boast a heterogeneous membership, but the latter's creation robbed it of Muslim members.<sup>579</sup> The importance of this party lay in being the only Christian opposition to the Unionist cause, but even that was to change shortly. The leaders of this party wanted what they termed 'conditional' or, in effect, federal union with Ethiopia. After a delegation led by Dejazmatch Abreha Tesemma visited Addis Ababa and sounded the Ethiopian Government, the party changed its name and

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<sup>578</sup>Hagos Mehary, *The Strained U. S.-Ethiopia Relations*, Almquist and Wiksell International, Stockholm, Sweden (1989). Melles Andom, Aman's brother, was Consul General at Adowa. He was Ethiopian Ambassador to Egypt in the 1970s. The story is taken from him by Hagos at the ambassador's residence in Al-Duggi, Cairo; in October 1981.

<sup>579</sup>Four Power Commission of Investigation, 86.



political programme to the 'Liberal Unionist Party,' and pledged to bring about the 'conditional union,' of Eritrea and Ethiopia.<sup>580</sup>

### **The Italo-Eritrean Party**

The Italians had vigorously campaigned to return to Eritrea to continue what they called their "civilizing mission." But when they discovered Eritrean relentless hostility, they changed their tactics, and began to champion Eritrea's independence. In doing so, says Tom Farer, they assumed that "an independent Eritrea would look to Italy for economic assistance, and also for political support against Ethiopian imperialism, and would, moreover, allow the settlers to play a mediating role between the Muslims and Christian parties."<sup>581</sup>

During this period, the Italian population had been reduced to 20,000. Nevertheless, by using that community as a core, the Veterans Association, and the Representative Committee of the Italians was established under the leadership of the Italo-Eritrean Party. Total membership was claimed as 219,000.<sup>582</sup> Because the objectives just outlined could not be met with the efforts of this party alone, as we shall see shortly, the Italians became instrumental in forging an alliance between their party/parties, and the various pro-independence movements to ensure that an independent Eritrea would function under Italian hegemony.

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<sup>580</sup>Op. cit., Trevaskis, *Eritrea, A Colony...*, 98.

<sup>581</sup>Farer, Tom, *War Clouds on the Horn of Africa* (Washington, D. C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1979), 27-28.

<sup>582</sup>Report of the Four Power Commission, 15.

### The Independence Bloc

With Italian backing and financial support, the various pro-Italian parties had created a united front along with the Muslim League and the Liberal Progressive Party, and called themselves the Independence Bloc. According to Trevaskis, the Bloc began to receive covert directions and lavish funds from the Italians..<sup>1</sup> Even Christian communities, such as the Bilen, deserted the Unionists. The corrosive effect of Italian money was having its effect. Though the Unionists had used Ethiopian money to further their interests, they had never had the means to resort to bribery on so lavish a scale [as the Italians].<sup>2</sup>

Such a state of affairs subsequently led to terrorism. Although it was widely reported by British officials that the Unionists started terrorism, in the words of an American diplomat in Asmara, "many people on the spot believe the trouble had been incited by the proponents of independence, who were being encouraged by the Italians."<sup>3</sup> Whoever started terrorism is not significant. What was significant and of profound consequence was that Italian interference in Eritrean politics resulted in the disintegration of the Independence Bloc. It also resulted in the loss of influence and prestige by Ibrahim Sultan, who was the Bloc's Secretary-General.

In the eyes of the Unionists, those in the Independence Bloc who started terrorism were nothing but tools of Italian fascism, and traitors who were selling out Eritrea to Ethiopia's number-one enemy--Italy. Hence, the Unionists returned in kind:

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<sup>1</sup>Trevaskis, 94-95.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 95.

<sup>3</sup>*Foreign Relations of the United States*, vol. V, 1950, 1646.

An organized campaign of terror and intimidation was launched against the Bloc. Between October 1949 and February 1950, nine Italians, an Indian, a Greek, three Christian supporters of the Bloc, and four Moslem tribesmen were assassinated. Italian cafes in Asmara (and elsewhere) were attacked with rifle fire; hand grenades were thrown at Italian and Eritrean supporters of the Bloc in Asmara, Massawa, and Dekemhare; Italian farms were raided and ransacked...a campaign of threats against the Italians and the Eritrean supporters of the Bloc [was conducted].<sup>586</sup>

Few needed excuses to abandon the Independence Bloc. It lost more than half of its members. Those who deserted the Unionist Party returned. The Muslim League of Massawa changed its name into the Independent Muslim League, and was no longer nostalgic about the "golden days" of the Italians. It had a membership of 56,377, of which some 25,000 of its members were from Dankalia.<sup>587</sup> It declared that it desired Union with Ethiopia under conditions designed to preserve the rights of Muslims. In fact, speaking in Asmara before the United Nations Commission on behalf of the League, its President, Quadi Mohammed Omar, demanded the union of Eritrea with Ethiopia. It should be noted that the Independent Muslim League withdrew from the Independence Bloc as soon as its members realized that the Bloc was being manipulated by Italy. In February 1950, a delegation from the Independent Muslim League travelled to Addis Ababa to learn the intentions of the Ethiopian government. The delegation was assured by Emperor Haile Selassie that Eritreans--both Muslims and Christians--once joined with Ethiopia--would enjoy equal rights and consideration in all spheres, and that their participation in public life would be based on absolute equality--a promise which, to say the least, was written on water.<sup>588</sup>

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<sup>586</sup>Trevaskis, 96.

<sup>587</sup>Report of the Four Power Commission of Investigation, 14. See also Supplement, no. 8, 18.

<sup>588</sup>*The Ethiopian Herald*, 6 January 1950. Quadi Omar was a founding member of the Unionist Party. Born in 1912, a Tigre from Zula, he remained a firm

In any event, the Liberal Progressive Party which had already changed its name and programme pledged to bring about the "conditional union" of Eritrea and Ethiopia. In their eyes, union with Ethiopia was only objectionable because of Ethiopia's Shoan hegemony. If some form of union could be devised which would leave the management of Eritrea's affairs in Eritrean hands, and preserve Eritrea's languages and customs, it would be incomparably more attractive than an Italian sponsored independence.<sup>589</sup>

The major party against union with Ethiopia was, therefore, the Muslim League of the Western Province, having a population of 275,000. Led by Ali Reddai, it demanded independence after a period of British trusteeship. But eventually, even this party, since it did not seek a separate government, and had refused to be annexed to the Sudan, it came to terms with the Unionists. Such was the internal situation in Eritrea.

Both the Four Power Commission of Investigation and the U. N. Commission for Eritrea spent some time in Eritrea. Their findings and recommendations and the different proposals, ranging from full independence to trusteeship and from federation to partition, will be considered in the next chapter. Suffice it to say that Haile Selassie had nothing to do with the founding of the Unionist Party, and far from abhorring unity with Ethiopia in the 1940s, the majority of Eritreans supported some sort of association with Ethiopia.

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advocate of federation between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Arrested from Etegue Hotel in Addis Ababa in 1975, where he had some personal business, and kept in prison for two years without charge, paralyzed and eventually released, he died shortly thereafter.

<sup>589</sup>Trevaskis, 98.

### **Ethiopia's Claims to Eritrea and Its Diplomatic Campaigns**

Ethiopia started its diplomatic campaigns for recovering Eritrea in 1941. There were two factors working in its favour. First, having been a victim of an unprovoked Italian aggression (1935-1941), Ethiopia had just emerged from the fascist yoke. Most of the former members of the defunct League of Nations had sacrificed it in 1936 at the altar of political expediency and, therefore, had some feeling of guilt. Second, Ethiopia was trying to recover a territory that the Italians had used as a base for military operations against it and, therefore, Addis Ababa's claim to recover Eritrea as a matter of legitimate defense, had credibility.

At the 1945 London Peace Conference of the Council of Ministers, and at the Paris Peace Conference of 1946, Ethiopia asked that Eritrea be restored to it. Addis Ababa claimed the ex-colony on historical, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, economic, geographic, and security grounds.<sup>590</sup> To that end, in the memorandum it submitted to these conferences, Ethiopia asserted that Eritrea was the cradle of Ethiopian civilization, statehood and history; that Eritrea's ethnic groups were akin to other Ethiopians in every respect and, therefore, should be reunited under one flag; that Ethiopia had exercised effective sovereignty over much of Eritrea before the advent of Italian colonialism; and so on. Even the Hewett Treaty of 1884,<sup>591</sup> which restored to Ethiopian administration some Eritrean provinces that were under Egyptian control, was invoked. So was the argument of economic interdependency that existed

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<sup>590</sup>Memorandum Presented to the Council of Foreign Ministers by the Imperial Ethiopian Government, London, September 1945. Summary of the Document presented to the Paris Peace Conference is available in the *Last Phase of the Reunion Struggle*, 291-316. The background is also provided by John M. Spencer, in *Ethiopia at Bay* (Alganoe, MI: Reference Publishers, 1984), 174-82.

<sup>591</sup>See the text of the Treaty in August Wylde, *Modern Abyssinia* (London: 1901), 472-473.

between Eritrea and Ethiopia. It was also claimed that because Eritreans strongly identified with the Ethiopian state, and considered themselves Ethiopians, twenty percent of the Ethiopian government officials were Eritreans.<sup>592</sup> Perhaps to lend weight to this point, two Eritreans, Dr. Lorenzo Tazaz, the former Foreign Minister (1941-42), who was then Minister Plenipotentiary to the USSR, and Ephreim Tewelde Medhin, the Minister in London, were made members of the delegation to the Paris Peace Conference,<sup>593</sup> where they made impassioned speeches demanding Eritrea's reunification with Ethiopia.

The historical, cultural, linguistic and ethnic links between Eritrea and Ethiopia are all amply documented. There is therefore no need to go into them. However, two of the following arguments are worth considering: a) Ethiopia's need for an outlet to the sea, and b) The necessity, finally, to prevent Eritrea from being used as a base for military operations against Ethiopia.

If we consider the first point, it can be conceded that without the two Eritrean ports of Massawa and Assab, Ethiopia would be land-locked, and forced to look for alternatives elsewhere. In 1936, for instance, France denied Ethiopia access to the port of Djibouti.<sup>594</sup> As a result, Addis Ababa could not obtain the necessary military hardware it needed for national defense. This

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<sup>592</sup>Ibid., Memorandum. It should be interesting to note that in the early 1960s, the Ethiopian Minister of Education, Gebre Meskel Kifle Egzie; the Chief of Staff of the armed forces, General Eyassu Mengesha; the Minister of Justice, Asefha Wolde Machael; the Commander of the Third Division, Aman Michael Andom; the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dawit Ugubagzy; the Attorney-General, Bereket Habte Selassie; and many other officials, were from Eritrea. Even more significant, sixteen of the country's twenty-three ambassadors were Ethiopians of Eritrean origin. These included Dr. Tesfaye Gebre Egzie, U. N., New York; Melesse Andom, Egypt; Dr. Goitom Petros, Mexico; Saleh Hinit, Turkey; Petros Sahlu, Sweden; and so on.

<sup>593</sup>Spencer, *Ethiopia at Bay*, 178.

<sup>594</sup>Spencer, *Ethiopia at...*, 181.

historical experience seems to have reinforced its determination to secure Eritrea.

With regard to the second problem, it should also be noted that in less than eighty years, Eritrea had served as a base for no less than four foreign invasions against Ethiopia. These included the Napier expedition of 1868, the ill-fated Egyptian adventures of 1875, the disastrous Italian aggressions of 1887 and 1896, and most recently, the Fascist invasion and occupation of Ethiopia (1935-41).<sup>595</sup> Since foreign rule in Eritrea would always constitute a threat, or so it would seem, a fifth and sixth invasion of Ethiopia was not unimaginable. Unless it had the key to its own front door, Ethiopia would never be secure.<sup>596</sup> In advancing its claim, to Eritrea, therefore, it appears that Ethiopia had such vital security considerations in mind. According to Haile Selassie, 250,000 Ethiopians were killed during the 1936-1941 Italian invasion of the country. In addition, 500,000 houses were burned down, 2,000 churches ransacked, 14 million cattle devoured, and seventy-five percent of the educated young men killed in cold blood.<sup>597</sup>

It is against this background that the Paris Peace Conference of 1946 took place. In its diplomatic campaigns to recover Eritrea, Ethiopia had the support of a number of African, European and Asian countries.<sup>598</sup> Each had

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<sup>595</sup>Rubenson, Sven, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence* (London: 1976) provides a comprehensive reading. For the struggle against Egypt, see Zewde Gebre Selassie, *Yohannes IV*. For the Italian period, see Del Boca Angelo, *The Ethiopian War, 1935-41* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

<sup>596</sup>Trevaskis, 81.

<sup>597</sup>Haile Selassie, *My Life and Ethiopia's Progress*, vol. II, (ed.) Harold Marcus (forthcoming), 169.

<sup>598</sup>Spencer, 181.

its own reasons for supporting Ethiopia, but that should not preoccupy us here. In general, it can be said that they strongly sympathized with Ethiopia.

Despite their differences, even the Big Powers were not blind to the merit of Ethiopian claims. By the time the United Nations General Assembly was fully seized with the Eritrean problem, Ethiopia had gained considerably. It had already secured some concession from most of the major powers. It had the sympathy and support of such countries as Canada, Greece, India, Liberia, and Yugoslavia. Ethiopia's active participation in the debates of the U. N. seems to have enhanced its chances. Its historical, ethnic and other claims over Eritrea were gaining more recognition than ever before. Ethiopia's need for an outlet to the sea was no longer debatable. In fact, it was recognized as legitimate. Its argument, that if Muslims and Christians could live in peace in Ethiopia, that there was no conceivable reason why Eritrean Muslims could not live with Ethiopian Christians, was convincing.<sup>599</sup>

Under such circumstances, when a minority of Eritrean parties were vying amongst themselves for either British or Italian trusteeship, the Unionist Party, which was indeed an authentically Eritrean movement and which consistently pursued its unionist platform, gained considerable influence and recognition.

### **The Ethio-Eritrean Federation**

It is worth mentioning here, even if briefly, that Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia through the United Nations. Apart from the right to retain its own flag, Eritrea was also provided with a democratic constitution that was drafted by U. N. legal experts. The Constitution had adequate provisions to

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<sup>599</sup>U. N. Document A/C-1/SR-239, 14.



safeguard human rights and fundamental freedoms.<sup>600</sup> It guaranteed freedom of speech, press and assembly, and had a system of separation of powers and checks and balances.

Eritrea was also to have a wide range of autonomy in internal matters, and its government was to be answerable to a freely elected Eritrean Assembly. In contrast, the Ethiopian Senate and Chamber of Deputies were both appointed.<sup>601</sup> The federal government was to be responsible only for defense, foreign affairs, finance and foreign trade. As *Time* magazine aptly, if not cynically, described it, the Ethio-Eritrean relationship was a Swiss federation adapted to an African absolute monarchy.<sup>602</sup>

The 1931 Ethiopian Constitution, still in force in 1952, was a constitution largely inspired by royal absolutism. It reflected the "divine" right of kings,<sup>603</sup> and defined the unlimited and indivisible power of the emperor over all of his subjects. In 1955, a new Ethiopian Constitution came, but it made no mention of the federal relationship.<sup>604</sup>

As Lloyd Ellingson pointed out, the United Nations failed to recognize that placing Eritrea in the hands of a traditional monarchy, was preparation for Eritrea's revolt.<sup>605</sup> Indeed, federation between autocracy and democracy

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<sup>600</sup>Text of the *Eritrean Constitution*, as adopted by the Eritrean Assembly on 10 July 1952, is published in: 7 GAOR, Supplement 15 (A/2188), at 76-89. See also Lipsky, 174-175.

<sup>601</sup>See full text in Perham, 423-426.

<sup>602</sup>*Time*, 13 October 1952. Krzeczunowicz, G., "The Regime of Assembly in Ethiopia," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, I, no. 1, (Addis Ababa: 1963).

<sup>603</sup>See full text in Perham, 423-426.

<sup>604</sup>See text text in Perham, 435.

<sup>605</sup>Ellingson, Lloyd Schettler, "Eritrea: Separation and Irredentism, 1941-1985," unpub. Ph.D. dissertation, (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University, 1986), 269-270.

was anomalous and a contradiction in terms. Elections were nevertheless held in 1952 in Eritrea for an Assembly of sixty-six seats.

Tedla Bairu, the leader of the Unionist Party, was elected President of the Assembly, while Ali Redai of the Muslim League of the Western Province, became Vice-President.<sup>606</sup> In a situation where the Unionists and their allies won forty-seven out of sixty-six seats in the Eritrean Assembly, could one say, as Jordan does, that less than twenty percent of the Eritreans wanted unity with Ethiopia, that the Unionist Party had insignificant support, or that Eritreans abhorred any formal links with Ethiopia?

Nevertheless, no sooner had the Eritrean Government started to function than Haile Selassie's government moved in to undermine, subvert and eventually destroy the essence of democracy in Eritrea and its federal status. The first victim of this arrangement was obviously the press. It was forcefully silenced.<sup>607</sup> Soon political parties were banned, and the trade union movement was suppressed. When Eritrean members of the assembly complained to Andargatchew Messaie, Haile Selassie's Personal Representative to Eritrea, that he himself was interfering in Eritrea's internal affairs, his reply was blunt: There are no internal or external affairs as far as the Office of His Imperial Majesty's Representative is concerned, and there will be none in the future.<sup>608</sup> Yet, Eritrea had been given complete internal autonomy by the United Nations. And this fact was adequately reflected in its constitution.

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<sup>606</sup>Spencer, John, *Ethiopia at Bay*, 249-250.

<sup>607</sup>For example, an outspoken Eritrean journalist named Eyassu Tecklou was arrested. Greenfield, Richard, *Ethiopia...*, 304.

<sup>608</sup>*Ibid.*, 304.

Having struggled to curb the excesses of Andargetchew Messaie, even Tedla Bairu, the leading unionist, resigned in 1955 in sheer disgust. But to crown it all, the new Chief Executive, Asfha Wolde Michael, who replaced Tedla Bairu, was not appointed by the Assembly as stipulated in the constitution, but by Haile Selassie's Personal Representative. Moreover, when elections were held in 1956, participation of organized parties was prohibited, and politicians had to campaign as individuals. Two years later, the President of the Assembly, Idris Muhammed Adem, also resigned, and in 1958, the Assembly was made to vote for abolishing Eritrea's flag. Sometime later, the validity of Eritrea's Criminal Code was canceled and some prominent Eritrean politicians, like Omar Khadi, were arrested. Amharic replaced Arabic and Tigrigna as the official language. Finally, the Eritrean Assembly was made to vote "unanimously" to make Eritrea, Ethiopia's 14th province.<sup>609</sup> Subsequently, Eritreans began to organize themselves and to fight under the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF).

Despite this terrible political and administrative experience, the situation was not entirely bleak. In the field of education, some progress was made. By 1952, for instance, the number of schools had grown to 190 government schools, fifty-three mission schools and fifty-six private schools enrolling a total of 57,292 students.<sup>610</sup> By 1965 the total number of students enrolled in primary and secondary schools had increased to 80,844,<sup>611</sup> and,

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<sup>609</sup>See Zewde Gebre-Selassie, *Eritrea and Ethiopia in the Context of the Red Sea and Africa*, Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, March 1976. See also Getahun Dilebo, "Historical Origins and Development of the Eritrean Problem, 1889-1962," *Current Bibliography on African Affairs*, 7.3., 1974.

<sup>610</sup>*Eritrea, Social and Economic Development* (Asmara: 1962), 51. See also *Ethiopia: Statistical Abstract* (Addis Ababa: Central Statistics Office, 1962), 142.

<sup>611</sup>*Ibid.*, *Statistical Abstract*, 1966, 111-112.

Eritrea continued to produce about twenty percent of all secondary school students and about twenty-five percent in the institutions of higher learning.

Eritrea's infrastructure also continued to grow despite claims that Addis Ababa tried to discriminate against Eritrea. In fact, from 1952-1962, the government spent Eth. \$75 million in financing development projects in Eritrea.<sup>612</sup> Sherman, while discussing the economy of Eritrea *vis-a-vis* Ethiopia, wrote that by 1974, thirty-five percent of all industrial activity occurred in Eritrea.<sup>613</sup> Several pages later, however, he produces an unsubstantiated allegation and states that, 'what was once a modestly productive light industrial economy has in the 1970s been almost totally dismantled by the Ethiopian government.'<sup>614</sup> On the contrary, even according to the appraisal of the ELF, most of Ethiopia's domestic capital was invested in Eritrea.<sup>615</sup>

According to the ELF, "the Eritrean bourgeoisie composed of comprador and bureaucratic-military-capitalist are not limited to Eritrea:

There are hundreds of Eritreans who have deep roots in Ethiopia and who have carved out bourgeois existence at all levels of the Ethiopian state and society. These two strands of Eritrean bourgeoisie (those in Eritrea and Ethiopia) are developing into a powerful, coherent class; allied to the bourgeoisie of other nationalities in a grand Alliance of the bourgeoisie. Strictly speaking, therefore, there is no Eritrean national bourgeoisie. The Eritrean bourgeoisie has, in fact, become a part of the Ethiopian bourgeoisie. They are, therefore, hostile to the idea of Eritrean national independence.<sup>616</sup>

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<sup>612</sup>*Menen*, 6, no. 2., Addis Ababa, 2 September 1962.

<sup>613</sup>*Op. cit.*, Sherman, 111.

<sup>614</sup>*Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>615</sup>See *The First Eritrean National Congress of the ELF: Programme of the Eritrean Revolution*, 1971, 9.

<sup>616</sup>*Ibid.*, 6-7.

Could this be a product of a totally dismantled economy?

### **Aman Andom and the Eritrean Conflict**

Lieutenant General Aman Michael Andom,<sup>617</sup> who replaced Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974, was the first military Head of State in Ethiopia, who also retained his position of Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces and Minister of National Defense. After assuming his post, one of the immediate problems confronting him was the Eritrean conflict.

In mid-August 1974, twenty-three Eritrean Deputies had tendered their resignations to the Ethiopian Parliament. They maintained that there had not been peace in Eritrea for the last thirteen years, that no remedies had been found to alleviate the situation, that some years ago they had petitioned the Emperor concerning the plight of the Eritrean people, and that despite their pleas to the President of the Chamber of Deputies four years ago to raise the matter in Parliament, their effort was to no avail. The Deputies further charged that in July 1974, many people were indiscriminately killed and property deliberately destroyed in the Om Hager district of Eritrea, and that despite the order of amnesty for all political prisoners in Ethiopia, no Eritrean prisoner had benefited from the amnesty.<sup>618</sup>

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<sup>617</sup>Aman Andom was an Ethiopian soldier statesman, born on 21 July 1924 of Eritrean parents in Khartoum, Sudan. Educated in the Sudan and Ethiopia, he completed his staff college courses at the military Academies in Camberley and Sandhurst in Britain, and graduated as a P.S.C. He served under Wingate in Gondar (1941); at the Army Headquarters in Addis Ababa (1942); took part in the Woyane operations at Mekelle in 1943; served as Commander of the 8th and 17th Battalions in Gondar (1944); took part in the Allied Victory Parade in London in 1945, appointed Training Officer of the 2nd Division in Dessie (1950); Commander of the first Kagnew Battalion in Korea (1951); Commander of the Guenet Military Academy (1953); Assistant Chief of Staff (1954-56); Military Attaché, Ethiopian Embassy, Paris (1958); Assistant Chief of Logistics (1959); Commander of the 3rd Infantry Division in Harrar (1960); Military Attaché, Washington, D. C. (1961-64); Senator (1965-74).

<sup>618</sup>*The Ethiopian Herald*, 21 August 1974.

As a result of the protests of the Eritrean Deputies, the Chamber of Deputies of the Ethiopian Parliament set up a special committee of fourteen members to follow up all decisions made by the government to solve the Eritrean conflict. General Aman was also requested by the Dergue to tour Eritrea, and to investigate what could be done to ameliorate the situation. General Aman spent twelve days on an extensive tour of Eritrea. He addressed mass rallies in Asmara, Keren, Massawa, Adi Keyeh and Mendefera. Wherever he went, he was warmly welcomed by the people who expressed to him their strong desire for the restoration of peace. Addressing a rally of some 80,000 people at Queen of Sheba Stadium in Asmara, General Aman spoke of how the former government managed systematically to suppress any information about the problem in Eritrea. The situation deteriorated, he said, when "it was sanctioned a criminal act to talk about the Eritrean problem, thereby denying our brothers and sisters in Eritrea an outlet to their grievances." He went on to say that Eritrea had been historically an integral part of Ethiopia, and that the heroic role played by many Eritreans in the golden annals of Ethiopia, was well known.<sup>619</sup>

In Keren, General Aman reminded a rally that when he last visited the town in 1950, peace and national unity was the rallying cry. "As your son and brother," he said, "you would recall that I was very much pleased with the sentiments expressed at the time, and you will also recall that Eritrea voluntarily united with Ethiopia." He observed further that:

The problem in Eritrea kept getting worse from time to time because of the divide and rule policy of the officials assigned to the province. This same policy was applied elsewhere in Ethiopia, thus creating dissension and conflict among brothers

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<sup>619</sup>*The Ethiopian Herald*, 29 August 1974.

on religious and ethnic grounds, and that the misery and bloodshed in Eritrea had saddened me--a native of Eritrea--and that injustice and suffering should not have been the reward to the people of Eritrea who have always dedicated themselves to the task of safeguarding Ethiopian independence and national unity.<sup>620</sup>

Finally, at the end of his tour, General Aman made the following recommendations to help resolve the Eritrean problem: modernization of the administrative system; reform of the judiciary and abolition of the arbitrary and illegal government activities, amnesty to all political prisoners; return and resettlement of exiles; promotion of foreign investment to help expand the economy and to create employment opportunities for the people; the resurrection of industrial plants which had interrupted operations as a result of the civil war; increased relief aid to drought-affected areas of Eritrea; expansion of public health facilities to ensure adequate medical services; development of educational facilities, the end of the state of emergency; freedom of speech; abolition of the discredited system of divide and rule along religious and ethnic lines; bringing the culprits of Om Hager to justice; and safeguarding Ethiopian unity and independence, and seeing to it that the Eritrean people followed the example of their forefathers and ensured an indivisible Eritrea united with Ethiopia.<sup>621</sup>

General Aman Andom was advocating nothing less than the transformation of the Ethiopian state. In fact, even if his recommendations were implemented in Ethiopia alone, they would have had a positive impact in facilitating the resolution of the Eritrean conflict. However, despite his best intentions, there was a limit to what he could have done to solve the conflict. Afterall, the removal of an autocrat does not remove autocracy. The change of

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<sup>620</sup>*The Ethiopian Herald*, 31 August 1974.

<sup>621</sup>*The Ethiopian Herald*, 7 September 1974.

personalities did not change the nature of the Ethiopian state, which essentially remained an absolutist and autocratic state. General Aman was killed in November 1974, by a regime that never understood the society it was ruling.

Over many years, it imposed on Ethiopia various institutions of Russian origin.<sup>622</sup> The institutions which Ethiopia copied from the USSR were characterized by a single command centre and by the absence of any mediating institutions between the citizens and the state. In effect, the autocratic and absolutist monarchist state was overthrown only to be replaced by another absolutist state. Furthermore, like the ancien regime, the new state forbade the formation of political parties, a free press, and independent trade unions. Under such circumstances, because there had been no fundamental change in the nature and orientation of the Ethiopian state, it should be of no wonder why the Eritrean conflict could not be resolved.

What are some of the conclusions that we could make from what we have discussed so far? First, we could say that in the 1940s, an Eritrean nationalist movement was non-existent. The overwhelming majority of the Eritrean voters, both Christians and Muslims, identified themselves clearly with Ethiopian Nationalism.<sup>623</sup> The federation failed because two

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<sup>622</sup>For example, as early as 1649, the activities and obligations of all Russians were determined by the Czar. Towns were subjected to tight controls and sealed off from the rest of the country, making it impossible for any Russian to travel anywhere without the permission of the Czar. See Anderson, Perry, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: N. L. B., 1975), 220-337.

When the Bolsheviks came to power, they had no difficulty in converting this practice into law. The post-1974 Ethiopian state simply copied this and others, as if such practices were obligatory models to build socialism. But such measures hardly contributed to the resolution of the Eritrean problem.

<sup>623</sup>See "The Eritrean Autonomy, 1952-1962: Its Failure and its Contribution to further Escalation," by Haggai Erlich, in *Models of Autonomy* (ed.) Yoram Dinstein, Transaction Books, Tel Aviv University, 1981.



fundamentally different systems could not be reconciled. Ethiopian absolutism and Eritrean representative democracy could not tolerate each other. One had to destroy the other. In this case, autocracy “won,” but temporarily.

Among those Eritreans who went abroad to become active in organizing the armed opposition were Ibrahim Sultan, Idris Muhammed Adem, Osman Saleh Sabbe and Wolde Ab Wolde Mariam. All these leaders effectively utilized historical memories. Menelik’s deal with the Italians, the treatment visited upon Eritrean prisoners of war at Ethiopian hands in 1896, the slaughter of plough oxen to feed the army, which resulted in seven years of famine in Tigrai, the bombing of Mekelle in 1943, and, last but not least, the way in which Eritrea was treated by Ethiopia during the period of the federation (1952-1962), were all recalled to target the “enemy” and to sustain the guerrilla warfare, which in a period of twelve years, significantly contributed to the overthrow of Haile Selassie’s government.

In sum, we could say that if the drive for Eritrean and Ethiopian unity was a genuine expression of the hopes and aspirations of the people themselves, if the Unionists and their allies won forty-seven out of sixty-six seats in the Assembly, and if the Secretary General of the Unionist Party, Tedla Bairu, was elected President of the Assembly by an overwhelming vote, it is incorrect to say that the Unionists had few followers in Eritrea. Historical facts should not be obscured by political rhetoric and extravagant hyperbole, and passion should be balanced with realism.

In the Eritrea of the 1940s, there was a strong identification with Ethiopia. The situation dramatically changed in subsequent decades, when those in power in Addis Ababa began to fear the inspiring example of Eritrea's democratic institutions, and when they attempted to solve complex social and political problems with the iron fist and crude repression, and brought untold

suffering on the people of Eritrea. But this does not mean that one has to distort facts in order to convey a message.

We can also conclude that in the 1940s, an Eritrean nationalist movement was non-existent. The overwhelming majority of the Eritrean voters, both Christians and Muslims identified themselves with Ethiopian nationalism.



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**THE INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL DIMENSIONS OF THE  
ERITREAN CONFLICT**

**Volume II**

**By**

**Daniel D. Kendie**

**A DISSERTATION**

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## CHAPTER V

### The Eritrean Problem: An Extension of the Conflicts in the Horn of Africa and the Middle East

Haggai Erlich, in his most stimulating study, *The Struggle Over Eritrea*, observes:

The problem of Eritrea should be viewed as an integral part of the Red Sea and Middle Eastern affairs rather than as an African conflict, and that all local actors in the Eritrean conflict are directly connected sometimes even closely allied with Middle Eastern countries and organizations.<sup>624</sup>

In another study, Erlich similarly notes:

The Ethiopian state which used to dominate the Horn of Africa, now faces a possible "Middle Easternization" of the Horn. The various organizations, movements and "fronts," whether motivated by personal ambitions or by ethnic, religious, socially radical and other concepts, are closely related to Middle Eastern counterparts. For both ideological and practical reasons, they aim at a rearrangement of the Horn of Africa at the expense of Ethiopia's territorial [integrity], and at rebuilding it as an extension of the Middle East.<sup>625</sup>

By taking the above statements as general observations, this chapter will, among other things, (1) investigate the historical roots of the currently emerging Muslim-Christian conflict in Ethiopia and (2) consider the validity of Erlich's observations. In the process, the study will focus on the hidden agendas of such countries as Egypt, the Sudan, Somalia and Syria. It will also examine the hydro-politics of the waters of the Blue Nile, Israel's relations with Ethiopia, the question of the Red Sea, and the Eritrean conflict.

#### The Historical Background

According to the Koran, Jihad is a religious war that must be conducted against unbelievers. It is an incumbent religious duty, established in the

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<sup>624</sup>Haggai, Erlich, *The Struggle over Eritrea....*, (Stanford, 1983), 55.

<sup>625</sup>Haggai, Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Challenge of Independence* (Boulder, CO: L. Rienner Publishers, 1986), 257.

Koran and in the Traditions as a divine institution, and enjoyed especially for the purpose of advancing Islam and of repelling evil from Muslims. When an “infidel” country is conquered by a Muslim ruler, its inhabitants are offered three alternatives:

- (1) Becoming Muslim, in which case the conquered become enfranchised citizens,
- (2) The payment of a poll-tax (Jizyah), by which unbelievers in Islam obtain protection,
- (3) Death to those who will not pay the poll-tax.<sup>626</sup>

In view of this, Bernard Lewis, one of the leading Orientalists, and the renowned scholar of Islam, contends:

Islam from its inception is a religion of power, and in the Muslim world view it is right and proper that power should be wielded by Muslims and Muslims alone. Others may receive the tolerance, even the benevolence of the Muslim state, provided that they clearly recognize Muslim supremacy. That Muslims should rule over non-Muslims is right and normal. That non-Muslims should rule over Muslims is an offense against the laws of God and nature, and this is true whether in Kashmir, Palestine, Lebanon or Cyprus.<sup>627</sup>

As we will shortly see, Abyssinia (Ethiopia) provided a decisive support to the Prophet Muhammed in the early days of his mission, and helped to save Islam. As a result, the Prophet had instructed his followers not to wage a jihad on Ethiopia: in the hadith<sup>628</sup> of the Prophet--“Atruku al-Habasha Ma

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<sup>626</sup>The Jihad extends into the Dar al-Harb, i.e., the non-Islamic territories which are described as the “abode of struggle.” Adult males must participate if the need arises, but not all of them, provided that “a sufficient number” (fard al-kijawah) take it up. See: *Koran*, ii, 191. See also *Dictionary of Islam*. (Premier Book House Publishers, 1964), 243.

<sup>627</sup>Lewis, Bernard, “The Return of Islam,” *Commentary*, vol. 61, no 1, January 1976.

<sup>628</sup>Hadith consists of the sayings of the Prophet Muhammed, his companions and other prominent early Muslims. It is regarded as a source of law only second to that of the Koran, and provides guidance on aspects of law and life where Koranic warrant was lacking. See Guillaume, Alfred, *The Traditions of Islam: an Introduction to the Study of the Hadith Literature*, Beirut, Khayats, 1966.



Karakukum,"<sup>629</sup> "Leave the Abyssinians in peace, so long as they do not take the offensive." In view of this, how valid is the assertion of Bernard Lewis? How faithful have the followers of Muhammed been to the hadith with regard to Ethiopia?

### The Early Relations

Before Islam, the acquaintance of the Arabs with Sub-Saharan Africa was limited mostly to Ethiopia, a country with a level of moral and material civilization significantly higher than their own, and whom they regarded with respect.<sup>630</sup> It was a land ruled by a just king, and where the Quraish used to do merchandise because they found abundance of food, protection and good traffic.<sup>631</sup> Ethiopians were active in Arabia in the 6th century as allies of the Byzantines in the great struggle for power and influence between the Roman and the Persian Empires. Indeed, an Ethiopian expedition of 120,000 soldiers led by Emperor Kaleb had crossed the Red Sea in about 512 A.D. to help the Christians in Southern Arabia against the Jewish Kingdom of Himyar. After fighting a victorious campaign they returned home, leaving garrisons behind.<sup>632</sup>

The Ethiopians again returned to Arabia in about 525 A.D., in order to restore their authority and once again to protect the Christians. Having done this, they again withdrew, leaving the area in the hands of Abraha, a native of

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<sup>629</sup>Op. cit., Trimmingham, *Islam in .....*, 46.

<sup>630</sup>Lewis, Bernard, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East, an Historical Enquiry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 23-41.

<sup>631</sup>Muir, William, *The Life of Mahomet: from original sources*, 3rd ed. (London: Smith Elder, 1894), vol. ii, 133.

<sup>632</sup>Sergew Hable Sellassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270*, (Addis Ababa: United Printers, 1972), 133.

the Ethiopian port city of Adulis, who was the Commander of the Ethiopian forces in the Yemen, and who was crowned king in Zafar church by Kaleb in the presence of the army. In 570 A.D. Abraha led about 60,000 soldiers against Mecca. The purpose of the expedition was to destroy the Ka'ba - the holy stone of Mecca supposed to have been sent from God.<sup>633</sup> The attempt, which seems to have been part of a campaign against the Persians, failed, and subsequently, the Persians sent a naval expedition which brought the Yemen under their control.<sup>634</sup>

More significant for the future of the region in general and for Ethio-Arab relations in particular was the emergence of the Prophet Muhammed on the scene. It appears that an Ethiopian Christian community living in Mecca had provided a wet nurse named Umm Ayman for the young Muhammed, who influenced him to develop special interest in Ethiopia.<sup>635</sup> There was also another Ethiopian known as Bilal ibn Rabah, an early convert to Islam and a devoted follower of the Prophet Muhammed. When the call to prayer was instituted shortly after Muhammed's arrival in Medina, Bilal became the first muezzin, and it could be from him that Muhammed heard pleasant things about Ethiopia.<sup>636</sup>

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<sup>633</sup>Ibid., 133.

<sup>634</sup>Op. cit., Lewis, (*Race ....*), 23. Muslim tradition recalls that Abraha's attempt to challenge the religious and mercantile supremacy of the Prophet's hometown, Mecca, was "miraculously" defeated. Mythology notwithstanding, small pox was responsible for the death of many of his soldiers. He is also credited with building a magnificent church at Saana in the Yemen.

<sup>635</sup>Cuoq, Joseph, *L'Islam en Ethiopie* (Paris, 1981), 26.

<sup>636</sup>Lewis, *Race and Slavery*, 25. Bilal ibn Rabah or Bilal al-Habesh, as the Egyptians and the Syrians call him, was very close to Muhammed. Apart from being entrusted with the responsibility to call Muslims to prayer, he was also the Prophet's mace bearer, steward, adjutant and valet. To this day, Bilal is very much venerated in the Muslim world. His grave remains a sacred shrine. The biggest mosque in the city of Damascus, Syria, is named after him.

When Muhammed's early followers were being persecuted in Arabia, it was to Ethiopia that the Prophet recommended that they migrate. Bilal may have assured the Prophet that Ethiopia could provide the Muslims with protection and custody. The Messenger of God thus told his followers to go to Ethiopia where they will find a "righteous king," the Najashi<sup>637</sup> (Negus), under whom no one is wronged. Remain there until God gives you relief from what you are suffering.<sup>638</sup> As a result, many Muslims immigrated to Ethiopia and lived there under the protection of the Negus.

The sympathy and hospitality given to the Arab immigrants by the Ethiopians gave birth to the later idea of hijra to Medina. Indeed, without the protection and support provided by the Negus, Islam might have not survived, and the Prophet himself might happily himself have migrated to Ethiopia.<sup>639</sup>

According to Tor Andrae, the fact that the Prophet described the Negus as a "righteous king" clearly indicates Muhammed's satisfaction at the prospect of Muslims migrating to Ethiopia, that Muhammed felt that Christianity was most closely related to his own belief, and that the Christians on their part seemed to show sympathy and understanding of the new message.<sup>640</sup>

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<sup>637</sup>"Najashi," Negus/Negash, is a word borrowed from Aethiopic meaning "king" or "prince". In Arabic it is sometimes used as a proper noun, sometimes as a *nomen appellatinum*. The word is also genuinely Arabic, but as such, it has the meaning of 'driver of a game'. It does not occur in the Koran. In hadith, it is the designation of the king of Ethiopia, just as Kaiser, Kisra, and al-Mukawkas are the designations of the rulers of Rum (Byzantium), Faris (Persia) and Misr (Egypt). It is now recognized that King Armah was the king in power in Ethiopia at the time.

<sup>638</sup>Ibn Hisham, *Sira*, Guillaume's Translation, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 146.

<sup>639</sup>Op. cit., Muir, *The Life of ....*, 68.

<sup>640</sup>Andrae, Tor, *Muhammed: the Man and his Faith* (New York: George Allen and Unwin, 1936), 177.

Watt, however, suggests that Muhammed's motive in sending his followers to Ethiopia was not only religious but also political and economic.

The following are some of the reasons that he advances:

- 1) The Prophet sent some of his companions to Ethiopia in order to avoid the hardships of persecution;
- 2) To remove them from the danger of apostasy;
- 3) To engage in trade in Ethiopia;
- 4) To get military help or to attempt to develop an alternative trade route to Byzantium; and
- 5) To overcome sharp division of opinion within the embryonic Islamic community.<sup>641</sup>

In any event, when it was safe, Muhammed asked the Negus to permit the exiles to return. To that end, he sent Amr b. Umayyah al-Damri to the Ethiopian Negus. Muhammed also sought for himself the hand of Umm Habiba, the daughter of Abu Sufyan, in marriage. Her husband, Ubaydullah b. Jahish, who had become a Christian, had died in Ethiopia.<sup>642</sup> The Negus acted accordingly and wedded Umm Habiba to the Prophet, paying the customary dowry of 400 dinars to her on behalf of Muhammed. Then he sent back the emigrants in two ships as desired by the Prophet, also sending presents for him.<sup>643</sup>

The kindly welcome accorded to the Muslim refugees from Mecca could only further increase the good reputation of the Ethiopians.<sup>644</sup> As a result, Muhammed was said to have excepted the Ethiopian state from any Jihad (Holy

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<sup>641</sup>Watt, M., *Muhammed at Mecca* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1979), 112-113.

<sup>642</sup>Op. cit., Ibn Hisham, *Sira*, 527.

<sup>643</sup>Ibn Sa'd, *Al-Tabaqat al-Kabir* (English Translation) (Pakistan Historical Society, 1967), 240.

<sup>644</sup>See Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, 44-46.

War): "Leave the Abyssinians/Ethiopians in peace so long as they do not take the offensive."

Islam divides the world into dar-al-Islam and dar-al-harb. In the first, Islam is accepted as a means of salvation and as a way of life. In the second, which is the territory of the infidels, there is hostility to Islam. Muslims are free to declare a jihad on it. Some scholars of Islam, however, accept an interim stage, *i.e.*, dar-al-sulh, where non-Muslims could dominate society. Since Muslims are free to practice their religion, a territory of this type enjoys temporary agreement with Islam.<sup>645</sup>

There were many other types of contacts between the Arabs and the Ethiopians both in Arabia and in Africa during the life-time of the Prophet Muhammed and after. In fact, many prominent figures of the earlier Islamic period had Ethiopian women among their ancestors, including no less a person than the Caliph Omar himself, whose father, al-Khattab, had an Ethiopian mother.<sup>646</sup> Another was Amir ibn al-As, the conqueror of Egypt and one of the architects of the Arab Empire.<sup>647</sup> Another prominent figure was also Abu Bakra, literally, "the Father of the Pulley," an Ethiopian slave in Taif. He acquired this nickname by letting himself down with a pulley during the Muslim siege of Taif, and joining the Muslims. He was accepted and manumitted by the Prophet and later settled in Basra, where he died in about 672 A.D.<sup>648</sup> The list can continue indefinitely.

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<sup>645</sup>See Majid Khadurri, *War and Peace in the Law of Islam* (The John Hopkins Press, Baltimore 1955), Chapter 12: "Neutrality".

<sup>646</sup>Lewis, *Race and Slavery*, 25. Caliph Omar (634-644), the second Caliph, was one of the most notable figures in Islam. Under him, the Islamic empire centered in Damascus expanded with astonishing speed.

<sup>647</sup>*Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>648</sup>*Ibid.*, 25.

In any event, did the Prophet really utter those words with regard to Ethiopia? Or was that particular hadith a fabrication of a later stage to reflect the fact that Islam was unable to launch a combined sea and land operation against the mountainous citadel of Ethiopia.<sup>649</sup>

Far from being grateful for what Ethiopia did to support the Prophet Muhammed, Muslim scholars like Muhammed Rajab, however, write that Ethiopia has been, and remains, the country of the infidels and of crusaders who hated Islam and denied Muhammed, that even before the time of Muhammed, Ethiopians were crusaders who wanted to destroy the Ka'ba and Christianize the whole Arab Peninsula, and that they have been a historical enemy of Islam and a loyal partner to Europe in an on-going Christian crusade.<sup>650</sup>

### **The Series of Offenses**

Occasionally, Muslim rulers, too, deviated from the principle of "leave the Habesh," for strategic interests and went on the offensive. The Ummayyad Caliph Omar al-Khattab was the first to begin the offensive. Although he did not declare a Jihad on Ethiopia, he did dispatch a small naval expedition, under Alkama bin Mujazziz, against an Ethiopian fleet in the Red Sea to raid the port of Adulis in 640 A.D. However, because the Arab fleet suffered so disastrously, Omar would have no more to do with the sea.<sup>651</sup>

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<sup>649</sup>Erlich, Haggai, *Ethiopia and the Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, forthcoming), 12.

<sup>650</sup>As quoted by Haggai Erlich, *ibid.*, *Ethiopia and...*, 20.

<sup>651</sup>E. Cerulli, "Ethiopia's Relations with the Muslim World," in *Cambridge History of Africa, Africa from the Seventh to the Eleventh Century*, 575. Op. cit., Trimingham, *Islam*, 46.

Throughout the seventh century, the Axumite navy was among the strongest in the Red Sea. In fact, in 702, the Ethiopians invaded the Hijaz, occupied the port of Jeddah and caused panic in Mecca. As a result, in retaliation, Caliph Suliman bin Abdul Malik occupied the Dahlack islands. With the Byzantine defeats in Syria and North Africa by the Ummayyads and Abbasids between the 7th and 10th centuries, Islam expanded very rapidly.<sup>652</sup>

During the reign of Naod (1494-1508), the war against the Ethiopian state by Mahfuz, the Emir of Zeila, was admired by all Muslims. In addition to volunteers from Arabia who flocked to his camp, Mahfuz also enjoyed the support of the rulers of Yemen and the Heijaz. When he declared a jihad and renewed his campaign against Ethiopia, he was presented with the green flag of Islam by Ulama from Arabia. Many more volunteers and substantial quantities of arms were shipped to him from Arabia, and the struggle against the Christian kingdom assumed a new dimension.<sup>653</sup>

Moreover, a brilliant and daring military commander known as Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim, or Gragne, as the Ethiopians call him (1506-1543), was bent on converting Ethiopia to Islam. With the support provided to him by the Ottoman Turks, he devastated Ethiopia for sixteen years (1527-1543).<sup>654</sup> Because the Ottomans considered the conquest of Ethiopia a jihad worthy of support of all

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<sup>652</sup>Op. cit., Cerulli, *"Ethiopia's Relation ..."*, 575. For many centuries, the existence of the Christian Empire of Ethiopia impeded Muslim penetration of North East Africa. It was in fact only with the imposition of European colonial rule on East and Central Africa, that the expansion of Islam into the interior was facilitated.

<sup>653</sup>See Alvarez, F., *The Prester John of the Indies*, vol. II, 408 (ed. Beckingham, C.F. and Huntingford, G.W.B.) (Cambridge, 1961).

<sup>654</sup>Ahmed's war against Ethiopia was not intended to be just a Jihad, but a Futuh—a permanent conquest aimed at that country's transformation into a Muslim Sultanate.

believers,<sup>655</sup> they provided him with arms and soldiers who could use them.<sup>656</sup> Churches and monasteries were sacked, and monks and clergy were systematically slaughtered.<sup>657</sup> The jihad was devastating in its destruction, irresistible in its ferocity, and appalling in its cruelties.<sup>658</sup>

The Ottoman Turks failed in the proxy war they were conducting through Ahmed. They witnessed the defeat and destruction of Ahmed's army at the hands of the Ethiopians and the Portuguese. Apart from the religious motive, we should also note that any direct or indirect Ottoman military pressure on Ethiopia was Istanbul's response to Ethiopian flirtations with the Portuguese. The latter were attempting to divert the trade of the east from its old channels, through the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, to the Cape of Good Hope route, which was now in their hands.

The Portuguese were also endeavouring to obstruct the Pilgrimage to Mecca from their bases along the Red Sea coast. As a result, there was considerable reduction in the custom revenues of such ports as Jeddah, Suez, and Tur. As protector of the Holy cities of Islam, i.e., Mecca and Medina, the Ottoman Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-1566) was forced into action. He appointed Ozdemir Pasha, a Circassian Mamluk, who proved himself a

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<sup>655</sup>Abir, Mordechai, *Ethiopia and the Red Sea - the Rise and Decline of the Solomonic Dynasty and Muslim-European Rivalry in the Region* (London: Frank Caas, 1980), 88.

<sup>656</sup>A Yemenite chronicler, Shihab Ad-din provides in *Futuh-al-Habash* (1559), an eye-witness account of the conquest of Ethiopia. The account, of course, is slightly biased in favour of the Muslims. It has been translated to French by Rene Basset and appears as *Etudes Sur L'Histoire d'Ethiopie* (Paris, 1882). For the engagement of Arab and Turkish soldiers in Ahmed's army, see 233-34 and 254-55. Portuguese sources also confirm the military aid provided by the Ottoman Turks to Ahmed. See, for example, Alvarez, vol. I, 287, and 305-6.

<sup>657</sup>Abir, *Ethiopia and the Red Sea*, 90-91.

<sup>658</sup>Trimingham, 87.



brilliant military commander in the conquest of Yemen and Nubia to lead an Ottoman army that was gathering in Egypt.<sup>659</sup> By using both land and naval forces, Ozdemir succeeded in conquering the whole region from Massawa to Zeila and established the Ottoman Province of Habeshistan in 1557.<sup>660</sup> Ozdemir Pasha also directed the conquest of the hinterland of Tigray and ravaged Northern Ethiopia. The main purpose of the Turkish forays into Ethiopia was not just the seizure of cattle and human captives, but the promotion of jihad. While Ozdemir Pasha built mosques in Debarwa and Massawa, he massacred the monks of Debre Damo, profaned churches, and slaughtered many Christians who refused to be converted to Islam.<sup>661</sup> Despite their foothold on the coast, the Ottoman Turks found that they could not succeed in conquering the Ethiopian mainland and left Massawa's management to the local Naib, who owed allegiance to the Ethiopian emperors. Nevertheless, the Ottomans managed to isolate Ethiopia from the Christian world for a long time.<sup>662</sup>

Then there was Egypt, which, under Muhammed Ali had expanded into the Nile Valley (1820-1840) and had attempted to conquer Ethiopia. Even if Egypt's motives were more geopolitical than religious, the conversion of

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<sup>659</sup>Merriman, R. B., *Suleiman the Magnificent, 1520-1566*, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1944), 253.

<sup>660</sup>Kammeru, Albert, *La Mer Rouge, L'Abyssine et L'Arabie, aux XVIe et XVIIe siecles*, (Cairo: 1947). There were two Ozdemirs, father and son. Both were distinguished military commanders in the middle of the 16th century. Ozdemir Pasha fell ill and died at Debarwa in 1560, where he was buried. His son, Osman Pasha, transferred his father's grave to Massawa and built for him a tomb with a magnificent dome, which still remains a site frequented by Muslims. See *Truk Ansiklopedis*, CICTXXVI, Ankara (1977), 295. See also *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. I, Leyden/London (1913), 120.

<sup>661</sup>Conzelman, W.E., *Chronique de Galawdewos* (Paris: 1895), 74, 164.

<sup>662</sup>It was not possible to enter Ethiopia without permission from the Ottomans. Ships were always guarding and watching the coast. See Franz Amadeus Dombrowski: "Some ideas about the Historical Role of Ethiopia's Access to the Sea," *Northeastern African Studies*, 6, nos. 1-2, 1984, 172-74.

northern Ethiopians to Islam has had its consequences. Reintegrating them into the Ethiopian state was made extremely difficult.

But even more ominous for Ethiopia's security was the emergence of the Sudanese Mahdists who felt threatened by the emerging understanding between Britain, Egypt and Ethiopia. This militant Sheite sect of the 1880s, was under the leadership of Muhammed Ahmed ibn Sayyid Abd Allah Al Mahdi (1845-85). A jihad was declared against Ethiopia. The north-western Ethiopian provinces were sacked. Gondar was looted in 1887. Forty out of forty-seven of its churches were burnt. In addition, two hundred churches were ravaged *en route* and 3,445 Ethiopians were taken as slaves to Khartoum. Even the Ethiopian leaders, including Emperor Yohannes, were warned to abandon Christianity and to endorse Islam.<sup>663</sup>

As we have seen, a series of jihads were conducted against Ethiopia. Yet, these wars are ignored by historians. This is so either because the jihads were unsuccessful or because they went unnoticed as they had limited objectives.<sup>664</sup> Nevertheless, these wars violated the supposed hadith of the Prophet Muhammed regarding the Ethiopians.

It appears that in Islam, religion is not as it is in Christianity one sector or one segment of life regulating some matters, while others are excluded. On the contrary, Islam is concerned with the whole of life, from which it has a total jurisdiction. With Islam, the very idea of the separation of church and

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<sup>663</sup>See Zewde Gabre Selassie, *Yohannes IV*, 238-239. Hamdan Abu Anja (c. 1835-88) defeated Ras Adal of Gojjam and sacked Gondar in 1887. Of all the Mahdist Amirs, he was perhaps the best fighter. Zaki Tamal was Abu Anja's deputy. He reached the height of his fame when an army under his command turned defeat into victory by killing Emperor Yohannes and sending his head as a trophy to the Khalifa.

<sup>664</sup>Abir, *Ethiopia and the Red Sea*, 77.

state is meaningless. Church and state, religion and political authority are one and the same.<sup>665</sup>

### **Nasser and Ethiopia**

For thousands of years, Ethiopia and Egypt maintained close cultural, political, and trade relations. The head of the Ethiopian Church - the Abuna, came from Alexandria. Thousands of Ethiopians annually passed through Egypt on their way to the Holy Land.

Indeed, Gamal Abdel Nasser and his generation of Egyptians grew up reading a literature that was in part friendly and in part hostile to Ethiopia. In 1935, on the eve of the Italian aggression against Ethiopia, for example, the Egyptian intellectual, Muhammed Lufti Juma, wrote:

The Ethiopians proved that they were a noble people, lofty in spirit and humanity. The Prophet was right in sending the Sahaba to their country. The Egyptians never forget that the Ethiopians never interfered with the flow of the Nile. For the Muslims in Ethiopia, Egypt is the spiritual centre, as is Alexandria for Christians. Ethiopia is a neighbour and a sister - an important part of the East. Its enemy was and still remains the West. The Italian conquest of Eritrea was a stabbing the heart of Ethiopia with a dagger. The fascist Italians seek revenge for the defeat at Adwa, but Ethiopia, the Eastern, Christian-Muslim country will prevail.<sup>666</sup>

A similar sentiment was expressed by Dr. Abdel al-Rahman Shahbandar, the exiled Syrian politician, who led the 1925 anti-French uprising. In 1935 he wrote:

I should not hesitate to sacrifice myself for Ethiopia in 1935, the same as I was not hesitant to do so for Syria in 1925. I do not hesitate to stand by Ethiopia and identify with her, for indeed, the

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<sup>665</sup>Bernard Lewis, "The Return of Islam."

<sup>666</sup>As quoted by Haggai Erlich, Op. cit., *Ethiopia and....*, 120-122.

highest obligation for freedom and liberation commands us to do so.<sup>667</sup>

In contrast, the Egyptian writer, Yusuf Ahmed, writing in 1935 on Islam in Ethiopia, expressed the inherent hatred the Ethiopians felt for Arabs from the beginning of history. The reason Ethiopia was never conquered by Islam, was, he said, for practical reasons.

Ahmed Gragne's war was a defensive war which turned into an epic of Islamic bravery second only to the early Islamic conquests. Tewodros was a fanatic crusader who burned the mosque of Gondar. Yohannes humiliated the Egyptian prisoners he captured in Gura. He then forced 50,000 Muslims to Christianize, but God sent the Mahdi to punish him for maltreating Islam. The history of Ethiopia vis-a-vis Islam was a story of injustice and that oppressed Muslims under Christian Ethiopia were entitled to both Islamic and Arab liberation.<sup>668</sup>

Yusuf Ahmed, and other Egyptians who shared his views notwithstanding, an Egyptian Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia was established in 1936 in Cairo. Thousands of Egyptians registered as volunteers to fight against the Italians. A medical mission was also sent to the front. General Wahib Pasha, a prominent officer in the Turkish army during World War I, actually served in the Ogaden under General Nassibu Zammanuel. So did the Sudanese General Muhammed Tariq.<sup>669</sup> The latter maintained:

The Ethiopians are truly brave. They do not fear death and can sustain all difficulties. But they cannot face warfare in the modern world. Their bravery is outdated. Their psychology is irrelevant. It is the era of technology, and they have nothing of it.<sup>670</sup>

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<sup>667</sup>As quoted by Haggai Erlich, in *Op. cit.*, *Ethiopian and...*, 132.

<sup>668</sup>*Op. cit.*, Haggai Erlich, *Ethiopia and...*, 122-126.

<sup>669</sup>*Op. cit.*, Khadurri, 267

<sup>670</sup>See Hussien Ahmed, *op. cit.*, *The Historiography of ....*, vol. 1, (1992), 103-108.

It is against this background that Gamal Abdel Nasser wrote the *Philosophy of the Revolution* in which, among other things, he said:

There remains the Third Circle [the first two being the Arab and African circles] - the Islamic. As I ponder over the millions of Muslims throughout the world, all welded into a homogenous whole by the same fate, I come out increasingly conscious of [their] potential and their unlimited power.<sup>671</sup>

Even if the "Arab Circle" was Egypt's main sphere of identity, the African circle was not without its merits. Nasser had the opportunity to meet Haile Selassie in the Sudan in 1941. While the Emperor was making preparations to enter Ethiopia after five years of exile in Britain, Nasser was stationed there as an officer in the Egyptian army. After Nasser came to power in 1952, contacts between the two leaders became frequent.

The Egyptian leader strongly toyed with the idea of the unity of the Nile Valley countries of Egypt, Ethiopia and the Sudan, under his hegemony. But when he was rebuffed by Haile Selassie, who was consciously developing his relations with the USA and Israel, Nasser started to undermine Ethiopia through Eritrea and Somalia, and by other means.<sup>672</sup> It seems, indeed, that

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<sup>671</sup>Gamal Abdel Nasser, *The Philosophy of the Revolution: Egypt's Liberation* (Washington, D. C.: Public Affairs Press, 1955), 67-68. Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-1970), served as Prime Minister (1954-56) and as President of Egypt (1956-1970), and became one of the most important Arab leaders of the 20th century. As one of the organizers of the Free Officers' Movement, he planned and led the Egyptian Revolution of 1952. He fought in Palestine (1948); opposed the pro-Western Baghdad Pact (1955), nationalized the Suez Canal (1956), and carried out a series of internal structural reforms; withstood the tripartite attacks of Israel, France and Britain (1956) and built the Aswan Dam with the help of the USSR. When Egypt united with Syria, he became President of the UAR (1958) until Syria withdrew from the federation (1962). In 1962, he was involved in the civil war in Yemen supporting the revolutionaries against the Saudi-backed royalists. In 1967 Nasser closed the Straits of Tiran which led to a lightning Israeli air and ground attack, and which left Israel in control of the Sinai. See: Vatikiotis, P.J.: *Nasser and His Generation*, (London: Croom Helm, 1978).

<sup>672</sup>Ismael Tareq, *The UAR in Africa, Egypt's Policy Under Nasser* (Evanston North Western University Press, 1967), 178-179.

Ethio-Egyptian relations took a downward spiral as a consequence of Haile Selassie's strong ties with the USA and Israel, in so far as Nasser felt that Haile Selassie was conspiring with Egypt's enemies to undermine his government.

As we will see shortly, Nasser warned Ethiopia of the dire consequences of building dams on the Blue Nile, declared the Red Sea an Arab Lake, helped organize the Muslim dominated Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) as a manifestation of Muslim solidarity, and saw to it that Ethiopia's problems became an integral part of the conflicts in the Middle East.

No doubt, Ethiopian Muslims had felt profound alienation. They were treated as second class citizens. Their resentment and alienation had led to Muslim resistance in Eritrea, Harrar, Arussi, and Bale provinces, and the Muslim attitude showed that the religious problem had to be tackled.<sup>673</sup>

With the coming of the revolution of 1974, however, Ethiopia was made a secular state, and three important Muslim holidays Id al-Fitr, Id al-Adha, and the Mwalid were declared national holidays.<sup>674</sup> But, because of the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism in the region, Ethiopia's peace and security seems to be seriously threatened. The issue at stake here is not secularism, or Muslim/Christian equality, but control of a state in which Muslims rule over non-Muslims.

The Muslim Brotherhood, Ikhwan Al-Muslimun, is a militant religious and political organization that was formed in Egypt in 1928.<sup>675</sup> It emphasizes

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<sup>673</sup>Jesman, J., *The Ethiopian Paradox* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 29.

<sup>674</sup>*The Ethiopian Herald*, 24 December 1975. See also *Al-Akbar* (Cairo: 16 January 1975).

<sup>675</sup>Its founder was Hassan al-Banna. Hassan al-Banna preached the need for Muslims to follow an Islam that returns to the original pure state of the religion in its dawning years in Arabia. His message also contained rejection of the west. President Nasser banned the organization several times in the

Islam as a religious and social force, and advocates government and laws based directly on the Quran and Sunna, and works for basic Islamic revival. It is claimed that such a religion, rigorously adhered to, would provide the solution to the personal, social, and, indeed, political problems faced by Islamic societies.

Presently, there are some ten million Coptic<sup>676</sup> Christians in Egypt who are under siege. They are being attacked, robbed and killed by roving bands of Muslim fundamentalists. Churches are regularly vandalized and sometimes burned. Christian children are often insulted, ostracized or humiliated by militant Muslim teachers. Even though Christians represent about 17% of Egypt's population of 58 million, not one of the 26 provincial governors is Christian. No senior army, police or government official of any consequence is a Copt. In fact, Christian Egyptians have been systematically eliminated from positions as cabinet ministers, army officers, police officials, governors, bankers, parliamentary representatives, and university professors. Indeed, Christian Arabs have come under severe pressure not only in Egypt but also in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Syria and among the Palestinians in the territories occupied by Israel.<sup>677</sup>

With regard to the Sudan, although individual Sudanese were recruited into the Ikhwan Al-Muslimun in the 1940s, a branch was not opened in that

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1950s and 1960s. See Richard Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).

<sup>676</sup>The Copts of Egypt are the direct descendants of the original inhabitants of the country. The word "coptic" had its origins in a Greek word meaning Egyptian. Following the Council of Chalcedon, which condemned the Monophysite theology accepted by the Christians in Egypt, in 451 A. D., an independent church was established.

<sup>677</sup>Ibrahim, Youssef M., "The Fury of Egypt's Muslim Militants is Falling on the Country's Christians," *The New York Times*, 15 March 1993.

country until the 1950s. The Sudanese branch of this movement is now headed by Dr. Hassan Turabi.<sup>678</sup> It is very active in the Horn of Africa, opening branches everywhere. Southern Sudan is considered a lost brother that can only be retrieved through the spread of Islam.<sup>679</sup> Ikhwan even rejects calls for a federation of the South.<sup>680</sup>

It has its links with Iran, which has sent some 2,000 so-called Revolutionary Guards to the Sudan. The Guards train cadres who would carry out fundamentalist duties in such countries as Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Tunisia, Algeria, and so on. The political philosophy which guides Sudan is such that Khartoum wants to impose even on non-Muslims Koranic Sharia laws, and punishment in accordance with hudud, which provides for amputation of limbs for crime and stoning to death for such offenses as adultery.<sup>681</sup>

As a result, such movements as the Mujahedeen of the Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement, the Islamic Front for the Liberation of "Oromia," and others have emerged in Ethiopia with the direct support and assistance of the Ikhwan Al-Muslimun. These movements have singled out Christians, many of whom

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<sup>678</sup>Hassan Turabi became the leader of the university branch of the Brotherhood in 1954. A year later, he went to London to study for a masters degree. In 1957-58, he was active in internal politics. But in 1959 he went to the Sorbonne to complete a Ph.D. and returned in 1962 to lecture at Khartoum University. See Abdelwahab El-Affendi, *Turabi's Revolution: Islam and Power in the Sudan* (London: Grey Seal, 1991).

<sup>679</sup>Ibid., 148.

<sup>680</sup>Ibid., 148.

<sup>681</sup>After concluding an alliance with Iran, the Sudan established over thirty military bases in its territory for training terrorists. In fact, Hassan Abdallah Al-Turabi, has already formulated his global Islamic doctrine with an emphasis on utilizing the Muslim Brother's infrastructure in Egypt. See, for example, *The Economist*, 4 April 1992; see also "Iran's Shadow Over the Red Sea," *Report of the Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare*, House Republican Research Committee, U. S. House of Representatives, Washington, D. C., 3 February 1992.



now seem killed in Eritrea, Harrar, Arussie, Bale, and Southern Shoa. They, and their mentors, consider Ethiopia as a country where Islam has a good opportunity to triumph. They claim that the country, an ally of the "Zionist state," has deep hatred for Islam and the Arabs. They claim that the disintegration of Ethiopia can only offer good opportunities for Muslims. They are convinced that an independent Eritrea whose early phase of struggle was a jihad in advancing the Muslim cause, will play a positive role. According to them, Eritrea has a strong Muslim-Arab heritage, that it is close to Egypt, the Sudan, the Gulf, the Arabian Peninsula and the newly united Yemen, and that it will constitute a strategic loss to Israel and its western allies. Therefore, Muslims should continue to struggle to win the area on the basis of a grand Muslim alliance.<sup>682</sup>

What can we conclude from what has been said about Ethiopia? Shall we say that (1) the hadith was a fabrication, that Muhammed never said that there should be no jihad on Ethiopia; (2) that there was such a hadith but some of Muhammed's followers have occasionally deviated from it; or that (3) Islam being a religion of power, cannot tolerate non-Muslims ruling over Muslims, and that the jihad can only be interpreted as an on-going process.

### **The Politics of the Blue Nile**

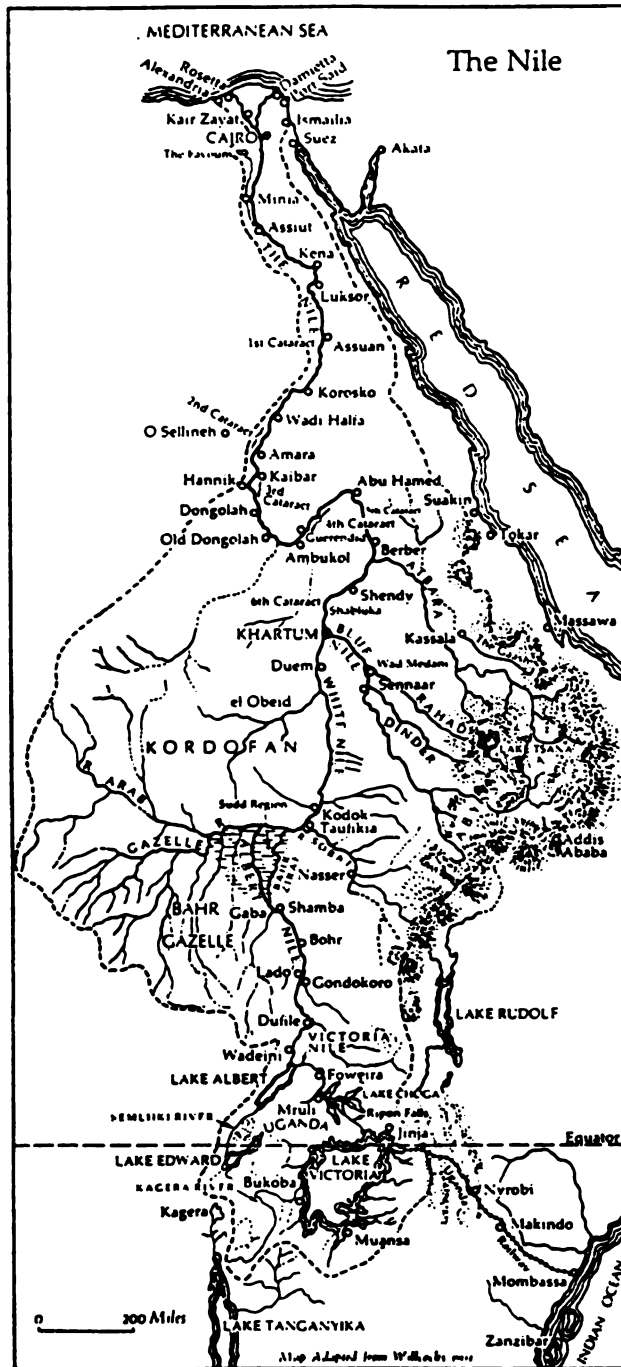
Egypt's population, which is growing by more than one million per year, could reach 95 million by the year 2025. The country depends on imports for over half of its food. Water shortage, which is forecasted to reach a deficit of 10,000 million cm by 2,000 A. D., threatens Egyptian agriculture and

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<sup>682</sup>*Crescent, News Magazine of the Islamic Movement*, 16-31 July 1990; and 16-31 December 1986; *Arab News*, 31 May 1992; *The Economist*, 12 May 1990.

industry. Because of domestic drought in Ethiopia, the Aswan Dam power station, which provides 22% of Egypt's industrial and domestic electricity,

Figure 6. The Nile



could be closed down if the water level continues to drop. The water crisis threatens to wipe out export revenues from Egyptian oil, which is the only alternative source of electricity production.<sup>683</sup>

If this is being said now, thirty-two years ago, that is, at roughly the same period when the Eritrean insurrection was launched, Leo Silberman wrote:

Egypt cannot be indifferent to what goes on at the headwaters of the Blue Nile. Egypt wants to return to the Southern Straits of the Red Sea. Egyptian broadcasts call upon Ethiopian Muslims to remember their primary loyalties.<sup>684</sup>

As if life itself has been at a standstill, some twenty years later, John Waterbury also noted:

In the Horn of Africa, the implications of the geopolitical game [being played] are far-reaching, for the real estate is very important. The struggle for the Nile--real or imagined--is literally paralleled by the struggle for the Red Sea, or at least the entrance thereof. Egypt has always sought arrangements for regional security that would cushion it against unforeseen and uncontrollable developments in and around the hinterland. This has meant, since the British re-occupation in 1898, a constant effort to maintain Egypt's preeminence in the Sudan so as to neutralize whatever unfriendly regime[s] might emerge in Ethiopia.<sup>685</sup>

While there will be occasion to examine what Waterbury refers to as "the struggle for the Red Sea," insofar as the Nile in general, and the Blue Nile in particular is concerned, we may begin by asking: What is Egypt's interest in the Blue Nile? Why does Egypt want to maintain pre-eminence in the

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<sup>683</sup>Gauch, Sarah, "Nile Nations Move a Step Nearer Water-use Solution," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 2 July 1990. See also *Africa Confidential*, 29, no. 6, 18 March 1988.

<sup>684</sup>Silberman, Leo, "Ethiopia: Power of Moderation," *The Middle East Journal*, 14, no. 2, (1960).

<sup>685</sup>Waterbury, John, *Hydro-Politics of the Nile Valley* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1979), 79.

Sudan? Why has Egypt been pre-occupied with the task of neutralizing unfriendly regimes that may emerge in Ethiopia? The initial answer, of course, lies in the fact that the Blue Nile is the life-blood of Egypt. The major unifying factor in Egypt's economic and political life throughout history has been the Nile. In its transit of Egypt, the Nile converts what would otherwise have been a desert into a rich agricultural area. It is not without reason, therefore, that the Greek historian Herodotus (c. 486-425 B. C.) observed that Egypt was a gift of the Nile. To this, the British of the 19th century added, he, who controls the Nile, controls Egypt. Even the physical functioning of the Suez Canal depends on the flow of fresh water from the Nile.<sup>686</sup>

There is practically no rainfall in Egypt. Nearly 86% of the country is classified as very arid, and the rest as arid. The exceptions to the extreme aridity are the narrow band of the Nile Valley and the narrow coastal strip, where some 150 mm of winter rain falls. All these account for no more than 3.03% of the total land area. As a result, some 96% of the population is forced to live astride the great river, on which the entire life of Egypt depends.<sup>687</sup>

The source of the Blue Nile is Lake Tana in northwestern Ethiopia. Second only to the Mississippi River in length, the river travels north, and it joins the White Nile at Khartoum. Lake Tana is situated at an elevation of 6000 ft. above sea level. It is about forty to fifty miles square and reaches depths in the neighbourhood of two hundred feet. About three-and-a-half billion cubic meters of water are discharged by the lake in a normal year. In June, the Blue Nile and the other Ethiopian rivers begin to flood. The flood stream reaches

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<sup>686</sup>Halford L. Hoskins, "The Suez Canal in Time of War," *Foreign Affairs*, 14, October 1935-July 1936, 101.

<sup>687</sup>Garretson, Albert, "The Nile Basin," in Albert H. Garretson, R. D. Hayton and C. J. Olmstead (eds.), *The Law of International Drainage Basins* (Dobbs Ferry, New York: Oceana, 1967), 256-97, and 297.

lower Egypt near Cairo in August. When the flood season is over, the Nile settles to a steady flow that varies little for the rest of the year. Since the flow of the river is not evenly distributed, more than 80% of its total discharge occurs from August to October. The rest of it is shared over the remaining nine months. The water as it issues from the lake contains no silt. About six billion cubic meters of water could be stored and ready for use when needed, by blasting a deeper outlet and erecting a dam.<sup>688</sup>

The volume of the entire Nile discharge is dependent upon the Blue Nile flood. Over the entire year, about 86% of the Nile's waters derive from the Ehtioipian Highlands, while 14% are contributed by the White Nile. During the flood period, however, 95% of the water originates from Ethiopia and only 5% from East Africa. The reason for this disproportionate contribution is the enormous evaporation losses in the White Nile.<sup>689</sup> On August 28, 1902, for example, the Blue Nile, near Khartoum, discharged 9,544 cubic meters of water per second, while the figure for the White Nile for the same period was only 710 cubic meters.<sup>690</sup> The situation is more or less the same today.

The Blue Nile also provides Egypt with virtually all of the decomposed basalts which make up the silt so essential to its agriculture. The suspended matter consists of about 45% sand, 40% clay, and 15% silt. According to Gamal Hamdam: It appears that both Egypt and Ethiopia are intertwined ecologically. Among the Egyptians, it was believed that the Emperor of Ethiopia could shut

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<sup>688</sup>Langer, William, "The Struggle for the Nile," *Foreign Affairs*, 14, no. 2, 14 October 1935-July 1936, 267.

<sup>689</sup>Waterbury, 23.

<sup>690</sup>Garstin, William, *Report Upon the Basin of the Upper Nile* (Cairo: 1904), appendix 4, 46-7.

off the water of the Nile as one would shut off a faucet.<sup>691</sup> In 1093 A.D., for instance, when the Nile failed to rise to its usual level, it is said that the Egyptian Caliph suspected the origin of the dry spell to Ethiopia, and sent the Coptic Patriarch laden with gifts, to the Ethiopian king. The Ethiopian monarch approvingly yielded to his spiritual overlord,<sup>692</sup> and the Nile allegedly rose three cubits in one night.<sup>693</sup>

Similarly, during the reign of Negus Amde Zion (1314-44), the Mamluk Sultan, Al-Nasir Muhammed, b. Qalaum, began to persecute the Copts of Egypt and even demolished their churches. His actions brought forth a strong protest from the Ethiopian Negus, who sent envoys to Cairo in A.H. 726 (A.D. 1321) to ask the Sultan to restore the churches and to refrain from persecuting the Copts. Otherwise, he said, he would take reciprocal measures against the Muslims in his dominions and starve the people of Egypt by diverting the course of the Nile.<sup>694</sup> It was, no doubt, this incident which caused Al-Umari to write, "the Abyssinians claim that they are the guardians of the course of the Nile for its descent to Egypt, and that they further its regular arrival out of respect for the Sultan of Egypt."<sup>695</sup>

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<sup>691</sup>Langer, William, "The Struggle for the Nile," *Foreign Affairs*, 14, no. 2, 14 October 1935-July 1936, 261.

<sup>692</sup>The Ethiopian and Egyptian churches follow the same tenets of Christianity. Since both subscribe to the Doctrine of the Trinity set forth by the Council of Nicaea of 325 A. D., their relation with the Catholic church has never been amicable. After the 4th century, the Coptic Patriarch of the See of St. Mark of Alexandria appointed Ethiopian Bishops, a practice that went on for 1,500 years. The Ethiopian Church became independent only in 1959 with the appointment of an Ethiopian to head the church.

<sup>693</sup>Jones, H. H. M. and Elizabeth Monroe, *A History of Ethiopia*, revised ed. (Oxford: 1968), 3.

<sup>694</sup>Trimingham, Spencer, 70-71.

<sup>695</sup>*Ibid.*, 71, as quoted by Trimingham.

In the reign of Dawit I (1382-1411), as one legend explains it, the Egyptians decided to discontinue the gifts and tribute they had long paid Ethiopia for the use of the Blue Nile. Dawit promptly threatened to divert the river and the Egyptians just as promptly, resumed their tribute. It is also said that the Ethiopian monarch had invaded Egypt and punished the Mamluk Sultan for persecuting Christians. The peace agreement was celebrated by Dawit who sent 21 camel loads of Ethiopian curiosities to the Sultan. In return, the Egyptians sent Dawit some religious relics including fragments of the "true cross."<sup>696</sup> If we shift into events that took place in more modern times, we could note that the Egyptian conquest of the Sudan in the 19th century was motivated by the desire to secure control over the entire Nile system.<sup>697</sup>

There have been repeated incursions into Ethiopia by Egyptian rulers at different times. The invasions were primarily motivated by the need to guarantee the flow of the waters of the Blue Nile. Muhammed Ali (1769-1849), for instance, felt that the security and prosperity of Egypt [would] only be assured fully by extending his conquests to those Ethiopian sources from which Egypt received her great reserves of water.<sup>698</sup> Khedive Ismail (1863-79), too, wanted to make the Nile an Egyptian river and to annex to his country all the geographical area of its basins.<sup>699</sup> To that end, he invaded Ethiopia in 1875 and 1876.

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<sup>696</sup>See, for example, Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527* (London: Clarendon Press, 1972), 252-257.

<sup>697</sup>Ibid., Langer, 261.

<sup>698</sup>Trimingham, 115.

<sup>699</sup>Sabry, M., *L'empire Egyptian sous Ismail et L'ingerence Anglo-Francaise* (Paris: 1933), 379-81.

The crucial importance of the Blue Nile to Egypt was not lost to Britain. In 1902, London dispatched John Harrington to Addis Ababa to negotiate border and Nile water issues. Article III of the May 15, 1902 Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty, which resulted from the visit, provides:

His Majesty the Emperor Menelik II, King of Kings of Ethiopia, engages himself towards the Government of His Britannic Majesty not to construct or allow to be constructed, any works across the Blue Nile, Lake Tana or the Sobat, which would arrest the flow of their waters into the Nile except in agreement with His Britannic Majesty's Government and the Government of the Sudan.<sup>700</sup>

Likewise, there was the 1929 Agreement between Egypt and Britain. The Agreement stipulated that "no irrigation or power works or measures are to be constructed or taken on the River Nile or its branches, or on the lakes from which it flows so far as all these are in the Sudan or in countries under British administration, which would entail prejudice to the interests of Egypt."<sup>701</sup>

Ethiopia repudiated the 1902 Treaty on account of the fact that one Party reserved for itself all the rights and privileges, leaving the other party without any *quid pro quo*. Following the restoration of Emperor Haile Selassie's government in 1941, Ethiopia denounced the obligations of the 1902 Treaty on account of British recognition of the Italian conquest of Ethiopia.<sup>702</sup> Furthermore, Ethiopia declined to recognize the 1929 Treaty because it was

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<sup>700</sup>*United Nations Legislative Series, Legislative Texts and Treaty Provisions Concerning the Utilization of International Rivers for purposes other than Navigation* (New York: 1963), 112. See also Hertslet, E.: *Map of Africa by Treaty*, II, 585.

<sup>701</sup>*Ibid.*, *United Nations Legislative Series*, 102-6. See also Godana, 106-17.

<sup>702</sup>Godana, Bonaya Adhi, *Africa's Shared Water Resources Legal and Institutional Aspects of the Nile, Niger and Senegal River Systems* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1985), 156.



geared mainly to protect and to promote Egypt's interests without any reciprocity.<sup>703</sup>

Ethiopia had repeatedly declared that it did not regard itself bound by treaty obligations with regard to the Nile waters. It had argued that its territory is the source of some six-sevenths of the waters of the Nile. It maintained that its waters have nourished Egypt without compensation. But this does not mean, says Ethiopia—that it had renounced its own quantitatively unspecified but existing natural right to the Nile waters in its territory. It had also argued that the treaties which made no reference to its “natural rights” to the waters in her territory could have no binding force.<sup>704</sup> To that end, as early as 1957 Ethiopia asserted and reserved, now and for the future, its right to utilize the waters of the Blue Nile without recognizing any limitations on its freedom of action. It also had invoked its new economic needs as grounds for her release from old treaty obligations.<sup>705</sup> Nor has Ethiopia recognized the Agreement of November 1959, between Egypt and the Sudan on the division of the waters of the Nile which gave Egypt 75% of the waters of the river (i.e.,

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<sup>703</sup>Other projects had been under investigation since the beginning of the century. A number of engineers and experts have visited Lake Tana and studied the feasibility of building a dam at the source of the Blue Nile. In 1935 an agreement was reached between the technical representatives of Egypt and the Sudan on a dam project, the execution of which was to yield some 2.2 milliards of cubic meters of over-year storage. The water benefits and financial costs of the project were to be shared following a ratio of 3:1 between Egypt and the Sudan.

<sup>704</sup>Ethiopia sought to build a dam on Lake Tana for a long time. For example, in 1927, Ethiopia reached an agreement with J. G. White Engineering Corporation of New York for the construction of a dam with an estimated cost of \$20 million. There were also other attempts. See James McCann, “Ethiopia, Britain and Negotiations for the Lake Tana Dam, 1922-35,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 14, no. 3 (1981), 667-96.

<sup>705</sup>Godana, 156.

55.5 billion cubic meters) and 25% to the Sudan (18.5 cm<sup>3</sup> billion).<sup>706</sup> In an Aide Memoire of 23 September 1957 addressed to the diplomatic missions in Cairo, the Government of Ethiopia declared:

Ethiopia has the right and obligation to exploit the water resources of the Empire--for the benefit of present and future generations of its citizens [and] must, therefore, reassert and reserve now and for the future, the right to take all such measures in respect of its water resources.<sup>707</sup>

Despite Ethiopia's protestation, Egypt went ahead with the construction of the Aswan Dam. The project took seven years, (1964-71) and was completed at a cost of £850 million. The dam helped to reclaim 650,000 feddans<sup>708</sup> and brought some 880,000 feddans under permanent irrigation.<sup>709</sup> As a result, agricultural production has considerably increased, and village communities have been provided with water and electricity. However, Lake Nasser--an artificial lake caused by the damming of the Nile, blocked the normal flow of the rich Nile, preventing the nourishment of agricultural lands further down the river, and destroying the fishing industry. Vegetation in Lake Nasser also grew so rapidly, with the result that the irrigation channels clogged, creating stagnant water and a breeding ground for a variety of disease-bearing insects

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<sup>706</sup>*Agreement Between the United Arab Republic and the Republic of the Sudan for the Full Utilization of the Nile Waters*, signed at Cairo, 8 November 1959, and the Protocol Concerning the Permanent Joint Technical Committee, signed at Cairo, 17 January 1960. See the text in *Revue égyptienne de droit international*, 15, 1959.

<sup>707</sup>See the Text of the Aide-Memoire of the Ethiopian Government of 23 September 1957 in Marjorie Whiteman, *Digest of International Law*, vol. 3, Washington, D. C., Department of State, 1964, 1011-1012.

<sup>708</sup>1 feddan = 1.04 acres.

<sup>709</sup>Fahim Hussein, *Dams, People and Development: the Aswan High Dam Case* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1981). See also "Discord on the Nile," *South*, August 1991.

and sea urchins.<sup>710</sup> Hydrologists also estimate that each year, the reservoir loses a staggering 15 cubic kilometers of water to evaporation.<sup>711</sup>

Despite these negative aspects, the Aswan project has facilitated double and triple croppings, and the country's agricultural yields have soared. Egypt still uses far more of the river's annual flow of around 80 cubic kilometers than any of the other eight nations along its banks. But the question is: what will happen when countries like Ethiopia begin to utilize their waters meaningfully and substantially? At present, only five percent, *i.e.*, 160,000 hectares are being irrigated out of a potentially three million hectares of irrigable land.<sup>712</sup> In fact, Ethiopia only uses 0.6 billion cm. of the water a year, but has indicated its intention that it wants more.<sup>713</sup> As a matter of fact, the Blue Nile was surveyed (1959-64) at a cost of some \$20 million by the United States Bureau of Reclamation. The findings reveal that the Blue Nile has a power potential of 35 billion kilowatt hrs., twice larger than the combined national water energy output of both the Sudan and Egypt. Of the 35 multi-purpose projects that the survey identified, 16 were irrigation schemes which could utilize as much as 20% of the waters of the Blue Nile, reducing Ethiopia's water contribution to Egypt by the same amount.<sup>714</sup>

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<sup>710</sup>*Ibid.*, *South*. See also Sarah Voll, "Egyptian Land Reclamation since the Revolution," *Middle East Journal*, 34, no. 2, Spring 1980, 127-148.

<sup>711</sup>*Ibid.*, Waterbury, 123-124.

<sup>712</sup>*The Ethiopian Herald*, 26 March 1994.

<sup>713</sup>*The Christian Science Monitor*, 2 July 1990.

<sup>714</sup>*Silver Jubilee: 25th Anniversary of the Liberation of Ethiopia*, Ministry of Information, (Addis Ababa: 1966). "Ethiopia's ambitious development plans on the Blue Nile, if put into effect, will pose a grave threat to Egypt before the end of the century." Dr. Mohammed El Said Selim of Cairo University in May 1982.

The question we raised earlier seems to be answered by the observation that Egypt's foreign policy has largely been shaped by geo-politics and predicated upon the premise that Egypt should be strong enough to dominate its environment, or risk becoming the victim of outside powers. Its national security is therefore linked to the control of the Nile, on whose waters its survival depends.<sup>715</sup> No sooner were Ethiopian engineers and economists carrying out irrigation feasibility studies in 1978 in the Lake Tana area, than Abdul Azim Abdel Atta, Egypt's Irrigation Minister declared that Egypt would never permit Ethiopia to exploit the waters of the Blue Nile.<sup>716</sup> The late President Sadat was even more blunt, when he announced on May 30, 1978 that "Egypt would go to war if Ethiopia planned to build a dam on Lake Tana."<sup>717</sup>

The Ethiopians quickly countered by accusing Egypt of expansionist ambitions--of a dream to control the sources of the Nile, of attempting to convert the Red Sea into an Egyptian/Arab Lake, and of training and arming the Eritrean guerrillas to help Cairo achieve its objectives at Ethiopia's expense.<sup>718</sup> Perhaps Wondimeneh Tilahun of Addis Ababa University was speaking for many Ethiopians when he said:

Egypt has never relaxed its age-old campaign of weakening Ethiopia. When its political interests in the Organization of African Unity made direct and flagrant hostility against Ethiopia somewhat difficult, Egypt managed to continue its not-too-well-

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<sup>715</sup>Hinnebusch, Raymond A., "Government and Politics" area handbook series, *Egypt--a country study*, Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, Helen Chapin (eds.), (Metz: 1991), 279.

<sup>716</sup>*The Ethiopian Herald*, Addis Ababa, 10 December 1978. The minister made his statement on 13 May, 1978.

<sup>717</sup>*The Ethiopian Herald*, Addis Ababa, 10 December 1978.

<sup>718</sup>Press Release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Provisional government of Socialist Ethiopia, *The Ethiopian Herald*, 10 December 1978.

disguised anti-Ethiopian campaign by means of proxy using primarily non-OAU Arab regimes.<sup>719</sup>

If the Aswan Dam has given Egypt relative mastery over Nile waters, it has also made Cairo totally dependent on the upstream nations to allow the water safe passage. In this regard, Dr. Boutros Ghali, former Egyptian Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, and now United Nations Secretary-General observed: "The national security of Egypt, which is based on the waters of the Nile, is in the hands of eight African countries."<sup>720</sup> One of the eight countries is Ethiopia, which provides not only 86% of the waters that Egypt annually consumes but also decomposed basalts, rich alluvial soil and silt without which Egypt can only be a desert. This was demonstrated clearly when Egypt was in near panic in 1988 because of the long drought in Ethiopia, which lowered the water in the Aswan High Dam's Lake Nasser to levels that threatened complete stoppage of the turbines.<sup>721</sup>

What, then, are the implications of this dependence on Ethiopia's waters? As we shall see shortly, Egypt is involved in the Eritrean conflict. Could there be a correlation and linkage between the Nile waters on which Egypt is dependent, and the Eritrean conflict, in which Ethiopia is vulnerable? From the perspectives of Egypt's needs and security, it appears that Cairo must either be in a position to dominate or weaken Ethiopia. Its attempt to maintain pre-eminence in the Sudan should also be seen in that light. Egypt's involvement in the Eritrean problem and its biproxy use of Non-OAU Arab sources was certainly designed to divert Ethiopia's energy from utilizing the

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<sup>719</sup>Wondimneh Tilahun, *Egypt's Imperial Aspirations Over Lake Tana and the Blue Nile* (Addis Ababa: United Printers, 1979), 30.

<sup>720</sup>*Ibid.*, *South*, 20.

<sup>721</sup>*Ibid.*, *Egypt: A Country Study*, 199.

waters of the Nile, so that that country squanders scarce resources in military adventures, as Ethiopia has been doing in Eritrea for some thirty years.

As if that was not enough, in September 1979 when the late President Sadat visited Haifa, in announcing his plan to construct the Suez Canal tunnel, he said:

After the tunnel is completed, I am planning to bring the sweet Nile waters--this is the sweetest of the four big rivers of the whole world--to the Sinai. Well, why not send you some of this sweet water to the Negev Desert as good neighbours?<sup>722</sup>

At a time when Ethiopia itself was suffering from a disastrous drought, Sadat was threatening war and destruction if Addis Ababa built dams to meet Ethiopia's own domestic needs. Here, he is seen promising to deliver the waters of the Nile to Israel and, in the process, to internationalize what would have otherwise been a bilateral problem.

But strangely enough, in a statement published in *Al-Sudan Al-Hadieth*, Yaqub Abushourer, Sudan's former Irrigation Minister accused Israel of involvement in the construction of dams in Ethiopia in return for permitting the immigration of Felashas to Israel. The paper even claimed that both the Sudan and Egypt appealed to the Arab states to shoulder their historical responsibilities in the face of this direct Israeli intervention.<sup>723</sup>

The appeal to Arab countries to shoulder their historical responsibilities was meant to urge them to increase their support to the Eritrean insurrectionists in order to destabilize Ethiopia, and to prevent it from building dams on the Nile. It could also have been designed to urge the Arabs to stand up to the Israeli challenge. Nevertheless, Egypt cannot have it both

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<sup>722</sup>*The Washington Post*, 7 September 1979.

<sup>723</sup>*Arab News*, XV, 21 January 1990.

ways. When it suits Cairo's interests, it offers to Israel "the sweet waters of the Nile." When Israel fails to deliver, links with that country become more expedient than imperative, and Ethiopia is made a convenient scapegoat for Arab frustration, and an outlet for a potentially expansive and aggressive Arab nationalism.<sup>724</sup>

The first phase of the \$300 million Tana Beles project was underway in Ethiopia in 1988. The project aimed at doubling Ethiopia's hydro-electric power and to provide irrigation for a settlement scheme that would take water from Lake Tana to the Beles river across which five dams were to be built. Some 200,000 peasants were to be settled after the completion of this project.<sup>725</sup> However, Egypt's attitude was such that it temporarily blocked a loan from the African Development Bank because Cairo feared that the project could consume too much Blue Nile water.<sup>726</sup>

Blocking a loan or not, to the dismay of the Egyptian authorities, the fertile Nile Delta is now going through an unprecedented winter drought which is seriously jeopardizing the country's wheat crop and its cotton exports. Water Resources Minister Abdul Hadi Radi informed a stormy parliamentary session in Cairo that the drought was due to meager rainfall in Ethiopia and not to the diversion of the waters of the River Nile.<sup>727</sup> From the foregoing, we can simply conclude that the hydro-politics of the Blue Nile is also linked with the conflicts in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa in which Eritrea is central.

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<sup>724</sup>*The New York Times*, No. 48, 139, 7 February 1990.

<sup>725</sup>*African Confidential*, Volume 29, No. 3, 5 February 1988.

<sup>726</sup>*The New York Times*, No. 48, 139, 7 February 1990.

<sup>727</sup>*Arab News*, 8 March 1994.

### Ethio-Israeli Relations

The other area which has made the Eritrean issue an extension of the conflicts in the Middle East is the question of Ethiopia's relation with Israel. Ethiopia and Israel have had strong historical and cultural relations.<sup>728</sup> The Ethiopian Jewish community, commonly known as the Felasha, for instance, believe that their roots can be traced back to Jews at the court of King Solomon and to his son by the Queen of Sheba, Menelik.<sup>729</sup> The first major statement

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<sup>728</sup>Apart from the long history of Jewish settlement in Ethiopia, there is also the legend of the Queen of Sheba. King Solomon symbolizes the Judaic link with Ethiopia because of his legendary encounter with the Queen of Sheba from which Menelik the 1st was born. The Ark of the Covenant at Axum legend says, is the same one taken from Jerusalem by Menelik the 1st and transferred to Ethiopia when he refused his father's offer of his kingdom. As a result, no church is built in Ethiopia without a procession and the placement of a replica of the Ark (the tabot). Most churches are also divided into three areas, similar to synagogues.

Only Jews and Ethiopians perform circumcision on the eighth day after birth. Dietary laws in Ethiopia are Old-Testament inspired, and Ethiopia alone among Christian nations has rejected the doctrine of Pauline Christianity that Biblical law lost its binding force with the coming of Christ; and the liturgy of church service is largely from the Hebrew Bible. Many Ethiopic works are derived from early Hebrew, and a number of magical rites to ward off evil spirits are similar to ancient Hebraic ones. The six-pointed "Star of David" was part of the imperial Ethiopian insignia. The September New Year is similar to the Jewish Rosh Hashanah, and Mesqel, the commemoration of the finding of the True Cross, timed as a harvest festival, is like the Jewish Sukkoth. Ethiopian Easter, Fasika, has overtones of the Jewish Pesach, both in name and nature of the observance. Mourning customs bear a striking resemblance to the Jewish week of *shiva*.

For the story of Queen of Sheba and the Ark of the Covenant, see *The Queen of Sheba and Her Only Son Menyelek: being the History of the Departure of God and His Ark of the Covenant from Jerusalem to Ethiopia, and the establishment of the religion of the Hebrews and the Solomonic line of kings in that country* (London, Boston, Mass: The Medici Society, Ltd., 1922). See also Post Wheeler, *The Golden Legend of Ethiopia: the love-story of Maqeda, Virgin Queen of Axum and Sheba: and Solomon the great king* (New York, London: D. Appleton-Century, Inc., 1936). For a romantic view of Israeli-Ethiopian relations, see Shimon Peres, *David's Sling* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970), 149-52.

<sup>729</sup>The Semitic linguist and scholar, Wolf Leslau is a leading authority on the Felashas. See his *Falasha Anthology: Black Jews of Ethiopia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950). Others include, Steven Kaplan. See his, *The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia: from the earliest times to the 20th century* (New York: New York University Press, 1992); and Kay Shelemay, *Music, Ritual, and Falasha History* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1989). In



affirming the Jewish identity of the Felasha was made in the sixteenth century by David ibn Zimra, a Felasha scholar, who concluded that these people were "of the seed of Israel, and of the tribe of Dan."<sup>730</sup>

Nevertheless, interest in the Felasha did not gain momentum until 1867 when the Alliance Israelite Universelle of Paris sent to Ethiopia, the Semiticist Joseph Halevy to investigate the Felasha situation. He became convinced that they were a Jewish people. Halevy in turn inspired an interest on the part of Professor Jacques Faitlovitch, whose efforts led to a tangible relationship between the Felasha and world Jewry.<sup>731</sup> The Pro-Felasha Committee established by Faitlovitch was most active in Italy, Germany, the United States (after World War I), and Palestine (after World War II). This committee brought some aid to the Felashas through mobile schools for the villages and a boarding school in Addis Ababa. Young Felashas were also given scholarships to study in Europe and Palestine. For example, Mikael Aregawi studied in Europe and returned to Ethiopia to establish a school for his people in 1874. Similarly, Professor Tamrat Amanuel who served Haile Selassie's government

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the so-called "Operation Moses", the code name for the secret Israeli-American-Sudanese organized airlift of Ethiopian Jews, more than 10,000 Felashas were taken from Khartoum to Israel in 1985. For details, see David Kessler, *The Felashas: The Forgotten Jews of Ethiopia* (New York: 1985). It has also been alleged that the regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam traded military hardware in exchange for free migration of thousands of Felashas to Israel. See, for example, Clifford Krauss, "Ethiopia Said to Cut Off Flight of Jews in an effort to Gain Israeli Arms," *New York Times*, 12 July 1989. Quoting the *London Sunday Times*, *Arab News* also reported that Israel had reached a secret agreement with Ethiopia on a supply of military aid to the regime in exchange for thousands of Ethiopian Jews, who will be allowed to emigrate. Citing Western diplomatic sources, the newspaper also said that some 12,000 were still in Ethiopia. See *Arab News* (11 Dec. 1989, vol. xv, no. 14).

<sup>730</sup>*Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 6, (D1-F0).

<sup>731</sup>The American Association for Ethiopian Jews and the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council have championed the cause of the Felashas. See *Encyclopaedia Judaica Decennial Book, 1973-1982*.

in various capacities in the early 1940s and 1950s, studied in Palestine, Egypt and France. Likewise, because of their relatively high level of education, many Felashas like Tadesse Yacob acquired important positions in the Ethiopian government.<sup>732</sup>

When Ethiopia was invaded by Fascist Italy in 1936, the Emperor Haile Selassie went to Jerusalem to establish connections with the Jewish community in Palestine. More to the point, during the liberation campaign of the early 1940s, Major Orde Wingate<sup>733</sup> had to rely initially on technical and military aid from his Jewish friends in Palestine, which he could not get from the British Military headquarters in Alexandria, Egypt. Consequently, some twelve Jewish doctors and several fighters joined the "Gideon Force"--which was composed of British and Ethiopian soldiers under Wingate's command. It was also then that Haile Selassie came to appreciate the devotion of this small Jewish group and their commitment to duty. When the emperor entered Addis Ababa in May 1941, in front of the imperial Rolls Royce was Orde Wingate on a white horse, but behind him marched Sergeant Akiva and his Jewish fighters from

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<sup>732</sup>*Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 6 (Di-Fo).

<sup>733</sup>Major General Orde Charles Wingate (1903-1944) was a British Military officer who was prominent as a supporter of the Zionists while serving on special duty in Palestine (1936-39). Though not himself a Jew, he became a friend of Chaim Weizmann (1874-1952). When on June 10, 1940, Benito Mussolini declared war on the Western Powers, the British Government appointed Wingate as the liaison officer with the emperor. In actual fact, Wingate served as Haile Selassie's commander-in-chief throughout the liberation campaign. In 1942, Wingate was assigned with the task of organizing a guerrilla force to fight the Japanese in Burma. He was subsequently promoted to the rank of Major General and taken by Prime Minister Churchill to the USA to explain his ideas on guerrilla warfare to President Franklin Roosevelt. Wingate was killed in a plane crash in 1944. For more information, see L. Mosley, *Gideon Goes to War* (London: 1955).

Palestine.<sup>734</sup> It was also in the same year that the Emperor Haile Selassie invited a group of Jewish scholars to work in his country.<sup>735</sup>

Despite the fact that Ethiopia figured prominently in Israel's foreign policy priorities,<sup>736</sup> Haile Selassie's government was engaged in footdragging diplomatic tactics because of the reality of the situation. Ethiopia could not go against the wishes of its Arab neighbours. When the question of Palestine was debated at the United Nations, Ethiopia abstained from voting on partition, which was opposed by the Arabs. Similarly, when the question of Israel's membership to the U.N. came to a vote, Ethiopia voted against. This was done in part not to antagonize the Arab and Muslim countries, and in part because of the Eritrean question which was shortly to appear on the U.N. agenda. In effect, it could be said that Haile Selassie did not want to alienate the Muslim votes he might need.<sup>737</sup> As a retaliatory quid pro quo, Israel abstained during the United Nations vote that federated Eritrea with Ethiopia in 1950. Yet, the Ethiopian Consulate, which was established in Jerusalem in the days of the British mandate, continued to function.

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<sup>734</sup>Hanan Inor, *A Guide to Superb Documentation in the Relations Between Israel and Ethiopia* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University), 15.

<sup>735</sup>Erlich, Haggai, *The Emergence of New Countries in Africa* (Tel Aviv: The Open University, Unit 9, 1980).

<sup>736</sup>See Michael Brecher, *The Foreign Policy System of Israel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972); see also Samuel Decalo, "Israeli Foreign Policy and the Third World," in *Orbis*, Fall 1967, 724-45, "Israel in Africa: A Selected Bibliography," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 5, no. 3 (1967), 385-99; and Naomi Chazan, *Jerusalem Quarterly*, no. 18, Winter 1981, 29-44.

<sup>737</sup>Eytan, Walter, *The First Ten Years* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1958), 16; See Spencer, J.: *Ethiopia at Bay, A Personal Account of the Haile Selassie Years*. (Algonac, Michigan, 1984), especially Chapter 12, 223-242. See also Peter Schwab, *Haile Selassie I, Ethiopian Lion of Judah* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1979).

In fact, since its establishment as a state, Israel considered the development of its diplomatic ties with other countries as crucial. It felt that each new embassy was an additional fortress to protect Israel.<sup>738</sup> Hence, Israel anxiously sought Ethiopia's diplomatic recognition.

On September 3, 1949, Mordechai Namir, the Israeli Ambassador to the USSR, reported to Moshe Sharett<sup>739</sup>--the Foreign Minister--that he had a meeting with his Ethiopian counterpart, Blatta Tirfe Shumye, who informed him that there were no serious problems that could prevent Ethiopia from extending diplomatic recognition to Israel.<sup>740</sup> Two months later, however, Namir reported back to Sharett that Shumye had not succeeded in changing Haile Selassie's position on recognition.<sup>741</sup>

On January 15, 1951, a one man good-will "Ethiopian delegation", led by Nathan Marien,<sup>742</sup> Haile Selassie's legal advisor, visited Israel. In the course of discussions, Israeli Foreign Office officials were informed by Nathan Marien that the question of recognition had been postponed because of the critical Arab vote needed at the U.N., which could determine Eritrea's future.

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<sup>738</sup>Nehemia Lev Zion, "The African States and the Crisis in the Middle East," *Monthly Review*, Dec. 1973.

<sup>739</sup>Moshe Sharett (1894-1966), was born in Russia. He moved to Palestine in 1906, where he became a labour leader and chief Zionist spokesman in the 1930s and 1940s. He served as Foreign Minister (1948-1950), and as Prime Minister (1954-1955).

<sup>740</sup>Yemimah Rozental (ed.) *Documents to Israel's Foreign Policy*, Jerusalem (1968), vol. 4, 449.

<sup>741</sup>*Ibid.*, 602.

<sup>742</sup>The State Archives, Israeli Foreign Office, file No. B/13/2414.

Nathan Marien was a lawyer from Jerusalem who served Haile Selassie as advisor in legal and constitutional matters. The Emperor met him in Jerusalem in 1936 and subsequently invited him to Ethiopia in 1941. An expert on matters of Ethiopian jurisprudence, his work includes: *The Ethiopian Empire: Federation and Laws* (Rotterdam: Royal Netherlands Printing and Lithographing Co., 1955).

Now that federalism was decided, Ethiopia would pursue the matter of recognition, and proposed that the most effective approach would be to develop commercial ties. However, nothing materialized. On August 15, 1952, Ambassador Abba Eban<sup>743</sup> met his Ethiopian counterpart, Ras Imru Haile Selassie<sup>744</sup>, in Washington and again brought up the subject of recognition, but nothing was actualized. Abba Eban made a similar attempt with Ambassador Yilma Deressa<sup>745</sup> on March 3, 1953, but again in vain. The Israeli diplomat met Emperor Haile Selassie at a reception at the U.N. Headquarters in New York in June 1954 and raised the issue. He was informed by the Emperor that Ethiopia would establish diplomatic relations with Israel soon.<sup>746</sup>

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<sup>743</sup>Abba Eban was born in 1915 in Cape Town, South Africa, but he grew up in Britain, where he completed his studies at Cambridge University. He served as Israeli's Permanent Representative to the U.N. (1949-59), concurrently, he was Ambassador to the USA (1950-59); Minister without Portfolio (1959-60); Minister of Foreign Affairs (1966-74). Considered by many as one of Israel's most brilliant orators, Eban speaks many languages fluently.

<sup>744</sup>Ras Imru Haile Selassie (c. 1894-1980), cousin of Emperor Haile Selassie, was an enlightened Ethiopian statesman. Having served as Governor of Harrar (1916), Wollo and Gojjam provinces (1933), during the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, he commanded the army that lost in Shire. He managed to escape and to join the "Black Lions"—one of the resistance movements formed in 1936, and of which he was the leader. Ras Imru gave himself up to the Italians so that most of his followers could escape. He spent the next seven years in Italian prisons and was liberated by the Allies in 1943. Thereafter, he was appointed Governor of Gondar Province (1943-1947); Ambassador to Washington, D.C. (1947-1953); and Ambassador to India (1954-1959). The leaders of the 1960 *coup d'etat* who were the ideological precursors of the 1974 revolution, appointed him Prime Minister.

<sup>745</sup>Yilma Deressa (1907-1974) was an extremely able and influential Ethiopian politician. He completed his early education in Ethiopia and Egypt and graduated from the London School of Economics, in England. He was detained in Italy for five years (1936-1941) for his membership in the "Black Lions" resistance movement. In subsequent years, he served as Minister of Finance (1941-1949); Minister of Commerce (1949-1953); Ambassador to Washington, D.C. (1953-1958); Minister of Foreign Affairs (1958-1960); Minister of Finance (1960-1969); and Minister of Commerce, Industry and Tourism (1969-1974). Using oral traditions, he wrote in 1967, *The History of Galla* (Oromo).

<sup>746</sup>*Ibid.*, (The State Archives).

Yet, John Spencer knew the truth:

Corridor discussions at the General Assembly confirmed our suspicions that the Islamic states would be hostile to Ethiopia on the Eritrean issue. It became important for the Ethiopian delegation to avoid giving offense to that group.<sup>747</sup>

Nasser's ambitious policy of attempting to dominate the region was being perceived by both Ethiopia and Israel as a direct threat to their security. Israeli representatives had visited Ethiopia in 1956 and secured the emperor's agreement to establish diplomatic relations.<sup>748</sup> There are sources, however, which claim that there was already a secret security pact between Ethiopia and Israel signed in 1954, at the instigation of the respective military establishments and with the particular blessing of General Moshe Dayan<sup>749</sup>. This deal formed part of Israel's peripheral pact, which supposedly safeguarded its frontiers.<sup>750</sup>

On November 28, 1956, the Ethiopian Government declared the Egyptian Cultural Attache *persona non grata*, and expelled him from the country. The Emperor Haile Selassie blamed Egypt for inciting the Ethiopian Muslim population to rebel against the authority of the government.<sup>751</sup> It appears

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<sup>747</sup>Spencer, John, *Ethiopia at Bay...*, 202.

<sup>748</sup>Eytan, Walter, *The First Ten Years* (New York: Simon and Schuster), 191.

<sup>749</sup>Moshe Dayan (1915-1981), was born in Palestine. In 1936-1937, he served in Orde Wingate's Special Night Squads. Dayan lost his left eye in Allied operations against French Vichy forces in Syria and Lebanon in 1941. He served as Chief of Staff of the Israeli Armed Forces (1953-58); directed the Sinai Campaign in 1956, in which he became a national hero; Minister of Agriculture (1959-1964); Minister of Defense (1967-1974) and Minister of Foreign Affairs (1977-1979).

<sup>750</sup>Michael Bar-Zohar, *Ben-Gurion: The Armed Prophet*, L. Ortzen (trans.) (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-hall, 1968), 247.

<sup>751</sup>Erlich, Haggai, *War and Revolution in the Horn of Africa*, (California: Hoover Institution Press, 1983), 55-64. See also Gad Mazor, "Nasser in Africa," *Monthly Review*, October 1958, 17.

that the Ethiopians were feeling the consequences of Nasser's attempt to make Egypt the centre of his three circles--the Arab, the African, and the Muslim world. No sooner had Haile Selassie expelled an Egyptian diplomat, than Nasser retaliated by denying the use of Egyptian airspace to Ethiopian Airlines, and by permitting the facilities of Radio Cairo to be used for the dissemination of hostile propaganda against Ethiopia by Eritrean politicians.<sup>752</sup>

Between 1958 and 1961, Egypt was joined with Syria in the United Arab Republic. Egypt also became militarily involved in a civil war in the Yemen. On both counts, Ethiopia and Israel must have felt extremely threatened.

In April 1960, Ethiopian Government officials visited Israel. The same year, Emperor Haile Selassie met with General Moshe Dayan, who was then Minister of Agriculture. The possibilities of mutual efforts to diminish Nasser's subversive activities in Africa were discussed.<sup>753</sup> In December of the same year, when the Ethiopian Imperial Body Guard made an attempted *coup d'etat* to overthrow Haile Selassie's Government, David Ben Gurion and Golda Meir instructed the Israelis in Ethiopia to help save the regime and to abort the coup.<sup>754</sup> Subsequently, Israeli officers started to train the Ethiopian security and police agency.<sup>755</sup> In April 1960, the Israeli Deputy Minister of Defense, Shimon Peres<sup>756</sup>, hosted the Ethiopian Minister of Defense and the

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<sup>752</sup>Spencer, *Ethiopia at...*, 289.

<sup>753</sup>A. Sarig, "Visits and Liaisons," *Hapoel Hatzaeer* (September 27, 1960).

<sup>754</sup>*Yediot Abronot*, Tel Aviv, (June 23, 1976), and *Ma'ariv*, (February 10, 1973), as quoted by Erlich, 57.

<sup>755</sup>Erlich, Haggai, *War and Revolution in the Horn of Africa* (California: Hoover Institution Press, 1983), 57.

<sup>756</sup>Shimon Peres, one of the leaders of the Labour Party, was born in Poland in 1923 and immigrated to Palestine in 1934. He has served in several capacities: Director General, Ministry of Defense (1952-59); Deputy Minister of Defense (1959-65); Minister of Immigrant Absorption (1969-70); Minister of Transport

Ambassadors to Athens and Washington where Nasser's subversive activities in Africa were further discussed.<sup>757</sup>

Nevertheless, after Syria seceded from the United Arab Republic on September 28, 1961, Prime Minister David Ben Gurion<sup>758</sup> felt confident enough to request the establishment of full diplomatic relations between the two countries.<sup>759</sup> As we have seen, both countries maintained contacts in the absence of embassies in their respective capital cities.

At long last, in a dispatch dated October 24, 1961, the Ethiopian Foreign Minister, Ketema Yifrou, informed his Israeli counterpart, Golda Meir<sup>760</sup>, that "the friendly ties that characterize our two sister states will become stronger with this recognition. It is my hope that this move will pave the way for a strong and fruitful cooperation between Ethiopia and Israel."<sup>761</sup> On her part, Golda Meir expressed her "sincere appreciation and deep satisfaction," and declared:

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(1970-74); Minister of Information (1974); Minister of Defense (1974-1977); Prime Minister (1984-1986), Foreign Minister (1986-88), (1993- ).

<sup>757</sup>Levitch, Joseph, *Bamahaneh*, April 26, 1960, 12.

<sup>758</sup>David Ben Gurion (1886-1973), the first Prime Minister of Israel (1948-63), was born in Poland. He went to Palestine in 1906, and studied law at the University of Istanbul. Expelled from Palestine by the British in 1914, he went to the USA, where he became active in the struggle for a homeland for Jews—a cause for which he lived, and in which he made outstanding contributions. Ben Gurion spoke Hebrew, Yiddish, Arabic, Russian, Turkish, and English.

<sup>759</sup>*Ma'ariv*, 10 February 1978.

<sup>760</sup>Golda Meir (1898-1978), the fourth Prime Minister of Israel was born in Russia, but was raised in the USA where she was trained as a teacher. She immigrated to Palestine in 1921 and served Israel as the first Minister to Moscow in 1949; Minister of Labour (1949-50); Minister for Foreign Affairs (1950-66); and Prime Minister (1969-1974).

<sup>761</sup>*The Ethiopian Herald*, 24 October 1961.



The government and people of Israel will do all they can to strengthen and to deepen the historic ties between Israel and Ethiopia, and to establish active cooperation between the two states which will serve the desires for peace, security, and prosperity in our region."<sup>762</sup>

The first Israeli ambassador to Ethiopia, Rahamim Dibon, arrived in Addis Ababa in 1961.<sup>763</sup> From the Israeli point of view, it was felt that the creation of an anti-Egyptian front in the Horn of Africa would decrease the Arab pressure on Tel Aviv and pave the way to the recognition of Israel by the rest of Africa. On the other hand, from Ethiopia's point of view, Haile Selassie felt that with Israeli support, he could stand up to Nasser, and reduce Egyptian interference in Ethiopia's internal and external affairs. This was partly evidenced in the May 1963 African Heads of State Summit in Addis Ababa which created the Organization of African Unity (OAU). In that conference, Nasser was very much guarded and restrained in his remarks. He even announced in advance that he would not raise the Israeli problem at the conference.<sup>764</sup>

Tel Aviv sought to form alliances linking it to Ethiopia, the USA, Turkey, and Iran. In such a set up, Israel was to supply the logistics, planning, and training. Iran was to provide finance and to deter Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Ethiopia was to provide military cooperation and the moral and political support of its Black African friends. However elaborate, the Shah and the Emperor did not like the idea. They wanted everything to be bilateral, informal, and secret as much as possible.<sup>765</sup> There and then the matter was dropped.

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<sup>762</sup>*The Ethiopian Herald*, 5 October 1961.

<sup>763</sup>Hannon, Inor, 23.

<sup>764</sup>Hanan Inor, *A Guide to ....*, 17-18.

<sup>765</sup>*Ibid.*, 17-18.

There were conflicts of interest between Haile Selassie and Nasser. The Egyptian leader wanted to dominate the sources of the Nile. He wanted to convert the Red Sea into an Arab lake and control the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb. Nasser was also assisting the ELF with a view to annexing Eritrea into the Arab League. In these and other Egyptian adventures, Haile Selassie's government saw eye to eye with Israel. It is this convergence of interests, more than anything else, that brought the two countries together.

The port of Eilat, "window to the East," was Israel's only Red Sea outlet to the markets of Africa and Asia. The Ethiopian ports of Massawa and Assab along the Straits of Bab-el-Mandeb were of vital significance for this purpose. Moreover, 60% of Israel's oil went from Iran through the port of Eilat. Israeli ships were denied access to the Suez Canal. Besides, Israel fought the 1956 and 1967 wars largely to see to it that its rights for free international navigation were respected. Hence, because the two countries more or less faced similar problems, bilateral cooperation made sense to both Addis Ababa and Tel Aviv.<sup>766</sup> Israel wanted to see a militarily strong Ethiopia in order to ensure free passage on the Red Sea, to neutralize the Sudan and to force Egypt to evacuate part of its forces from the Sinai front. They sought an Ethiopia, which, in an emergency situation, would enable the Israeli airforce to use the air bases at Debre Zeit and Asmara against Egypt.<sup>767</sup>

Upon the request of the emperor, officers from the Israeli Defense Forces were sent to Ethiopia to train the Ethiopian army. Israeli advisors also

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<sup>766</sup>*The New York Times*, 23 May 1967, 16, and 24 May 1967, 20. See also Noah Lucas, "Israeli Policy in the Red Sea," in *Abdel Majid Farid* (ed.), 119.

<sup>767</sup>Hanan Inor, *A Guide to ....*, 17-18.

began to serve in the police and security departments. In addition, Israel began to supply Ethiopia with some weapons.<sup>768</sup>

In June 1971, an Israeli oil tanker was sabotaged by elements from the Popular Front for the liberation of Palestine headed by Dr. George Habesh. Because of the gravity of the situation, no less a person than the Israeli Chief of Staff--Haim Barlev<sup>769</sup>, visited Ethiopia in order to strengthen cooperation between the two countries in the military and security fields.<sup>770</sup>

### **Economic and Cultural Relations**

As early as 1952, Yaakov Meridor had established in Asmara, a meat packing plant, INCODE. Its products were exported to Israel. Since it was running under a deficit, in 1955 Prime Minister David Ben Gurion agreed to transfer it to state ownership. This plant served as an impetus for expanding trade between the two countries. Thereafter, agreements between the state banks of Ethiopia and Israel were signed, leading to other cooperative ventures.<sup>771</sup>

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<sup>768</sup>The idea was Ben Gurion's idea. He wanted to ally Israel with the pro-Western, non-Arab countries on the periphery of the Middle East. See Haggai Erlich, *The Struggle Over...*, 57. See also Peter Schwab, "Israel's Weakened Position on the Horn of Africa," *New Outlook* (Tel Aviv: April 1978), 23.

<sup>769</sup>Hiam Barlev was born in Zagreb, Yugoslavia in 1924. He moved to Palestine in 1932 and was subsequently educated in Israel, USA, Britain and France. He distinguished himself in the Sinai Campaign of 1956 as well as in the Six Day War of 1967. He served as Deputy Chief of Staff (1967-1968) and as Chief of Staff (1968-72).

<sup>770</sup>Yaako Eidelstein, "Light and Shadow in Israel-Ethiopia Relations," *Hatzofeh* (December 1, 1971), 3. See also Mordechai Abir, "Red Sea Politics," 31. See also *The Jerusalem Post*, 18 October, 1972.

<sup>771</sup>Hess, Robert, *Ethiopia: The Modernization of Autocracy* (London: Cornell University Press, 1970), 200.

After the combined Israeli, British and French invasion of Egypt in 1956, Israel increased its assistance to Ethiopia in a variety of fields, including building construction and engineering projects, in finance and taxation and in developing model farms. In addition, a great number of Ethiopians began to study in vocational institutes of higher learning and in major universities in Israel. In turn, Ethiopia's ports served as bases for Israel's merchant fleet. The Israeli national carrier, ELAL and Ethiopian Airlines also signed agreements to serve both countries on a reciprocal basis.<sup>772</sup>

Between 1960 and 1970, Israel sent 24 professors and lecturers to Haile Selassie University. Most were in the engineering faculty, but Israelis also served as deans of the faculties of natural sciences and humanities. Israeli experts worked with the Ethiopian government on a variety of projects related to agriculture, introduced a new approach to the education of the blind, and helped to modernize Ethiopia's major bus transport services. Israel's exports to Ethiopia ran at \$4.4 million in 1975 but had increased to \$11.2 million in 1980. Imports from Ethiopia in 1970 were \$2 million, increased to \$5.6 million in 1975, but had declined to \$1.8 million in 1980.

### **The 1967 War and Its Impact on Ethio-Israeli Relations**

In the Six Day War of 1967, after Israel defeated its Arab adversaries, it occupied the Golan Heights, the West Bank of the Jordan and the Sinai Peninsula. As a result, several resolutions were tabled at the United Nations demanding Israeli withdrawal from the occupied Arab territories.

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<sup>772</sup>Abir, Mordechai, "Ethiopia: Transition from Past to the Present," *Monthly Review* (February 1971), 12-20. See also L. Laufer, *Israel and the Developing Countries: New Approach to Cooperation* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1907), 129-33. For the earlier economic link see the *Israeli Economist*, Feb-Mar 1972.

A Yugoslav draft proposal called for the unilateral withdrawal of Israel from all occupied territories. On the other hand, a Latin American resolution linked Israeli withdrawal to ending the state of belligerency on the part of Arabs, and to starting peace negotiations, and affirmed "the desirability of establishing an international regime for Jerusalem." It also urged the Security Council to guarantee free transit through international waterways in the Middle East, and the political independence of the region's states, as well as to establish demilitarized zones.<sup>773</sup> It has been claimed by some observers that while the Yugoslav draft resolution was pro-Arab, the Latin American draft was pro-Israel.<sup>774</sup> Ethiopia voted for the Latin American resolution and abstained on the Yugoslav draft<sup>775</sup>—a position which the Arabs did not appreciate.

In the early 1970s, the view that Israel was unwilling to withdraw from conquered Arab territories gained considerable currency among African states, and a few of them began to sever relations. Ethiopia, in whose capital city the Headquarters of the Organization of African Unity was housed, did not break its relations with Israel, even though Israel had occupied the territory of an African state, Egypt. Libya took the initiative and severely criticized Ethiopia for supporting "the Zionist enemy." Indeed, Tripoli threatened to disrupt the tenth anniversary celebration of the establishment of the OAU, which was to take place in Addis Ababa on May 25, 1973. It even demanded that either Ethiopia sever its relations with Israel, or that the celebration be

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<sup>773</sup>*The New York Times*, 1 July 1962, 1.

<sup>774</sup>Samuel Decalo, "Israeli Foreign Policy and the Third World," in *Orbis*, (Fall 1967), 741-43, and "Africa and the Mid-Eastern War," [in] *Africa Report*, October 1967, 57-61.

<sup>775</sup>*Ibid.*, *Africa Report*.

boycotted and the Headquarters of the OAU be moved from Addis Ababa to Cairo.<sup>776</sup>

Haile Selassie was rescued from this dilemma by the timely intervention of Presidents Sadat of Egypt and Boumedienne of Algeria. Sadat took the opportunity to warn the Emperor of the importance of loosening his ties with Israel. For a break in relations, the Algerian President offered the use of his influence to convince Arab states to halt all support for the Eritrean Liberation Front. Although Ethiopian Prime Minister Aklilou Habte Wolde<sup>777</sup> was persuaded, Haile Selassie remained skeptical.<sup>778</sup> He argued that relations with Israel in no way had affected Ethiopia's position "where basic principles of international law and the cause of justice had been at stake."<sup>779</sup> In 1966, when he was in Kuwait on an official visit, an Arab journalist had asked him why Ethiopia recognized Israel. Haile Selassie's reply was similar: Ethiopia was abiding by the decision of the United Nations.<sup>780</sup>

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<sup>776</sup>Jake C. Miller, "Africa-Israeli Relations: Impact on Continental Unity," *Middle East Journal*, 29 (Autumn 1975), 397-398.

<sup>777</sup>Born in Addis Ababa in 1912, Aklilou was one of the most important Ethiopian politicians under Haile Selassie. He was executed without trial by the military regime on November 24, 1974. Educated in Ethiopia and in Egypt, Aklilou completed his studies at the University of the Sorbonne, Paris (1930-1936), where he studied law and political science. Having spent the war years in Europe (1936-1941), he was appointed Vice-Minister of the Pen (the Emperor's Secretariat) 1942-1941), Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs (1943-1949); Minister for Foreign Affairs (1949-1961); and Prime Minister (1961-1974). Aklilou was the key negotiator in the Anglo-Ethiopian Agreement of 1944. He also signed the U.N. Charter on behalf of Ethiopia at San Francisco (1945); helped to obtain U.N. approval for Eritrea's federation with Ethiopia, which was achieved in 1952; and was Ethiopia's leading representative at international conferences in the 1940s and 1950s.

<sup>778</sup>Colin Legum (ed.) *Africa Contemporary Record, Annual Survey and Documents, 1973-1974* (London: Rex Collings, 1974).

<sup>779</sup>Colin Legum, *Observer*, (13 May 1973), 6.

<sup>780</sup>*Jewish Observer* and the *Middle East Review*, 14 October 1966. Haile Selassie had to cancel a planned visit to Iraq after his press conference in Kuwait because of its anticipated results in arousing passion in Baghdad.

Nevertheless, Ethiopia cut off diplomatic relations with Israel in October 1973. Addis Ababa declared that relations would remain severed "until such time that Israel withdrew from the occupied Arab territories."<sup>781</sup> However, trade links continued, and clandestine military contacts were also maintained. In fact, although a military regime had overthrown Haile Selassie's government in 1974, a few Israeli technicians were still servicing Ethiopian jets. In February 1978, Israel's Foreign Minister, Moshe Dayan, revealed that Israel had sold some spare parts for American equipment to the Ethiopian airforce. The Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs countered by dismissing the arms purchase story as a "simple business deal made on a commercial basis."<sup>782</sup> Dayan was accused by his political adversaries of damaging Israel's security interests irreparably.

As if diplomatic contacts, trade links, arms deals and military cooperation were not enough, the Bete Israel issue had come to the forefront to complicate an already complex situation. The Government of Israel itself confirmed that it had airlifted ten thousand Ethiopian Jews.<sup>783</sup> Some of the Felashas were settled at Kiryat Araba near Hebron in the West Bank, and some were drafted into the army.<sup>784</sup> The Felasha presence in Israel may alleviate

<sup>781</sup>*The Ethiopian Herald*, October 24, 1973, p. 1.

<sup>782</sup>Even after the Dergue came to power in 1974, relations were maintained. See for example: David E. Albright, "The Horn of Africa and the Arab-Israeli Conflict," in R.O. Freeman, (ed.) *World Politics and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, (New York: Pergamom Press, 1979), p. 160. See also: *Foreign Report*, 20 January 1984, p. 6; *The Jerusalem Post*, 12 February 1978, p. 5. For the Ethiopian Foreign Ministry Press Release, see: *The Ethiopian Herald*, February 10, 1978. Moreover, in the U.N. Resolution of November 1975 which condemned Zionism as a form of racism, Ethiopia abstained. This position was enough for the Arabs to conclude that Ethiopia maintained a conspiracy with Zionism.

<sup>783</sup>*The New York Times*, 4 January 1985.

<sup>784</sup>*Daily World*, 24 January 1985.

the manpower shortage in the army and even in certain labour intensive sectors of the economy. There is also a further advantage for Israel. In a country where thousands of blacks are recognized as Jews and accepted as Israeli citizens, the adversaries of Jerusalem may find it extremely difficult to equate Zionism with racism. All this may be fine for Israel. But for Ethiopia, it aggravated its relations with the Arabs, who, in turn, retaliated most effectively by arming and assisting the Eritreans to continue the bloody confrontation.

### **The Red Sea**

Mohammed Hassanien Haikal, the former editor of the Egyptian daily newspaper, *Al-Ahram*, who was also at one time, political advisor to the late President Nasser of Egypt, wrote on October 22, 1971:

The domination of the Red Sea has always been an important Egyptian policy from Thutmose III to the days of Gamal Abdul Nasser. Since all the states surrounding the Red Sea are Arab states, that sea would have to be considered an Arab Lake. To that end, a naval command should be established to help its complete Arabization.<sup>785</sup>

In the same vein, the late President Sadat of Egypt also observed that the Red Sea is an Arab Lake.<sup>786</sup> The Arab character of the Red Sea also has been stressed by President Hafez Al-Assad of Syria.<sup>787</sup> Kuwait's Foreign Minister

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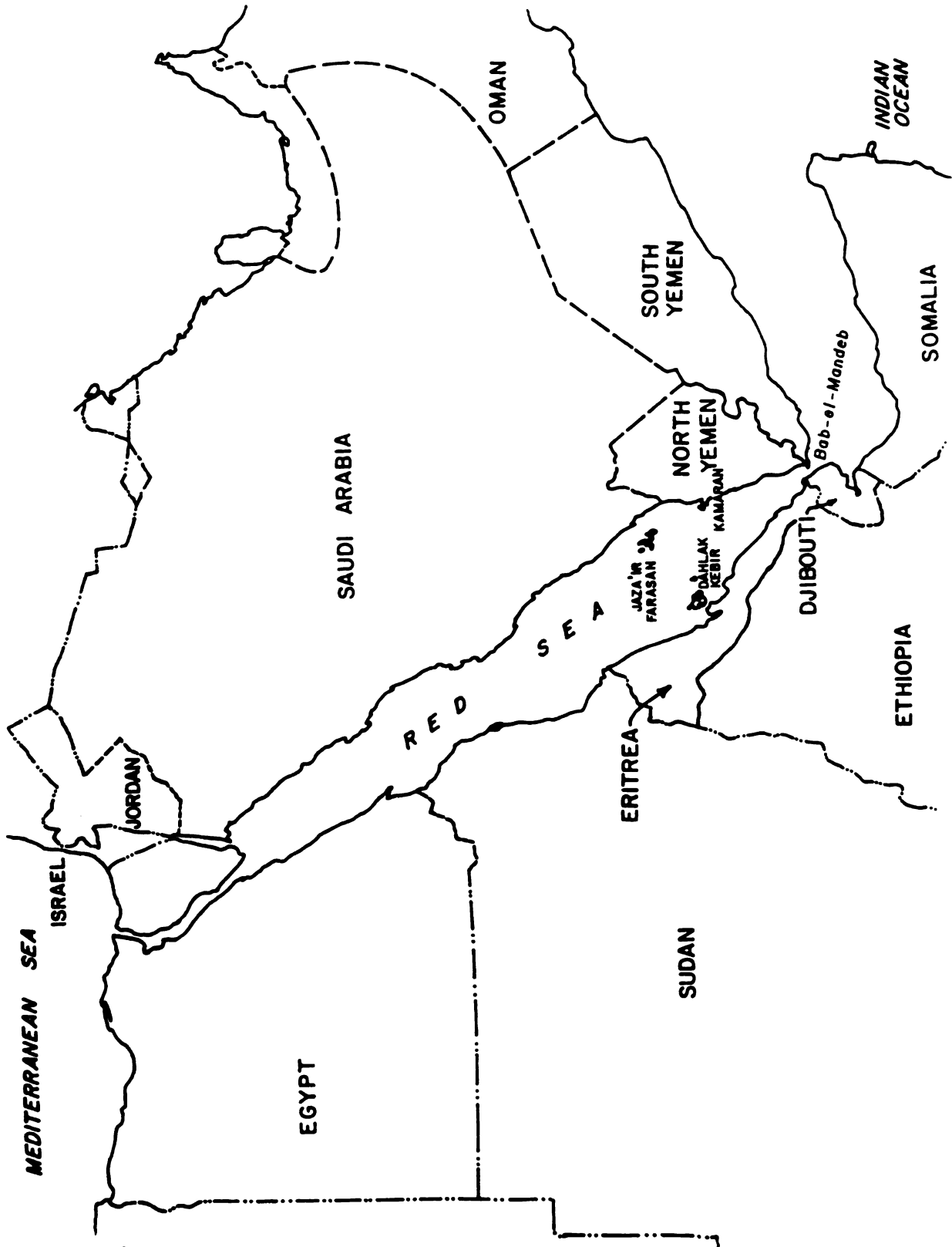
<sup>785</sup>*Al-Ahram*, October 27, 1972, p. 3.

<sup>786</sup>Sadat in an interview to *Al-Sayyad*, quoted by the *Middle East News Agency*, 30 December 1976 - 4 January 1977.

<sup>787</sup>In February 1977, there was a conference in Khartoum between Egypt, Syria and the Sudan to establish a unified political command. As a result, Assad told journalists that the three leaders had concluded that the Red Sea was an "Arab Lake" and that Ethiopia had "lost its foothold" there because of the success of the Eritrean struggle, supported by the Sudan, Saudi Arabia and North Yemen. See: Erlich, *The Struggle For* (p. 81). See also: *Middle East News Agency*, 28 February - 1 March 1977.



Figure 7. Riparian States of the Red Sea



Sabah Al-Ahmed Al-Sabir Al-Sahah also maintained that the states bordering the Red Sea are all Arab states.<sup>788</sup> Perhaps major General Hassan el-Badri, former Military Adviser to the Presidency of Egypt, was more unequivocal than most when he said that:

Of all the parties concerned, only the Arab states have a fair chance of dominating the Red Sea and even of transforming it into an Arab Lake. This is vehemently opposed by the Israelis, the Ethiopians and above all, by the Americans and the Soviets. Therefore, the Arabs must play a more assertive role in order to protect their vital interests. However, judging from the international developments in the last decade, one is almost certain that the Red Sea is heading for a stormy period in the foreseeable future.<sup>789</sup>

#### Did Egypt Dominate the Red Sea?

The various claims of the Arab leaders regarding their alleged control and domination of the Red Sea notwithstanding, we may conduct a structured discussion, if we restrict the investigation to Egypt. This is so because among the littoral powers, Egypt holds a special place on account of the long duration of its existence and the size of its territory. For the Egypt of antiquity, the Red Sea was a highway of commerce with the known world of the time, including

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<sup>788</sup>*Middle East News Agency*, 25 June - 27 June 1977. See also: *Middle East Contemporary Survey*, vol. 1: 1976-1977; (ed.) Colin Legum, The Shiloah Centre for Middle Eastern-African Studies. (New York: Horns and Meier Publishers, 1976).

<sup>789</sup>Abdel Majid Farid, (ed.) *The Red Sea: Prospects for Stability*, Croom Helm, St. Martin's Press, New York (1981), p. 63. In this interesting compilation, one of the contributors, Hassan el-Bazzaz claims that before the existence of Israel and the control of Eritrea by Ethiopia, the Red Sea was originally a purely Arab Sea. (Farid, p. 103, f.n., no. 3). Other relevant sources that could be consulted, include: Mordechai Abir, *Oil, Power and Politics: Conflict in Arabia, the Red Sea and the Gulf* (London: Frank Cass, 1974); Ruth Lapido, *The Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden*, vol. 5, International Straits of the World, Marinus Nijhoff, (The Hague, 1982); Mordechai Abir, "Red Sea Politics," *Conflicts in Africa*, Adelphai Papers, no. 393, The International Institute for Strategic Studies (1972).

the fabled land of Punt/Horn of Africa, which supplied Egypt with myrrh, frankincense, wood and ivory. But there were also other states, like the first Ethiopian Kingdom of Axum, on the scene.<sup>790</sup>

To Axum, the Red Sea was the source of its power and prosperity. Axum derived substantial commercial and strategic benefits from it. Between the fourth century and fifth century A.D., for instance, when Axum's power was at its zenith, this powerful Ethiopian kingdom took upon itself the preservation of order in the Red Sea waters. Roman authorities and others were obliged to recognize its hegemony in the southern portion of the Red Sea.<sup>791</sup>

Even if one cannot go so far back as 1490 B.C., as Haikal did in reference to Thutmose III, suffice it to note that the Arab conquest of Egypt itself is, in historical terms, a recent phenomenon which took place in 640 A.D.<sup>792</sup> Hence, the alleged historical domination of the Red Sea by "Arab" Egypt becomes a moot point. Not only did Egypt not dominate the Red Sea, Egypt itself had lost its independence to the Persians (525 B.C.-332 B.C.); to the Greeks (332 B.C.-30 B.C.); the Romans (30 B.C.-A.D. 395); the Byzantines (395 A.D.-642 A.D.); the Abbasids, Umayyads, and Fatimids (642 A.D.-1171 A.D.); Mamelukes (1250-1517); the Ottoman Turks (1517-1798); the French (1798-1801); and the British (1882-1922).<sup>793</sup>

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<sup>790</sup>Alan Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 37-93.

<sup>791</sup>Juri M. Kobishchanov, *Axum*, (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1979), pp. 40-50.

<sup>792</sup>Philip Hitti: *History of the Arabs, from the Earliest Times to the Present*, 9th edition, (New York: St Martin's Press, 1967). Apart from providing the necessary information regarding Egypt, he also discusses Axum. See pp. 62-65.

<sup>793</sup>G.S.P. Freeman and Grenville (etc.), *Chronology of World History, A Calendar of Principal Events from 3,000 B.C. to A.D. 1976*, (New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1978).

Through all these centuries, Egypt derived substantial commercial benefits from the Red Sea. The Fatimids and the Mamelukes for instance, had developed a strong trade<sup>794</sup>, but control and domination of the Red Sea was a different matter. While Egypt was still a part of the Ottoman Empire, in the days of Ali Bey Al-Kabir (1728-1773)<sup>795</sup>, there was also an attempt to build an Egyptian navy. This was followed by Mohammed Ali (1769-1849)<sup>796</sup>, who wanted to establish an economically sound, militarily strong, and politically stable Egyptian state. In 1810, he even planned to turn the Red Sea into an Egyptian *mare nostrum*. However, since the move prompted the British government to ensure their control over this important waterway, Mohammed Ali's plan never materialized, and, in spite of the rise of Egyptian nationalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Red Sea remained under British control virtually until the 1950s.<sup>797</sup>

The most active outlets of the Red Sea slave trade, Massawa and Swakin, were leased to Egypt by the Ottoman Sultan in 1865.<sup>798</sup> Zeila and Berbera were also handed over to Egypt by Istanbul in 1875 and 1876. In approaching the Sultan for the lease of these ports, Khedive Ismail argued that because of

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<sup>794</sup>See, for example, Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State*, 43-46.

<sup>795</sup>Daniel Crecelius, *The Roots of Modern Egypt, a study of the Regimes of Ali Bey Al-Kabir and Mohammed Bay Abu al-Dhahab, 1760-1775* (Los Angeles: California State University Press, 1981). For the eighteenth century, see David Kimche, "The Opening of the Red Sea to European Ships in the Late 18th Century," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 8, no. 1, January 1972.

<sup>796</sup>Al-Syyid-Marsot, and Afaf Lutfi: *Egypt in the Reign of Muhammed Ali*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). Marsot does not give much credit to Muhammed Ali's achievements. She argues that much of what he did was largely inspired by Ali Bey Al-Kabir--or the Great Ali Bey.

<sup>797</sup>Mordechai Abir: *Oil, Power and Politics: Conflicts in Arabia, The Red Sea and the Gulf*, (London: Frank Cass, 1974), pp. 120-121.

<sup>798</sup>Ehud T. Toledano, *The Ottoman Slave Trade and its Suppression: 1840-1890*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 205-209.

distance, Istanbul would not be in a position to check the slave trade, whereas Egypt could.

As might be expected, the most important naval and commercial power of the day--Britain--supported Egypt. There were two reasons: first, because of the American Civil War (1861-1865), the supply of cotton to British textile mills was threatened. Hence, in order to ensure the continued supply of cotton from Egypt, for what could be described as enlightened self-interest, Britain had to support Khedive Ismail. Secondly, with the opening of the Suez Canal, the Red Sea had also assumed a special role in Britain's world-wide communications network, and therefore, it wanted to continue the safety of the sea route to India. Other than these instances, there was no historical period when Egypt entertained even the pretension of controlling the sea. In any case, the leasing of a handful of Red Sea ports by the Ottomans to Egypt for the specific purpose of suppressing the slave trade, does not confer on Egypt legal rights, or historical justifications, to claim the Red Sea.

Then followed the Suez crisis of 1956 and unity with the Sudan became a side-show compared to the ideal of a untied and powerful Arab nation controlling strategic assets such as Suez, Bab el-Mandeb and most of the world's proven oil reserves.<sup>799</sup>

Ethiopia had consistently challenged the Egyptian/Arab policy on the Red Sea. For instance, in reply to the Khartoum Declaration by the leaders of Egypt, Syria and the Sudan, in which they claimed the Red Sea to be an Arab Sea, Ethiopia observed:

What the three leaders said about the Red Sea being an Arab Sea, and that they would collaborate to guarantee the security of the

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<sup>799</sup>Abir, Mordechai: "Red Sea Politics," *Conflicts in Africa*, Adelphai Papers, No. 393, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1977, p. 30.

Red Sea area, was indicative of a feeling of superiority and readiness to interfere. Ethiopia would keenly follow all events in the region and would not stand idly by if countries made decisions affecting the Ethiopian part of the Red Sea area. Ethiopia had had full control over the Red Sea coast in its region until the European colonialists arrived in Africa, and it had clearly demonstrated this by waging several battles to safeguard its independence. The Red Sea should by no means be regarded as an Arab Sea.<sup>800</sup>

### **Could the Red Sea Be Considered An Arab/Egyptian Sea on Geographic Grounds?**

The Red Sea is a long and narrow body of water which ordinarily separates Northeastern Africa from the Middle East and the Arabian Peninsula. It links the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea through the Suez Canal. Authorities in the field maintain that the Red Sea is an ocean in the making, which took its present form as a result of the drifting apart of the continents of Africa and Asia.<sup>801</sup> It has a total area of some 170,000 square miles and stretches about 1,400 miles from Bab-el-Mandeb, "the gate of tears" in the South, to the Gulf of Suez in the North. While the Red Sea is 220 miles long at its widest point, it is only 14 1/2 miles at its narrowest.<sup>802</sup>

The Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb links the Indian Ocean with the Red Sea. The Strait itself is a narrow passage, about 14 1/2 miles (23 kms) wide between Ras Bab-el-Mandeb on the Asian shore and Ras Siyan in Africa. At this point, it is bordered on the east by Yemen, and in the west by Djibouti. About 14 miles (22 kms) farther north, where the Strait is nearly 20 miles (32 kms) wide, lies

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<sup>800</sup>Addis Ababa home service in Amharic, March 1, 1972, as quoted by Colin Legum and Bill Lee (in) *The Horn of Africa in Continuing Crisis*, African Publishers (1979).

<sup>801</sup>Ross, David A., "The Red Sea, an Ocean in the Making," *Natural History* LXXXV: August-September 1976, 75-77.

<sup>802</sup>*Ibid.*, 75.

the coast of Eritrea/Ethiopia. What is noteworthy here is that littoral states have claimed a territorial sea of 12 miles.<sup>803</sup>

In the north, there is the Strait of Tiran which connects the Red Sea with the Suez Canal. It is between 12 and 20 miles (19-32 kms) in width and touches the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula on one side and the far northwestern tip of Saudi Arabia on the other. Although belonging to the territorial waters of Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the Straits of Tiran are part of the layer international waterway that connects the Suez Canal with the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Israel fought to keep it open to its shipping, and in 1956 and 1967, Tel Aviv occupied Sharm al-Shaykh, the fortress which dominates the Strait of Tiran in order to guarantee the use of the Gulf of Aqaba.<sup>804</sup> Prior to the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, Sharm al-Shaykh was used by Egypt to block Israeli or Israeli-bound vessels from reaching Eilat, Israel's only outlet to the Red Sea.

Israel's first policy imperative had been to deter militarily, and if necessary to counter, any attempt to blockade the choke-points along the Red Sea. Israel had vigorously resisted any projection of the idea of the Red Sea as an "Arab Lake." Free navigation to and from Eilat was considered absolutely essential, not only as an objective of international policy in the interest of economic development and strategic security, but also ideologically, as a symbol of Israel's sovereignty.<sup>805</sup>

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<sup>803</sup>Lapidoth-Eschelbacher, Ruth: *International Straits of the World—The Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden*. (Martinus Mijoff Publishers, 1982), p. 130.

<sup>804</sup>The Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty of 1979 spells out the importance of the Straits of Tiran to Maritime nations, and its use by Israeli vessels is assured. See: Bradley, C. Paul: *The Camp David Peace Process: A Study of Carter Administration Policies, 1979-1980*. (Grantham, N.H.: Thompson and Rutter, 1981).

<sup>805</sup>Lucas, Noah, "Israeli Policy in the Red Sea," *The Red Sea...* (ed.) Op. cit., Majid, Abdel, 147-154.

### The Riparian States

The countries that surround the Red Sea and the length of their coastline on that sea is as follows<sup>806</sup>:

State	Coastal length in miles	Percentage
Saudi Arabia	1,125	35.0
Egypt	875	27.0
Ethiopia/Eritrea	628	19.0
Sudan	309	10.0
North Yemen	275	8.0
Djibouti	25	0.7
Israel	7	0.1
South Yemen	5	0.1
Jordan	5	0.1

As we can see, while Arab League member states control 81% of the Red Sea coastline, the remaining 19.1% belongs to the two states that are not members of the Arab League—*i.e.*, Ethiopia and Israel.

The following table provides the distribution and ownership of the Red Sea islands<sup>807</sup>:

State	Number of Islands	The Most Important Islands
Saudi Arabia	144	Farasan
Ethiopia/Eritrea	126	Dahlack, Fatmah, Halib
North Yemen	39	Kamaran, Zukun
Sudan	36	Swakin
Egypt	26	Shadwin, Sanafir, Tiran
Djibouti	6	Mouleleh, Seba Islands
South Yemen	2	Perim, Grand Hanish

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<sup>806</sup>Mahmoud Tawfik Mahmoud, "The Red Sea in World Strategy," *Al-Seayssah al Dawlyyah*. (No. 127, Cairo, Egypt, July 1979): 32; See also: Kunan, George Thompas: *The Encyclopedia of the Third World*, (New York: Facts on File, 1987).

<sup>807</sup>*Ibid.*, 28.



Of the 379 islands in the Red Sea, 67% of these islands belong to the six Arab League member states, namely--Djibouti, Egypt, North Yemen, Saudi Arabia, South Yemen and the Sudan and 33% belong to Ethiopia. There are two non-Arab countries surrounding the Red Sea, *i.e.*, Ethiopia and Israel. If so, why do the Arabs insist on dominating the Red Sea and even in referring to it as the "Arab Sea?"

### **The Strategic Importance of the Red Sea**

A glance at a world map gives an indication of the paramount strategic importance of the Red Sea. Lying as it does between Africa and Asia and between the Middle East and Europe, this sea has served as an important trade route since ancient times. Before the opening of the Suez Canal, for instance, goods were transported overland by camel or donkey between the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea.

In the past, powers, ranging from the Persians and the Romans to the Portuguese and the Ottoman Turks, competed to control this vital seaway. In the 19th century, it was the turn of the British and the French to compete to dominate the Red Sea. In the 20th century, the French and the British were replaced by the USA and the USSR.<sup>808</sup> They sought to achieve commercial, military and political objectives. In fact, it would be no exaggeration to say that no international waterway has ever been the cause of more conflicts among nations than the Red Sea.

When the Suez Canal was opened in 1869, the importance of this sea was considerably enhanced.<sup>809</sup> As a result, considerable sea mileage was saved.

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<sup>808</sup>Sidebotham, Steven, *Roman Economic Policy in the Erythra Thalassa 30 B.C. - A.D. 217* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986).

<sup>809</sup>The Suez Canal was built at the cost of \$92,414,000. For its historical background, see C.W. Hallberg, *The Suez Canal in History, 1854-1956*, (1969).

Ships no longer had to circumnavigate Africa via the Cape of Good Hope. For example, the distance between Liverpool and present-day Kuwait, is 13,500 miles if one sails through the Cape of Good Hope, but only 7,000 miles through the Red Sea, and thus 58% shorter. Likewise, the London-Bombay distance was also reduced by 59 percent. This shortening of distance meant faster turn-around for ships, and increased tonnage and efficiency, which resulted in considerable reduction of freight charges, as well as in the lowering of the prices of transported goods.<sup>810</sup> Other factors which enhance the strategic importance of the Red Sea include:

1. The Red Sea connects the Atlantic and Indian Oceans through the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean;
2. All Southern movements through the Mediterranean and northern movements from the Persian Gulf pass through the Red Sea. These movements can be controlled by any power of consequence;
3. The Gulf countries which possess more than half of the world's proven oil reserves are not far from the Red Sea. They supply about 62% of Europe's oil, 90% of Japan's and are supplying a growing percentage of American oil.<sup>811</sup>
4. The Red Sea is the most direct route from Southeast Asia, India, the Horn of Africa, and the Persian Gulf to Western Europe and the USA.
5. It is through the Red Sea that much oil is shipped from the producers to consumers.
6. The Holy cities of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are located on the eastern shores of the Red Sea.

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<sup>810</sup>*The Encyclopedia Americana*, vol. 25, 1985, 846.

<sup>811</sup>Abir, "Red Sea....", 34.

7. The Red Sea is adjacent to the sources of the Nile River—a river that is critically important to countries like Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, and others.<sup>812</sup>
8. Nine countries surround the Red Sea. Of these, two of them, *i.e.*, Ethiopia and Israel control almost 20% of the cost.
9. There are also considerable resources at stake—including known deposits of oil, gas, gold, silver, copper, iron ore, lead, chromium and zinc.<sup>813</sup>

There are then three aspects to the conflict:

- a) The Red Sea being recognized as an international waterway and serving as an outlet to all the coastal states like Egypt, Ethiopia, Israel and Saudi Arabia.
- b) The Red Sea being converted into an Egyptian/Arab lake. This strategy is based on the belief that the Red Sea is, by its history, present reality and future, a truly Arab Lake. One should see the incompatibility of this idea, with the concerns of Ethiopia and Israel for free international navigation, as well as respect for the sovereignty of states.<sup>814</sup>
- c) The superpower view of the Red Sea being an indispensable part of their global strategy—a question which will be considered in the next chapter.

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<sup>812</sup>Amin Hewidi, "Egyptian Policy in the Red Sea, 1952 - 1982," in Abdel Majid (ed.), pp. 137 - .

<sup>813</sup>*Africa Events*, December 1992, vol. 8, no. 12.

<sup>814</sup>*Al-Ahram*, 23 March, 1983.

### **Possible Interpretations**

If the Egyptian/Arab claim to the Red Sea cannot be sustained on historical, legal, or geographic grounds, why then did the Arabs want to call the Red Sea an Arab Lake? More specifically, why did matters related to the Red Sea, which, in the past, have never been viewed as an all Arab concern, suddenly become a central topic of Arab interest in the 1970s? There are three possible reasons: 1) religious solidarity; 2) blocking Israeli navigation on the Red Sea; and 3) Arabizing Eritrea.

With regard to the first question, it must be noted that in the Muslim world, religious conviction precedes, shapes and often seems almost to define nationalism.<sup>815</sup> Even if the religious element was more important in the past, especially during the early years of Islam, its influence persisted in varying degrees of militancy down through the centuries. In the case of the Horn of Africa, it has meant solidarity with Red Sea riparian Muslim states like Djibouti, Somalia and the Sudan, and supporting their membership in the Arab League. Initial Arab support to the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), was also, to some extent, inspired by religious sentiments.<sup>816</sup>

The second concern of the Arabs, which is geo-political in character, is their conflict with Israel, in which Red Sea politics have become an important factor.<sup>817</sup> One can appreciate the economic and strategic significance of the

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<sup>815</sup>Haim, Sylvia, *Arab Nationalism, an Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962).

<sup>816</sup>Muslims and Christians are evenly divided. However, the Arabs wrongly believe that Eritrea is overwhelmingly Muslim and predominantly Arab. On both counts, some of the early leaders of the ELF, men like Idris Muhammed Adam, who were of Ben Amir extraction, established their credentials in the Middle East by advancing the idea of Pan Arabism. Osman Saleh Sabe convinced the Arabs that Eritrea was after all an Arab land. See his *The History of Eritrea*, (Beirut, 1974).

<sup>817</sup>Abir, 133.

area when one considers that over 50 percent of Western Europe's petroleum, and an increasingly large share of America's oil supplies are carried by tankers utilizing these two routes.

The overall Arab-Israeli dispute is very well-known,<sup>818</sup> and does not require a detailed discussion here. What is worthy of note, however, is that the policy of converting the Red Sea into an Arab lake should be viewed as a means of pressuring Israel to concede to the establishment of a Palestinian state, and to induce it to restore to the original owners the territories it annexed following the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Consequently, for such a strategy to be effective, blocking the northern entrance to the Red Sea, i.e., the Gulf of Tiran, will not suffice. It appears that controlling the southern entrance of this sea has become crucial. For this objective to be realized, power over the Bab-el-Mandeb would be needed. However, as long as the African side of Bab-el-Mandeb is not controlled by the Arabs, imposing a blockade against Israeli shipping would be a futile exercise. That was why Eritrea was needed, and that is why many Arab governments, including those who do not score high marks in their respect for human rights, had to champion the cause of Eritrean independence and its membership in the Arab League. Once Eritrea attained statehood, especially under the leadership of the Muslim dominated Eritrean Liberation Front, it was assumed that control of the Red Sea by the Arabs would be a relatively simple matter.<sup>819</sup> As a result, the

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<sup>818</sup>Roberto Aliboni provides a comprehensive account of the various conflicts and interest groups on the Red Sea. See his *The Red Sea Region, Local Actors and the Superpowers* (London: Croom Helm, 1985). For the Arab-Israeli conflict, see pp. 93-105; see also *The Jerusalem Journal of International Relations*, 8, nos. 2-3, (June 1986).

<sup>819</sup>John Franklin Campbell, "The Red Sea and Suez," *The Indian Ocean: Its Political, Economic and Military Importance*, (ed.) Alvin J. Cottrell, R.M. Burrell, (Praeger Publishers, 1972), 178-180.

Arab chain across the Strait will be forged, and a potential block created against ships that are bound for Israel from eastern and southern Africa, the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean.<sup>820</sup>

It is worth noting here that in the 1970s, Egypt had accused Ethiopia of leasing a number of Red Sea islands to Israel,<sup>821</sup> which Tel Aviv was allegedly using for military purposes in its struggle against the Arabs--an accusation which Ethiopia vigorously denied, and that was refuted even by North Yemen, and by other independent observers.<sup>822</sup> In so far as Eritrea has 628 miles of coastline on the Red Sea, the problem should be considered along with the general Arab interest in Eritrea.

#### **Egyptian/Arab Interest in Eritrea**

According to Aaron Klieman, Ethiopia is a target of special concern for Egypt. As claimant to the position of leader of the Muslim world, Egypt objects to the presence of Christian Ethiopia for the same reason that it resents Israel. Both are alien islands in the midst of Muslim communities. Moreover, Egypt's rulers always have sought to control the headwaters of the Nile River, three-quarters of which originate in the Blue Nile located within Ethiopia. There has always been some concern among Egyptians that Ethiopia, as a last resort, could divert these vital waters. Also, in aspiring to a major role in the African unity movement, Egypt regards Ethiopia as its principal rival, not least because the OAU was founded in Addis Ababa in May 1963 and still maintains its

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<sup>820</sup>Ibid., 178. See also Peter Robbs, "Battle for the Red Sea," *Africa Report*, March-April, 1975.

<sup>821</sup>Op. cit., *Al-Ahram*, 17 Oct. 1972. See also *African Recorder*, 29 Jan. - 11 Feb. 1973.

<sup>822</sup>Op. cit., Abir, 139.

permanent headquarters there. Lastly, as leader of the anti-Israel forces, Egypt had special reason to condemn Ethiopia for being one of the few countries in East Africa to have recognized Israel. In this regard, it has been reported, though not confirmed, that Israel was supplying Ethiopia with military advisers in its drive to suppress the nascent Eritrean separatist movement. Should these reports be true, then Eritrea has become yet another arena for Arab-Israeli competition on the African continent.<sup>823</sup>

Abir goes further than Klieman. According to him, the ELF is for the Arabs an important asset in the struggle against Israel. In addition to bringing the 628 miles of coastline under Arab control, Eritrea's independence could also spark off a chain reaction leading to the internal disintegration of Ethiopia. Its collapse can bring the waters of the Blue Nile, the Red Sea and the Ogaden under Arab control.<sup>824</sup>

From 1865 to 1885, Egypt controlled Massawa<sup>825</sup> and occupied most of present-day north western Eritrea from 1872-1884.<sup>826</sup> Egypt's military

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<sup>823</sup>Klieman, Aaron S., "Bab-Al-Mandeb: The Red Sea in Transition," *Orbis, A Quarterly Journal of World Affairs*, XI, no. 3, Fall 1967, Foreign Policy Research Institute, University of Pennsylvania, 769.

<sup>824</sup>Abir, 194.

<sup>825</sup>Chattel slavery was a profitable business in Northeast Africa for much of the 19th century. The ports of Massawa and Swakin were the most active outlets for much of the Red Sea slave trade. Ismail Pasha (1863-1879) approached the British Government and appealed to them to use their good offices with the Ottomans for the transfer of the two ports to Egypt. Ismail Pasha argued that because Istanbul was too far from the scene, it would not control the slave trade. On the other hand, if he was put in charge of the two ports he would be in a much better position to help abolish the slave trade. As a result, Massawa was leased to Ismail for the payment of an annual rate consisting of the port's revenue at the time plus fifty percent. See Ghada H. Talhami, *Swakin and Massawa Under Egyptian Rule, 1865-1885*, University Press of America, 1975.

<sup>826</sup>For the Ethiopia-Egyptian struggle over the region during this period, see Sven Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopia Independence*, London (1976), and Haggai Erlich, *Ethiopia and Eritrea During the Scramble for Africa: A Political*

adventures and its ambition to dominate northern Ethiopia was, however, brought to a halt by its disastrous defeats at Gura and Gundet in November 1875 and March 1876, respectively.<sup>827</sup>

By using Egypt's involvement in what was yet to become Eritrea as proof of historical legitimacy, as early as 1945, the Arab League declared its intention to put Eritrea under the Trusteeship of the Arab nations. At the Paris Peace Conference of 1946, Egypt advanced an outright claim to Eritrea.<sup>828</sup> On April 15, 1950, when the U.N. Commission on Eritrea visited Cairo to consult with the Egyptian Government, Foreign Minister Salah El-Din maintained that:

Italian expansion in Africa was inaugurated by an encroachment upon the rights of Egypt. Egypt has been in Eritrea and in Massawa long before it had been driven out by the Italians, at a time when power was the dominating factor over rights.<sup>829</sup>

Subsequently, Egypt launched a campaign for the unity of the Nile Valley, which aimed at bringing Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somaliland, Uganda and Kenya under its control.<sup>830</sup> When that ambition failed to materialize with the

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*Biography of Ras Alula*, Tel Aviv University, Shiloah Center and Michigan State University Press (1982).

<sup>827</sup>See Zewde Gabre Selassie, *Yohannes IV of Ethiopia...*, 63-78.

<sup>828</sup>An eye-witness account is provided by John H. Spencer. See his, *Ethiopia at Bay: A Personal Account of the Haile Selassie Years*, (Algonac, Michigan: Reference Publications, 1984), 181.

<sup>829</sup><sup>203</sup>*Report of the United Nations Commission for Eritrea, General Assembly Official Records: 5th Session, Supplement No. 8 (A/1285), Annex 9. Consultations with the Government of Egypt*, pp. 64-65. Egypt was not driven out of Massawa by the Italians. Contrary to what Salah El-Din argues, Egypt took over Massawa in 1865 with British support and blessing. In 1885 Britain invited Italy to take over Massawa with the full knowledge of Egypt. The transfer of administrative authority was done peacefully.

<sup>830</sup>Spencer, J., 205.



independence of the Sudan (1956), and Somalia (1960), Egypt sponsored the creation and establishment of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in Cairo.

Egyptian interest in the waters of the Nile, as we have shown, is of long duration. The Egyptian/Arab struggle against Israel is, however, of a recent origin. But if we ask how the Arab-Israeli conflict is linked with the Eritrean problem, we could again reiterate that to some extent, Arab interest in Eritrea is inspired by religious sentiments.<sup>831</sup> But on the whole Arab strategy has geo-political undertones.

Eritrea is involved in the geo-politics of the Middle East, the Persian Gulf and the northwest quadrant of the Indian Ocean. Its importance is highlighted by its strategic location along the two most important sea lanes linking the Persian Gulf with the West--the Suez Canal route. Commerce from the Persian Gulf, East Africa and Asia must pass near the Somali coast, maneuver through the narrow Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, and proceed through the Red Sea, paralleling Eritrea's coast for about 600 miles enroute to the Mediterranean Sea, and the Cape route, where traffic from the Persian Gulf must cross the Gulf of Aden and pass near the Somali coast on its way South and East.

The late 1950s and early 1960s were marked by intensive political changes in northeast Africa and the Middle East. The period was characterized by Nasser's accession to power in Egypt (1952), the independence of the Sudan, and Somalia, the civil war in the Yemen, and the emergence of Baathists in Syria.<sup>832</sup>

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<sup>831</sup>At least half of the population in Eritea is Muslim.

<sup>832</sup>Baathism, which means Arab "Renaissance," stands for Arab unity, absolute Arab independence and socialism. According to this doctrine, the Arab world is one nation divided into regions. Baathism was conceived by Michel Aflaq and Salah Bitar and launched as a movement in 1947. See Michel

Following the internal developments in Eritrea, Idris Mohammed Adem, the former President of the Eritrean Parliament, Ibrahim Sultan, Secretary General of the Islamic League, and Wolde ab Wolde Mariam, President of the Eritrean Labour Unions, and others went to Egypt. Subsequently, Wolde Ab was given a special radio programme and began to broadcast to Eritrea from Radio Cairo. He sought to undermine Haile Selassie's Government, and urged Eritreans to take up arms and struggle for their independence.<sup>833</sup>

Nasser had repeatedly extended official invitations to Haile Selassie to visit Egypt. The emperor had repeatedly declined the offer. In fact, in December 1956 he instructed his ambassador to the Sudan, Melesse Andom, to discuss matters with Nasser, who had not given up on the idea of the unity of the Nile countries. Melesse Andom did not mince words:

You claim to be an Arab and to lead the Arab world but you interfere in the affairs of your Arab neighbours and have tried to cause trouble for the Governments of Iraq, Libya, Lebanon and the Sudan. We Ethiopians are not Arabs. We are Africans and we are black. We do not belong to your world although like you we drink of the water of the Nile. Yet, you have military objectives. We do not know exactly what they may be, but we have no confidence in the strength of your armed forces...<sup>834</sup>

After such a showdown, relations could only get worse. Nasser provided scholarships to Muslim Eritreans at Al-Azhar University, and Cairo became the centre for the Eritrean Student Union.<sup>835</sup> In 1958, a small training camp for Eritreans was opened near Alexandria, where some of the future military

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Aflaq: *The Ba'ath and the Heritage*, New Dehli, 1976. See also *The Ba'ath Party: A History from Its Origins to 1966*, by John F. Devlin.

<sup>833</sup>Spencer, *Ethiopia...*, 304-205.

<sup>834</sup>As quoted by Haggai Erlich, Op. cit., *Ethiopia and ...*, 158.

<sup>835</sup>Haggai Erlich, *The Struggle for...*, 62.

commanders received their initial training.<sup>836</sup> In 1961, the Egyptian government permitted the exiles to set up the office of the Eritrean Liberation Front in Cairo. A year later, Idris Mohammed Adem, by then, head of the ELF, travelled extensively throughout the Middle East soliciting for aid. The April 1962 meeting of the Arab League promised ELF full support.<sup>837</sup>

Two years before the outbreak of the rebellion, the fact that the ELF was preparing to launch its military campaigns was an open secret in Egypt. In fact, the Ethiopian Embassy in Cairo had warned the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs that Idris Mohammed Adem, Ibrahim Sultan and Wolde ab Wolde Mariam were preparing to launch a military uprising in Eritrea.<sup>838</sup>

Somalia also became an active supporter of the ELF. In June 1963, Idris Mohammed Adem opened an office in Mogadisho, and Somali Radio became the chief carrier of the voice of the ELF and continued to denounce "Savage Abyssinia," a Christian country under a "stone age," and "feudalist rule," that oppressed Muslims.<sup>839</sup>

Somalia's support of the ELF was largely guided by self-interest, indeed, by the possibility of annexing the Ogaden, which it claimed since independence, and in the hope that Ethiopia would disintegrate as a consequence of the Eritrean insurrection.<sup>840</sup> There is Idris Mohammed

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<sup>836</sup>*Afro-Asian Affairs*, 14 February 1975 (as quoted by Erlich, p. 62). Eritrea, "Survey of Country Insurgency Operations in Eritrea and Draft Proposals," prepared at the request of Ras Asrate Kassa, Governor of Eritea, by the Ministry of Defense (1968), 28; See also: Colin Legum and Bill Lee (p. 25) for the early Egyptian assistance.

<sup>837</sup>Spencer (*Ethiopia...*), 318.

<sup>838</sup>EPA, File U2/168, vol. I, letter of the Ethiopian Embassy in Cairo to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Addis Ababa, Miazia 8, 1951 (15 April 1958).

<sup>839</sup>*Radio Mogadisho*, 5 August 1965, in the BBC/ME, 7 August 1965.

<sup>840</sup>EPA/File U1/251.

Adem's letter of August 23, 1960, to the Somali Defense Minister and other high ranking Somali officials in which he thanked them for their earlier support.<sup>841</sup> There is also Osman Saleh Sabbe's letter of September 15, 1960, to Somali nationals and their leaders in Saudi Arabia requesting assistance for the publication of a planned book on "the ill-treatment of the Muslims in Ethiopia".<sup>842</sup> The issuance of Somali passports to ELF members is evidence of close collaboration between the leaders of the ELF and officials of the Government of Somalia.<sup>843</sup>

Somalia also became instrumental in helping send some Eritreans for training in guerrilla warfare. In fact, as early as 1963, twenty-two men were sent to China via Somalia, for military training. Cuba also cooperated in the task of training the guerillas. Issaias Afeworki and Mohammed Ramadan Nur, the two top leaders of the insurrection, were among the early trainees in China.<sup>844</sup>

Conservative Arab Governments like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and King Idris' Libya also provided considerable support to the ELF, as part of their policy of encouraging Islamic movements. They wanted to minimize the danger of such movements falling under the influence of radical Arab governments. The latter were avowed critics of conservative monarchies in the Middle East, whom they considered as architects of decay. Egypt felt that

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<sup>841</sup>EPA/File U1/251.

<sup>842</sup>Ibid.

<sup>843</sup>EPA, file 186, letter of the Ethiopian Embassy in Egypt to the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Nehase 12/1957 (20 August 1964) 41/702, Intelligence Report No. 84, 15 April 1964.

<sup>844</sup>Op. cit., Erlich, *Ethiopia and ....*; John F. Campbell, "Background to the Eritrean Conflict: Differed Results of Colonial Map-Making, Geo-Politics and Religion," *Africa Report*, (May 1971), 20.

these monarchies, which included Ethiopia, obstructed reforms and collaborated with imperialism as a function of their reactionary outlook.<sup>845</sup> It was in part to support Yemeni Republicans against Saudi-Arabian financed monarchists that Nasser deployed 70,000 Egyptian soldiers in the Yemen from 1962-67.<sup>846</sup>

In November 1964, Haile Selassie met Nasser in Cairo twice.<sup>847</sup> In one of these meetings, he complained of Egypt's unfriendly activities against Ethiopia and that he would like to see concrete measures taken to curb the activities of the Eritrean 'rebels'.

At a relaxed moment, when Haile Selassie complimented Nasser on his healthy and vigorous posture, the Egyptian President replied by saying:

I do not concentrate too much power in my hands. Prime Minister Ali Sabri does his job. Military affairs are left to Field Marshall Abdel Hakim Amer. Diplomacy and foreign affairs are handled by Dr. Mohammed Fawzie, and so on. My job is simply to check if things are being done or not.

Prime Minister Aklilou Habte Wolde, who was witnessing all this, turned to Ambassador Melesse Andom, who was translating for Haile Selassie, showed him a curious look, and asked him what Nasser was insinuating. The Ambassador's reply was simple: "My job is to translate. The Emperor is the

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<sup>845</sup>Kerr, Malcolm H., *The Arab Cold War*, Royal Institute of International Affairs (1971), 6; John F. Campbell, "Background to the Eritrean Conflict: Differed Results of Colonial Map-Making, Geopolitics and Religion," *Africa Report* (May 1971), 20.

<sup>846</sup>Erlich, *The Struggle...*, 62. See also Afro-Asian Affairs, 14 Feb. 1975. To the Ethiopians, the ultimate objective of Nasser was to control the Arabian Peninsular and the Red Sea Basin. Yemen was just the beginning.

<sup>847</sup>Haile Selassie was mediating the conflict between Algeria and Morocco. He made a stop over in Cairo. See Keesing's, *Contemporary Archives*, vol. 14, Dec. 28, 1963-Dec. 1964.

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head of state, and you are the head of the government. You work it out amongst yourselves."<sup>848</sup>

It appears that it was after such a frank talk that sometime in 1964, the training camps for Eritreans were transferred from Alexandria to Algeria.<sup>849</sup> The predominantly Muslim composition of the ELF and its propaganda strongly emphasized the Arab and Muslim character of the Eritrean people. This led more and more Arab governments to view the cause of the ELF as part of the Arab cause. Indeed, an increasing number of Arab Governments became attracted by the pledge of the leaders of the ELF that an independent Eritrea would be part and parcel of the Arab homeland.<sup>850</sup> The leaders of the ELF skillfully exploited the anti-Zionist attitude of the Arabs and described their struggle as an integral part of the Arab-Israeli dispute. They even drew a connection between the Eritreans and the Palestinians and presented themselves as victims of a common Jewish aggression.

The following indicates how Ibrahim Sultan, one of the leaders of the ELF, presented his case to the Second Arab Summit Conference in Cairo in 1964:

The cause of the Eritrean people has a strong connection to the cause of wounded Palestine, as both peoples suffer from Jewish aggression and the connection of the people of the Lion of Judah of Ethiopia with Israel. It is known to the Arab and Muslim nations that Haile Selassie of Ethiopia has given active help to Israel and opened for Israel the whole of Ethiopia with its bountiful riches from Allah. If the Arabs really want to weaken Israel and choke her, they must pay attention to the sources of Ethiopia before dealing with Israel itself. We Eritreans are Arabs no less than the Palestinians. We Eritreans fight the Jews of Africa as personified by the Emperor and his government—the

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<sup>848</sup>As related to the author by Ambassador Melesse Andom in Cairo in 1972.

<sup>849</sup><sup>223</sup>*Afro-Asian Affairs*, 14 February 1975. In 1970 the number of Eritreans being trained in Algeria was estimated at 150. See *Africa Confidential*, 13 March 1970.

<sup>850</sup>EPA, File U2/42/1195, vol. 2, Intelligence Report, No. 59/59 and 239/60.

offspring of Solomon, the Lion of Judah, just as the Palestinians fight the Jews of Palestine.<sup>851</sup>

But the most eloquent and articulate spokesman for promoting the Arab interest in Eritrea was Osman Saleh Sebbe. In an interview given to an Arab Newspaper in 1969, he said:

The imperialist forces in the Red Sea are the imperialist Zionists. Their aim is to exploit the Eritrean coast against the Arab nation and the Arab revolution, but the Eritrean revolution is on guard and is the guarantee that this will be corrected, until finally, the Red Sea will become a purely Arab sea.<sup>852</sup>

In October 1974, Eritrean representatives at the Rabat Conference of the Arab League also submitted a request to join the League as observers, "and thus make it possible for the Arab people of Eritrea, who are an integral part of the Arab nation to become a member of the Arab League upon gaining independence."<sup>853</sup>

The biggest financial, military, diplomatic and moral support for the ELF actually came from Syria. In fact, Article II of the Constitution of the ruling Syrian Baath Party of 1952 defines the "Arab homeland," as consisting of that "area which extends beyond the Taurus Mountains....the Gulf of Basra, the Arabian Sea, the Ethiopian Mountains, the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, and constitutes one single complete unit, and no part thereof may be alienated."<sup>854</sup> Several maps prepared in Damascus, therefore,

<sup>851</sup>EPA, File U2/77, vol. I, "Statement of the Eritrean people: an appeal to the Second Arab Summit Conference," 31 August 1964.

<sup>852</sup>*Al-Hayat*, 25 June 1969. See also *Al-Ray al-Amm* (Kuwait) 21 November 1972.

<sup>853</sup>*Al-Gumhuriyya* (Cairo) 28 November 1974. It is indeed ironic that in spite of documentary evidence, Amare Teckle, formerly an official of the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and now an EPLF functionary wrote: None of the Eritrean liberation fronts have ever expressed a desire to turn the Red Sea into an Arab Lake." See *The Christian Science Monitor*, 3 August 1990.

<sup>854</sup>Abir, 69; Erlich, 59.



included Eritrea as part of the "Arab homeland." Hence, the Syrians took it upon themselves to help fellow Eritrean "Arabs," and considered it their duty to champion the ELF as an Arab liberation movement. Damascus' competition with Cairo for leadership of the Arab world, especially after the disintegration of the U.A.R., could only intensify Syrian involvement.

In June 1963, Idris Mohammed Adem opened the ELF office in Damascus, and after December 1965, Syrian Radio enabled Osman Saleh Sabbe to begin to broadcast to Eritrea frequently. Syrian arms were also smuggled to the rebels--and most important of all--Eritreans began to undertake year-long military training courses at the Syrian Military Academy at Aleppo. In 1968, for instance, some sixty Eritrean commanders reportedly received advanced training there.<sup>855</sup>

The Ethiopian government had detailed information about the organizational plans, and even about the strength of the guerrillas. However, it took no action. Even the forces deployed to crush the movement were far too small compared to the strength of the guerrillas. In 1966, for instance, there were only 1,200 Ethiopian soldiers and 800 policemen assigned for the purpose of containing an estimated force of 800 guerrillas. The government

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<sup>855</sup>The constitution was largely drafted by Michael Aflaq and Sallah Bittar, founders of Baathism. See Muhammed Khalil, *The Arab States and the Arab League*, Beirut, 1962, vol. I, 685. See also *The Ethiopian Herald*, 16 Feb. 1975. U2/1195, vol. 2, Intelligence Report No. 59/59 and 230/60. A transcript of Osman Saleh Sabbe's broadcast through Radio Damascus on 1/13/1959 (8/20/1966) is also available. In it, Sabbe announced: Eritreans have been Arabs since antiquity. Intermarriage with black Africans did take place. In that way, Arab Eritrea continued to present Arab colonization and culture to non-Arabs. And on 27/12/1960, Ethiopian Calen Osman Sabbe announced: "Eritrea's independence is very useful to the Arabs. An independent Eritrea can only be an integral part of the Arab nation." See also Taye Geremew, "Rebellion in Eritrea--who is behind it? What are its aims?" *New Middle East*, no. 31, April 1971, 24-28.

characterized the guerrilla activity as ordinary banditry carried out by a handful of criminals and mercenaries of the Arabs.<sup>856</sup>

The 1967 Arab-Israeli war further heightened Arab suspicions about the Israeli role in Ethiopia--a country which had by then been branded as an ally of "Zionism" and of "American Imperialism." The urge to secure the Red Sea coast of Eritrea for the Arabs began to be felt most intensely. Indeed, with the escalation of the Arab-Israeli conflict, many Arab countries became increasingly convinced that the success of the secessionist movement in Eritrea could become an asset in the struggle against Israel.

Following the 1967 war, however, funds for the ELF from Arab sources began to dry up, and ELF activities also correspondingly declined. The period of comparative lull was utilized by the Ethiopians to reinforce troops and to regain control of most of western Eritrea. Consequently, several Eritrean guerrillas surrendered to the Ethiopian army, while many escaped to Damascus.<sup>857</sup>

In 1968, the Baathists came to power in Iraq. Even without the Baathists, sympathy for the ELF was not lacking in Baghdad. In fact, earlier, Emperor Haile Selassie had to cancel a planned visit to Iraq because he received advance information that President Aref would use the occasion to press the cause of the ELF. The emperor simply used the outbreak of cholera in Baghdad as an excuse to return home from Kuwait.<sup>858</sup>

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<sup>856</sup>EPA, file 42/168, vol. I. See also EPA, File U3/24, Minutes of the Meeting of the Defense Committee on Eritrean Security, Ministry of Defense, September 16, 1958 - June 23, 1966.

<sup>857</sup>EPA, File 513 states that Woldai Khassai, a Christian, and one of the regional commanders of the ELF, defected to the government side. See his statement of 26/2/1960 (Ethiopian Calendar) on the activities of ELF in the Sudan in EPA, file 513, Eritrea, "Survey of Counter Insurgency...". See also: Graham Taylor: "Ethiopia's Rebellion," *Africa Report*, December 1969.

<sup>858</sup>Spencer, *Ethiopia at Bay...*, 321.

Nevertheless, ELF members began to train at Iraqi military training centers. An Eritrean Students Union was also established in Baghdad.<sup>859</sup> The rivalry between the Baathist governments in Syria and Iraq for influence was a blessing for the ELF. Indeed, in an effort to undermine Syria's influence over the Eritrean movements, the Iraqi Government doubled and tripled its aid and trained more guerrillas.

The PLO also started training Eritrean fighters at camps in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.<sup>860</sup> "The Arabs have to understand," wrote one PLO journalist:

That [in Eritrea] a revolution in an Arab country is in the making, a revolution that is inseparable from the Arab liberation movement or from the struggle to liberate Palestine, or from the Arab revolution in any other Arab country. We are, therefore, obliged to sympathize with the struggle of this people and support it in words and deeds.<sup>861</sup> Indeed, the PLO made it clear that it was actively participating 'in liberating Arab Eritrea from Ethiopian occupation' and rescuing the Arab Eritreans from the reactionary Ethiopian terror, which colludes with imperialism and cooperates with Zionists.<sup>862</sup>

PLO training and support were major factors in shaping Eritrean tactics. They were reflected in the sophisticated mining and ambushing tactics, in spectacular assassinations, and in attempts at high-jacking.<sup>863</sup>

<sup>859</sup>*Africa Contemporary Record*, 1973/1974, B155. Radio Baghdad, 1 Oct. 1974 in BBC/ME, 3 Oct. 1974 and Ma'ariv, 26 March 1974.

<sup>860</sup>See *Africa Confidential*, 13 March 1970.

<sup>861</sup>*Al-Muharrir*, 10 April 1969.

<sup>862</sup>*Voice of the Fatah*, 20 November 1969, in BBC/ME, 22 November 1969. See also *Voice of the Fatah*, the official statement by the PLO in *Eritrean Review*, September 1974.

<sup>863</sup>Erlich, *The Struggle...*, 61.

Under such circumstances, it should not be surprising if the Arabs maintain that Eritrea is part of the Arab "nation," or that the Arab struggle for Eritrea is part and parcel of the battle for Palestine. Nor should it be astonishing to see Eritrean fighters being trained in Syria or Iraq shoulder to shoulder with the Fedayeen of the Palestinian Liberation Organization.<sup>864</sup> After Colonel Gaddafi came to power in Libya, Tripoli emerged as an important source of arms and finance to the Eritreans. The bulk of Libyan support was transferred to Eritrea through South Yemen.<sup>865</sup>

Trained guerrillas and large quantities of Soviet, Czech and Chinese arms smuggled via South Yemen to Eritrea actually enabled the ELF in 1969-70 to intensify operations and to extend them to the east. By 1970, the ELF succeeded in gaining control of most of western and northern Eritrea and part of the coast.<sup>866</sup>

Of all the assistance given to the ELF by the Arabs, that of the Sudan was the most effective and significant. After the Ethio-Eritrean federation of 1952, it was the Sudan which became a natural centre for Eritrean exiles. While the political leaders had their headquarters in Khartoum, the military command was in Kassala. Willingly or not, the Sudan was also the host for thousands of

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<sup>864</sup>*Observer*, 23 June 1969; *Ethiopian Herald*, 20 and 24 Sept. 1967; see also John Franklin Campbell, "Rumblings Along the Red Sea," *Foreign Affairs: An American Quarterly Review*, 48, no. 3, April 1970, 544.

<sup>865</sup>In a speech through Radio Tripoli, on 15 November, 1970, Osman Saleh Sabbe praised Libya's support and assistance, BBC/ME 17 November 1970 and interview with Osman Saleh Sabbe in *Al-Fajr al-Jadid* (Tripoli) 24 April 1973.

<sup>866</sup>D. Laporte, *Revue de Defense Nationale*, July 1971 (p. 1131); *Financial Times*, 20 May 1989; *L'Unita*, 12 Sept. 1970; *The Times* (London) 10 May 1970; 9 Jan. 1971; 26 Feb. 1971; *Time Magazine*, 1 March 1971; BBC, 10 July 1971; A. Castango, *Africa Report*, Feb. 1970; *Le Monde Diplomatique*, 4 June 1971 (p. 4); *Daily Telegraph*, 4 November 1971. EPA, File 513, Wol.

Eritrean refugees who fled their country whenever the Ethiopian army accelerated its drive against the guerrillas.<sup>867</sup>

The Eritrean insurgents freely used the Sudan both as a base and as a refuge. They established offices in Kassala, Gedarif, Port Sudan and Khartoum. Stores and training camps were set up in a number of places inside that country. Military supplies from other Arab countries found their way to Eritrea through the Sudan, including significant quantities of relatively new weapons such as assault rifles, heavy machine guns, mortars, bazookas, mines, explosives and the like. Sudan became actively involved in the Eritrean conflict in order to attract Arab financial support.<sup>868</sup> In turn, Ethiopia became a vital conduit for the Israeli communication with the Anya Nya fighters of the Southern Sudan, who had been fighting against the Khartoum regime since 1965.<sup>869</sup> Egypt, Sudan, Syria, Iraq, Somalia, the PLO, Algeria and others continued their support for the ELF. In June 1970, Emperor Haile Selassie was in Egypt on an official visit. The emperor asked Nasser to use his good offices and to restrain the Sudanese government from helping the Eritrean guerrillas. As a *quid pro quo*, Nasser demanded the expulsion of the Israelis from Ethiopia.<sup>870</sup>

Are we to conclude from all this that the support provided by the Arabs to the Eritrean fighters was designed merely to pressure Haile Selassie to expel Israel from Ethiopia? If we make a distinction between the rights of Eritreans

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<sup>867</sup>See Erlich, *The Struggle For...*, 64.

<sup>868</sup>Ibid., AC, 13 March 1970; Jack Kramer, "Hidden War in Eritrea," *Venture*, May 1969, 21.

<sup>869</sup>Muhammed Omer Beshir, *The Southern Sudan: From Conflict to Peace*, (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1975), 91. See also *The London Times*, 7th and 12th of April, 1971.

<sup>870</sup>Erlich, *The Struggle For...*, 63.

to fight against injustice and tyranny--a right which is legitimate--and Arab interests, where do the two interests coincide, and where do the two collide?

In 1972, Ethiopia and the Sudan signed an agreement. Accordingly, Ethiopia agreed to refrain from assisting the Southern Sudanese, and the Sudan agreed to cut off aid to the Eritrean 'separatists'.<sup>871</sup> Despite that, the degree of Arab "commitment" to Eritrea was demonstrated at the Fourth Islamic Foreign Ministers Conference in Benghazi in March 1973. In that conference, the Ministers denounced the "Zionist" danger in the Red Sea, which Israel was allegedly posing by attempting to dominate the area politically and militarily, and the facilities placed at its disposal by Ethiopia. It, therefore, called on the Islamic countries to support the liberation movements in Eritrea.<sup>872</sup>

The Ethiopia Government reacted promptly. In fact, in a rejoinder dated 27 March 1973, Addis Ababa described the resolutions as solely based on hostile propaganda against Ethiopia. It is regrettable, the statement said, that a conference of this nature, which could have important tasks to perform, had been duped and hoodwinked by a handful of bandits.<sup>873</sup>

Reasserting that Eritrea was an "integral part of Ethiopia", the Government repeated its denial that any islands or other facilities on the Red Sea had been placed at the disposal of Israel or any other foreign state. Ethiopia once again invited anyone "to come and confirm" this fact.<sup>874</sup>

In 1974, Haile Selassie's Government was overthrown by the Ethiopian Revolution and a military government headed by General Aman Andom took

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<sup>871</sup>Op. cit., Erlich, *The Struggle over...*, 65-66.

<sup>872</sup>Sauldie Madan, *Super Powers in the Horn of Africa* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Ltd., 1987), 106.

<sup>873</sup>*Ethiopian Herald*, 27 March 1973.

<sup>874</sup>*Ibid.*, Sauldie, 106.

over. In Egypt, where Melesse Amond, Aman's brother was Ethiopia's Ambassador, the Ethiopian Revolution was considered as a great victory for the Arab cause. In September 1974 an Egyptian political analyst even suggested:

There is no room whatsoever for hesitation. We have to support the Ethiopian regime, for such a support is direct aid to an ally in the context of the Arab struggle in general and the battle for the liberation of the occupied territories in Palestine in particular. Good relations between Ethiopia and the Arabs may well result in the closure of the [Ethiopian] ports of Massawa and Assab to Israeli ships, and thus, the Red Sea from the gates of the Indian Ocean to its northern edge will become a purely Arab sea."<sup>875</sup>

When President Nimerie, however, attempted to mediate between the Eritrean guerrillas and the Ethiopian regime, Iraq rejected Nimerie's proposal for peace and called on all Arab countries to back the "legitimate struggle" of the Eritrean people. It declared that Eritrea could not accept a solution along the lines of that adopted in Southern Sudan and that any peace move must be based on the creation of an independent government in Eritrea.<sup>876</sup>

At the July 1975 Organization of African Unity Summit in Kampala, Uganda, the delegation of Tunisia proposed the granting of observer status to the Eritrean movement. Ethiopia strongly denounced the proposal and severed diplomatic relations with Tunisia.<sup>877</sup> Kuwait too, expressed its strong solidarity with Eritrea, which it referred to as a dear part of the Arab nation.<sup>878</sup>

The pledge given in 1973 by Algeria to the Ethiopian authorities, that it would use its influence and restrain other Arab Governments from financing

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<sup>875</sup>*Al-Gumhuriyya*, Cairo, 23 September 1974.

<sup>876</sup>Quoted in *Afriscopes*, April 1975, 10.

<sup>877</sup>Sauldie, 118.

<sup>878</sup>*Radio Kuwait*, 16 February, 1975.

the Eritrean insurrection, was, in retrospect, like a promise written on water. Six years after Ethiopia severed diplomatic relations with Israel, in a joint communique Algeria issued with Syria, both sides expressed their support for the right of the Eritrean people for self-determination.<sup>879</sup>

Moreover, at the Eighth Islamic Foreign Ministers Conference, some member states like the Sudan, proposed to mediate between the Ethiopian Government and the guerrillas. However, Iraq placed once again, on record that Eritrea had never been part of Ethiopia, that its present plight has been imposed on it by imperialist circles through the establishment of a federation between Eritrea and Ethiopia, and that because of its Islamic and national responsibilities, Iraq cannot abandon the Arab people of Eritrea in their just and legitimate struggle against oppression, terror, genocide and expulsion practiced by the fascist regime in Ethiopia.<sup>880</sup>

The Eritrean conflict so far has been interpreted as an extension of the Arab-Israeli dispute. But by 1977-1978, this dispute was being offset by an increased transportation into the Horn of Africa of the internal conflicts of the Arab world, between conservative and radical states, and within these two general groupings themselves. The expanded level of conservative Arab involvement suggested that the fear of a revolutionary regime in Ethiopia, however well disposed to the Arab cause against Israel, was considered a much greater threat to these states than an overtly pro-Israeli, but socially conservative, imperial Ethiopia. This can be evidenced from the remarks of the then Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Fahd bin Abdel Aziz:

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<sup>879</sup>*Resistance 1*, no. 4 (1979).

<sup>880</sup>Baghdad Radio, 22 May, 1977 (as quoted by Colin Legum and Bill Lee), 165.



The present Ethiopian policy constitutes an open aggression against Arab nationalism. Therefore, we in the kingdom call for coordination and cooperation between the Arab and Muslim states bordering the Red Sea, especially between the Sudan, Somalia, and the three Eritrean Liberation Movements. They should unite in order that a strong alignment is established to ward off the danger.<sup>881</sup>

The Baathist regime of Iraq continued to provide material support including pharmaceutical and medical assistance. In 1980, for example, Iraqi transport planes were flying wounded EPLF fighters from Kasala, Sudan to Baghdad for treatment.<sup>882</sup> Egypt went on to supply the EPLF with Soviet-made weapons it had acquired when it enjoyed good relations with the USSR.<sup>883</sup> Kuwait, too, continued to finance the insurrection. In fact, a government spokesman in the Parliament assured his listeners that Kuwait would not stand by while fellow Muslims were massacred and hinted broadly of extensive aid. The Saudis also admitted that they were assisting the insurgents.<sup>884</sup>

Even internal Eritrean conflicts were mediated by Arabs. The Tunis Agreement of March 1981, for instance, was initiated by the President of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Zayid of Abu Dhabi, under the auspices of the Arab League.<sup>885</sup> Similarly, ELF-PLF, ELF-RC unity meetings held in June 1984, were undertaken in Khartoum largely at the initiation of Saudi Arabia.<sup>886</sup>

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<sup>881</sup> *Middle Eastern Contemporary Survey*, vol. 1, 1976-77, (ed.) Colin Legum, the Shiloah Centre for Middle Eastern African Studies (New York: Horns and Meier Publishers), 525.

<sup>882</sup> *Africa Confidential*, 7 May 1980.

<sup>883</sup> Michael Warr, "There is a Revolution in Ethiopia," in *Horn of Africa*, 2, no. 3, 7. Warr also includes the other Eritrean faction, ELF, as a recipient of arms from Egypt.

<sup>884</sup> Tom Farer, 40.

<sup>885</sup> *Africa Confidential*, 25 February 1981.

<sup>886</sup> *The New York Times*, 1 July 1984.

It appears that there is no state in the Middle East that has not been involved in the Eritrean conflict, including Iran. In fact, inspired by his desire to support what he thought was a struggle of fellow Muslims against their enemies, Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran also assisted the Eritreans and offered the ELF an office in Tehran.<sup>887</sup>

The Islamic Solidarity Fund (ISF), established by major donations from Saudi Arabia, Libya and the United Arab Emirates, assisted the Eritrean rebels, which it called an Islamic liberation movement.<sup>888</sup> For example, out of \$854,000 the Fund gave to non-member elements, the Eritrean Liberation Front, which it considered "Arab" received almost half. The amount is certainly negligible. It is mentioned here merely to illustrate the seriousness with which the Muslim countries took the Eritrean situation. <sup>889</sup>

The cost of arming the Eritreans has been estimated as between five million to seven million dollars a year. Considering the stakes and the number of countries and interested groups involved in the conflict, the estimation is both conservative and misleading. If we take the higher figure and make a calculation, we could say that over a thirty year period, the cost has been more than \$200 million, a small investment for the oil rich Arab states, but in actual fact, what all the foreign powers spent to undermine the governments of Haile Selassie and the Dergue by using the Eritreans, could be five times more than that.<sup>890</sup>

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<sup>887</sup>Halliday, Fred, War and Revolution in Afghanistan, in *New Left Review*, no. 119, (Jan.-Feb. 1980), 25.

<sup>888</sup>Mertz and Mertz, 60.

<sup>889</sup>Ibid.

<sup>890</sup>Henze, Paul, "Arming the Horn 1960-1980 in Military Expenditures, Arms Imports and Military Aid in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Sudan with Statistics on Economic Growth and Governmental Expenditures," in S. Rubenson (ed.)

Even after Eritrea's independence, Egypt continued to undermine Ethiopia. According to Dr. Abdul Mejid Hussein, Ethiopia's Minister for External Economic Cooperation, while the Secessionist movement in Ethiopia's Ogaden province is backed by Libya, Iraq, and Syria, Egyptians have swelled its ranks.<sup>891</sup>

What can we conclude from all this? We have seen that within the framework of the Eritrean conflict, other kinds of conflicts are taking place—religious, ideological, economic, ecological, ethnic and geo-political. As we have shown in Chapters three and four, some of these conflicts have their internal causes, but because the internal conditions did not permit their resolution, external forces have given them a twist and internationalized them. Other causes for entry into the conflict were simply externally generated. The Eritrean problem can and should be considered as an extension of the conflicts in the Horn of Africa and the Middle East. Therefore, given the necessary qualification, Haggai Erlich's conclusions are valid.

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*Proceedings of the International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* (Uppsala: SIAS, 1984).

<sup>891</sup>*Ethiopian Review*, April 1994.

## CHAPTER VI

### The International Dimensions of the Eritrean Conflict

#### The Political Climate

At their meeting off the coast of Newfoundland in August 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill agreed that their countries would seek no territorial gains for themselves, that they would oppose territorial changes which did not accord with the wishes of the people involved, that they would respect the rights of all people to choose their own forms of government, and that they would restore "sovereign rights and self-government to those who have been forcibly deprived of them." Roosevelt took these promises more seriously than did Churchill. The British Prime Minister regarded the Atlantic Charter as only "an interim and partial statement of war aims designed to assure all countries of our righteous purpose." But Franklin Roosevelt possessed a streak of idealism which led him to believe that these lofty objectives might be attained.<sup>892</sup>

In November 1943 when Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt met for the Tehran Conference, they seemed to get along very well. When they again met at Yalta in February 1945, they were able to compose their differences and get along. The war seemed almost over in Europe. But still, the three leaders had to negotiate and develop joint strategies against Germany and Japan, and to resolve post war political problems.<sup>893</sup>

At the end of the Yalta Conference, in answer to a toast proposed to him by Stalin, Roosevelt said that he felt the atmosphere at the dinner was that of a

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<sup>892</sup>Diary of Franklin Roosevelt, IV (1941-42), 209-10.

<sup>893</sup>Buhite, Russell, *Decisions at Yalta: An Appraisal of Summit Diplomacy* (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 1986).

family, and that he liked to characterize the relations between the three countries in those words.<sup>894</sup> Stalin was more cautious and restrained. In responding to a toast addressed to the alliance, he remarked that it was not so hard to keep unity in time of war since there was a common aim clear to everyone. The difficult time would come, he said, after the war, when diverse interests would tend to divide the Allies.<sup>895</sup> Churchill felt that all were standing on the crest of a hill with the glories of great future possibilities stretching before them and that it would be a great tragedy if they let it slip from their grasp.<sup>896</sup>

In the summer of 1945, the Allied Powers again met, this time at Potsdam, outside Berlin. The major participants in this conference were Truman, Churchill and Stalin.<sup>897</sup> They discussed military operations against Japan and the substance of a peace settlement in Europe. However, the atmosphere had changed. The approaching victory exposed conflicts of interest. Charges and counter-charges were exchanged, especially between Stalin and Churchill, regarding the establishment of new post-war political regimes in Eastern Europe. Indeed, the heated atmosphere that prevailed at Potsdam was a recognition of the fact that the threat of Nazi Germany which had held the Allies together during the war period, no longer existed. Hence, increased suspicion of each other's motives and competitive policies emerged.

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<sup>894</sup>Feis, Herbert, *Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin—The War They Waged and the Peace They Sought* (Princeton University Press, 1957), 557.

<sup>895</sup>*Ibid.*, 557.

<sup>896</sup>*Ibid.*, 558.

<sup>897</sup>Gaddis, John L., *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-47* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 190. Roosevelt died some months before the Potsdam Conference. Furthermore, Clement Atlee was elected Prime Minister of Britain during the conference.

The charged political atmosphere hardly changed when the Foreign Ministers of France, Britain, USA and USSR and their deputies met in London in 1945.

In fact, after attending this very same conference as an observer, John Foster Dulles, the future Secretary of State in the Eisenhower Administration, had the following to say:

Professions of war-time unity had been nothing more than a "soothing syrup." It was no longer necessary, nor was it healthy, to hide the fact that fundamental differences now existed between the USA and the Soviet Union."<sup>898</sup>

The western powers had promised Stalin that they would open a western front to ease the military pressure on the Soviet Union. The delay in opening that front by two years aroused the suspicions of the Soviet leaders. While the promise of the USSR to enter the Far Eastern war theatre against Japan was reaffirmed at Potsdam--a promise that was kept, Truman's experience of negotiating with Stalin and the alleged violations of Yalta, led him to reject sharing the occupation of Japan with the Soviet Union. Many historians disagree over which side contributed most to the deterioration of relations between the great powers. Nevertheless, they do agree that old suspicions and new opportunities for all participants emerged to dampen their war-time ardour.

Thus emerged the division of the world into two camps: the capitalist and the socialist camps. It was also a period when the Marshall Plan, NATO, the Warsaw Pact and other organizations were established. The "Cold War" was fully unleashed.<sup>899</sup> Berlin, Palestine, Korea, Greece, Kashmir, Indonesia and

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<sup>898</sup>*The New York Times*, 7 October, 9 (1945).

<sup>899</sup>The term, "cold war" denotes a state of hostility between the rival East and West blocs involving economic, political and subversive actions, but without overt war. Responsibility for the condition of cold war is variously attributed to Stalin's ambitiousness, to international communism and the series of *coups*

other conflict areas of the world were either looming on the horizon, or actually threatening international peace and security. It was also a period when the "Truman Doctrine" was launched.<sup>900</sup> It was under such circumstances that the formerly Allied Powers, who became implacable enemies, began the consideration of the future of the former Italian colonies such as Eritrea, Libya and Somalia.

### **Haile Selassie Meets Roosevelt and Churchill**

The major European powers had never reconciled themselves to Ethiopia's independence. If anything, ten years after the Battle of Adowa, the three colonial powers neighbouring Ethiopia, i. e., Britain, France and Italy signed the December 13, 1906 Tripartite Treaty. This agreement partitioned Ethiopia into three spheres of influence. The area around the Addis Ababa--

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*d'etats* in Eastern Europe organized by local communists and the USSR, or to the activities of international capitalism and the foreign policy of the USA, especially in the Far East. It is clear, however, that the cold war could not have existed without there being two immensely powerful antagonists each of whom wanted to exercise a power that the other sought to deny to him.

<sup>900</sup>"The Truman Doctrine" pledged U.S. support for "free peoples" who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or outside pressures. It laid the ideological foundation for subsequent US policy towards communism. It called for halting Soviet expansionism by drawing a "geopolitical shatter zone" from Northern Europe to South Eastern Europe and from the Middle East to South and South East Asia. The Truman Doctrine called for implementing the policy by building "situations of strength" through countervailing American power allied with other "free world" nations. Having thus established a perimeter, the U.S. would be able to react to any Soviet attempt to break the ring at a time and place and in a manner of its own choosing. The Truman Doctrine therefore accepted as fact the hostility of the former WWII Allies and their continuing competition in the post-war world. To make the containment doctrine effective, the Truman Administration began a massive programme of rearmament having established military bases around the world, especially in the perimeter area around the USSR, and entered into direct military alliances with more than 40 countries. Hence, instead of stability and peace, the implementation of the Doctrine led to implacable hostility between the USA and the USSR, and to a mutual fear that encouraged a massive arms race.

Djibouti railway was to go to France. The Blue Nile area was allowed to Britain. The rest of Ethiopia was assigned to Italy.<sup>901</sup> Since this treaty was never officially abrogated, it continued to influence the thinking of the major colonial powers of the day.

Having utilized for sometime "Politica Tigrigna" and "Politica Sciana,"<sup>902</sup> when Italy invaded and occupied Ethiopia in 1936, and forced Emperor Haile Selassie into exile to Britain, the major powers in the League of Nations did nothing. Ethiopia was sacrificed at the altar of political expediency. What was consoling to Haile Selassie, however, was the fact that the USA and the USSR never recognized Italian occupation of Ethiopia.<sup>903</sup> In 1941, Patriotic Ethiopian forces and British Commonwealth troops liberated Ethiopia, and as a result, Britain became the dominant western power in the country for much of the 1940s. In fact, the United Kingdom seized the opportunity in order to establish what would be tantamount to a protectorate over Ethiopia.<sup>904</sup> Haile Selassie was honest about it when he wrote in his

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<sup>901</sup>See Hertslet, E., *The Map of Africa by Treaty*, vol. II, New York: Frank Cass & Co., 1967, 422-423.

<sup>902</sup>[As explained earlier] Foreign powers who were involved in the Horn of Africa had to choose between the two options of "Politica Tigrigna" and "Politica Sciana." The former was a strategy designed to subvert and to undermine the centre by using the periphery. Hence, by obtaining control over the mostly Muslim coast, one could deal with Ethiopia both defensively and offensively through the promotion of internal subversion. Since the province of Tigre was a fertile ground for such a strategy, the Italians called it "Politica Tigrigna." The other option was to promote foreign economic, political and cultural influence in Ethiopia through the centre, i.e., the emperors. The Italians called this option "Politica Sciana," after the Ethiopian province of Shoa where the capital city Addis Ababa is located. In varying degrees of success, the Italians, the British, the Americans and Soviets used these options in dealing with Ethiopia. See Haggai Erlich's, *Ethiopia--The Challenge of Independence* (Boulder, CO: West View Press, 1981), especially Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

<sup>903</sup>Op. cit., Haile Selassie, *My Life and ..*, 22.

<sup>904</sup>Department of State (DOS) Memorandum, June 18, 1941, National Archives, 884.001 Selassie 1372, DOS Reminder to President Roosevelt, July 24, 1942,



memoire "that the British brought us enormous difficulties, that in the guise of advancing racial and tribal concerns, the British authorities advanced some proposals inconsistent with our independence. We made a bitter struggle to wrest our country from the jaws of the lion."<sup>905</sup> The emperor had serious difficulties in asserting his power.<sup>906</sup> Since the British authorities practiced "Politica Tigrinia," they were also pre-occupied with such seemingly charitable, but in reality self-serving schemes as the creation of a united Tigrai-Eritrean state, the incorporation of lowland Eritrea into neighbouring Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, annexing Ethiopia's Ogaden province into Somaliland, and so on.<sup>907</sup>

Haile Selassie was very much aware of these mischievous schemes. But what could he do? The emperor knew that if ever Ethiopia was to secure Eritrea and the Ogaden, his country would have to extricate itself from being a *de facto* British protectorate and assert its sovereignty in its own right. However, what options did he have? Led by Britain and France, most of Europe had sacrificed Ethiopia at the altar of political expediency in the 1930s. The realities of international politics also meant that Ethiopia would have little or no say in the post-war disposition of colonial and enemy-occupied territories.<sup>908</sup> The USSR was most helpful both at the League of Nations and

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884.001 Selassie 374/1/2: Roosevelt to Winant, August 4, 1942, 884.001 Selassie 1/375/PS/KN.

<sup>905</sup>Op. cit., Haile Selassie, *My Life and ...*, 175.

<sup>906</sup>Ibid., Spencer, John, *Ethiopia at Bay*, 99.

<sup>907</sup>Pankhurst, R., "Decolonization of Ethiopia, 1940-1955," *Horn of Africa*, 4 (October/December 1978). In a flight of sophistry, Britain kept the Ogaden from 1941-1948, contending that it needed the province in order to prosecute the war against the Axis powers.

<sup>908</sup>Marcus, Harold, *Ethiopia, Great Britain and the United States, 1941-1974* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1983), 85.

outside, but because Ethiopia had a world outlook different from that of the Soviet Union, Haile Selassie could not approach Joseph Stalin.

The one country that did not recognize the Italian occupation of Ethiopia—and an influential great power at that—and sympathetic to Ethiopia's land-locked plight, was the USA.<sup>909</sup> No doubt, the role of the American Government in Ethiopia's struggle for liberation against Fascism was minor. The pro-Mussolini faction in the USA, spearheaded by the Italian-Americans, could not be ignored. Yet, President Franklin Roosevelt condemned Italian aggression against Ethiopia, even if isolationist America was unable to produce anything more substantive than conformity to the armament embargoes of October 5, 1935 and February 29, 1936, which applied both to the aggressor and

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<sup>909</sup>Diplomatic relations between Ethiopia and the USA began with the signing of the Treaty of Commerce of December 27, 1903, and with the personal interest of President Theodore Roosevelt in the Skinner Mission to Ethiopia. In 1919, an Ethiopian Goodwill Mission consisting of Dejach Nadew Aba Wollo, an already prominent political figure in Menelik's court, Heruye Wolde Selassie, the future Foreign Minister and Kentiba Gebru, the Mayor of the city of Gondar, visited the USA. American interest in Ethiopia in 1927 included the American-Ethiopian Mica Concession, the Anglo-American Petroleum Exploration concession, a missionary hospital and a school. A year later, Dr. Martin Workneh, the Ethiopian Minister to London, negotiated with the New York firm, White Engineering, for the construction of a dam on Like Tana, the surveying work of which was completed by the company's engineers. When Haile Selassie was crowned Emperor in 1930, H. M. Jacoby attended the coronation anniversary on behalf of President Herbert Hoover (1929-1933). Before the outbreak of hostilities with Italy, there were 127 Americans in Ethiopia, mostly engaged in missionary and philanthropic activities. Also, there were American professionals employed by the government to advise in key positions. These included, Dr. John West (public health); Cyril Price (education); Everett Colson (finance); John Spencer (diplomacy); Pittman Potter (legal affairs). On August 29, 1935, the African Exploration and Development Corporation—a cover for Standard Oil, was granted a 75 year concession to explore, prospect, drill and extract petroleum and natural gas in an area covering almost half of Ethiopia. By giving the company such an extensive concession, it was hoped that should the Italians attack the country, the US government could be obliged to defend the interests of the company, and therefore, Ethiopia itself. The Ethiopian calculation misfired. The State Department used high pressure on the company and forced it to cancel the agreements, and asked all American citizens to evacuate Ethiopia. See *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1943, vol. 4, 103-108.

to the victim of aggression. In any event, Franklin Roosevelt was among the first world leaders to congratulate Haile Selassie on his successful entry to Addis Ababa on 5 May 1941.<sup>910</sup> For the American President, Ethiopia became an inspiring example for stimulating the struggle against the Axis powers. It was, therefore, to President Franklin Roosevelt that Haile Selassie wrote in 1942:

My Government and people are anxious to assume the obligations of the United Nations Pact. We, the first nation to regain our freedom and independence, wish to place the military and economic resources of our country at the disposal of those nations who gladly sacrifice all for liberty and justice.<sup>911</sup>

The President's response was both encouraging and consoling:

It is a source of much satisfaction to me and to the people of the United States that your country, which fought so courageously against a ruthless enemy, has regained its independence and self-government. The steadfast friendship of the American people and their sympathy with you in your period of trial will continue to be manifested during the days of reconstruction now facing your country.<sup>912</sup>

True to his word, Roosevelt gave due consideration to Ethiopia's early rehabilitation, and made her benefit from Lend-Lease.<sup>913</sup> It was in the same year, too, that the President had expressed his desire to meet with Haile Selassie.<sup>914</sup> It was also in the same year that United States officials expressed

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<sup>910</sup>Op. cit., Haile Selassie, *My Life...*, 166.

<sup>911</sup>Haile Selassie to Roosevelt, Addis Ababa, 28 July 1942, SD 884.001 Selassie.

<sup>912</sup>Roosevelt to Haile Selassie, Washington, 4 August 1942, Ibid. Yet the American Government had denied Haile Selassie the right to visit the USA while the emperor was in exile in England.

<sup>913</sup>*Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1943, vol. IV, 82; See also Spencer, *Ethiopia at Bay*, 103-104.

<sup>914</sup>Ibid., 159.

support for the idea that at least part of Eritrea should be given to Ethiopia. Roosevelt was informed by the Secretary of State Cordell Hull that Ethiopia was administered by the British as enemy-occupied territory.<sup>915</sup>

There was some enlightened self-interest in America's display of goodwill. Ethiopia had a potential location and the physical characteristics needed for a major communications centre. Ethiopia's agriculture could be used as a source of food for the war effort in the Middle East and Europe. Ethiopia's facilities for American aviation could not be ignored. As the oldest independent African state, Ethiopia could also be a useful point of contact between the USA, its black population, and a continent long dominated by the European colonial powers. But most significantly, many Americans had strongly identified with Ethiopia against Mussolini. Peace groups, labour organizations, Jewish organizations, Black Americans, and so on, supported Ethiopia very strongly. In fact, on September 4, 1935, some 9,000 Americans staged a rally in New York and tore apart a huge effigy of Mussolini.<sup>916</sup> Some Americans like Colonel John C. Robinson and Hubert Julian had also gone to Ethiopia and joined the Imperial Ethiopian Air Force to fight the Italians.<sup>917</sup> Others had volunteered. However, since the government of Franklin Roosevelt felt that enlistment of American citizens in the Ethiopian armed forces would constitute an infraction of United States Neutrality Law, they were refused passports.<sup>918</sup> But with the defeat of Fascist Italy, Roosevelt felt that

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<sup>915</sup>*Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1943, vol. 4, 103-108. See the *Ethiopian Aide-Memoire to President Franklin Roosevelt on Eritrea*, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 104-105.

<sup>916</sup>Boca, Del Angelo, *The Ethiopian War, 1935-41* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 41.

<sup>917</sup>*The Philadelphia Tribune*, 10 October 1935.

<sup>918</sup>*The Pittsburgh Courier*, 20 July 1935.

"supporting Ethiopia would indicate in a concrete way the interest of the USA in the stake which Negroes (African-Americans) have in this war.<sup>919</sup>

It also appears that Ethiopia and the USA were drawn to each other by mutual self-interest which needed time and opportunity to materialize. Such an opportunity occurred in 1945, when President Roosevelt was returning home from the Yalta Conference. He had informed Stalin that three kings were waiting for him<sup>920</sup>, one being, Haile Selassie. The meeting was secretly arranged without the knowledge of the British. It took place at Payne Field near Alexandria, Egypt. Haile Selassie informed Roosevelt of his many problems. Among other things, he handed the President a memorandum requesting Washington's support for the return of Eritrea to Ethiopia. In reply to the President's question as to whether the pressing port outlet should be Djibouti or in Eritrea, the Emperor said that from a short-term point of view, Djibouti would be the best port because of the existing railway, but that a long-term policy required a port in Eritrea. When President Roosevelt further inquired regarding the possibility of building a railway to such a port, he was informed that it could be done. In sum, it could be said that by expressing his sympathy with Ethiopia's aspirations, Roosevelt opened the door for future Ethio-American cooperation.<sup>921</sup>

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<sup>919</sup>U.S. National Archives 884.24/89 PS/LC, Memorandum of Dept. of State, November 20, 1942, approved by Secretary of State Hull, December 2.

<sup>920</sup>Op. Cit., Feis, 557. The others were the kings of Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

<sup>921</sup>On 14 February 1945, the Secretary of State and his party arrived from Moscow. In the course of his pleasant conversation with Haile Selassie, the Secretary of State expressed the hope that Ethiopia would be represented at the San Francisco conference on 25 April 1945. See J.K. Caldwell's Report, *The Foreign Service of the United States of America, American Fighters*, Addis Ababa, February 27, 1945. Secret No. 371, "Meetings of the Emperor of Ethiopia with the President and the Secretary of State"; SD 884.001 Selassie, Haile/2-2745.

When Churchill was informed of the meeting between Roosevelt and Haile Selassie, he flew from Athens to Cairo along with Anthony Eden.<sup>922</sup> Haile Selassie was both amused and slightly annoyed that the British Prime Minister should have provoked the meeting with little warning and most incomplete arrangements. The emperor was unwilling to accept any hospitality or facilities from the British, as he considered himself the guest of the American Government. Haile Selassie tried to have the meeting take place at Payne Field, but because Churchill insisted that it be at the British Embassy in Cairo, the emperor reluctantly agreed. He raised the question of "the return of Eritrea to Ethiopia," and asked Churchill what could be done about it. The British Prime Minister is reported to have informed him that President Roosevelt was at times inclined to "favour the Italians." Churchill, nevertheless, assured Haile Selassie of the sympathy of the British Government with Ethiopia's aspirations to recover Eritrea.<sup>923</sup>

When Churchill went to say good-bye to Roosevelt for the last time at the harbour in Alexandria, "the President seemed placid and frail." In his own words, "I felt that he had a slender contact with life."<sup>924</sup> Two months later, he was dead. Emperor Haile Selassie continued his contacts with President Harry Truman. To that end, in a letter dated April 4, 1946, he wrote to the new

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<sup>922</sup>Anthony Eden (1897-1977), was educated at Eton and at Christ Church, Oxford, where he specialized in Oriental languages. He entered Parliament in 1923, and subsequently served as Foreign Secretary, 1935-38; 1940-45; 1951-55; becoming Prime Minister, 1955-1957. He supported the 1956 Anglo-French invasion of Egypt in collusion with Israel, thereafter resigning his post for health reasons.

<sup>923</sup>Tuck's Telegram of 17 Feb. 1945 to the Secretary of State. SD 884.001 Selassie, Haile/2-1745 CS/EG; SD 884.001 Selassie, Haile/2-2745. See also Pankhurst, E. Sylvia and Pankhurst, Richard, k.p. *Ethiopia and Eritrea, the Last Phase of the Reunion Struggle, 1941-52* (Essex: Woodford Green, 1953), 122.

<sup>924</sup>Churchill, Winston, *Triumph and Tragedy, The Second World War*, vol. 6, (Boston: 1955), 397.

President, requesting his support for Ethiopia's access to the Sea.<sup>925</sup> As we will see shortly, it was under these and other circumstances that the Eritrean case was considered by the great powers.

#### **The Four Power Commission of Investigation**

On September 3, 1943, Italy pulled out of World War II by signing an armistice with the Big Four Powers. Article 23 of the Peace Treaty held:

1. that Italy agreed to renounce its rights in all her former colonies in Africa, including Eritrea;
2. that the fate of the former Italian colonies would be taken by the United States, France, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union within a year after a peace treaty came into force; and
3. that if the four powers were unable to agree, the matter would be taken over by the United Nations.<sup>926</sup>

During the course of the war, Soviet authorities had repeatedly expressed their dissatisfaction over Allied policy in North Africa and elsewhere, because they felt that they were not being well enough informed, and certainly not being consulted about what was being done with regard to liberated territories.<sup>927</sup> Stalin's fears surfaced in the summer of 1943 when Italy became the first member of the Axis to seek peace. Shortly after the fall of Mussolini, Moscow began to criticize the Americans and the British for

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<sup>925</sup>Haile Selassie to Truman, Addis Ababa, 4 April 1946, File 85 E, Truman Library.

<sup>926</sup>See Kogan, Norman, *Italy and the Allies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956).

<sup>927</sup>Feis, 136.

failing to consult the USSR over the Italian situation because the Kremlin wanted a role in running the occupation of defeated Italy.<sup>928</sup>

It should be noted that at the Potsdam Conference of 1945, Stalin had expressed the strong desire of the USSR to have some territory of the defeated states.<sup>929</sup> At the Paris Peace Conference of 1946, this demand was further articulated by Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov<sup>930</sup> for Russian control of former Italian colonies in Africa.<sup>931</sup> However, Winston Churchill had made it known to Moscow that settlement affecting the *status quo* in the region, was subject to many other considerations.

The question of the disposal of the former Italian colonies had, therefore, to be looked at in relation to the conflicting strategic and political objectives of the western powers on the one hand, and the USSR on the other. Any proposal advanced by the western powers, individually or collectively, was interpreted by the Soviet Union as an imperialist plot designed to encircle and outfox the USSR.<sup>932</sup>

It is also against this background of mutual suspicion and conflicting global claims that the Paris Peace Conference met in 1946. Each minister

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<sup>928</sup>Gaddis, 89.

<sup>929</sup>Byrnes, F. James, *Speaking Frankly* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1947), 76.

<sup>930</sup>Vyacheslav Mikhailovich Molotov (1890-1988), was educated at Kazan and at the Polytechnic Institute, St. Petersburg. He took part in the 1905 Revolution, and was arrested twice (1909 and 1915) before he joined the Bolsheviks in 1916. Molotov became a member of the Politburo (1928); First Secretary of the Moscow Party Committee (1928); Chairman of the Council of People's Commissions (1930), and Foreign Minister (1939-1949); co-signed with Ribbentrop the Hitler-Stalin Pact. He held the foreign office position again from 1953-1956, thereafter, declining in influence and losing power to Khrushchev.

<sup>931</sup>*The New York Herald Tribune*, 11 September 1945.

<sup>932</sup>Op. Cit., Byrnes, *Speaking Frankly*, 94.



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presented the demands and positions of his country in areas where conflicting strategic interests prevailed. The question of decolonizing the former Italian colonies such as Eritrea and, still less, of promoting their welfare was secondary. Eritrea's case was further complicated because of the claims of Egypt, Ethiopia and Italy. Nevertheless, the Four Powers, *i.e.*, Britain, France, the USA and the USSR, agreed to send a commission of inquiry to Eritrea. Its task was not to come out with recommendations, but to limit itself to finding facts about the territory and to ascertain the wishes of the people.<sup>933</sup> As we will see shortly, while the American and British delegations cooperated closely, the French and Russian delegations saw eye-to-eye on many issues. The reason for this was not because ideology was swept under the rug in the interest of the Commission's work. The attitude of the French delegation was probably an expression of France's antipathy towards, and a response to the rebuffing of France by "*Les Anglo-Saxons*," who thought of de Gaulle's pretensions as false, his contribution to the war small, and his ambitions dangerous.<sup>934</sup>

The Commission arrived in Eritrea on November 12, 1947, and carried out its task until January 3, 1948. With the help of Italian and British documents, they compiled available information on Eritrea, interviewed people, distributed questionnaires to the representatives of the population, and conducted on the spot investigations. There were many problems before the

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<sup>933</sup>Four Power Commission (Deputies) of Investigation, hereafter referred to as FPCI, Report on Eritrea (London: 1948) Appendix I. The leaders of the four delegations were: F.E. Stafford (Britain), Etienne Buring des Roziers (France), J.E. Utter (USA) and A.F. Feodorou (USSR). Except for the head of the British delegation, none of them had any background on Africa. The American was a banker; the Russian an army general fresh from Manchuria; and the French man a career diplomat, but who had never set foot on African soil. There was also a vivid lack of qualified experts in the Russian and American delegations.

<sup>934</sup>Feis, 137.

four delegations could agree on a single report. Even then, the final report is full of dissensions, reservations, brackets and footnotes that reveal wide divergences of positions.<sup>935</sup>

The British had arranged 3,336 "spokesmen" for the whole of Eritrea. In reality, they were spokesmen of clans and tribes. The Anglo-American delegations accepted this scheme, but the French and the Russians objected, questioning the manner with which the "spokesmen" were selected, and their competence to represent the people. And in cases where they were spokesmen of parties, the Russians and the French argued that their job was not to find out the allegiance of clans and families to parties, but to ascertain the wishes of the people. Even the population figures submitted by the British administration were dismissed.

However, since a direct plebiscite was regarded as time consuming, the French and Russian representatives had no choice but to accept the administration's proposal with the following reservations: (a) Each representative was to be asked what proposal he had regarding the future of Eritrea. He was not to be questioned which party he favoured. (b) Population figures given by such representatives, and not those presented by the Administration, were to be regarded as valid. Despite these qualifications, the spokesmen started speaking in terms of the various political parties. Indeed, it became difficult to know whether they were expressing their own views, or simply repeating party positions that they had memorized. They also boosted population figures to the extent that Eritrea's total population almost doubled. One method the Commission employed was to counter-check their figures with those submitted by the Administration. Yet, the British Military

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<sup>935</sup>Stafford, F. E., "The Ex-Italian Colonies," *International Affairs*, XXV, no. 1, January 1949, 48.

Administration had excluded Asmara from consideration. This is a city whose 95,000 inhabitants were mostly Christians, and therefore, sympathetic to the Unionist Movement, which campaigned for unity with Ethiopia. When questioned by the Commission, the administration admitted only to grave error and provided the lame excuse that no machinery was created for the city of Asmara.

In any event, the following table provides the strength of the political parties in Eritrea. It indicates the different estimates made by the Anglo-Americans on one hand, and the French and Soviet delegations on the other.<sup>936</sup>

Party	Anglo-American Estimation	France-Soviet Estimation
The Unionist Party	44.8%	47.83%
The Muslim League	40.5%	30.96%
Italo-Eritrean Party	9.2%	10.73%
Liberal Progressive Party	4.4%	9.38%
National Party	<u>1.1%</u>	<u>1.1%</u>
Total	100.00	100.00

Despite their wide differences, the delegates did agree on at least the following points: that the country was split into two camps, Christians and Muslims; that political thought was conditioned by religion;<sup>937</sup> that the population was politically unsophisticated, and hence, not ready for immediate independence;<sup>938</sup> that the Christians strongly favoured unconditional union with Ethiopia; and that the Muslims in the lowlands favoured eventual

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<sup>936</sup>*Four Power Commission of Investigation*, 95-102. See also Trevaskis, *Eritrea, A Colony...*, 83-92.

<sup>937</sup>*Report of the Four Power Commission*, 69.

<sup>938</sup>*Ibid.*

independence;<sup>939</sup> that Eritrea was an economically poor country which would need external aid in order to lead an independent existence, that it had never had a favourable balance of trade, that total skilled labour as of October 31, 1947, amounted to 6,062 Eritreans and 4,555 Italians, and therefore, Eritrea could not and did not constitute a viable state<sup>940</sup>, and that even if many Eritreans had voiced their desires to live in an independent country, "these wishes are not mature enough or the result of independent thinking. They are not founded on serious political and economic considerations."<sup>941</sup>

Having arrived at such conclusions, the delegations left Eritrea to submit their reports to their respective governments. Subsequently, the four Foreign Ministers and their Deputies, met in Paris on September 13, 1948. The following were their conflicting recommendations with regard to Eritrea's future.

#### Recommendations of the Ministers

France proposed that "with the exception of the territories situated between the Gulf of Zula and French Somaliland, Eritrea should be placed under the trusteeship of Italy," and that "the territories situated between the Gulf of Zula and French Somaliland should be assigned to Ethiopia in full sovereignty."<sup>942</sup> Paris was making such a gesture in order to compensate for

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<sup>939</sup>Ibid., 90-96.

<sup>940</sup>Ibid., 107-108.

<sup>941</sup>FPCI, *Final Report on Eritrea* (London: 1948), 116-117.

<sup>942</sup>*Report of the Deputies of the Four Foreign Ministers to the Council*, dated 1 September, 1948. See Document C.F.M./D/L/48/IC/202 of the Council of Foreign Ministers. For a concise account of the position of the Four Great Powers, Italy and Ethiopia, See John Spencer, *Ethiopia, The Horn of Africa and U.S. Policy, Foreign Policy Report*, Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, Inc. (Cambridge, MA: September 1977).

past guilt on Djibouti. It should be recalled that when Mussolini attacked Ethiopia in 1936, despite treaty obligations, France denied Ethiopia the right to use the port of Djibouti and the railway for the import of arms. Though Paris may have seemed positive towards Ethiopia, nevertheless, in the larger colonial game, it was actually for the *status quo ante*. The eviction of Italy from Eritrea would have grave political implications for its colonial presence in North Africa. A change in Libya, for instance, could threaten French rule in Algeria, Tunisia or Morocco.

The Soviet Union recommended placing the former Italian colony of Eritrea "under the trusteeship of Italy for a definite acceptable term."<sup>943</sup> In saying so, Moscow was convinced that Eritrea was not prepared for independence. The USSR must have also felt that far from supporting an independent existence, Eritrea would fall under the influence of the western powers, and consequently, tilt the strategic balance in favour of the west. In its recommendations that Italy, a western state, be the administering power, one may discern contradictory motives on the part of the USSR. But, it is not difficult to see a correlation between the Italian elections and the recommendations of the USSR. By recommending that Eritrea be under Italian trusteeship, it appears that the Soviet Union was trying to influence the outcome of the Italian elections in favour of the Communist Party of Italy. If that was not Moscow's calculation, why should it abandon that policy, especially after the Italian Communist Party lost the elections, and, as we will see shortly, propose something different at the United Nations?

On the other hand, Britain proposed that "Ethiopia should be appointed to be the Administering Authority in Eritrea for a period of ten years"--after

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<sup>943</sup>Ibid., See also *The London Times*, 14 September 1948, 1.

which, "the General Assembly of the United Nations would decide whether, and if so, under what conditions, Ethiopian administration should continue indefinitely." There should be set up an advisory council with the right to suspend any legislation on certain reserved subjects introduced by the Ethiopian Administration and a special Eritrean commission of the United Nations to which the advisory council and the Ethiopian Administration would report from time to time; this commission would be quite distinct either from the Trusteeship Council or the Trusteeship Committee of the General Assembly.<sup>944</sup>

Such a proposal seems, at least on the surface, favourable to Ethiopia. It responds to the promise Churchill made to Haile Selassie in 1943. It also takes into account the memorandum Franklin Roosevelt had handed over to Churchill in 1944, suggesting that all or part of Eritrea be handed over to Ethiopia.<sup>945</sup> The proposal of the United Kingdom, when considered in relation to what London was yet to recommend shortly to the United Nations, was clearly designed to buy time in order to work out a scheme that would take care of Britain's interests in Northeast Africa. Like the other powers, it too was to change its position shortly.

The United States proposed that the southern section of Eritrea, including the Danakil coast, and the districts of Akele Guzaie and Seraie, be ceded to Ethiopia, and that the Foreign Ministers recommend to the General Assembly of the United Nations, that the question of the disposition of "the

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<sup>944</sup>Ibid., Document C.F.M./D/C/48; Spencer, *The Horn of Africa...*; *The Manchester Guardian*, 16 September 1948, 12.

<sup>945</sup>Marcus, Harold, *Ethiopia, Great Britain, and the USA...*, 39.

remainder of Eritrea, that is, the northern and predominantly Moslem portion including the area of Asmara and Massawa, be postponed for one year."<sup>946</sup>

The major reason behind Washington's proposal and its underlying objective needs some explanation. At a secret meeting held at the U.S. War Department on November 19, 1941, the United States government implemented a highly classified operation (Project 19), aimed at aiding the allied war effort in Africa.<sup>947</sup> Under the aegis of the Lend-Lease Act, the United States had also established a naval repair base at the Eritrean port of Massawa in order to support the British Mediterranean fleet. U.S. civilians under the management of the Douglas Aircraft Corporation also operated an air base at Gura, Eritrea, to maintain Britain's Royal Airforce (RAF) that was conducting operations against Rommel's Africa Corps. Although Germany's defeat and departure from North Africa in March 1943 marked the end of Project 19, American interest and involvement in Eritrea continued into the postwar years.<sup>948</sup>

As the war in North Africa drew to a close, the United States shifted its primary regional objectives to the long-term strategic mission of establishing a fixed radio station site in Africa. Hence, at the end of January 1943, the War Department proposed that a communications facility should be established at the former site of an Italian naval radio station called Radio Marina, that was

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<sup>946</sup>Ibid., Document C.F.M., *The New York Times*, September 14, 1948, 12.

<sup>947</sup>Rasmusen, John, *A History of Kagnaw Station and American Forces in Eritrea*. (Arlington, VA: U.S. Army Security Agency, Information Division, 1973), 21, 27-37; Irvine Anderson, *Aramco: The United States and Saudi Arabia*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 111. Allied damaged aircrafts were repaired during the war in Eritrea. In 1942, for sometime, Massawa was the single operative Allied base in the region. It was also from Eritrea that the Italians launched an air attack on Bahrain in October 1940.

<sup>948</sup>Lefebvre, Jeffrey, *Arms for the Horn, U.S. Security Policy in Ethiopia and Somalia, 1953-1991* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991), 65.



located outside the Eritrean capital city, Asmara.<sup>949</sup> In late April, a U.S. survey team arrived in Asmara to conduct a feasibility study. Refurbishing the station began the following month. By September the first communications and receiver sets were completed, and a staff of four officers and fifty enlisted men from the U.S. Army Signal Corps was assigned to the facility. The extraordinary location of what would be renamed Kagnev Station, made this communications facility invaluable for years to come. Radio frequency changes were less frequent and operations facilitated because the station was situated in the tropics several thousand feet above sea level, far from the North and South magnetic poles, the Aurora Borealis, and magnetic storms, and in a zone where there was limited seasonal variation between sunrise and sunset.<sup>950</sup> The station possessed an inherent ability to transmit radio signals back to Washington from the Middle East, Europe, North Africa, the Pacific Theater, as well as listening in on transmissions in the Middle East and Africa.<sup>951</sup> At seven thousand feet, the station was ideally sited in a latitude little affected by daily variations in weather or by seasonal changes, thus reducing the need for numerous frequency shifts. Indeed, it functioned as a relay station, forwarding messages to and from naval vessels, and served as an intelligence-gathering and beaming outpost for the Pentagon.<sup>952</sup>

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<sup>949</sup>Rasmusen, *A History of Kagnev Station*, 27-37.

<sup>950</sup>*Ibid.*, 42. See also *The testimony of John Spencer in the U.S. Senate, Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, Hearings before the Sub-Committee on African Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Relations, 94th Congress, Second Session* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1976), 26.

<sup>951</sup>Rasmusen, 42; *U.S. Senate, Ethiopia and the Horn*, 26.

<sup>952</sup>Marcus, Harold, *Ethiopia, Great Britain and the United States, 1941-1974* (Berkeley, and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), 83. The station was inspected in 1943 by United States Ambassador to the USSR, Averell Harriman (1891-1986).

Washington's objective in deciding Eritrea's future therefore became simple, i.e., to operate and to maintain an unimpeded access to this strategic communications facility. During the last years of the war, the problem of access did not arise because final authority over the occupied colony's internal affairs was in the hands of the British Occupied Enemy Territory Administration. After the war, American officials apparently felt more comfortable with Great Britain, and thus initially favoured ceding only southern Eritrea to Ethiopia and keeping the northern part of the territory, where Radio Marina was located, under British domination.<sup>953</sup> The United States needed time to decide the fate of Radio Marina. That was the major reason why Washington proposed that decision about the future of the rest of Eritrea be postponed for one year.

As we can see, because of their conflicting interests, the four great powers could not come into an agreement on Eritrea's future. Hence, in application of Article 23 and paragraph 3 of Annex XI of the Treaty of Peace with Italy, on September 15, 1948, the USA, the USSR, Britain and France submitted the question of the disposal of Eritrea to the United Nations. The four powers also agreed to accept the General Assembly's recommendation and to take appropriate measures for giving effect to it.<sup>954</sup>

At the United Nations sessions too, the big powers continued with their political, ideological and other differences, characterized as they were by accusations, charges and counter-charges. Positions were constantly changing. What was recommended at the Paris Peace Conference, was not necessarily repeated at the United Nations in New York. If Britain proposed

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<sup>953</sup>Marcus, (*Ethiopia, Great Britain...*), 82.

<sup>954</sup>A/645, *Official Records of the Third Session of the General Assembly, Part I, Plenary Meetings, Annexes to the Summary Records of Meetings*, 149-150.

something, and the USA happened to support the proposal, the USSR would denounce the "Anglo-American clique" for advancing a proposal designed to feed their insatiable imperialist appetite. The Western powers in turn would counter the charge by reminding the USSR of its inglorious record in annexing the Baltic States, and of its bad faith in Eastern Europe.

In any event, at the Third Session of the U.N. General Assembly, the United Kingdom abandoned its earlier position and proposed that the Danakil coast, the port of Assab, the Eritrean capital of Asmara, and the port of Massawa, and the plateau be ceded to Ethiopia. Western Eritrea, it said, which was predominantly Muslim, did not wish to be joined to Ethiopia. As a result, Britain proposed that Eritrea be partitioned so that western Eritrea would be annexed to the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and the rest to Ethiopia.<sup>955</sup>

In advancing such a proposal, it seems that Britain had already had some understanding with the USA, which argued that the population of Eritrea was neither homogeneous nor ready for independence. To avert the possibility of the territory being used at any future time as a base against Ethiopia, and to give the latter access to the sea, the eastern part of Eritrea, including the port of Massawa and the town of Asmara, would be incorporated in Ethiopia. With regard to the rest of Eritrea, Washington maintained that as the population of the western part of Eritrea had more affinities with its western neighbours, a separate solution should be sought for it.<sup>956</sup> Since Secretary of State George Marshall<sup>957</sup> had already reached an understanding

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<sup>955</sup>*Official Records of the Third Session of the General Assembly, Part II, First Committee, Political and Security Questions Summary Records of Meetings, 5 April-13 May 1949, 12.*

<sup>956</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>957</sup>George Marshall (1880-1959), was one of America's important military leaders during World War II. After graduating from the Virginia Military Institute (1902), he served in various capacities. Chief of Operations of the 1st

with Ethiopia,<sup>958</sup> Washington was no longer worried about the fate of Radio Marina. Half of Eritrea, it said, should be incorporated into Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, with the obvious intent to benefit Britain. The USA and the UK therefore had no difficulty in coordinating their positions at the U.N.

As far as the USSR goes, the Italian Communist Party had lost the elections, and so, it was pointless to propose Italian trusteeship over Eritrea. Moscow also had no intention of helping to expand Western influence in North East Africa. This time, the USSR submitted a proposal providing for the establishment of a United Nations Trusteeship for Libya, Eritrea and Italian Somaliland. In addition, Moscow also recommended that territorial concessions be made in favour of Ethiopia, in order to enable that country to obtain access to the sea through the port of Assab.<sup>959</sup>

France maintained that since 1945, it had declared that Italy was best qualified to assume responsibility for the trusteeship. However, it also added that Ethiopia had a right to reparation for past wrongs, and to guarantees with regard to the future.<sup>960</sup>

After considerable debate at the General Assembly, the question of the disposal of the former Italian colonies was assigned to the First Committee. Subsequently, on May 13, 1949, the committee decided by a vote of 37 to 11 with

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Army and Chief of Staff of the 1st Army Corps (1914-18); served in China (1924-27); in charge of instructions at the military school at Fort Benning, Georgia (1927-32); Chief of Staff (1939-45); served as military adviser to Roosevelt at the conferences in Casablanca, Tehran and Yalta. Secretary of State (1947-49); initiated the European recovery programme known as the "Marshall Plan," played a key role in the formation of NATO, and served as Secretary of Defense (1949-52).

<sup>958</sup>United States Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) 1952-1954*, 11: 433-435.

<sup>959</sup>Op. Cit., *Official Records of the Third Session*, 23-24.

<sup>960</sup>*Ibid.*, 9.

10 abstentions,<sup>961</sup> that the whole of Eritrea, except the Western Province, be incorporated to Ethiopia.<sup>962</sup> As we can see, the recommendation of the First Committee reflected the position taken by the UK and the USA. However, the General Assembly, by 37 votes to 14, with 7 abstentions, rejected the draft resolution<sup>963</sup>, and decided to postpone further consideration of the question of the disposal of the former Italian colonies until its fourth regular session.<sup>964</sup>

The position of the USA was central to the future of Eritrea. In this respect, it could be said that the various recommendations of the different branches of the U.S. government favoured Ethiopia. For example, the National Security Council argued against an independent Eritrea on the grounds that such a state would be a "weak state...exposed to Soviet aggression or infiltration."<sup>965</sup> The State Department recommended against an Italian trusteeship in Eritrea for fear that the unstable Italian government might fall to the communists, and given Italy's recent fascist past, the UN General Assembly might decide to restrict the use of the territory for military

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<sup>961</sup>*Year Book of the United Nations, 1948-1949* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), 263.

<sup>962</sup>The section of the resolution dealing with Eritrea was voted upon in two parts. The part referring to the disposal of Eritrea except for the Western Province was adopted by roll-call, by 36 votes to 6, with 15 abstentions. The part of paragraph 3, dealing with the disposal of the Western Province, was rejected by roll-call, by 19 votes to 16, with 21 abstentions. See *Official Records of the Third Session, Part II, First Committee, summary records, 393-394.*

<sup>963</sup>Paragraph 3 dealing with Eritrea had been adopted by 37 votes to 11, with 10 abstentions. See *Official Record of the Third Session of the General Assembly, Part II, Plenary Meetings, summary records of meetings, 593-596.*

<sup>964</sup>*Official Records of the Third Session of the General Assembly, Plenary Meetings, summary records of Meetings, 302.*

<sup>965</sup>See Resolution 289A(IV) *Official Records of the Fourth Session of the General Assembly, Plenary Meetings, summary records of meetings.*

purposes.<sup>966</sup> Likewise, the Joint Chiefs of Staff argued that it would be inadvisable to remove the radio facility from Asmara because there was no other suitable location available in the Middle East. The Defense Department therefore favoured Ethiopian control over Eritrea.<sup>967</sup>

Consequently, the Truman administration decided that the security interests of the United States would be best served if the former Italian colony of Eritrea fell under the political domination of Addis Ababa.<sup>968</sup> Hence, Secretary of Defense James Forrestal proposed that the United States obtain written guarantees from Ethiopia so that in the event Eritrea was ceded to Ethiopia, there would be no political or technical interference in the operation of the station. Although Ethiopia offered to supply such a written guarantee, Washington preferred a purely verbal commitment, at least at this stage.<sup>969</sup>

#### **The United Nations Commission for Eritrea**

Despite the lengthy deliberations,<sup>970</sup> a number of delegations in the General Assembly maintained that whatever available information the United Nations possessed was insufficient. It was thus found necessary to establish a United Nations Commission for Eritrea. Subsequently, Burma, Guatemala,

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<sup>966</sup>Marcus, *Ethiopia, Great Britain, and the U.S.A....*, 83.

<sup>967</sup>Jessup, Philip, *The Birth of Nations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 220.

<sup>968</sup>Op. cit., Marcus, 83.

<sup>969</sup>Op. cit., Jessup, 220.

<sup>970</sup>See Resolution 289A(IV), *Official Records of the Fourth Session of the General Assembly*, Plenary Meetings, summary records of meetings, 302.

Norway, Pakistan and South Africa became members of the United Nations Commission for Eritrea. The Commission's task was:

to ascertain more fully the wishes and the best means of promoting the welfare of the inhabitants of Eritrea; to examine the question of the disposal of Eritrea and to prepare a report for the General Assembly, together with such proposal or proposals as it may deem appropriate for the solution of the problem of Eritrea. In particular, the Commission was empowered to take into account the wishes and welfare of the inhabitants of Eritrea, including the views of the various racial, religious and political groups of the provinces of the territory and the capacity of the people for self-government; the interests of peace and security in East Africa; the rights and claims of Ethiopia based on geographical, historical, ethnic, or economic reasons, including in particular Ethiopia's legitimate need for adequate access to the sea, and that in considering its proposals the Commission should take into account the various suggestions submitted during previous sessions of the General Assembly.<sup>971</sup>

#### **The Commission In Eritrea**

Between February 14, 1950 and April 10, 1950, the Commission canvassed Eritrea for at least eight weeks. It borrowed some of the techniques utilized by the Four Power Commission of Investigation, heard leaders of parties and groups, and moved around the country. Although the Commission members did not agree on all aspects of the political, cultural and economic conditions of Eritrea, there were some areas of major agreement.

The findings of the representatives of Burma, Norway and South Africa were, in many ways similar to the findings of the Four Power Commission of Investigation. They declared that Eritrea was a heterogeneous society both geographically, ethnically, socially and confessionally; that the people were not ready to assume the responsibilities of self-government; that the bulk of the population was illiterate; and that the leaders of the community had no knowledge of the responsibility of government, and possessed no

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<sup>971</sup>Present-day Eritrean nationalists claim that the Eritrean people have never been consulted about their wishes.

administrative or judicial experience other than the regulation of tribal affairs and the application of customary law, and so on. They also confirmed that Eritrea was inherently a poor country, with a very small chance for development as it possessed no sources of power, raw materials, industrial skill, and had negligible mineral deposits. Furthermore, they pointed out that Eritrea depended on Ethiopia for its cereal deficits, that its transportation system was profitable only in relation to trade with and of Ethiopia, that Ethiopia provided an escape for Eritrean peasants during adverse seasons, that Ethiopia and the Sudan had been the largest markets for Eritrean imports and that Eritrea suffered from a chronic budgetary deficit as a result of the paucity of its resources. They therefore came to the conclusion that Eritrea had neither the resources nor the revenue to make it economically viable in the foreseeable future.<sup>972</sup>

Politically, they observed that "a majority of the Eritreans favour political association with Ethiopia," though this conclusion was not supported with statistics. They admitted that there were sizeable groups opposing such a solution, but they also argued that these groups were a minority. In addition, they found that most of the parties were of the view that the role of the Italians in the future of the country should be kept to a minimum.<sup>973</sup>

Having thus established the economic and political realities extant in Eritrea, the delegates of the three countries made the following conclusions. First, economic considerations precluded a solution that would aim at the creation of an independent state in Eritrea either in the proximate future, or

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<sup>972</sup>*Report of the United Nations Commission for Eritrea*, General Assembly, Official Records: 5th Session Supplement No. 8 (A/1285). (Lake Success, NY: 1950), 16.

<sup>973</sup>*Ibid.*



after a considerable interval even under a system of international trusteeship. Secondly, because of the great command of pro-Ethiopian sentiment among the population, as manifested by the Unionist Party, because of the rights of Ethiopia to have access to the sea, and because of the close affinities between large sections of the Ethiopian and Eritrean peoples, "the Commission agreed that the best solution for Eritrea must be based on close political association with Ethiopia."<sup>974</sup>

Agreement between the three delegations extended only this far. When it came to the formulation of proposals for the final disposal of the territory, the South African and Burmese delegations jointly recommended to the General Assembly that Eritrea be federated with Ethiopia. On the other hand, the Norwegian representative recommended unconditional union between the two countries.

In arguing for the "complete and immediate reunion" between Eritrea and Ethiopia, the Norwegian delegation maintained:

The overwhelming majority of the people of Eritrea are in favour of reunion [with Ethiopia]. To impose obligations on Ethiopia to organize its relations with Eritrea on the basis of a federative status, without any knowledge as to whether this would be the best constitutional solution, could easily lead to future conflict and unrest, and in the end, endanger the peace of East Africa.<sup>975</sup>

The findings of the Guatemalan and Pakistani delegations were, by and large, similar to those expressed by the others. While both affirmed that Eritrea was lacking in general development and leadership, they also observed that the inhabitants of the highlands favoured annexation to Ethiopia, and that the lowlanders favoured independence or United Nations trusteeship leading to independence. Nevertheless, they recommended that Eritrea be

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<sup>974</sup>Ibid., 24.

<sup>975</sup>Ibid., 26-28.

placed under a ten-year U.N. trusteeship leading to independence. Such a proposal they said, could not and should not preclude any future arrangements of association in any form between Ethiopia and an Independent Eritrea, when the population of the latter unmistakably indicated such a desire.<sup>976</sup>

In proposing, therefore, different recommendations for the disposal of Eritrea, the members of the United Nations Commission were in reality, reflecting the different wishes of the Eritrean people. Norway's recommendation for unconditional union between Eritrea and Ethiopia was the wish of the Unionist Party, and that of South Africa and Burma was the position of the Liberal Unionist Party and the National Party, which favoured Eritrean autonomy in some form of political association with Ethiopia. On the other hand, Pakistan and Guatemala largely reflected the wishes of the Muslim League. The division of political opinion in Eritrea between independence, trusteeship, federation and unconditional union, which was reflected in the different positions of the members of the Commission, was also subsequently reflected in the General Assembly of the United Nations.

When the United Nations Commission for Eritrea was empowered to look at Eritrea's future in relation to the problem of peace and security in East Africa, it meant that Eritrean "nationalism" was scrutinized carefully and had to pass over several hurdles. First, there had to be evidence of the existence of a cohesive Eritrean nationalism. In the Eritrea of the time, there was no such nationalism. Second, Ethiopia's claims to Eritrea had to be addressed. In this case, far from rejecting such a claim, a substantial portion of public opinion in Eritrea identified with Ethiopia to such an extent, that, what may be called Eritrean nationalism expressed itself in terms of Ethiopian nationalism. In

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<sup>976</sup>*Report of the U.N. Commission for Eritrea (GAOR) 5th Session, A/1285, 1950, 29-36.*

such a situation, the problem of peace and security in East Africa could only be addressed by promoting the aspirations of those Eritreans who wanted unity with Ethiopia.

### **The Role of the USA**

Having been formally debriefed about the verbal arrangements made with Ethiopia regarding U.S. defense requirements in the Horn of Africa, the American delegation began to push for some form of Ethiopian control over most of Eritrea.<sup>977</sup> In fact, by the latter half of 1950, in what was justified publicly as compensation for Ethiopia's offer to contribute troops to the U.N. police action in Korea, the US began advocating federation between Ethiopia and all of Eritrea. The American U. N. Mission presented the federation plan to the United Nation's Ad Hoc Political Committee during the latter half of November. On December 11, 1952, Charles A. Sprague, U.S. Representative to the U.N., introduced a resolution calling for the federation of Ethiopia and Eritrea, and on December 17 the General Assembly adopted it by 46 votes, 10 against and 4 abstentions. Henceforth, Eritrea would "constitute an autonomous unit federated with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian Crown."<sup>978</sup>

U.N. Resolution 390 provided that all home affairs were to be the responsibility of the Eritrean Government while the Federal Government with its seat in Addis Ababa would preside over foreign affairs, currency and finance, internal and foreign trade, and external and interstate communications, including ports, as well as defense. The Eritrean Government

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<sup>977</sup>Op. cit., Jessup, *The Birth of Nations*, 248.

<sup>978</sup>See Resolution 390 (V), *Final Report of the U.N. Commission for Eritrea*, (GAOR), 7th Session, Supplement No. 15A/2188, 74-75.

had the power to establish a home police force, to raise taxes and to establish its own budget. Customs and duties on goods entering or leaving Eritrea were to be paid to Eritrea itself.<sup>979</sup>

As was repeatedly pointed out in the British supervised elections that took place in Eritrea in March 1952, the Unionist Party which advocated for unconditional re-union with Ethiopia, won 32 of the 67 seats of the Eritrean National Assembly.<sup>980</sup> Issaias Afewerki, the Secretary General of the EPLF, however, contends:

We have hard facts, historical facts....The fact that the population was not consulted on its right and destiny and the findings which prove that all the political groups within the Independence Bloc represented more than 75 percent of the population prove that their rights were trampled upon. These historical truths are recorded in historical archives and could be consulted.<sup>981</sup>

Which archives he has in mind, is quite a mystery. John Spencer, who was personally involved with all the recommendations and decisions concerning Eritrea from 1946-1960, recently wrote:

No less than 18 steps had been taken to consult the wishes of the peoples of Eritrea, starting with the Four Power Commission of Investigation of which the United States itself was a member. When the question was sent to the U.N. General Assembly its Committee I (the Political Committee) summoned before it spokesmen from various groups in Eritrea to testify as to the wishes of the population. Then Committee I referred the matter to four of its sub-committees before deciding to send out to Eritrea another Commission of Investigation. This second commission of five members consisted of representatives of three states that had been opposed to the return of Eritrea to Ethiopia and two that had not. After wide travels and consultations of the population, that commission recommended a federation formula for the return of Eritrea to Ethiopia. The proposal was then discussed by the

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<sup>979</sup>Ibid.

<sup>980</sup>Pankhurst, E. Sylvia and Pankhurst, Richard, *Ethiopia and Eritrea, the Last Phase of the Reunion Struggle, 1941-52* (Essex: Woodford Green, 1953), 281.

<sup>981</sup>As quoted by Aleme Eshete in "Eritrea: The Force of the Unionists," *Ethiopian Review*, 2, no. 12, December 1992.

Interim Committee of the General Assembly and thereafter submitted to it for approval. General Assembly Resolution 390 (V) which adopted the Commission's recommendation then called for yet a third commission to be sent out to Eritrea. The U.N. commissioner in charge traveling throughout Eritrea, held hearings with 15 political parties, 4 foreign communities, 3 economic, cultural and professional organizations and with religious leaders before completing a draft constitution. That constitution was submitted to a representative assembly elected by the people and adopted by it on July 10, 1952.<sup>982</sup>

Could one argue that the Eritrean population was not consulted? The support provided by the United States was, of course, greatly appreciated by Emperor Haile Selassie. To be sure, while addressing a Joint Session of the U.S. Congress on May 26, 1954, he noted:

You have given us valuable support, not only in lend-lease assistance during the war...but you have also powerfully aided us in obtaining rectification of long-standing injustices. If, today, the brother territory of Eritrea stands finally united under the crown, and if Ethiopia has regained her shore-lines on the Red Sea, it has been due, in no small measure, to the contribution of the United States of America.<sup>983</sup>

The Eisenhower administration was very anxious to sign an agreement with Ethiopia for political and strategic reasons. They wanted to involve Addis Ababa in countering communism. In addition to reaching an agreement in 1952 on Kagnew Station<sup>984</sup>, which permitted the US to continue its Army

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<sup>982</sup>Spencer, John H., "Secession of Eritrea on the U. N. Agenda," *Ethiopian Review*, November 1992.

<sup>983</sup>Haile Selassie I, *Selected Speeches of H.I.M. Haile Selassie 1st, 1918-1967* (Addis Ababa: Ministry of Information, 1967), 116.

<sup>984</sup>Radio Marina was renamed "Kagnew Station," after the Ethiopian battalion which had returned from Korea in May 1952. The draft treaty which the U.S. tabled guaranteed almost sovereign privileges at the American facilities in return for a limited programme of military aid to Ethiopia. The Americans got a 25-year lease. See Draft Agreement as delivered to the Ethiopian Government on 11 October 1952, attachment 6 in "Record of U.S. Negotiations with Ethiopia for Base Rights Agreement during the period December 15-December 22, 1952," Washington, 9 January 1952, SD 711.56375/1.953. See also U.S. Department of State, "Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement: United States--Imperial Ethiopian Government," United States Treaties and other International

Strategic Communications Station at Asmara, the US also negotiated docking rights at Massawa, landing rights at Asmara, rights to overfly Ethiopia, and the right to build an evacuation camp at Ghinda. The U.S. Embassy in Addis Ababa urged that Ethiopia could serve as an important "staging area and region for building up military and troop reserves."<sup>985</sup> Another agreement was signed in 1953 'governing the provision of grant military assistance and training to the Ethiopian forces.'<sup>986</sup>

Since John Foster Dulles was setting up the Northern Tier of anti-communist states which culminated in the Baghdad Pact, the Ethiopian Government skillfully presented the argument that Ethiopia should form part of a "Southern Tier," or secondary line of defense against communism in the Middle East. That type of argument, it is said, made it possible for the Secretaries of State and Defense to "find" that the defense of Ethiopia was essential to the defense of the free world.<sup>987</sup> Henceforth, Washington took a strong interest in Ethiopia. In fact, United States development aid to Ethiopia from 1951-1975 totalled \$309 million.<sup>988</sup> Likewise, between 1952-1976,

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Agreements, vol. 4, pt. 1(1953), pp. 422-26/ and U.S. Department of State, "Utilization of Defence Installations within the Empire of Ethiopia," *Ibid.*, vol. 5, pt.(1954), 750-61; *U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1952-1954*, ii: 419-20.

<sup>985</sup>"Ethiopian Government Memorandum 'Defense Problems of Ethiopia,' and Country Team Comments," Communication from American Embassy in Addis Ababa to the Department of State, 15 February 1957. Document found in Michigan State University Special Collections.

<sup>986</sup>*U.S. Treaties and Other International Agreements, Part I, 1954.*

<sup>987</sup>John Spencer, *Testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 94th Congress, 2nd Session, U.S. Relations with Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa.* (Washington, D.C.: 1976), 27.

<sup>988</sup>Of the total sum, \$132 million was in development loans, \$112 million in technical assistance grants, \$35 million in PL 480 food programmes, and \$30 million from the Peace Corps. USAID--Ethiopia, "The Aid Programs in Ethiopia," January 1975.

American military assistance to Ethiopia amounted to \$272 million.<sup>989</sup> And between 1963-1970, some 2,813 Ethiopians were trained in the United States under military assistance programmes.<sup>990</sup>

In all this, United States officials believed that aid could accomplish three goals: first, it could "contribute to Ethiopia's general western orientation," second, "it could limit the effectiveness of Soviet Bloc economic and commercial initiatives," and "foster the moderate evolution of Ethiopia through real increase in consumption levels and standards of living."<sup>991</sup> Unfortunately, however, the objectives were not completely fulfilled—a theme that is outside the scope of this paper.

Once he took over Eritrea, how could Haile Selassie have averted the present crisis? What options did he have? He could have respected Eritrea's federal status and used Eritrea's institutions as models for the development of the other provinces of the country. He could have also reduced Ethiopia's perceived military vulnerability and head off future problems caused by the Eritrean issue, either by throwing in his lot with the Arabs, or by adopting an even-handed policy on the Arab-Israeli conflict. If he had also speeded up the necessary social, economic and administrative reforms under the umbrella of the USA and, in the process, reduced undue dependence on Washington, the Eritrean issue may have not gone the way it did. However, given Ethiopia's

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<sup>989</sup>Ibid., 94th Congress, 2nd Session, U.S. Relations with Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, Senate Foreign Relations Committee. See also Mohammed L. Ayoab, *The Horn of Africa: Regional Conflict and Superpower Involvement*. Canberra, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence. (Australian National University, 1978), 11.

<sup>990</sup>Ibid.

<sup>991</sup>"Non-Military Assistance to Ethiopia," *Country Team Message from the American Embassy in Addis Ababa to the Department of State*, 9 June 1960, Michigan State University Special Collections.

historical troubles with its Muslim neighbours, military alignment with the USA appeared to offer a surer solution to the problem of maintaining control over Eritrea. Yet, when the time came, in the frustration of their defeat, the Arabs turned against Ethiopia and began to help the Eritrean rebels against the United States' and Israel's friend, Haile Selassie.<sup>992</sup> What about the USSR?

### The Role of the Soviet Union

The interest of the Soviet Union/Russia in Ethiopia pre-dates the October Revolution of 1917.<sup>993</sup> However, it was only on July 1, 1943 that the

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<sup>992</sup>Korn, David, *Ethiopia, the USA and the Soviet Union, 1974-1985* (Croom Helm: 1986), 3.

<sup>993</sup>It has been suggested that historical ties between Russia and Ethiopia centered on certain similarity in their histories and structures—Czar and Emperor, Orthodox and Coptic Christianity, feudalism and serfdom, and so on. But by and large, early relations sprang from an assumed spiritual and confessional propinquity, and from a perceived need to withstand a common foe—the powerful Ottoman Turkish State (See *Russia and Africa*, USSR Academy of Sciences, Africa Institute, Moscow, 1966). In the course of the first quarter of the 18th century, the Ottoman Empire had, somehow, lost its aggressive impetus, while Russia's acquisitive drive to consolidate the state began to shape. Under such circumstances, St. Petersburg saw no reason to cultivate exotic alliances with a far away country, called Abyssinia/Ethiopia. Thus, even the letters of Emperor Eyassu II (1739-1755) to Elizabeth II, daughter of Peter the Great (1672-1725), remained unanswered. The Ethiopian sovereign was obsessed by the crusading notions of a Muslim encirclement and of the imperative need of all Christian rulers to unite against Islam. Likewise, Emperor Theodore (1855-1868) dreamed about some nebulous alliance with Russia to humble the Muslims and to liberate Jerusalem. (Guillaume Lejean, Theodore II; *Le Nouvel Empire d'Abyssinie* (Paris: 1865). Emperor Yohannes (1872-1889) was also anxious to establish political relations with Russia. In 1876, he had succeeded Theodore. As a gesture of goodwill, Yohannes had sent to Emperor Alexander II an ornate golden cross and a personal letter. Yet, it was only in 1890 that Russian State officials visited Ethiopia, and in 1895, that an Ethiopian mission, largely military in composition, visited Russia and returned with arms and promises of military and diplomatic cooperation. From then on, Russian support for Ethiopian nationalism was used as a means of undermining the rival European powers in the area. During Ethiopia's war with Italy in 1896, Russian arms and the role of Captain N.S. Leontiev, who advised Ethiopian generals in military strategy, made a qualitative difference in the outcome of the war. After Italy's defeat, relations between the two countries were strengthened. Russian officers served in the Ethiopian army and even assisted in establishing the country's borders. Ethiopians began to attend Russian institutions of higher learning. For example, Bejirond Tekle



two countries resumed diplomatic relations. The principal Soviet goal at the time was to gain leverage in a country that Moscow considered a key African nation.<sup>994</sup> Yet, the USSR was also burdened by the demands of ideological "purity," since the Kremlin recognized two irreconcilable camps--that of socialism and capitalism. Hence, unless a developing country like Ethiopia allied itself with the USSR, it was, by definition, supposedly reactionary and therefore, an ally of "imperialism."<sup>995</sup>

Nevertheless, despite such a dogmatic and sterile world view, the Soviet Ambassador in Addis Ababa had repeatedly assured the Ethiopian Foreign Minister that military aid from the USSR could be had for the asking.<sup>996</sup> This was done in the hope of detaching Ethiopia from the west. The ideological preferences of its leaders notwithstanding, Ethiopia's conditions did not permit Addis Ababa to respond to Moscow's overtures. As was noted earlier, for all

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Hawariat (1886-1975), who was to serve Ethiopia as Ambassador to the League of Nations (1936), and who closely worked with G. Chicherin and M. Litvinov, was trained at the Military Academy of St. Petersburg. In any case, as a result of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904/1905, the Russian Empire withdrew from active external involvement. After the Russian Revolution of 1917, Ethiopia became a sanctuary for many prominent Russian emigres--doctors, engineers, lawyers, and so on, who were evacuated from the Crimea by the White Army in 1920. In 1924, Ethiopia expressed its desire to restore diplomatic relations with Russia. But its efforts were blocked by Britain and Italy. See G.A. Nersesov, "The Soviet Union, Anti-Colonialism, Africa: From the Great October Revolution of 1917 to the Italo-Ethiopian War of 1935-1936." *Africa in Soviet Studies*, 4, 1976, p. 238. The USSR was also one of the first states to denounce Italian aggression against Ethiopia, and to support Haile Selassie at the League of Nations.

<sup>994</sup>Paul B. Henze, 'The Russians and the Horn,' in Kenneth Hunt and Uwe Nerlich (eds.) *The Flanking Strategy: Regional Instability and Soviet Power Projection* (London: MacMillan, 1981). See also Nimrod Novick, *On the Shores of Bab al- Mandeb, Soviet Diplomacy and Regional Dynamics* (Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 1979).

<sup>995</sup>Andrey Zhdanov, *The International Situation* (Moscow: Foreign Printing Publishing House, 1947), cited in Alvin Z. Rubinstein, ed., *The Foreign Policy of the Soviet Union* (New York: Random House, 1972).

<sup>996</sup>Op. Cit., Spencer, *Ethiopia at Bay...*, 266.

practical purposes, Ethiopia was a British protectorate. Therefore, Haile Selassie had to skillfully exploit Washington's economic and strategic interests in the area, so that the USA would pressurize Britain to relinquish its occupation of Ethiopia. Indeed, without the support of its close ally, and lacking the financial wherewithal to continue the military occupation of the country, Britain had no choice but to leave Ethiopia, including Eritrea and the Ogaden. The balance of power was such that there was not much that the USSR could have done for Haile Selassie.

In any event, in June 1946, the USSR favoured international trusteeship for Eritrea.<sup>997</sup> Then within days of the opening of the Paris Peace Conference, Moscow came to support as we have noted earlier, the idea of an Italian trusteeship for Eritrea. The change was based on the hope that the Italian Communist Party would win the general election of April 1948. When the Communists failed to take power, the USSR returned to its earlier proposal of international trusteeship. When that, too, could not materialize, the USSR along with some Arab states, advocated complete independence for Eritrea. Volte-face notwithstanding, we should understand that the Soviet Union's stand was less about Eritrean rights than preventing the western powers from enhancing their strategic position in Northeast Africa.

Thereafter, for many years, the USSR dismissed Ethiopia as one of those "formally independent states which fell into the rapacious claws of American and British monopolists—a country whose independence was more symbolic than real, and which has been converted into a raw-material appendage of foreign monopoly."<sup>998</sup>

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<sup>997</sup>Dallin, David, *Soviet Foreign Policy After Stalin* (London: Methuen, 1960), 107.

<sup>998</sup>Voblikov, D.R., *Review of Economic Handbook of Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa: 1951), in *Sovetsoye Vostokovedeniye*, 4, 1955, 185-7.

Whenever America's relations with the emperor grew strained or Washington was found unwilling to equip and modernize the Ethiopian army, Haile Selassie played his Soviet card ably. Once he described the USSR as "the world's greatest power,"<sup>999</sup> and made it clear that Ethiopia wishes to live in peace and have good relations with both East and West."<sup>1000</sup> No sooner had he uttered these words, than he flew to the Soviet Union in June 1959, on an official visit. In Moscow, Haile Selassie negotiated trade, cultural and credit agreements including a \$100 million loan,<sup>1001</sup> and had an offer of military assistance. A Soviet military delegation was even invited to attend the 25th anniversary of the Guenet Military Academy on April 28, 1960.<sup>1002</sup> The message was not lost on Washington, and in 1960, the US revised its stiff military-assistance programme and agreed to equip and train a 40,000 strong Ethiopian army, and reaffirmed its opposition to any activity threatening the territorial integrity of Ethiopia.<sup>1003</sup> That was what Haile Selassie had wanted from the Americans in the first place, and he got it.

Disappointed with an unlikely honeymoon with an emperor who was essentially anti-communist and anti-Marxist in outlook, thereafter, the USSR started to practice its own brand of "Politica Tigrigna" on a grand scale, and

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<sup>999</sup>Sergius Yakobson: "The USSR and Ethiopia: A Case of Traditional Behaviour," 186; Marina Ottaway, *Soviet and American Influence in the Horn*, 27.

<sup>1000</sup>*Addis Zemen*, The Official Amharic Daily, Miazia 21, 1952, (28 April, 1960), Addis Ababa.

<sup>1001</sup>U.S. Senate Investigating Sub-Committee on Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad, June 1970, cited in *Africa contemporary Record (ACR)*, 1970, B107.

<sup>1002</sup>*Addis Zemen*, The Official Amharic Daily, Miazia 21, 1952, (28 April, 1960), Addis Ababa.

<sup>1003</sup>Op. Cit., Lefebvre, *Arms for the Horn*, 94-101.

had to advance its policy by other means. Knowing full well that Somalia had territorial claims on Ethiopia, the USSR began to arm Mogadishu to the teeth. To that end, when war broke out between the two countries in 1964, in a message to Emperor Haile Selassie, Nikita Khrushchev simply observed: "It is the conviction of the Soviet government that in our time, there are not, and there cannot be any territorial disputes that have to be settled with the use of arms,"<sup>1004</sup> and offered to mediate the conflict. The message was not lost on the emperor. Nevertheless, the arms delivery continued. Between 1963-1973, the USSR provided \$181 million worth of arms to Somalia as compared with the \$190 million worth of total arms transfer to Ethiopia from western countries,<sup>1005</sup> much of which was from the USA.<sup>1006</sup>

As if Somalia was not enough, Haile Selassie was not also convinced of Soviet indifference to the Eritrean uprising. After all--Egypt, Syria, Algeria, Iraq, Somalia, and the PLO had very close relations with the USSR, and they were the countries which strongly supported the Eritrean rebellion. Libya, Sudan and South Yemen also later joined this radical camp. The weapons that the Ethiopian army captured from the Eritrean fighters were of Soviet vintage. Under such circumstances, it became difficult to convince the Ethiopian authorities that the USSR was not involved in the Eritrean conflict, or that it was unaware about the eventual destination of some of the arms it supplied its Arab friends. As a matter of fact, they worked very closely. The removal of the American communications centre--Kagnew Station, elimination of western influence in Ethiopia, bringing an end to the pro-

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<sup>1004</sup>*Addis Zemen* (Addis Ababa: Yekatit 8, 1956)/(1 February 1964).

<sup>1005</sup>Hoffman, Erik, *The Conduct of Soviet Foreign Policy* (New York: Aldine Publishing Co., 1980), 135.

<sup>1006</sup>*Ibid.*, 519.

Western and pro-Israeli government of Haile Selassie, and at least for the Arabs, the status of Ethiopian Muslims, were issues that brought them together. In contrast, the moderate and pro-Western governments of the area like Ethiopia, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and others were preoccupied with countering the activities of the left leaning radical regimes, and in particular, the influence of the USSR in the region.

As could be expected, by 1966, Ethio-Soviet relations had deteriorated to such an extent that *The Ethiopian Herald*, the official English daily, could write:

The USSR has commenced taking steps that adversely affect the interests of the Ethiopian people...it is one thing to give arms to meet a country's security needs, and quite another to conduct a traffic in heavy weapons above and beyond the defense needs of the country.<sup>1007</sup>

Whatever message Addis Ababa wanted conveyed to the USSR, was to no avail. The growing military burden of Eritrea, coupled with the heavy concentration of Soviet arms in Somalia was indeed threatening the future of the government. In its frantic attempt to compete with the USA and the USSR in the so-called Third World, China also joined the fray. Premier Chou En-lai had visited Ethiopia in 1964. Yet, the premier's message that "Africa was ripe for a revolution," and China's continued support for the ELF, did not help matters. However, when Haile Selassie visited China in October 1971, he was received by Chairman Mao Tse Tung, provided \$84 million in development aid, and saw to it that Chinese support to the ELF was completely terminated. One could say that this was one of the few success stories of his diplomacy before his downfall.<sup>1008</sup>

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<sup>1007</sup>*The Ethiopian Herald* (Addis Ababa: 12 May 1966).

<sup>1008</sup>Halliday, Fred and Maxine Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 1980, 258.

For a long time, the Soviet navy had only limited access to onshore facilities in NorthEast Africa. However, in 1972, when the USSR acquired the Berbera base from Somalia, this problem was solved. In addition to missile holding and storage facilities, Moscow also constructed naval repair and long-range communication facilities. The price the USSR had to pay for this was to transform Somalia's armed forces into the best equipped force in the Horn of Africa.<sup>1009</sup> It delivered 100 T-54 heavy tanks to add to the estimated 150 T-36 tanks already in the Somali arsenal. In February 1974, the USSR also began supplying to the Somali Air Force, which had already been equipped with some twenty-one outmoded MiG-15 and MiG-17 jet fighters and bombers, the more modern MiG-19 aircraft and a squadron of advanced MiG-21 jet fighters, along with SA-2 surface-to-air missiles. This compared quite favourably with the Ethiopian arsenal, which included approximately fifty M-41 medium tanks and twenty M-24 light tanks and 37 aircraft, the best of which—the F-86 Sabre jets and F-5 Freedom Fighters—would be outclassed by the MiG-21 fighters.<sup>1010</sup>

In an effort to head off this shifting balance, in May 1973, Haile Selassie used the occasion of an official state visit to the USA to obtain \$500 million worth of military assistance, including Phantom Jets, M-60 tanks, surface-to-air missiles, and air-to-ground missiles. To say the least, his trip was an unqualified disaster.<sup>1011</sup> Instead of guns, Washington continued to suggest

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<sup>1009</sup>See Ottaway, "Ethiopia Gets New U.S. Arms." Some analysts disputed Ottaway's critique which seemed to mirror the thinking in Addis Ababa. Ethiopia's F-5s were comparable in performance to the MIG-21s. Although the MIG-21s possessed a speed advantage, the F-5s had greater range and versatility. The F-86 jets were assumed to be comparable to Somalia's MiG-15s and MiG-17s. See Irving Kaplan, *Area Handbook for Somalia*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1977), 316.

<sup>1010</sup>Lefebvre, *Arms for the Horn*, 55-149; 175-241.

<sup>1011</sup>Ibid., Spencer, *Ethiopia at Bay...*, 323-24. See also: Donald Petterson, "Ethiopia Abandoned? An American Perspective," *International Affairs*, 62 (Autumn 1986), 628.

land reform, greater civil and political freedoms, more autonomy for Eritrea, and a stronger role for the Ethiopian Parliament. Nixon flatly rejected the emperor's shopping list for modern military equipment.<sup>1012</sup>

The truth is, Washington had lost faith in Haile Selassie's usefulness earlier than he had realized. Evidence of change in the Ethiopian society was noticeable. The inefficiency of the imperial regime was evident, as was the growing alienation and disenchantment of the intellectuals, military officers and the bureaucracy. Moreover, the emperor's decision to terminate relations with Israel following the Arab-Israeli conflict in 1973, considerably reduced Ethiopia's usefulness as an ally in the Middle East. Even more significant, the United States was phasing out Kagnew. In fact, American diplomatic, military and intelligence communities were relying more and more upon satellites for information. Furthermore, the United States was acquiring the capacity to move American strategic operations entirely offshore. Consequently, American strategic interests would be less vulnerable to political instability in host countries and Washington would be less prone to blackmail in having valued operations held hostage as points of leverage.<sup>1013</sup>

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<sup>1012</sup>Halliday, Fred and Molyneux, Maxine, *The Ethiopian Revolution* (London: N.B., 1981), 218.

<sup>1013</sup>In December 1970, Washington announced plans to construct a radio communications center on Diego Garcia that would become operational in early 1973. The base formally opened with 274 personnel on March 23, 1973. According to Pentagon officials, Diego Garcia would close a gap in the U.S. worldwide strategic communications network. See John Finney, "U.S. Opens Small Post in Indian Ocean," *New York Times*, 18 June 1973. There was a predisposition on Capitol Hill to pursue a "Blue Water" strategy to move off land masses and onto the seas into an international situation where indigenous nationalism would not clash with U.S. interests. See U.S. Senate, *United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad: Ethiopia*, Part 8, 1910. See also David Korn, 28.

Haile Selassie needed more arms to withstand threats to his regime. The USA was not willing to provide that. Apart from Somalia, he had also to reckon with the Eritrean insurgents, who had received Soviet arms--possibly with occasional Soviet financing--since the early 1960s. Cuba was a vital link in the Soviet-Eritrean connection. The ELF was also sending its military cadres to Cuba and China for training. Through the services of Fidel Castro, the Eritreans gained military advice, ideological training, and leftist respectability as a revolutionary movement.<sup>1014</sup>

Since Eritrea was considered part of Ethiopia, the Soviet authorities were very careful lest they be accused of interfering in the internal affairs of a sovereign state. Nevertheless, the Eritrean separatists were constantly supplied with Soviet weapons by Soviet proxies like Syria, Iraq, Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt, South Yemen, Moammar Ghaddafi's Libya and the Sudan.<sup>1015</sup> The Palestinian Liberation Organization also provided valuable support.

At the power centre, the USSR maintained "cordial" and correct relations. Indirectly, however, conditions were being carefully created for the eventual penetration of the country by supporting exile organizations of Ethiopian students and leftist intellectuals, who in turn influenced the intelligentsia and the students inside the country.<sup>1016</sup>

The radical military regime of the Sudan, supported by Soviet-armed Egypt, and the radical military regime of Somalia, tied to the USSR in 1974 by a treaty of friendship, were now joined by two or more competing Marxist Eritrean movements. Pressures from these countries and movements,

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<sup>1014</sup>Op. cit., Erlich, *The Struggle Over Eritrea*, 133; See also *The New York Times*, 3 March 1967.

<sup>1015</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>1016</sup>*Ibid.*, 133.



combined with the erosion of the power base of the regime, was creating havoc. Finally, the indifference of Washington to the fate of the government, allied with domestic unrest, led to a military mutiny, which brought the downfall of Haile Selassie on September 13, 1974. Both the USSR and the left-leaning Arab regimes got what they had struggled for. Kagnew Station was dismantled. The USA was replaced by the USSR as Ethiopia's major ally. Israeli influence had dwindled. Ethiopia became a secular state in which Muslims and Christians became equal.

Haile Selassie's government was replaced by a radical military junta, which called itself the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC), or the Dergue.

Although U.S. arms transfers to Ethiopia reached an all-time high in 1976, including more than \$100 million in cash sales, hard-line and radical factions within the PMAC, whose informal memberships overlapped, were still unhappy with the United States. The hard-liners, who favoured continuing the war in Eritrea, were dissatisfied by Ethiopia's increasing reliance upon cash purchases and reductions in Military Assistance Programme (MAP) from the United States at this critical time. Radicals felt uncomfortable being in league with an "imperialist" power, whom they did not trust. In late December 1976, therefore, Mengistu Haile Mariam, the leader of the radical faction within the Dergue and first vice-chairman of the PMAC, visited Moscow and signed a secret military agreement with the USSR worth at least \$100 million.<sup>1017</sup> Since the Soviets were interested in riding two horses, they also continued to arm Somalia. In fact, between 1974-1977, the USSR supplied Somalia with more than \$300 million in arms. Observers noted that what

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<sup>1017</sup>J. A. Lefebvre, 152.

Somalia received from Moscow far exceeded the approximately \$180 million worth of arms which Ethiopia bought from the USA.<sup>1018</sup>

The new Ethiopian regime needed arms not only to resist Somalia's territorial ambitions,<sup>1019</sup> but also to forestall the secessionist drive of the Eritreans. While the US warned the Dergue that arms shipments would be affected if the regime went ahead with an intended human-wave attack of peasant militia on Eritrean rebels<sup>1020</sup>, the USSR seemed perplexed by the regime's foot-dragging tactics. In fact, as early as March 1975, Pravda had admitted that "it is still impossible to surmise what form the future development of Ethiopia will take."<sup>1021</sup>

The dominant argument in Washington then was that the US should continue to support the Dergue. Such a view rested on three basic premises. The first was that if the USA cut off aid, Eritrea would become independent and aligned with the Arab world. Such a possibility would give the Arab States control over both shores of the Bab al-Mandeb, the narrow mouth of the Red Sea, through which Israeli-bound tankers and other shipping pass. The second was, if Eritrea broke away, and if the USA acquiesced, it would have a negative impact throughout Africa, where the permanence of existing borders was a matter of cardinal diplomatic and political importance. The third, and

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<sup>1018</sup>Pateman, R., *The Soviet Union in the Horn of Africa, The Diplomacy of Intervention and Disengagement* (Boston: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 178.

<sup>1019</sup>For an up-to-date, but brief presentation of the Ethio-Somalia conflict, see Daniel Kendie, "Promoting Peace in the Horn of Africa through Development Cooperation," (in) *Proceedings 3rd International Conference on the Horn of Africa, Contemporary Economics, Politics, and Culture in the Horn of Africa*, 28-29 May 1988, (New York: The City College of the City University, 1988).

<sup>1020</sup>*Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>1021</sup>*Pravda*, 5 March 1975, as quoted by Pateman, 178.

the one most used in public pronouncements, was that since Somalia was under Soviet domination, and was in particular armed by the USSR, the United States should continue backing Ethiopia as a regional counter-weight, and as a guarantee of US credibility in the world as a whole.<sup>1022</sup>

The U.S.-Ethiopia military relationship, nonetheless, came to a swift end in the Carter Presidency in a series of retaliatory actions. On April 22, 1977, Washington informed Addis Ababa that the United States would close down Kagnev Station before the end of September, *i.e.*, eight months before the twenty-five-year lease expired. It was also brought to Addis Ababa's attention that because of Congressionally mandated cuts, the number of U.S. MAAG advisers in Ethiopia would be reduced from forty-six to twenty-four by the end of the summer. The next day, Ethiopia ordered the closure of the U.S. MAAG, Kagnev Station, the Naval Medical Research Unit, the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) office and the consulate general's office in Asmara. Subsequently, Addis Ababa unilaterally abrogated the 1953 MDAA treaty. On April 28, the United States suspended the remaining \$10 million FMS credit program and \$6 million in outstanding MAP funds for FY 1977 and halted the delivery of some \$100 million worth of arms still in the pipeline. A month later, Mengistu ordered a fifty percent reduction in the United States embassy staff. Then in June, Congress passed the International Security Assistance and Arms Export Control Act of 1977, which stated that military assistance, training, and FMS credits for Ethiopia as well as FMS cash sales and deliveries of military equipment financed by military assistance, credits, or guarantees, were

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<sup>1022</sup>Tom Farer considers both sides of the argument. See his, *War Clouds on the Horn of Africa: The Widening Storm* (Washington, D.C.: 1979).

prohibited unless the President declared that U.S. national security interests were at stake.<sup>1023</sup>

### **Revolutionary Ethiopia and the USSR**

Having skillfully played "Politica Tigrigna" for over three decades, and having made sure that the USA was shorn of its presence and influence in Ethiopia, the Soviet Union now became Addis Ababa's main ally and purveyor of ideological, political and military, if not economic assistance.<sup>1024</sup> Subsequently, Moscow started playing its own brand of "Politica Sciana." Because the Ethiopian regime claimed that it was guided by Marxist/Leninist principles, the USSR had to come to the rescue of the Dergue. In mid-1977, for example, when Somali forces invaded Ethiopia to seize control of the Ogaden province, the USSR carried out a massive airlift of weapons, advisors and Cuban combat troops, which enabled Ethiopia to repel the Somalis in 1978.<sup>1025</sup>

That the USSR and Cuba were coordinating policy with regard to the Horn of Africa was demonstrated when Fidel Castro visited Somalia on 13 March 1977, and Ethiopia the next day. The Cuban leader convened a joint meeting in Aden, of Siad Barre of Somalia and Mengistu Haile Mariam of Ethiopia. He proposed a plan by means of which Ethiopia and Somalia would put aside their differences and join in a socialist confederation of Ethiopia,

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<sup>1023</sup>Jeffrey A. Lefebvre, 153.

<sup>1024</sup>Op. cit., Korn, *Ethiopia, the USA...*, 28.

<sup>1025</sup>For more information on how the USSR was evicted from Somalia and turned to Ethiopia, see Henze, Paul, "Getting a Grip on the Horn"; Walter Laqueur (ed.), *The Pattern of soviet Conduct in the Third World* (New York: Praeger, 1983), 150-186; Ottaway, Marina, *Soviet and American Influence in the Horn of Africa* (New York: Praeger, 1982); Rothenburg, Morris, *The USSR and Africa: New Dimensions of Soviet Global Power* (Washington, D.C.: Advanced International Studies Institute, 1980).

Somalia, South Yemen and Djibouti. Some say that such a plan contemplated a federal status for Eritrea analogous to that of Byelorussia in the USSR. Others argue that Eritrea and the Ogaden were to be granted the status of autonomous regions within the existing border arrangements of Ethiopia.<sup>1026</sup> Mengistu accepted the idea in principle, but Siad Barre flatly rejected it, contending that confederation should come only as an expressed wish of the people concerned, and as an outcome of exercising the principle of self-determination.<sup>1027</sup>

The cold war dimension of conflicts in the region had a dramatic turn of events. It began with the gradual Egyptian shift from the Soviet to the American version of non-alignment after 1972. This outcome was prepared for, and followed by, a similar Sudanese disenchantment with both domestic and foreign communist allies, terminating in Sudan's expulsion of Soviet military advisers in May 1977 and the American decision to sell arms to the Sudan. Subsequently, Somalia, too, expelled its Soviet advisers and closed down the Soviet base in Berbera and port facilities at Kismayou. In such a set-up, countering the influence of the USSR in the region became an important task of such moderate or conservative regimes as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, Sudan, Kuwait, Jordan, and Somalia. For this reason, undermining and destabilizing the regime in power in Ethiopia through the Eritrean movements became a policy option.

In turn, since the USSR had lost Egypt, the Sudan, and Somalia, Moscow had to consolidate itself in Ethiopia. As Colin Legum has pointed out:

Already in 1974, Moscow began to show a tentative interest in backing the Dergue but without upsetting the Somalis. Moscow's calculations seem to have been based, among other things, on the

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<sup>1026</sup>The Ottaways, *Empire in Revolution*, 170.

<sup>1027</sup>*The New York Times*, 16 May 1977; *The Observer*, 8 May 1977; *The Daily Telegraph*, 17 May 1977.

need to get a firmer foothold in the Horn than was provided by Somalia. Ethiopia, with a population almost nine times that of Somalia and with two outlets to the Red Sea, seemed, at least on paper, a good horse to bet on. At the same time, given the Horn's proximity to the Middle East, Moscow must have felt that the losses it had suffered in terms of reduction of influence in Egypt and Sudan could be at least partially made up by the acquisition of a friendly Ethiopia. This was an inviting prospect, particularly since it was to be, at least technically, at the expense of the United States. Moreover, with Egypt and Sudan, along with arch-conservative Saudi Arabia, as the main supporters of the Eritrean nationalists, Moscow must have calculated that an Ethiopian victory in Eritrea, particularly with a Marxist government in Addis Ababa, would be in the Soviet interest.<sup>1028</sup>

It appears that Soviet ideologues and functionaries were fascinated by the depth of the Ethiopian upheaval, in contrast to what they described as "superficial" changes introduced by coups in many countries in Africa. In the words of the Soviet Ambassador to Ethiopia, Anatoli Ratanov:

Ethiopia is different from most African countries. If there were a revolution in Niger, everything would be over in one night. Political life there exists only among an elite of a hundred people. You could change the government, and the people wouldn't even notice. But in Ethiopia there has been a class society with well-established boundaries between classes. It has been an old monarchy with an old outworn church. In other words, there was an organic society—a body with a head, trunk, arms and legs. Here it was not possible to change the head without changing the body. It was not so different from Russia in 1917. At the root of the revolution was a popular movement against injustice. You had explosive material for a popular uprising by students or workers, or the army. As it happened, the army was the leading force. It played the role of the Party. Not that there was a military coup, or action by the general staff. Instead, the thrust came from below—the sergeants."<sup>1029</sup>

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<sup>1028</sup>See Colin Legum, *Ethiopia: The Fall of Haile Selassie's Empire* (London: 1975), and Legum, 'Realities of the Ethiopian Revolution,' *The World Today*, 33, no. 8, August 1977.

<sup>1029</sup>Kraft, Joseph, "Letter from Addis Ababa," *The New Yorker*, July 31, 1978, 54-55.

Apart from carrying out its ideological commitments, Cuba's gains from its involvement on the Horn are as unclear as its interests. The USSR, on the other hand, had received tangible benefits. It gained permission to anchor an 8,500 ton floating drydock, which was at Berbera in Somalia, at Dahlak Island, on the Eritrean coast. Dahlak also served as a maintenance facility and supply depot for Soviet naval ships operating in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. According to the U.S. Defense Department, guided-missile cruisers and nuclear-powered submarines regularly called at Dahlak for repair and supplies.<sup>1030</sup>

The dramatic reversal of the alliances in the Horn of Africa has been discussed from many angles. Indeed, it was the first battle in the policy war that tore the Carter administration and culminated near its end in the resignation of Cyrus Vance as Secretary of State in May 1980. The debate between Vance and National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, concerned the use of pressure to get the Russians out of Ethiopia. It came to a head in a duel of communiques on 1 March 1978 linking and delinking SALT and Ethiopia.<sup>1031</sup>

The President had instructed his advisers in April 1978 to "move in every possible way to get Somalia to be our friend." Indeed, in a speech in

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<sup>1030</sup>Department of Defense, *Soviet Military Power* (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1985), 123.

<sup>1031</sup>See Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983) esp. 87-91, 274, et passim; Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle* (New York: Farar, Strauss & Giroux) esp. 178-190; Michael Samuels, ed., *White Paper: The Horn of Africa*, special supplement, *The Washington Review of Strategic and International Studies*, May 1978; Elizabeth Drew, "Washington Report," *The New Yorker*, 1 May 1977; "Cy vs. Zbig," *Time*, 12 May 1980; *Manchester Guardian*, 15 February 1978. Interesting questions are raised by Constance Holden in "Ethiopia: Did Aid Speed an Inevitable Upheaval?" *CLXXXVI Science* 1192-1226 (27 December 1974). See also Philip LeBel, "Economic and Social Predictors of the Ethiopian Revolution," *The Horn of Africa* 2:53-59 (1978).

June, he indicated that his "own inclination is to aggressively challenge, in a peaceful way of course, the Soviet Union and others for influence in areas of the world that we feel are crucial to us now or potentially crucial 15 to 20 years from now." Dr. Kevin Cahill, a friend of Siad, was sent to Somalia at the same time to prepare contacts, indicating a possibility of military assistance. The Somali Ambassador was "encouraged" by talks with the President in May and June. On 15 July, 1978, the decision was also made in principle to sell defensive arms to Somalia. Shortly thereafter, Somalia regular army units were reported in the Ogaden.<sup>1032</sup>

There are those who argue that the evidence suggests that Washington switched policy in mid-stream, initially encouraging the Somalis to invade the Ogaden as a counter-revolutionary measure and then backing away from this commitment. It is evident, however, that the Somalis were keen to exploit the opportunity given by Ethiopia's turmoil, and needed no outside encouragement to invade the Ogaden. But they were also encouraged by Saudi Arabia to believe that the west would come to their aid if they attacked Ethiopia, and they made direct inquiries to Washington.<sup>1033</sup>

Saudi Arabia and the Shah's Iran shared a common interest with the USA in moving Somalia into the "Islamic fold." If, having succeeded in weaning the Sudan from the USSR by offering Khartoum economic aid as well as some \$220 million to buy arms from the west in order to replace Soviet weapons, there is no conceivable reason why Saudi Arabia would not pursue the same policy with regard to Somalia.<sup>1034</sup> Egypt also gave Somalia \$30

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<sup>1032</sup>See Arnaud de Borchgrave, *Newsweek*, 20 September 1977, and *Department of State Bulletin*, 11 June 1977.

<sup>1033</sup>Fred Halliday, *US Policy in the Horn of Africa*.

<sup>1034</sup>*Ibid.*, Marina and David Ottaway, 166.



million worth of Russian equipment, and at least \$7 million worth of weapons is known to have been flown in a covert operation by the CIA towards the end of 1977.<sup>1035</sup> At long last, when Somalia invaded Ethiopia in 1978, the USSR came to Addis Ababa's rescue. A massive airlift by the Soviet Union of \$2 billion worth of arms, 20,000 Cuban troops, 300 tanks and 3,000 Soviet military technicians proved decisive.<sup>1036</sup> In the process, over three-quarters of Somalia's 300 tanks, half of its 55 strong combat airforce and many of its best trained troops were destroyed.<sup>1037</sup>

A nation that had committed an unprovoked aggression against its neighbours cannot escape the consequences of its acts merely by moving the location of its troops. The principle of hot pursuit entitled Ethiopia to apprehend the culprit. However, on 14 December 1978, Brzezinski had to press Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin for assurance that the Ethiopians would not cross the Somali border once they began to recapture the Ogaden, and Dobrynin gave it on the spot.<sup>1038</sup>

Once the objective of destabilizing the Ethiopian regime through Somalia was found unlikely, the focus shifted to Eritrea and Brzezinski argued: If Ethiopia and South Yemen became Soviet associates, not only will access to Suez be threatened, but there will be a serious and direct political threat to Saudi Arabia.<sup>1039</sup>

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<sup>1035</sup> *7 Days* (New York), 19 March 1978.

<sup>1036</sup> *Op. cit.*, Hoffman, E., *The Conduct of Soviet...*, 496.

<sup>1037</sup> *Ibid.*, 532.

<sup>1038</sup> *Op. cit.*, Brzezinski, *Power and...*, (1983), 179.

<sup>1039</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

As if a subsidy to Somalia with a view to destabilizing Ethiopia was not enough, the Saudis similarly regarded the struggle of the Eritrean movements against Ethiopia as part of the broader objective of reducing the influence of the Soviet Union not only in the Horn of Africa but also throughout the Middle East.<sup>1040</sup>

The radical military regime of Ethiopia had to withstand not only Somalia, but also several insurgent movements including the ELF, EPLF, TPLF, EPRP, radical students as well as genuine socialists, who wanted to institute their own brand of socialism because they did not trust the ideological commitment of the regime to Marxism. There were also monarchist movements like the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU), and various others, which the Dergue lumped together as "counter-revolutionary." Most of them had external backing. As a result, the Dergue justified assistance from the USSR as the "revolutionary duty" of the world's first socialist state.

Western journalists had no difficulties in describing Ethiopia as a Soviet showcase in Africa, and argued that what happened in Ethiopia affected not only the Horn of Africa, but also the Red Sea, conservative states such as Saudi Arabia, and the countries through which the Nile River flowed, including Egypt and the Sudan.<sup>1041</sup> If what was happening in Ethiopia was not to spread into the rest of the region, or so it was claimed, destabilization or containment would be in order. Yet, it was also argued that as long as Ethiopia had insurgent movements on its hands, it would remain hostile to the USA and firmly allied to Moscow.<sup>1042</sup>

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<sup>1040</sup>Fred Halliday, *US Policy in the Horn*.

<sup>1041</sup>D. Willis, *The Christian Science Monitor*, 13 September 1984.

<sup>1042</sup>Robert J. McCloskey, *The New York Times*, 8 November 1984.

For their own different reasons, both the Ethiopian Government and the Eritreans announced that they were prepared to give peace a chance. Contacts were established between the Government and the Eritreans at the end of 1977 in East Berlin, with the German Democratic Republic acting on behalf of all socialist countries. But the three meetings with representatives of Addis Ababa, led by Berhanou Bayeh, ended in total failure.<sup>1043</sup> Soviet anger was revealed when Moscow announced that "Eritrea has always been part of Ethiopia."<sup>1044</sup> It was also noted by a highly placed functionary:

Many researchers recognized the progressive character of the Eritrean movement in the years when it opposed the anti-popular monarchist regime of Haile Selassie. However, by identifying the revolutionary regime with the monarchy, the Eritrean insurgents showed their political immaturity and acted as a tool in the hands of those hostile to the cause of national liberation.<sup>1045</sup>

The same view was conveyed by *Pravda*:

The Eritrean struggle was a tool of western imperialism aimed at weakening Ethiopia and depriving it of outlets to the Red Sea. In these conditions, the Eritrean separatists are involved in a game played by others and are objectively helping the realization of imperialist designs. The genuine interests of the population of the province (Eritrea) coincides with the interests of the entire Ethiopian people, which is trying to build life on a new principle. The revolutionary forces supported national unity and saw the whole national question in the context of class struggle within the country and the international sphere.<sup>1046</sup>

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<sup>1043</sup>The meeting took place in January, March and 9-11 June, 1978. Rene Lefort, *Ethiopia: As Heretical Revolution?* translated by A.M. Berrett, Zed Press, 57 Caledonian, 265.

<sup>1044</sup>V. Sofinsky and A. Khazanov, "The Imperialist Design for the Horn of Africa," *New Times*, no. 7 (1978), 5.

<sup>1045</sup>Vladimir Simonov, *Seething Continent: The Soviet Viewpoint* (Moscow: Novosti Press, 1980), 35.

<sup>1046</sup>*Pravda* as quoted by *Weekly Review*, 20 March 1978, 16.

Two years later, when Ahmed Nasser, Chairman of the ELF, visited Moscow, the situation had hardly changed. According to him:

An ELF delegation headed by myself held discussions with the USSR on an official invitation to explain our viewpoint concerning the regime in Ethiopia and the situation in Eritrea. This is a normal task in our everyday contacts with all progressive and anti-imperialist forces in the world which are willing to listen to our point of view.<sup>1047</sup>

Although the actual amount of Soviet military assistance to Ethiopia has been difficult to ascertain, a former Carter administration official has estimated that Ethiopia's arms imports from the USSR were worth \$1100 million in 1978 and \$192 million in 1979.<sup>1048</sup> The large military assistance in 1978 was given during the Ogaden war. Ethiopia's estimated military expenditure was \$362.8 million in 1980<sup>1049</sup>, \$439.61 million in 1981-2<sup>1050</sup>, and \$504.155 million in the 1983–1984 period.<sup>1051</sup> US government sources have estimated that the total Soviet military assistance to Ethiopia since 1977 is about \$4 billion.<sup>1052</sup>

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<sup>1047</sup>Quoted in *Eritrean Newsletter*, no. 39, April 30, 1980, 4.

<sup>1048</sup>Henze, Paul B., *Arming the Horn, 1960-1980*, Working Paper No. 43 (Washington, D.C., The Wilson Center, Smithsonian Institution, 1982), 25. Henze was an African specialist on President Carter's National Security Council, 1977-81.

<sup>1049</sup>*The Military Balance 1982-1983* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1982), 66.

<sup>1050</sup>*The Military Balance 1984-1985*, 76.

<sup>1051</sup>*The Military Balance 1985-1986*, 96.

<sup>1052</sup>US Department of Defense, *Soviet Military Power*, 5th end (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1986), 97. But these financial figures say little about the quantity and quality of arms Ethiopia received.

In any case, the weapons from the USSR had their effects. The ELF was forced to withdraw from the towns and from most of the border areas in southern Eritrea.<sup>1053</sup> The EPLF was also badly mauled.<sup>1054</sup>

Nevertheless, pressure on the regime continued unabated. Kuwait, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Sudan supported the Eritrean insurrection partly out of their dislike for the Soviet presence in Ethiopia,<sup>1055</sup> and partly, for their own objectives. Syria and Iraq did the same, but for different reasons.

Under Reagan, Washington called for strong support for its friends in the area, i.e., Sudan, Somalia and Kenya. It advocated greater co-ordination of policy towards Ethiopia and the other area states on the part of the NATO allies.<sup>1056</sup>

That the regime relied on crude repression and the iron fist can be discerned from the fact that it was spending at least \$2 million a day to finance the military expenses. In 1974, when the army took power, the defense budget stood at 105.8 million birr. By 1989, the budget had hit 1,500 mn birr, i.e., an average annual growth of 19%. In 1974, debt servicing was 51.4 million birr, by 1988, it had sky-rocketed to 530.5 mn birr.<sup>1057</sup> Soviet President, Mikhail Gorbachov, suggested a solution to the Eritrean problem within the framework

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<sup>1053</sup>Tesfa Tsion Medhne, 104.

<sup>1054</sup>Ibid.

<sup>1055</sup>Makinda, Samuel M., *Superpower Diplomacy in the Horn of Africa* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), 39.

<sup>1056</sup>Ibid., Korn, 57.

<sup>1057</sup>*Africa Confidential*, 30, no. 4, 17 February 1989.

of the Ethiopian State,<sup>1058</sup> and advised Mengistu to seek a non-military solution to the wars in Eritrea and Tigre.<sup>1059</sup>

Instead of taking the advice of the leaders of the USSR seriously, when Mengistu went back to Moscow and requested a substantial increase in the supply of military hardware, his request was turned down. He was told that "Soviet involvement in Ethiopia was a product of Brezhnev's years of stagnation—a period and policies we have broken away from," and that the arms agreement signed in 1986 and expiring in 1991 would be the last in its present form and scale.<sup>1060</sup>

Former United States President Jimmy Carter made a series of attempts to mediate the conflict between the Ethiopian Government and the Eritrean insurgents, but in vain.<sup>1061</sup> Having thus miserably failed in the task that it had set for itself, at the end of the day, the regime simply collapsed, and its leader fled to Zimbabwe. Instead of inducing unity, it generated ethnic divisions. Instead of promoting economic and social development, it fostered material deprivation and social stagnation. Instead of establishing a viable political and economic order, it left fissiporous tendencies and civil war situations to prevail.

In conclusion, we could say that while Haile Selassie relied on the USA to gain Eritrea and to retain it for at least two decades, the Dergue had to depend on the USSR. Having little internal support, both utilized crude repression and the iron fist to maintain a semblance of national unity. In the process, the

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<sup>1058</sup>*Africa Confidential*, 29, no. 23, 18 November 1988.

<sup>1059</sup>*Africa Confidential*, 29, no. 13.

<sup>1060</sup>*Africa Confidential*, 29, no. 13, 1 July 1988; *Africa Confidential*, 30, no. 4, 17 February 1989.

<sup>1061</sup>For the details, see *Africa Confidential*, 30, no. 12; 30, no. 17; 30, no. 20.

struggle for the Eritrean heart and mind was irretrievably lost. Both regimes miserably failed to carry out the necessary political, administrative, economic and social reforms in the entire country including Eritrea, that would have deprived the guerrillas of an internal power base. Instead, they succeeded in alienating the Eritrean masses by their inability to establish workable policies.

Both regimes failed to reduce significantly the antagonism of Ethiopia's adversaries or even to split them. If anything, Haile Selassie was too conservative in an otherwise emerging and left-leaning Northeast Africa and the Middle East. On the other hand, the Dergue was too radical and left-leaning in a region that was conservative at the level of the superstructure. In the end, Ethiopia could not ride through the storm because of the absence of a leadership that was capable of grasping the internal and external dimensions of the Eritrean conflict, and which was able to formulate appropriate policies at the local, national, regional and global levels.

According to Paul Henze, Washington had consistently sought Moscow's cooperation in reducing the intensity of the conflict in the Horn of Africa. Indeed, Ethiopia appeared several times on the agendas of high—and medium—level Soviet-American meetings. At last, when the Dergue collapsed, the USA took advantage of a previously scheduled conference of opposition parties in London on 27 May 1992, to impress them on the ideals of democracy and respect for human rights. In that meeting, Issaias Afewerki, head of the EPLF, agreed to accept a previously discussed two-year postponement of a referendum on Eritrean independence. By then, since the disintegration of

the Soviet political structure had reached an advanced stage, there was not much Moscow could have done to save the situation.<sup>1062</sup>

Just as the USSR and the leftist Arab regimes had succeeded in attaining their objectives a decade and half earlier, this time, the western powers and the west leaning regimes of the Middle East succeeded in evicting the USSR from Ethiopia, in weakening the country and in erasing the trace of socialism from Ethiopia: all this with the help of the Eritrean "freedom" fighters. A question that should be asked, but the answer for which will have to wait is this: Was the USA playing politica Tigrigna as a spoiling operation against the USSR, Cuba, and the others, or was it an innocent onlooker?

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<sup>1062</sup>Henze, Paul, "Ethiopia in Transition: Downfall of the Dergue and Establishment of New Government," *Ethiopian Review*, August 1992.



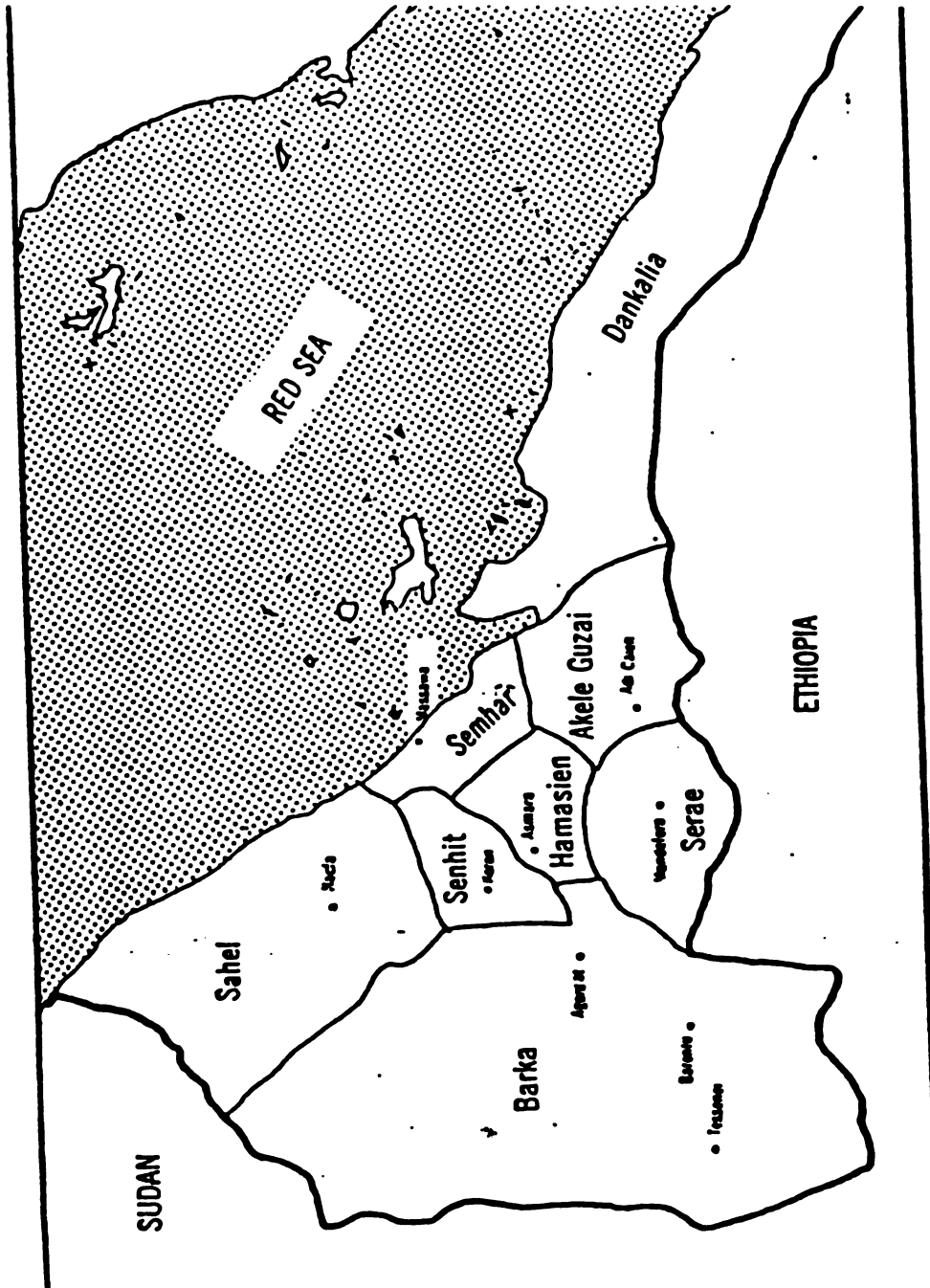
## Conclusion and Future Prospects

Under the rubric of what is commonly known as the "Eritrean conflict," various other types of conflicts have been going on--religious, ethnic, ideological, political, economic, and geo-political. We have examined the internal religious and ethnic strifes that continue to bedevil Eritrea, including the conflicts between and among the political movements. We have traced the root causes of the conflicts between Eritrea and Ethiopia. We have also discussed the various historical, economic, geo-political, and cultural questions which have made the Eritrean conflict an extension of the conflicts in the Middle East and the Horn of African sub-region. These include: the water politics of the Nile; the interdependence of Gulf and Red Sea Security issues for countries like Saudi Arabia and Iraq; the problem of Southern Sudan; Somalia's ambition to annex the Ogaden; the struggle between progressive and conservative regimes in the Middle East, and more recently, between Islamic fundamentalism and secularism. We have also discussed how Eritrea has been affected by the competition of the two major world powers and by their direct and indirect involvement in the fighting, and how the internal and external conditions favoured Eritrean independence. But how viable is an independent Eritrea? To what extent have the various dimensions of the conflict been addressed to permit it an independent and sovereign existence? What does political independence promise it?

### The Viability of Eritrea

Eritrea's emergence into nationhood is being tempered by sobering internal and external realities. The Internal problems include the political conflicts with the Eritrean opposition, ethnic tension, the government's inability to repatriate the thousands of Eritrean refugees in the Sudan and

Figure 8. Eritrea: Regions and Major Towns



elsewhere, and most significantly, the enormous difficulty of mobilizing the necessary resources urgently needed to reconstruct the material destruction suffered over the past decades.<sup>1063</sup> Eritrea is also beset by other strains and divisions, including the emergence of a fundamentalist Muslim movement, said to be sponsored by neighbouring Sudan. Let us first examine the internal conditions and then move on to discuss Eritrea's relations with Ethiopia, the reaction of the Ethiopian opposition to Eritrea's independence, and Eritrea's relations with the countries of the Middle East, the threat of Islamic fundamentalism and the future prospects.

### **The Internal Problems**

In spite of the fact that the thirty year old Eritrean insurgency was seemingly fought against Ethiopia because of the suppression of democratic liberties and the denial of basic human rights, according to the critics, Issaias Afewerki has instituted virtually a one-man dictatorship, and banned all political parties. Indeed, two years after the EPLF took power, freedom of speech, press and assembly are suppressed. There are no private newspapers or magazines, except for a couple of church publications.<sup>1064</sup>

Issaias Afewerki has already proclaimed that there will be no political parties in Eritrea that are based on religion, tribe or region. Likewise, he has also proclaimed that parties which are affiliated with foreign political tendencies, or act on behalf of foreign political organizations, or who receive material and financial assistance from foreign sources, and who propagate the

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<sup>1063</sup>Even with the best of intentions, the resources are not available. Most donor governments are giving priority to their domestic problems.

<sup>1064</sup>*The Christian Science Monitor*, May 6, 1993.

ideas of foreign political parties will not be allowed to operate in Eritrea.<sup>1065</sup> The proclamation may have been intended to serve two purposes: first, to promote national homogeneity, and secondly, to exclude Baathists, Islamic fundamentalists, tribalists and regionalists. However, the government is encountering serious problems.

To begin with, a number of ethnic groups including the Afars have created uncertainty over the achievement of national unity. They have already expressed their serious misgivings about becoming part of Eritrea. Mohammed Ibrahim of the Afar Democratic Union, for instance, raised the question of self-determination for the Afars, when he said:

all people who are willing to accept the independence of Eritrea should be able to answer this question: who are the Eritreans? Is it not the Afars, Kunamas, Tigrigna speakers, and so on, who are called "Eritreans?" Are not those the very same people who are going to be divided in two places, in which, one group will remain Ethiopian, and the other Eritrean?<sup>1066</sup>

Likewise, Mohammed Ahmed Gaas, the leader of the Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front (ARDUF), declared that the Afars are determined to continue fighting against the EPLF and to liberate the Red Sea coastal areas and the islands that extend from the Gulf of Zula to Ras Dumeira, otherwise known as Dankalia. He claims that the forces of ARDUF have so far survived the massive military operations of the EPLF, and will continue to intensify the struggle, and that fighting is going on in the mountains of Royalu, Bidu, Datka, Baada and Thio.<sup>1067</sup>

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<sup>1065</sup>Issaias Afeworki, Interview in Tigrigna, FBIS-AFR-93-115, June 17, 1993.

<sup>1066</sup>*Ethiopian Review*, June 1993.

<sup>1067</sup>*The Ethiopian Review*, Sept. 1993. See also the *Indian Ocean Newsletter*, June 1, 1991, no. 481. See also, Press Release, Afar Revolutionary Democratic Union, Spokesman Mahamada Ahmed Gaas, Washington D.C., 5/5/92.

If Dankalia secedes, Eritrea will be landlocked. Moreover, conditions leading to Eritrea's complete disintegration would be created. But what do the other Eritrean organizations say? According to the ELF, the EPLF has continued to deny the existence of other Eritrean organizations and to discredit their past and present roles, that it rejected outright the participation of all Eritrean political organizations in the political life of the country, that it arbitrarily started to decree laws without the consent of the people, and that the EPLF is doing everything in its power to suppress and to liquidate any form of opposition, and to that end, has embarked upon a war of extermination against all Eritrean political organizations in the western lowlands.<sup>1068</sup>

The ELF Revolutionary Command led by Ahmed Nasser contends that its current strategy is "to fight the tyrannical regime in Asmara and to replace it with a democratic regime. It rejects the recently established Eritrean "National Assembly," because its membership is limited to the central committee of the EPLF, and consequently, it is unrepresentative of the Eritrean society. The ELF Revolutionary Command likewise rejects the current Eritrean flag which happens to be the EPLF flag, and argues that any agreement signed by the EPLF with foreign powers will not be binding because the EPLF has no legitimacy.<sup>1069</sup>

Similarly, Muhammed Awhaj, member of the general staff of the Eritrean Liberation Army--Unified Organization, which opposes the EPLF, claims that violent battles have been raging between the opposition forces and

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<sup>1068</sup>ELF Foreign Relations Office, Bonn, 17-01. 1991. These organizations include the ELF-RC of Ahmed Nasser, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Eritrea of Abdellah Idris, the Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Eritrea headed by Gebre Brihan and the Islamic Jihad Movement.

<sup>1069</sup>FBIS-AFR-93-181, September 21, 1993.

the EPLF in several parts of Eritrea.<sup>1070</sup> Most effective has been the ELF faction led by Abdullah Idris, which is totally committed to armed struggle.<sup>1071</sup> It has called for a broad alliance with Ethiopian political movements opposed to the regimes in both Asmara and Addis Ababa. To that end, it has invited the Ethiopian Black Lions Movement to use the Eritrean lowlands that are under ELF control as bases for military operations as well as training.<sup>1072</sup> More ominous still for the EPLF is the emergence of the Islamic Jihad Movement, which has forged an alliance with Abdullah Idris. It claims that fighting against the Asmara government's forces began in September 1993 and is engaged in fierce fighting with the EPLF regular forces in the Keren area, and that out of the 25,000 EPLF soldiers demobilized by the government for carrying out a mutiny, most being Muslims, have joined the ranks of the Eritrean Islamic Jihad. They were provided with new weapons and are now fighting against the government forces.<sup>1073</sup> It is even claimed that six Eritrean districts have already fallen to the ELF.<sup>1074</sup> The ELF has accused the EPLF of kidnapping two of its Executive Committee members, Tekle Birhan Gebre Tsadik and Wolde Mariam Bahlibi in Kassala. In April 1992, Samuel Georgio, a devastating critic of Issaias Afewerki was killed by a silencer in Addis Ababa. Samuel's father, Georgio Habtit was a veteran member of the Unionist Party from Akele Guzaie.<sup>1075</sup> Given such conditions,

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<sup>1070</sup>FBIS-AFR-91-160, August 19, 1991.

<sup>1071</sup>*Africa Confidential*, 30 August 1993, 34, no. 9.

<sup>1072</sup>*Zog* (Amharic), no. 14, Addis Ababa, April 11, 1994.

<sup>1073</sup>FBIS-AFR-93-181, 21 September 1993.

<sup>1074</sup>*Ethiopian Review*, February 1994.

<sup>1075</sup>See *Africa Confidential*, 33, no. 10, 1992.

it would be no exaggeration to foresee the eruption of the age-old tribal, regional and religious conflicts in Eritrea. Even more alarming and potentially most damaging to the EPLF is the resignation of Rahmadan Mohammed Nur, the former Secretary General of the EPLF, and until recently, deputy to Issaias Afewerki. It appears that he was subjected to severe pressure from the leaders of the other Eritrean movements who advised him not to lend his name and give legitimacy to an essentially Christian dominated government. If the other Muslim officials in the government follow his example and quit, it could have serious consequences for peace and stability in the country.

### **The Economic Conditions**

Eritrea has few natural resources. In 1992 it imported 367 million birr worth of goods and exported goods worth a mere sixteen million birr.<sup>1076</sup> In a society in which 80% - 85% of the population is engaged in agriculture, 75% of the largely rural population is now dependent on food aid from international relief agencies. Agriculture continues to be devastated by drought. Some 60% of the livestock have perished and that 70% of the farmers have no oxen for ploughing.<sup>1077</sup>

Eritrea's immediate demand is for at least thirty-five megawatts of electricity, but national electricity production is only twenty megawatts, barely adequate for the capital city of Asmara. It is diesel generated and relies on imported fuel. As a result, forty public sector factories which include

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<sup>1076</sup>Sutton, Jacky, "Eritrea--Peace Brings New Problems," *African Business*, March 1994.

<sup>1077</sup>David Pool, "Eritrean Independence: The Legacy of the Dergue and the Politics of Reconstruction," *African Affairs*, (1993, 92) 395. See also *African Research Bulletin*, 1-31 May 1993, 30, no. 5.

textiles, footwear, beverages, and so on, are running at only one-third of capacity. This has limited employment opportunities, but it has also other implications. Foreign investment cannot be attracted because of this and other impediments, including lack of raw materials, skilled labour and effective demand. The government wants to sell the state-run industrial plants. So far, few takers have come forward. It has been forced to generate more revenues only by increasing taxes.<sup>1078</sup>

Much of the country's infrastructure was shattered during the war. The once fine railway linking the capital city, Asmara, with the Red Sea port of Massawa is no more. Asmara, which was built to support some 200,000 inhabitants, is now inhabited by some 450,000 people with the result that social services have been brought to the brink of ruin. The problem of land availability is compounded by the dilapidated infrastructure, and, in particular, the erratic water supply. In April 1992, some forty percent of the water was being lost through leakages from the unrenovated Italian built system. Even if the system is rehabilitated, there is insufficient water for the urban population, let alone manufacturing industry.<sup>1079</sup>

Houses, offices, and land inside towns are scarce. Foreign residents must pay between one thousand and three thousand dollars a month to rent a house in Asmara, compared to two hundred to six hundred dollars for a house with a similar comfort in Addis Ababa.<sup>1080</sup>

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<sup>1078</sup>*African Research Bulletin*, 1-30 April 1993, 30, no. 4. See also *Africa Confidential*, 30 April 1993. See also *Zena Ethiopia*, (Los Angeles), 2 February 1994, 1, no. 11, 1.

<sup>1079</sup>Op. cit., David Pool, 396-98.

<sup>1080</sup>*The Indian Ocean Newsletter*, 30 October 1993.



There are close to fifty-thousand unemployed youth in Asmara alone. Up to six thousand Eritrean youth crossed the Red Sea by boat last year in search of means of employment in Yemen and Saudi Arabia.<sup>1081</sup> In addition, the government must demobilize seventy-thousand soldiers. For the past two years, it had kept its fighters in barracks, paying them only pocket money. In May 1993, several of the units broke out and seized the airport, banks, and other vital installations in a protest to demand cash salaries.<sup>1082</sup> The government promised to pay them. It could do so only by closing either foreign embassies or by diverting funds from education and public health.

The refugee problem is equally staggering. The number of Eritreans abroad has been estimated as follows: Ethiopia (500,000); Sudan (500,000); Saudi Arabia and U. A. E. (100,000); U. S. A. (20,000); Germany (14,000); Canada (10,000); Sweden (8,000); Italy (5,000); Netherlands (4,000); Britain (3,500); Switzerland (1,000)—a total of 1,165,000.<sup>1083</sup>

Some of these refugees, especially those in the Sudan, have been “converted” to Islamic fundamentalism by the National Islamic Front of Turabi and Jihad Eritrea. A limited number of refugees have attained some education, some have accumulated some capital, but in general, most of them are poor and without skills. They need comprehensive assistance. The cost of repatriating and rehabilitating the refugees is beyond Eritrea’s means. If the Sudan were to expel even some of the refugees back to their homeland, as is alleged by some observers, Eritrea will be considerably de-stabilized.

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<sup>1081</sup>*Ethiopian Review*, November 1993.

<sup>1082</sup>*African Research Bulletin*, 1-31 May 1993, 30, no. 5.

<sup>1083</sup>Op. cit., Paulos Milikias, “Scenarios for Post-Independence.” *The Ethiopian Review*. Issaias Afeworki told a meeting, on refugee’s in Geneva, that his country had 2.25 million Eritreans inside and another 750,000 outside. See *The Indian Ocean Newsletter*, 30 October 1993.

Economic amelioration is a necessary component of domestic political legitimacy. However, in Eritrea's present conditions, the prospects are daunting. The EPLF government estimates that it will need at least two and half billion dollars in aid to rebuild roads, to modernize agriculture and to revive small industries such as food processing. But, the much needed foreign aid is not coming. Expectations have been high that independence will open the gates for aid. So far, however, only about one hundred million dollars has been pledged, and only for the next three years. It is not difficult to see that resources are not available even with the best of intentions. Most donor governments are giving priority, and rightly so, to their domestic problems.<sup>1084</sup>

#### **Ethio-Eritrean Relations**

Eritrea's independence has shattered the time-worn notion that geographical borders inherited from the former colonial powers were unalterable in Africa. As a result of Eritrea's present status, a dangerous precedent has been created. It is already causing concern to those African countries like Somalia, Sudan, Angola, Cameroon, Zaire, Mali, Senegal and South Africa, which are themselves facing separatist movements. In a continent that is badly divided along ethnic lines, the prospects of a domino chain of demands for self-determination because of Eritrea are only to be expected.<sup>1085</sup>

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<sup>1084</sup>*African Research Bulletin*, 1-31 May 1993, 30, no. 5.

<sup>1085</sup>*The Washington Post*, 24 April 1993. It should be noted that Articles II and III of the OAU Charter and the OAU Cairo Resolution 17(1) of 1964 on the inviolability of state frontiers have been violated.

Eritrea's divorce from Ethiopia, with whom it shares strong historical links of culture, religion, language and ethnicity, has taken on the aspects of a painful family break-up with strong and volatile emotions on all sides.<sup>1086</sup>

Having secured Eritrea's independence, Issaias Afewerki announced on 25 April 1993 that he would not rule out the establishment of a confederation with Ethiopia.<sup>1087</sup> He also said that in the economic sector there was a need to coordinate trade, currency and budget policies, and that it was in the interest of both countries to work together on projects for industrialization, telecommunications, energy and agriculture.<sup>1088</sup>

Trade promotion agreements have already been signed between the two countries in January 1992. The agreement made Assab a free port for Ethiopia, and provided tax-free trade between Ethiopia and Eritrea.<sup>1089</sup>

When Issaias Afewerki visited Addis Ababa in July 1993, a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation was also signed, which provides for the establishment of a Joint Ministerial Commission that is entrusted with the task of identifying areas of cooperation between the two countries.<sup>1090</sup> The need for closer harmonization of fiscal and monetary policies was also discussed. The two countries already share the same currency but have, interalia,

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<sup>1086</sup>Parmelee, Jennifer. "Eritreans Cast Votes for Independence." *The Washington Post*, 24 April 1993.

<sup>1087</sup>*Africa Confidential*, 30 April 1993.

<sup>1088</sup>*The Indian Ocean Newsletter*, 1 May 1993.

<sup>1089</sup>*African Profiles International*, August/September 1993. Ethiopia has alternative outlets. It can use Djibouti's. Somaliland will only be too happy if Ethiopia uses Zeila and Berbera. Both Mogadisho and Mombassa can also be utilized. Considering all these, Eritrea needs Ethiopian transit trade. Even if Assab remains a free port, there will still be dues to collect. Having no links with the other ports of Eritrea, Assab has little value for the country.

<sup>1090</sup>*The Ethiopian Herald*, Addis Ababa, 31 July 1993.

different exchange rates and trade policies. Ethiopia uses an auction system to allocate foreign exchange, Eritrea uses the official exchange rate.<sup>1091</sup>

When the joint ministerial consultative meeting took place in Asmara from 22-27 September 1993, agreements were further reached on a wide range of issues: economic, social, and political. Apart from monetary and technical subjects, matters related to security, defense, and foreign affairs were also covered. These mutual interests are to be pursued through joint projects and ventures with a view to promote the gradual evolution of the two economies and societies into a higher level of integration.<sup>1092</sup>

Agreement was also reached whereby Ethiopians and Eritreans are allowed to move freely in both countries without holding an entrance and exit visas, in accordance with the protocol agreement signed between the two governments. The Protocol of September 1993 entitles Ethiopians and Eritreans to reside in each other's country for an unlimited period of time.<sup>1093</sup>

### **The Reaction of the Ethiopian Opposition**

If one believes the views of the Ethiopian elite both at home and abroad, the Eritrean problem has not been solved. It has merely been postponed. They cannot reconcile themselves to the idea of Eritrean independence, which they consider as a foreign "plot," designed to undermine their country's independence. Whatever has been done to allow the Eritrean people to

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<sup>1091</sup> *The Economist Intelligence Unit: Eritrea, Country Report 3rd Quarter, 1993.*

<sup>1092</sup> Colin Legum. "Horn of Africa, Good News from a Troubled Corner of the World." *Ethiopian Commentator*, Sept/Dec 1993. See also *Third World Report*, no. TX, 2-21 July 1993.

<sup>1093</sup> *The Ethiopian Herald*, 10 October 1993. See also *Africa Research Bulletin*, 1-30 October 1993, 30, no. 9.

exercise their right to self-determination is equally dismissed as a stage-managed farce. As an acute observer of the scene views it: "in all probability, it is a question of time before the Eritrean-Ethiopian problem rears its ugly head again."<sup>1094</sup>

In point of fact, huge demonstrations were staged at home and abroad opposing Eritrea's secession. During such demonstrations, some Ethiopians were wounded, and some were even killed. One such occasion was on 4 January 1993 when university students wanted to deliver a protest note to U. N. Secretary General Boutros B. Ghali who was attending a meeting in Addis Ababa.<sup>1095</sup>

Furthermore, several of the opposition parties met in Paris in March 1993 and signed a communique reserving the right of a future Ethiopian Government over the Eritrean referendum. These include: The Afar Revolutionary Democratic Union (ARDU), the Coalition of Ethiopian Democratic Forces (CODEF), Medhin Democratic Party; the Congress Party of Ethiopia; Tigray-Tigrigne Party of Ethiopia (composed of Eritreans and Tigreans), the Oromo Liberation Front, and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Coalition.<sup>1096</sup>

Similarly, the Conference on Peace and Reconciliation organized by the opposition forces met in Addis Ababa from 18 to 22 December 1993. It brought together one hundred sixty-five participants, including delegates from fifty-one political organizations, fifty elders of communities from Addis Ababa and

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<sup>1094</sup> Makau Wa Mutua. "The New Oligarchy." *Africa Report*, September/October 1993.

<sup>1095</sup> *Africa Research Bulletin*, 1-31 January 1993, 30, no. 1.

<sup>1096</sup> *Africa Confidential*, 30 April 1993.

ten from regional administrations, thirty-one foreign diplomats, and twenty or so delegates from non-governmental organizations.<sup>1097</sup>

The conference agreed that the referendum in Eritrea does neither address the nationality question, nor contribute to peace and stability. In so far as Eritrea is considered a sovereign state, any agreement Ethiopia signs with it cannot be outside the scope and purview that normally guides the relations between two sovereign states.<sup>1098</sup>

Nor are Ethiopians impressed with proposals and agreements for economic cooperation between the two countries. They find it ironic that the EPLF and its supporters who had maintained all along the political fiction that Eritrea was a “colony” of Ethiopia during their struggle, now yearn for an economic union with the former “colonial power.” While the critics admit that there are sound economic reasons for an economic union between any two countries, there are even stronger arguments for maintaining the already existing union. It is, they say, much cheaper to clean, repair, or renovate a house than to demolish it altogether, and to start rebuilding from scratch two separate houses and somehow join them through scaffolding.<sup>1099</sup>

Nor are Ethiopians prepared to be taken for a ride with regard to the proposal for Ethio-Eritrean confederation, or the protocol which permits the nationals of both countries to move freely and reside in each other’s country for an unlimited period of time.

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<sup>1097</sup>*Summary of the Resolutions of the Conference for Peace and Reconciliation*, 18-22 December 1993, Addis Ababa (unpublished). See also the *Indian Ocean Newsletter*, 25 December 1993, no. 604.

<sup>1098</sup>*Ibid.*, Summary of Resolutions. Despite its independent status, Eritrea continues to be very dependent on Ethiopia economically. It continues to be subsidized by the regime in Addis Ababa.

<sup>1099</sup>*The Ethiopian Review*, June 1993.

After all, the EPLF government in Eritrea had, they say, forcibly expelled about one hundred twenty thousand Ethiopians including soldiers, teachers, former government officials, businessmen, workers and even students. This is confirmed by Amnesty International, which revealed that they were put across the border with Ethiopia without any transportation. Hundreds died of starvation or illness in transit camps, or while making their way South.<sup>1100</sup> It is far from certain that Ethiopian nationalism can demonstrate such forbearance--a nationalism that has been rekindled with new passion.

Given the reaction of the population and the opposition political parties, the prospects for amicable Ethio-Eritrean relations look grim. If the present regime in Addis Ababa, which Ethiopians consider an EPLF surrogate, were to be overthrown, and this should be possible once the nationalists recoup their cohesion and strength, the population's anger and frustration could easily get an outlet through the resurgence of Greater Ethiopian nationalism, which would claim Eritrea outright, even if that means going to war all over again.

Such a government could close Ethiopia's borders with Eritrea and trade through Djibouti.<sup>1101</sup> The ports of Berbera (Somaliland) and Mogadisho (Somalia) could also be utilized. Mombassa has always been at Ethiopia's disposal. Once the question of outlet to the sea is resolved, a nationalist Ethiopian government may be tempted to bring the EPLF down to its knees through economic blockade, military pressure, psychological warfare, and

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<sup>1100</sup>*African Confidential*, 30 April 1993, 34, no. 9.

<sup>1101</sup>The port of Djibouti and the Ethio-Djibouti railway are to be refurbished at a considerable cost. The economic advantage for Djibouti would be such that it might propose a confederation with Ethiopia. Such a move can also be justified in terms of uniting the Afars and Issais of both countries. See also Paulos Milikia. "Scenarios for..." and *African Research Bulletin*, 16 February to 15 March 1993, 30, no. 2.

even working with the Eritreans opposition political parties. Eritrea's resources limited as they are, would necessarily have to be diverted from rehabilitation and reconstruction into military expenditure with all dire consequences to the welfare of the population,<sup>1102</sup> and, therefore, to the future of the EPLF government itself.

### **Eritrea and the Middle East**

If Eritrea's internal political and economic conditions do not look bright, and its problems with Ethiopia are at an abeyance and suspension, nor can we say Eritrea's victimization as a result of the conflicts in the Middle East has come to an end. According to the *CRESCENT*:

The early phase of the Eritrean struggle was purely a jihad led by such Muslims as Hamid Awate. An independent Eritrea with strong Muslim-Arab heritage, and so close to Egypt, Sudan, the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula--including the newly united Yemen--will, in the long run, constitute a strategic loss to Israel and its western allies, especially the USA.<sup>1103</sup>

Even if Eritrea's present orientation and declared policy is in sharp contrast to what appears above, it would be erroneous to assume that radical Muslims or Pan-Arabists will compromise with an EPLF-led Eritrea affiliated with Ethiopia, and still less, permit it to have a normal working relationship with Israel and the USA. After all, the Arab governments did not invest so much in the "Arabism of Eritrea," merely to settle now for a non-Arab and a non-Islamic entity.<sup>1104</sup>

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<sup>1102</sup>Op. cit., David Pool. "Eritrean Independence,...." 392.

<sup>1103</sup>*CRESCENT*, (News Magazine); Future of the Islamic Movement, 16-31 July 1990, 19, no. 9.

<sup>1104</sup>Haggai Erlich. "Ethiopia, Eritrea and the Middle East." *Ethiopian Review*, February 1993.



As early as 1975, the Arab League had expressed the common Arab stand when it passed a resolution supporting the Eritrean struggle. The 1980 Conference of Arab Foreign Ministers extended material, political, and media support to Eritrea. In 1981, it convened a meeting of all four Eritrean factions in Tunis. In fact, no Arab meeting or conference had taken place without Eritrea being on the item of the agenda. On top of that, individual Arab countries like Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Egypt, Libya, Somalia, Syria, Iraq, Kuwait, UAE, Qatar, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, and Yemen have all made great effort to support the cause of Eritrean independence.<sup>1105</sup>

Apart from political and strategic considerations, the fact that half of the Eritrean population is Muslim, provides a further Arab interest in Eritrea. Indeed, the one Arab country that has a stake in the future of Eritrea is Saudi Arabia, which has never been anything but a classic fundamentalist Islamic state, with the Qoran as its constitution and the Sharia as its criminal and civil law.<sup>1106</sup>

Relations between Saudi Arabia and the EPLF have always been strained. During the war of independence, Riyadh financed Muslim Eritrean groups who were opposed to the EPLF, and had even confiscated boats loaded with arms which were sent to the EPLF. Recently, the Saudi authorities have had official representatives of the EPLF arrested and then expelled. Since they consider Eritrea part of Saudi Arabia's security perimeter, the Saudi authorities cannot countenance an EPLF dominated Eritrea, many of whose leaders are Christians. As if that was not enough, the EPLF has established relations with Israel at the official level—a move, which has shocked the Arab world in general, and the

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<sup>1105</sup>Dr. Abdul Qadar Tash. "Why does Afewerki Reject the Arabism of Eritrea?" *Arab News*, 27 October 1993.

<sup>1106</sup>*The Economist*, 4 April 1992.

Saudis in particular. When Issaias Afewerki went to Israel in February 1993, for a health check-up, the Saudis could not believe their ears. In response, the EPLF has accused Saudi Arabia of persisting with a "hostile policy towards Eritrea," and implored it and other similar "self-styled regional forces" to stop trying to sow chaos in Eritrea and in the Horn of Africa.<sup>1107</sup>

### **The Threat of Islamic Fundamentalism**

By far the greatest threat to Eritrea's stability is the emergence of Fundamentalist Islam in general, and that of the Mujahedeen of the Eritrean Islamic Jihad in particular. Over the last couple of years, violent anti-government campaigns by Islamic fundamentalist groups in Egypt and Algeria, and the presence of an activist, hard-line Islamic regime in the Sudan, have raised fears that the stirrings in the Horn of Africa presage the sub-region's emergence as the new battle ground for Islamic radicals. According to close observers of the scene, there is a creeping threat in Somalia; as well as in the self-declared "Republic of Somaliland;" Ethiopia; Eritrea; Djibouti; and Kenya. Fundamentalist organizations such as the Eritrean Jihad, the Ogaden National Liberation Front in Ethiopia, and the Muslim Brotherhood Wahadiya in Somalia, have all become very active in ambushing government troops. A further evidence of the newly assertive fundamentalist presence is the striking increase in the number of Muslim women who are now wearing Islamic head and body coverings.<sup>1108</sup>

Some of the groups have recruited experienced preachers and fighters from Mujahedeen and Muslim Brotherhood organizations in Egypt, Pakistan,

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<sup>1107</sup>*African Research Bulletin*, 1-28 February 1993, 30, no. 2.

<sup>1108</sup>Jennifer Parmelee. "Radicals Gain Strength in the Horn of Africa; Muslim Fundamentalist Groups Stepping Up Armed Attacks." *The Washington Post*, 5 January 5, 1994.

Afghanistan, Yemen, Sudan and Saudi Arabia to press their agenda around the Horn. Most of the financial support for the radical groups, as well as some weapons, is traced to Saudi Arabia. The Sudan and Iran lend support, but cannot match even private Saudi financial resources.<sup>1109</sup>

The Sudanese regime, in particular, has gone a rhetorical leap beyond other Islamic states, adopting the concept of Jihad as a domestic and foreign policy. It uses Jihad at once as a rallying slogan and as a *raison d'être*--a way of defining the regime in terms of the hostility it perceives.

Hassan Turabi, its theoretician, paints a vision of an emerging Islamic bloc that will serve as a counterweight to the influence of the USA in the region. His calls for a world-wide Islamic Revolution have converted Khartoum into a hot house for extremist elements ranging from Iran's proselytizing Revolutionary Guards to Mujahedeen guerrilla leftovers from the Afghan war.<sup>1110</sup>

The latest alarm was sounded by Issaias Afewerki, who charged that the Jihad Eritrean Movement was created by the Sudanese National Islamic Front, that this movement had sought to attack Eritrea from its base camps in the Sudan, and that on 16 December 1993, twenty Eritrean Jihad fighters including Islamic mercenaries from Morocco, Tunisia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan were killed by his soldiers.<sup>1111</sup> In his own words:

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<sup>1109</sup>Iran's annual defense expenditures have been conservatively, estimated to be six billion dollars. However, according to *Jane's Defense Weekly*, Iran plans to spend some fifty billion over the next five years. See *Turkish Daily News*, Ankara, Turkey, 15 January 1992; *Jane's Defense Weekly*, London 1 February 1992.

<sup>1110</sup>*Chicago Tribune*, 28 October 1993.

<sup>1111</sup>*The New York Times*, Sunday, 2 January 1994.

These people claim that they are out to liberate the whole region. For the past two years, we have been trying to solve the problem with the Sudanese Government in a constructive manner, [but in vain]. We are now informing the public about the war which has been declared on Eritrea and its people.”<sup>1112</sup>

Turning to the Eritrean refugees in the Sudan, he said:

They are enduring moral and psychological stress as third-class citizens. The National Islamic Front is viciously exploiting their desperate status, literally using them as hostages, and forcibly conscripting them into its “people’s militia” to serve its strategy.<sup>1113</sup>

Is this incident merely a footnote to the emerging drama, or the beginning of independent Eritrea’s tragedy?

Apart from denying its involvement in the military encounter, the reply of the Government of the Sudan was as follows:

The Sudan has, within the limits of its own modest abilities, provided Eritrea with every material and political assistance. The Sudan helped to build the Eritrean state by dispatching manpower with various different skills and providing logistic support in all fields. It also helped to support the country’s agricultural production projects by providing one hundred tractors, and has provided constant supplies of food in recognition of the strong ties between the Sudanese and Eritrean peoples, and that it would make no sense for the Sudan to undermine a regime which it helped and supported.<sup>1114</sup>

With regard to the Eritrean refugees, the Sudanese Government argued that the Sudan has been hosting five hundred thousand of them for more than thirty years, and shared with them its limited resources. Following Eritrea’s

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<sup>1112</sup>FBIS-AFR-94-001, 3 January 1994.

<sup>1113</sup>Letter dated 3 January 1994 from the President of Eritrea, addressed to the President of the United Nations Security Council circulated as Security Council document 5/1994/34 of 15 January 1994.

<sup>1114</sup>The letter from the President of Eritrea does not refer to any involvement by Sudanese nationals in the incident. The Sudanese response is addressed to the President of the Security Council by Ali Mohammed Osman Yassin, Permanent Representative of the Republic of the Sudan to the United Nations, and circulated as Security Council Document 5/1994/34 of 24 January 1994.

independence, the Sudanese Government called for the return of the refugees to their country, but the Eritrean Government put forward numerous excuses, asserting that it was not ready or prepared to absorb such an enormous number at the present time. If what was stated in the Eritrean letter about the mistreatment and exploitation of the refugees was true, says the Sudan, we wonder why the Eritrean refugees are not being repatriated to their homeland by the Eritrean Government.<sup>1115</sup>

The fundamental obligation of a true Muslim is to wage a Jihad, or a holy war first at home, against the pseudo-Muslim apostates who rule, and then, having ousted them and re-Islamized society, to resume the greater role of Islam in the world, i.e., the return to roots and authenticity. Most Muslim countries face grave economic problems. If they fail to cope with these challenges, the existing regimes are likely to be overthrown and replaced by one variety or another of Islamic fundamentalists who happen to be popular because they are out of power and therefore cannot be held responsible for the present troubles. If they acquired power, and with it responsibility, they would soon lose that popularity. But this would not matter to them, since once in power, they would not need popularity to stay there, and would continue to govern. In time they would be overthrown, but by then, they would have done immense, perhaps irreversible damage to the cause of freedom.<sup>1116</sup>

When the Eritrean Ambassador to Cairo, Mohammed Ali Omero was submitting a protest note to Egyptian President Houseni Moubarek, the current OAU Chairman concerning Khartoum's unfriendly activities, the Sudanese Government was busy bringing together all Eritrean Muslim groups opposed

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<sup>1115</sup>Ibid.

<sup>1116</sup>Bernard Lewis. "Islam and Liberal Democracy." *The Atlantic Monthly*, 27, no. 2, February 1993, 98.

to the EPLF. Having repatriated a limited number of Eritrean refugees back to their homeland without warning the EPLF government in Asmara, Khartoum is also making further moves to repatriate the rest. This is being done in an apparent attempt to undermine the EPLF regime which faces enormous economic and social problems.<sup>1117</sup>

It appears that instead of the secular ideology of the EPLF, Islam in its fundamentalist form would be more appealing to Eritrean Muslims because it promises to provide the solution to their personal, social and indeed, political problems. To that end, Hassan Tourabi envisages a series of new Muslim states from the Nile to the Indian Ocean which will be members of the Arab League.<sup>1118</sup>

In order to shield Eritrea from the conflicts originating in the Middle East and to discourage foreign meddling in Eritrean internal affairs, Issaias Afewerki disowned the Arabism of his country and made a vehement attack on the Arab League. For him, there is no difference between Ethiopia and Eritrea. He even considers the question of Eritrea's entry into the Arab League as something quite strange.<sup>1119</sup>

In a bid to reject the Arabism of Eritrea, he also raised several questions, including the following: "What are the specifications that make one entity or another belong to the fold of Arabism?" "Are they ethnic in character or, are they related to religion?" "Are they linked with military and political goals of some strategic significance?" "Is it economic interest that brings an entity into the fold of Arabism?" He went on to argue that some confusion has taken

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<sup>1117</sup>*Al-Ittihade*, Khartoum, 18 January 1994.

<sup>1118</sup>*Africa Research Bulletin*, 1-31 May 1993, 30, no. 5.

<sup>1119</sup>*Arab News*, 27 October 1993.

place with regard to the question of identity, and noted that the understanding of the Arabs of the Eritrean issue was superficial. He also said: Somalis are not Arabs. Nor are Djiboutians. Perhaps there might be an invading Arab-Islamic culture.<sup>1120</sup>

Rapprochement between Israel and the Arabs does have its impact on the Eritrean situation. In the same way, the conflicts originating from the Middle East into which Eritrea continues to be enmeshed do contribute to its destabilization. The emergence of Fundamentalist Islam and the Mujahedeen of the Eritrean Islamic Jihad, are adding fuel to the fire. Witnessing the ascendance to power of the essentially Christian Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), the Arab countries are, once again, providing aid to the Muslim dominated Eritrean Liberation Front including to the faction headed by Abdella Idris. This is being done with a view to help the Muslims prevail over their Christian adversaries. In such a set up, the American, and in particular, the Israeli presence in Eritrea, can only strengthen the position of Islamic Jihad and Abdella Idris. As a result, the Eritrean society could be polarized on religious grounds. Under such conditions, just as Eritrean Muslims cannot help but look for sympathy and support from their co-religionists in the Middle East, the Christian Eritreans would, likewise, seek the support of their Christian neighbours in Ethiopia.

With regard to Israel's security interests in the Red Sea area, we should note that given Israel's conventional and nuclear capabilities, it could be argued that its security will not be adversely affected by anything that happens in Eritrea. Israel possesses not only the power but also harbours the political ambition to establish itself as the first regional hegemony in the Red

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<sup>1120</sup>Ibid.

Sea region. It may even be said that because of the dependence of the Red Sea states on the free flow of trade throughout the region, there is a convergence of Arab and Israeli interests to avoid taking actions which would disrupt this traffic. After all, stabilization of Arab-Israeli relationships keeps the Suez Canal open. Nevertheless, the triumph of Islamic fundamentalism will upset all this and more--peace, stability, trade, human rights, and so on. Fundamentalism or not, the Arabs will feel more secure in an Eritrea that is Muslim/ELF controlled and which will seek Arab League membership in the interest of Muslim solidarity. Such an arrangement could give the Arabs some leverage, even in their dealings with Israel. However, because Christian Eritreans and behind them, Ethiopia, may not accept such a set-up, a Lebanon type of civil war could be inevitable.

On the other hand, now that the Cold War is over, and the Middle East no longer a battlefield for rival power blocs, the Arab governments of the region may have a serious rapprochement with Israel. As a result, they could divert their energies and finances to address the economic and social problems of their societies. If such an atmosphere prevails, it could rub off and have a positive impact on Eritrea. The fact that 70% of the current Arab population has been born since 1970, may encourage this attitude. The population has no memory of the major Arab-Israeli wars. But unfortunately, seventeen out of twenty-two Arab states have a declining gross national product. At the current growth rates of 3.2%, in the next twenty years the population of many Arab countries will double. These states could be ungovernable through secular ideologies.<sup>1121</sup>

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<sup>1121</sup>Robert D. Kaplan. "The Coming Anarchy." *The Atlantic Monthly*, February 1994, 70.



What about Egypt's historical entanglement in the water politics of the Blue Nile? By promoting the Eritrean insurrection, Egypt made sure that Ethiopia would divert both its efforts and its resources into quelling the Eritrean uprising--resources which could have been utilized in tapping the waters of the Blue Nile for development purposes. By providing the necessary military, political and diplomatic support for Eritrea's independence, Egypt effectively undermined Ethiopia. Having done that, it came out with further plans to utilize the waters of the Nile. According to a close observer of the scene: Digging has began for the Salaam (peace) Canal--a \$1.4 billion project aimed to carry 12.5 million cubic meters a day of fresh water from the Nile into the Northern Sinai, irrigating 400,000 acres of new farmland and opening the way for three million or more Egyptians to eventually populate a region that is now home to only some 250,000 Egyptians. It is the second largest public works project in Egypt's history--second only to the Aswan High Dam on the Nile.<sup>1122</sup> Given the limits of Ethiopia's financial and technological capabilities, perhaps Egypt's sense of threat may have been blown out of proportion. But, in the long run, as close observers of the scene view it: a war could erupt between Egypt and Ethiopia over the Nile River because water will be in dangerously short supply.<sup>1123</sup> For the time being, at least, Egypt may have to preoccupy itself in addressing its domestic problems, including the threat of fundamentalism.

The interdependence of Gulf and Red Sea security issues for countries like Saudi Arabia, the struggle between conservative and progressive Arab states, as well as between secularism and Islamic fundamentalism are questions

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<sup>1122</sup>Murphy, Kim. "Making Another Desert Bloom." *World Report:: Analysis Forecast, The Los Angeles Times*, Tuesday, 1 February 1994.

<sup>1123</sup>Op. cit., Kaplan. "The Coming Anarchy...", 58.

that are intimately linked with the internal conditions of the Arab countries, with their dealings with Israel and with their overall relations with the west, about which we cannot say much. If the West adopts an even-handed policy in the Middle East in matters pertaining to the Palestinian question, persuades Israel to the return of lands it annexed from the Arabs following the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, supports modernizing regimes of the area, and makes its contributions to the peace and development of the region, the west can effectively undermine Muslim fundamentalism. Failing that, we will have more of Iran in the Middle East.

With regard to the international dimensions of the Eritrea conflict, we could also say the following: until very recently, Ethiopia was seen by both the USA and the USSR as having some strategic importance which they could use in their global competition and conflicts. Policy towards Ethiopia was, therefore, shaped predominantly by strategic considerations, as each world power sought to acquire strategic advantages and to limit the ability of the adversary to do so. And, despite the fact that all sorts of ideological justifications were advanced to rationalize the process, perceived strategic interest was the main factor in shaping the policies of the USA and the USSR. As a consequence, they lent a blind eye to the oppressive nature of regimes to which they gave their support. This was the case of the USA with regard to Haile Selassie's Ethiopia, and that of the USSR with regard to the Dergue. These regimes, of course, had their own agenda. They were content to use the superpowers much as they, in turn, were used by them and to play the game according to the role assigned to them.

Nevertheless, with the appearance of Mikail Gorbachev on the political scene and his *prestoroiika* and *glassnost*, the policy of the USSR in matters affecting countries like Ethiopia drastically changed. Such a change also

brought with it a corresponding shift of policy on the part of the USA. Now that the Cold War has ended, and the Middle East is no longer a battlefield for rival power blocs, the rapprochement had a corresponding impact in weakening the Dergue, in dramatically scaling down the Eritrean conflict and in Eritrea's eventual independence. In this respect, the following factors could be taken into account:

1. If arms transfers are a barometer of the relative strategic value of a region, Africa became negligible in the eyes of Washington. The fact that U. S. Security Assistance to Africa dropped from \$62 million in 1992, to \$41 million in 1993, illustrates the point.<sup>1124</sup> The US was for strategic disengagement, and have a low military profile.
2. Washington's ability to wage war against Iraq, without the use of any military facilities of the countries of the Horn of Africa, revealed the sub-region's global strategic marginality on the part of the USA.
3. In the past, the strategic interest of the USA in Kagnev converged with Ethiopia's geo-political imperatives in Eritrea. However, this time, facilities in Ethiopia were no longer needed. America's options in the Middle East had begun to expand since the 1973 Arab-Israeli war;
4. The threat to Israel had been low level. Besides, Israel's capabilities are deemed more than sufficient to keep the Red Sea open to international navigation.

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<sup>1124</sup>USA, Congressional Presentations for Security Assistance Program, Jointly prepared by the Department of State and the Defence Security Assistance Agency, Washington, D.C.. (1993).

5. The development of alternative oil-transit routes, and the construction of pipelines across the Arabian Peninsula had reduced the threat to oil supply.
6. United States policy on Eritrea changed. Washington no longer insisted on championing Ethiopia's territorial integrity. The possibility of an independent Eritrea had to be considered.<sup>1125</sup>

Since the USSR no longer exists, and its successor states regard Ethiopia as the least of their concerns, the reality of Eritrean independence became inevitable. This, in turn, meant, that the major strategic rationale for the world powers to grant support to authoritarian clients also disappeared, at least, theoretically. What was the result of this? African states were transformed from Cold War pawns, into irrelevant international clutter.<sup>1126</sup>

Ironic as it may sound, the physical presence of the USSR and the USA in the Horn of Africa had created a measure of internal stability and a restraining influence externally. The disquieting situation in Somalia serves to illustrate the point. The international power balance which had existed since the 1940s, had served the non-Western client states as a supportive source of leverage. With the departure of the USA and the USSR, a dangerous political void has been created in the non-western world, including in the sub-region. Nature abhors a vacuum, but who is to fill it? Would Britain, France, or Italy be interested in that? Neighbouring Islamic states are likely

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<sup>1125</sup>While the State Department's preferred solution was for some form of sub-regional federation, the African Bureau had to adjust to the military reality. See U. S. Department of State, Bureau of African Affairs, "The Horn of Africa: the need for Federalism and Dialogue." address by Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Irvin Hicks, to the African-American Institute, 1990 Forum Series, Washington, D. C., 18 November 1990.

<sup>1126</sup>Samuel Decalo. "The Process, Prospects and Constraints of Democratization in Africa." *African Affairs*, 91 (363) 1992, 17.

to try to fill the geopolitical void created in the Horn of Africa. Egypt and Iran have already been jockeying in order to extend their influence, while Saudi Arabia has been financing a major effort to revitalize the sub-region's Muslim cultural and religious heritage. Islam is thus pushing southward, reversing the geopolitical momentum of the last four centuries.

It could be claimed that with the collapse of the USSR, the Horn of Africa and the Middle East have been transformed into an area of overt and exclusive U.S. preponderance. This condition is historically unique, in so far as the Ottoman Turks and the Portuguese, Britain and France, the USSR and the USA all competed for influence in the region. With the collapse of the Soviet Union especially after the Gulf War of 1991, for the first time in modern history, a single external power has come to exercise exclusive preponderance. Yet, that preponderance is likely to remain quite superficial and even brittle, largely because there are no underlying bonds of shared values or political culture or religion between the USA and much of the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. American power rests largely on an alliance with local governments which, in several cases run the risk of losing touch with their own populations. Iran is an aspirant to regional hegemony and is prepared to outwit the USA. It possesses the religious and nationalist motivation as well as the imperial tradition to contest the American presence. In doing so, it can count on the religious sympathy of its neighbours. With both religion and nationalism conspiring against an alien regional hegemony, the current American supremacy in the Middle East and the Horn of African is built, quite literally, on sand. Arab hostility towards the USA will increase if American efforts to promote the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict fails. Such an outcome is

likely to facilitate the mobilization of religious fundamentalism and nationalist radicalism against American supremacy in the area.<sup>1127</sup>

Washington is engaged in activities which will only strengthen the resolve of Muslim extremists in the region. U. S. navy ships, for example, are making port visits. The U. S. military is also in advanced talks on installing powerful over-the-horizon radar in Eritrea that would allow monitoring of the region as far as Iran.<sup>1128</sup>

As far as Eritrea is concerned, although there are many imponderables, various probable scenarios could be elicited from the current situation:

1. Eritrea may muddle through. Mobilizing the population could be utilized as a means of combatting external pressures, in order to make externally generated policies unacceptable. But in Eritrea's conditions, the proposal may not be feasible;
2. Unable to withstand all the internal and external pressures, Eritrea may simply disintegrate. The ethnic politics being played by the regime in Addis Ababa and its bantustanization policy will also have contributory impact on Eritrea's stability;
3. Because of the paucity of its resources, Eritrea could also serve as a de-stabilizing element in the region.
4. Neighbouring Sudan may claim the eastern lowlands and the northern highlands of Eritrea on ethnic and religious grounds;
5. The entire Red Sea coast of Eritrea could be annexed by the Afar Revolutionary Democratic Union, which has gone on record and declared its intention to unite all the Afar inhabited regions of the area;
6. The possibility of an Ethiopian nationalist government coming to power in Addis Ababa and claiming Eritrea, once again, cannot also be ruled out;

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<sup>1127</sup>Brzezinski, Zbigniew, *Out of Control: Global Turmoil on the Eve of the 21st Century* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1993), 161-163.

<sup>1128</sup>Brooks, Geraldine, "Little Eritrea Emerges as an Oasis of Civility," *The Wall Street Journal*, 31 May 1994.

7. Since the Eritrean Government has already proposed an Ethio-Eritrean confederation, both sides may find it convenient to move into a federation.

### **Why Federation?**

Of all the possibilities and probable scenarios elicited, the last option merits some discussion because of its potential to contribute to the peace and security of the countries of the Horn of Africa.

If Eritrea's former federal status were to be restored, the same status would also have to be extended to the pre-1974 provinces of Ethiopia in order to make that country a federal republic. Such a political move will go a long way to restore the historically decentralized governmental and economic structure in which the provinces enjoyed a high degree of autonomy from the imperial centre and enabled them to function in the form of a federation.<sup>1129</sup>

Since both the Eritrean and Ethiopian leaders have expressed their desire to work for complete economic integration, the proposed federation can only facilitate that task. After all, partial indulgence with decentralization and using it to build consent for centralization has been the essence of nation-building in many states. Besides, it would be easier to integrate the integrated than would be the case otherwise.

The earlier Ethio-Eritrean federation failed because of political and structural incompatibility. If this proposal is to succeed, however, the system should be based on the rule of law, state secularism, separation of powers, a bill of rights, political and economic pluralism, governmental accountability and respect for human rights.

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<sup>1129</sup>Daniel Kendie. "Ethiopia: Towards a Federal Republic," *Medrek--Publication of an Association of Ethiopians and Ethiopianists*, East Lansing, Michigan, no. 3 (February 1991), 2-10.

Figure 9. Ethiopia's Provinces Prior to 1974



In his address to the 48th Session of the U. N. General Assembly, Issaias Afewerki noted: Eritrea and Ethiopia have already started mutually beneficial economic cooperation and together with the other countries of the Horn of



Africa, they are working to set up a regional mechanism to foster peace and cooperation.<sup>1130</sup>

The Secretary of the Eritrean Department of Economic Development and Cooperation, Haile Wolde Tensai also maintains: We plan to go as far as complete economic integration with our neighbours, including Ethiopia, Sudan, and Djibouti.<sup>1131</sup>

However, not all the states of the sub-region can have the same level of economic relations and depth of cooperation. They differ widely in history of cooperation and in infrastructural ties. Ethiopia and Eritrea are highly integrated historically and economically.<sup>1132</sup> Such level of integration does not exist between Eritrea and the Sudan; or between Ethiopia and the Sudan. For this reason, Ethiopia and Eritrea should restore their federal relations and serve as the nucleus around which economic cooperation and integration of the Horn could be based. Their resources are complementary. The ports of Massawa and Assab can make an economic sense only because of the Ethiopian hinterland. They do not generate revenues or create employment opportunities in isolation of the Ethiopian market.

Eritrea's industries would also function efficiently, if there is cooperation with Ethiopia. Given a secure market, guaranteed supply of raw materials and the provision of electricity by Ethiopia, the factories could function to capacity level. In fact, the Ethiopian Government has secured a credit of eighty million dollars from the African Development Bank, which

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<sup>1130</sup>Issaias Afewerki. *Address to the 48th Session of the United Nations General Assembly.*

<sup>1131</sup>*Arab News*, 28 August 1992.

<sup>1132</sup>Abraham Kidane. "From Shared Values to a Strategic Partnership," *Ethiopian Review*, April 1993.

could benefit Eritrea. The loan is to cover most of the financing for an 108-million dollar project to extend the country's electric grid towards the north. It will include construction of a 230 kilowatt transmission line over 500 kilometers between Bahir Dar and Axum; a 132 kilo volt line over 240 kms from Axum to Adigrat and Mekelle; 367 kms of 66-kilo volt lines from Axum to Enda Selassie, and from Mekelle to Abi Adi and Maidum, 327 kms of 15-kilo volt line.<sup>1133</sup>

The major Eritrean towns like Asmara, Massawa, Keren, and Mendefera can all be supplied from this extended system. Such an arrangement can help Eritrea save foreign exchange, create employment opportunities and promote the welfare of the population. As Issaias Afewerki pointed out, recently, Eritrea's revenues constitute only one-fifth of its expenditures.<sup>1134</sup> The task of transforming such an economy can, therefore, be daunting and formidable.

Ethio-Eritrean harmonization without a corresponding cooperative spirit with the other countries of the Horn of Africa would be like a job half-done. The problems are inter-linked. Because of the unravelling of centralized power, just like Ethiopia, both the Sudan and Somalia seem to require the loosest kind of political organization at the top and the de-evolution of power. After that is done, it could be proposed that a confederal union between these countries would be necessary both as a political complement to economic integration and as a framework to help create the necessary forum to debate sub-regional issues and action programmes.<sup>1135</sup>

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<sup>1133</sup>*The Indian Ocean Newsletter*, 6 February 1993.

<sup>1134</sup>*Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS)-AFR-93-174* 10 September 1993.

<sup>1135</sup>*Africa Confidential*, 8 January 1993, 34, no. 1.

With regard to Somalia, many in Northern Somaliland feel that their region's future lies in close association with Djibouti and Ethiopia rather than with southern and central Somalia.<sup>1136</sup> There is some merit to this argument. The economy of Hargeisa and Berbera is more oriented towards Jigiga and Dire Dawa in Ethiopia rather than towards Mogadishu, which is some one thousand eight hundred kilometers away from Berbera. However, it would be more practical for the northern and southern regions of the Somali Republic to form a federation. As we will see shortly, such an arrangement will not exclude contacts with Djibouti and Ethiopia. On the contrary, it will open the door for increased cooperation and interaction between Somalia and its neighbours. In fact, former President Abderahman, who contends that Somaliland is here to stay, pointed out that all the countries of the Horn--Somaliland, Somalia, Ethiopia, Djibouti and the Sudan could establish economic cooperation and work together in many fields. One can only agree with him.

With regard to Djibouti, we could say that the situation in that country has been aggravated by the destabilization of Ethiopia and Somalia. Nevertheless, the essence of the conflict remains the historic rivalry between the Afars and Issas. The once influential Afars feel that they have become an underdog in their own country. In fact, since 1976 when Ali Aref lost power, the prominence of the Afars has declined considerably. Their demands for political pluralism are not without some merit. In any event, the taking of speedy measures to address their grievances, coupled with the stabilization of Somalia and Ethiopia will, no doubt, help restore peace in Djibouti.

Finally, there is the Sudan. If that country were to be a secular state, reorganize its administrative structure on a federal basis, and grant the south

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<sup>1136</sup>See *Africa Confidential*, 31, no. 25, 21 Dec. 1990.

and the other regions such a status, the Sudan could also become a stable country. Stability and a policy of good neighbourliness will create favourable conditions for sub-regional cooperation.

### **Why Sub-Regional Cooperation?**

Having sorted out their domestic problems in a way that suits their conditions, if the neighbouring countries of the sub-region are to grow and to develop, they would have to cooperate between and among themselves. Why cooperation? Can they not develop separately? Why should their future necessarily depend on cooperation? These are legitimate questions.

The relation of national size to economic growth and efficiency is still in the realm of speculation. Nevertheless, some general observations can be made if we divide nations into small and large groupings. When economists speak of a small nation—small population multiplied by low per capita income—it is generally accepted that a country with a gross national product per capita of less than \$400-\$500 would be considered small because of the limited size of the domestic market and low income which preclude the creation of effective demand. The economist regards the difference of the size of nations primarily from the point of view of the opportunities which any given size offers or fails to offer for securing the greatest possible economies and regularity of production, in so far as these depend on scale of production.<sup>1137</sup> On the other hand, a large country—large in the sense of a large gross national product, or a large population multiplied by a relatively high per capita income and having a large area—may possibly have the opportunity to

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<sup>1137</sup>E. G. Robinson, ed., *The Economic Consequences of the Size of Nations* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1960) XI. For a similar view, see Simon Kuznet's, "The State as a Unit in the Study of Economic Growth," *Journal of Economic History* XI, 25-41, 1951.

be relatively self-sufficient in many resources. It may have a much greater variety of minerals, of climate, of topography, and of mixture of land and water. This observation does not mean, however, that small nations possess no natural resources. All it means is that any one of them is likely to have a lesser variety. It is also equally recognized that in the absence of foreign trade, a large country can withstand external obstacles and develop more rapidly than a smaller one.

The Keynesian investment multiplier, for instance, stipulates the number of times a change in investment will magnify the resulting change of the national income. If the multiplier is three, an increase of \$1 million in the amount of investment can lead to an increase of \$3 million in the national income. In plain language, if capital investment increases, there will be a large change in income, and the initial investment induces further investment. To secure one unit of income, three times as much capital must be invested or three units of capital will result in a one percent increase in the national income.<sup>1138</sup>

Annual population growth in Somalia and Ethiopia, for example, has now reached three percent.<sup>1139</sup> To keep pace with such an increase, each would have to invest nine percent of its national income. To get ahead of such a birth rate and to talk of a breakthrough, the amount of savings may have to go up between twelve percent and fifteen percent of the national income devoted to productive capital. But how could any of these countries save this

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<sup>1138</sup>John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (San Diego, New York, London: Oxford University Press, 1984) 114-16.

<sup>1139</sup>*The Europa World Year Book*, Europa Publications, Ltd., I & II, 992 & 2362, 1991.

much when they cannot even feed themselves.<sup>1140</sup> How can they industrialize when the cost of industrialization is becoming more and more expensive? The usual prescription is to consume less and save more; in order to save more, tighten your belts. But what if they say: "Fine, give us the belts?" Djibouti, Ethiopia, Somalia, and the Sudan are classified as the least developed of the "developing" world. Their average per capita GNP are less than \$300. A high proportion of their populations live under conditions of mere subsistence and manufacturing contributes less than ten percent to their total Gross Domestic Products.

In a world in which more and more governments are tending to be preoccupied with their own domestic social and economic problems, what options do these countries have, except sub-regional cooperation? Throughout the region, natural resources are diminishing, and the periodic droughts have pushed the fragile environment beyond its limits. The desert is encroaching on towns and villages, and the water resources that used to satisfy great herds of elephants, as well as the camels and goats of the nomads, have partially dried up. The competition for scarce resources sparks ethnic tensions, and has become a major factor in the more devastating wars in the Horn of Africa.<sup>1141</sup>

Besides, Africa in general, but the sub-region in particular, has failed to attract foreign capital. There are no telecommunications, transport infrastructures or political and social stability to attract foreign business. Labour is cheap and abundant in Africa, but it costs fifty percent more to run a business in Africa than in Asia, and the profits in Asia are nine times

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<sup>1140</sup>Estimated Per Capita GNP for Djibouti is \$400, Ethiopia, \$130, Somalia, \$200, and the Sudan, \$300.

<sup>1141</sup>Brittain, Victoria, "Africa, the Lost Continent," *New Statesman and Society*, 8 April 1994, 21.

greater. In the 1980s, three-quarters of all investment in developing countries went into just ten countries--none of them in Africa. The 1990s will be no different.<sup>1142</sup>

With a combined area of four million square kilometers, a total population of over eighty million, an estimated gross sub-regional product of more than \$17 billion, and complementary resource endowments, however, given the required leadership and institutional set-up for cooperation, these neighbouring countries could develop faster than they would individually.

In fact, as former U. N. Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar pointed out to the 40th Session of the United Nations General Assembly:

There are now a number of problems and realities with which only a large unity can effectively deal and where the requisite security of common interest can only be achieved through a collective effort of sovereign states. Many of these problems lend themselves best to sub-regional or regional cooperation of groups of nations with common interest.<sup>1143</sup>

Cooperation can help them to bring about a given degree and rate of industrialization at a lower cost than if it were attempted by these states separately. Such cooperation would enable them to create a wider market and to take advantages of the economies of scale and specialization. The possibilities of building a developed industrial infrastructure based on the common interests of the whole sub-region may increase considerably. Such cooperation should be viewed as a means of accelerating economic growth and of transforming economic structures by giving priority to one another's markets and by establishing a development pattern that is capable of linking the rate of domestic resource use to domestic demand.

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<sup>1142</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>1143</sup>*Report of the Secretary General*, Official Records of the General Assembly, 40th Session, I/4/40/4, 1985.

Indeed, as Christopher Clapham aptly observes:

No individual economy within the Horn, nor even the economy of the Horn as a whole, has any plausible prospect of self-sufficiency. And while regional integration is thus required under any successful economic order, this in turn needs to take the form of free trade across political boundaries, rather than the cumbersome and bureaucratized integration schemes through which African states have characteristically (and unsuccessfully) sought to compensate for their inadequate economies of scale.<sup>1144</sup>

This envisaged cooperation is to help lay down the ground work for future integration. Far from contradicting or duplicating existing arrangements, Clapham's proposal can only help implement the objectives of the Preferential Trade Area for Eastern and Southern African States (PTA). For this reason, it should adopt the institutional approach. For instance, a sub-regional development office manned by experts from these nations and financed by contributions from them could be established. Among other things, it could identify development projects of a sub-regional nature, carry out detailed feasibility studies and explore the possibilities of their being financed from domestic and external sources. Such a group of technical experts should be allowed to develop habits of continuous consultation over a wide range of topics including agriculture, industry, human settlement, energy, transport and communications, water resources, food production, food security, afforestation schemes, controlled grazing, education, public health, scientific research, trade, airlines, shipping, and so on. As cooperation deepens and matures, some sort of a loose confederation<sup>1145</sup> of the countries in question could be established to harmonize relations.

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<sup>1144</sup>ibid. See Clapham, *Survival*, Sept./Oct. 1990.

<sup>1145</sup>A confederation is simply an association of sovereign states, who surrender specific powers for specific purposes. All other powers are retained by the original states which enjoy great independence. Members cooperate in matters of defense and foreign affairs. The forum for solving conflicts by



### Some Possibilities For Cooperation

Very few scholars have studied the physical, cultural and economic links of the countries of the Horn of Africa. In fact, the accent has always been on what divides them rather than on what unites them. The countries of the sub-region operate as separate states, but they are also very interdependent. In physical characteristics such as climate, soils and rivers, they are essentially complementary. They also share similar ethnological characteristics and cultural fusion. Related population groups also straddle their common boundaries and spill over across international frontiers.<sup>1146</sup>

While Ethiopia functions, for example, as a natural hinterland for Eritrea, Somalia, and Djibouti, Somalia, Djibouti, and Eritrea, in turn, are Ethiopia's natural outlets to the sea.<sup>1147</sup> Moreover, the harnessing of common rivers like the Blue Nile, the Awash, the Wabi Shibelle and the Juba--rivers

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peaceful means can be provided. Members also enjoy the advantages of free trade and economic cooperation in a wider area.

In a federal system, on the other hand, power is constitutionally divided between the different branches of government. There will be a legislative branch--an upper house where the states have equal representation as a matter of right--and a lower house--where representation will be proportionate to the population. In such a system, the judiciary plays a big role. It is required to adjudicate in disputes between the central and local authorities. While the federal government is responsible for foreign affairs, defense, foreign trade, and the provision of social services, the autonomous state enjoys local self-rule and effective representation at the centre.

Why federation? Large areas like the Sudan and Ethiopia, for example, are difficult to govern effectively from a single centre. Hence, in heterogeneous societies where it is thought necessary to allow distinct areas as much political autonomy as possible, the federal system is used. There is also another advantage of such an arrangement. Small entities can be linked together for defense and foreign representation purposes in order to reduce costs. It is also an effective if not efficient way to protect minorities and to advance economic growth and development.

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1146 Assefa Mehretu, "The Choice Between Cooperation and Confrontation in the Horn of Africa," *Horn of Africa*, 5, no. 1, (1982).

1147 Mesfin Wolde Mariam, *The Ethiopia - Somalia Boundary Dispute* (Addis Ababa: Berhanne Selam Printing Press, 1964) 65.

that originate from Ethiopia but which are crucial for the livelihood of the peoples of the sub-region in terms of food production, nomadic grazing, irrigated agriculture, settlement of nomads, afforestation schemes, electricity production, and the like—require the cooperation of these countries.<sup>1148</sup>

Similarly, the Blue Nile river provides eighty-five percent of the water needs of both Egypt and the Sudan. The hydro-electric potential of the river has been estimated as 172 billion hydro kilowatts. Ethiopia's development plans call for building four dams to retain enough water from the 3.8 billion cubic meters of water which annually flow out to the Sudan and Egypt, and to develop one million acres of land through irrigation and to settle four million farmers.<sup>1149</sup> Because of the excess hydro-electricity that can be generated, export to the Sudan should be feasible. The sharing of water, the construction of roads for trade and communication purposes, and other areas of development require close cooperation between Sudan and Ethiopia. The Red Sea is also another area which provides new opportunities for cooperation. The Preferential Trade Area for Eastern and Southern African States (PTA) is to start the construction of railway lines connecting Addis Ababa with

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<sup>1148</sup>Daniel Kendie, *Prospects for Promoting Peace in the Horn of Africa Through Development Cooperation* (New York: United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), 1986). The study proposes, among other things, the construction of two multi-purpose dams on the Juba and the Wabi Shibelle rivers, electricity transmission lines from Dire Dawa to Djibouti and from Gode to Mogadishu, upgrading the Dire Dawa-Djibouti and Dire Dawa-Jigiga-Berbera roads; the Negele-Mogadishu and the Jigiga-Mogadishu roads, establishment of integrated regional development projects; the construction of an eight hundred kilometer long Shilabo-Addis Ababa and one hundred seventy kilometer long Shilabo-Mogadishu gas/oil pipeline. The ground work for the extraction of the natural gas deposit was to have began in October 1993. When the project comes in full swing, seventy thousand tonnes of oil products, including diesel oil and butane gas, would be extracted each year from an estimated seventy-six thousand m-cu-m gas deposit in the Kalub area. *African Research Bulletin*, 16 September - 15 October 1993, 30, no. 9, as quoted from Radio Addis Ababa, 15/9, 4/10: BBC, Monday.

<sup>1149</sup>*Ethiopia: Liberation Silver Jubilee (1941-1966)* Ministry of Information, Birhane Selam (Addis Ababa, 1966).

Khartoum and a road between Gedaref (Sudan) and Doka (Ethiopia).<sup>1150</sup> Likewise, areas for cooperation between Somalia and the Sudan, between Djibouti and Somalia, and between the Sudan and Djibouti could be undertaken.

The East African Economic Community is often cited as a case to prove that economic cooperation and integration would not work in Africa. But what is conveniently forgotten is that the Community failed not because it was African but because it was conceived, manned, and run by the British in the interest of Britain. The benefits of cooperation were also not fairly distributed, but largely favoured Kenya. Uganda and Tanganyika became raw material producers and suppliers to a rapidly industrializing Kenya. The countries of the Horn of Africa can benefit from the experiences of the East African Economic Community, in the sense that they should avoid such mistakes. The idea of cooperation and integration must originate from them. The projects must have a direct bearing on their growth and development efforts. They should also play a part in financing the projects. If external aid were to be required, the sources of aid should be diversified. The execution of the projects should involve, to a substantial extent, local technicians and experts. Moreover, the less developed in the group should be granted extensive advantages in accordance with the principle that "backward" members should be favoured at the beginning in order to achieve a balance thereafter. In this way, these countries can assist in carrying out the economic programmes of the PTA.

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<sup>1150</sup>*Africa Research Bulletin* 28, no. 12, (16 December 1991-15 January 1992).

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