

## REFLECTIONS ON THE BATTLE OF ADWA AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR TODAY

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In 1896, Italy, a late-comer to the family of nations and a slow-footed scrambler for colonial spoils in Africa, made her *move* to conquer Ethiopia, the only remaining unclaimed-by-Europeans prize on the continent. Expansionists leaders of the recently unified Kingdom of Italy dreamed of a second Roman Empire stretching from the Alps to the Equator, and it was assumed that a show of military might would quickly bring "barbarian" lands and riches into an Africa Orientale Italiana. The Italian dream was turned into a nightmare, *however*, in the mountain passes and *valleys* near the northern Ethiopian city of Adowa by the knockout punch of the mailed fist of an unified Greater Ethiopia. The Italians retreated from the scramble with egg on their faces and stigmata on their arms. On the other hand, the battle put Ethiopia on the map of the modern world and had ramifications that are still being felt today by her own populace and by other African people *everywhere*. The centennial of the Battle of Adowa provides an appropriate time for Ethiopians and Ethiopianists to reflect upon the significance of the *victory* and to attempt to discern any lessons from that auspicious *event* that might be of *value* to present day Ethiopia.

### PRELUDE TO THE BATTLE

Italy entered the Horn of Africa through a window of commercial opportunity. Following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, an Italian steamship company, Rubattino, leased the Port of Assab on the Red Sea from the Sultan of Raheita as a refueling station. During the next year, Rubattino purchased the port for \$9,440 (a bargain for *even* such a hot property). In 1882, the Italian government bought Assab from Rubattino for \$43,200, thereby providing the steamship company a handsome profit on its investment and establishing the first Italian colony in Africa since the days of the Caesars.<sup>1</sup>

From its Assab base, the Italians, through the good office of Britain, occupied the nearby Red Sea port of Massawa (replacing the Egyptians) and adjoining lands in 1885 while the Ethiopian Emperor Yohannes was distracted by wars in the highlands and against Sudanese Mahdists. Emboldened by their easy occupation of the coastal areas, the Italian army and local conscripts invaded the highlands in the late 1880s. The reputation of Ethiopians as spirited fighters, evidenced in battle against the Egyptians in the 1870s and against the Madhists in the 1880s,<sup>2</sup> apparently was not taken seriously by the Italians. That attitude soon changed when Ethiopian metal was tested in the rough terrain of Tigray. With their military momentum stalled and the bluster of their milites gloriosi punctured, the Italians resorted to guile and diplomacy to promote their expansionist aims.

Taking a page from the British book of colonial domination, the Italians pursued a policy of *divide and conquer*. They provided arms to Ras Mengesha of Tigray and all other chiefs hostile to the Emperor. During his internecine *rivalry* with Yohannes, *even* the Negus of Shewa, Menilek, sought closer collaboration with the Italians. When the Emperor Yohannes was killed in battle against the Madhists, the Italians sensed an opportune moment to solidify their foothold in the country through negotiation. Count Pietro Antonelli headed a mission to pay homage to the new Emperor, Menilek II, and to negotiate a treaty with him. The Treaty of Wuchiale, signed in Italian and Amharic versions in 1889, ultimately was to provide the Raison\_d'etre for the Battle of Adowa.

Under the treaty, the Italians were given title to considerable real estate in the north in exchange for a loan to Ethiopia of \$800,000, half of which was to be in arms and ammunition. The piece de resistance for the Italians, *however*, was Article XVII, which according to the Italian version bound Menilek to make all foreign contacts through the agency of Italy. The Amharic version made such service by the Italians optional.<sup>3</sup>

Proudly displaying the Roman rendition of the treaty in Europe, the Italians proclaimed Ethiopia to be her protectorate. The Ethiopians were not too concerned with such Italian braggadocio until 1893 when Menilek attempted to make treaties with Russia, Germany, and Turkey. The Italians railed at this insubordination by a "black African barbarian chieftain," and prepared to go war to teach the Ethiopians a lesson in obedience. In a display of integrity rare among belligerent nations, **Menilek paid back the loan incurred under the treaty with three times the stipulated interest.** He kept the armaments, *however*, and sought to rally the nation against a foreign invader.<sup>4</sup>

While the Italians massed arms and men in their Colonia Eritrea, their agents sought to subvert Ethiopian rases and other regional leaders against the Emperor. What the Italians did not realize was that they were entering into the Ethiopian national pastime: the tradition of personal advancement through intrigue.<sup>5</sup> Menilek, master of the sport, trumped the Italians' efforts by persuading the provincial rulers that the outsiders threat was of such serious nature that they had to combine against it and not seek to exploit it to their own ends. The Emperor called his countrymen's attention to the fate of other African nations that had fallen under the yoke of colonialism. The magic of Menilek worked. *Whatever* seeds of discord the Italians had planted sprouted as shoots of accord on the other side. Minor military actions of the Italians in 1895 fueled the anger of the Ethiopian masses and leaders alike, who *viewed* the invasion as a threat to their nation's sovereignty.

#### THE BATTLE OF ADOWA

**By late February 1896, the Italian army, the strongest colonial expeditionary force that Africa had ever known, was entrenched around Mount Enticchio in Tigray.** Led by General Oreste Baratieri, Governor of Eritrea, the 20,000 Italians and Italian-office red native auxiliaries had waited for the Ethiopians to attack their fortified positions as they had in previous battles. When such an attack did not occur, Baratieri ordered what he hoped would be a surprise attack on the Ethiopians assembled near Adowa. Defeat was unthinkable for a modern European army of such size, and a decisive *victory over* the upstart natives would win a *vast* new empire for Italy.<sup>6</sup>

Awaiting the Italians was a *massive* Ethiopian army, 100,000 men strong, with contingents from almost *every* region of the country. They were commanded by an all star team of warriors amassed by Menilek in "an eloquent demonstration of national unity." When the Italian troops made a three-column *advance* against Ethiopian positions on March 1st, St. George's Day, the combined forces of Greater Ethiopia were primed for a fight. The Ethiopians surrounded the Italian units, and in fierce combat, closed with and destroyed many of the enemy **in the bloodiest of all colonial battles.** Peasant troops fought ruthlessly and well. A large number of Ethiopian women, following the example of the "Warrior Queen," Empress Taytu, were on the battlefield. They served well as a water brigade for the fighting men, paramedics, and guards of prisoners.<sup>7</sup>

At the end of the day, the Italians had suffered the greatest single disaster in European colonial history. **There were 11,000 dead from both sides, including 4,000 Italian soldiers.** Remnants of the Italian army retreated northward, **leaving behind 1,900 Italian and 1,000 Eritrean askari** prisoners of war. In addition, four million cartridges and 56 cannon were captured by the Ethiopians.<sup>9</sup>

Menilek chose not to pursue the routed army. With the battle over, he held a religious service of thanksgiving and proclaimed a three day period of national mourning. The victory celebration of the jubilant Ethiopians was muted because the Emperor saw no cause to rejoice over the death of so many Christian men.<sup>10</sup>

The military *advantage* won by Menilek was not followed up politically. Why he did not press his *advantage* and drive the foreigners from his country remains a puzzle. The Emperor may *have* been concerned about consolidating his territorial interests in the south and may *have* been afraid of *over-* extending his resources." *Whatever* his reasons, Menilek allowed the Italians to remain in their colonial foothold in Eritrea creating what was to be a continuous source of problems for Ethiopia *ever* since. He also missed a golden opportunity to guarantee Ethiopia an outlet to the sea.

### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BATTLE

For the *victor*, the spoils were immediate and long lasting. In the negotiated peace following the battle, the Treaty of Wuchale was annulled, ending Italy's self-proclaimed "protectorate" over Ethiopia. The settlement acknowledged the full sovereignty and independence of Ethiopia. The Italians paid an indemnity of \$5 million in gold and were allowed to remain in Eritrea. The price paid by Italy for its belated quest for empire was extravagant in terms of money, lost lives, surrendered arms, and tainted prestige at home and abroad.

By winning the battle, Menilek had preserved and extended the territories of ancient Ethiopia--with the important exception of Eritrea. By uniting most of the leaders from almost all parts of the country against a common foe, the Emperor began to implement the idea of a central government rather than the Ethiopian Orthodox Church being the symbol of national unity.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the battle gave momentum to the creation of the modern Ethiopian empire-state, and the future of Ethiopia became different from that of the rest of Africa.<sup>13</sup>

Internationally, Ethiopia supplied the most meaningful negation to the sweeping tide of colonial domination of Africa. Egged on by Italy's defeat, European nations scrambled to make treaties with Menilek's government. Indeed, 1896 became the "year of the *ferengi*" in Ethiopia. Expatriate traders flocked in, spearheading stepped up economic activities. In record numbers, European governments set up consulates throughout the country and aided foreign merchants and investors in seeking concessions and royalties. A major benefit accruing to Ethiopia at that time was the introduction of European medical practices.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to material changes, the Battle of Adowa produced psychic rewards. Ethiopians basked in national pride and a sense of independence that was lost to other Africans mired in the abasement of colonialism. This post-Adowa spirit of Ethiopia, instilled in successive generations, gave Ethiopians a confidence and an unique *weltanschauung*.

The image of independent Ethiopia, the nation that successfully stood up against the Europeans, gave inspiration and hope to Africans and African-Americans fettered by racial discrimination and apartheid in *whatever* guise. Ethiopia provided a model of independence and dignity for people *everywhere* seeking independence from colonial servitude.<sup>15</sup>

### LESSONS FROM THE BATTLE

One hundred years after the Battle of Adowa, Ethiopia faces an internal threat to its people's dignity from a government dominated by Marxist-Leninist ideology intent on dividing the nation along ethnic lines. There is little danger from external sources, although it can be argued

cogently that the EPRDF-led government remains in power only by being propped up by developmental financial assistance from donor nations.

As in 1896, the danger to Ethiopia originates in the mountain passes and valleys of Tigray and Eritrea. Although the artificial administrative border drawn between Eritrea and Tigray by the Italians is now proclaimed to be the boundary of sovereign nations, it remains an artificial creation, for the people on both sides of the frontier are one in race and civilization,<sup>16</sup> and both a part of Greater Ethiopia. In a similar fashion, the boundaries of the FDRE's administrative regions drawn along ethnic lines ignore historic ties between areas that transcend linguistics and lineage. Both the EPRDF and the EPLF should ponder an episode of the battle of Adowa: through faulty map-reading, an Italian brigade found itself isolated and the target of the combined fury of the Ethiopian troops.<sup>17</sup> Cartographical mistakes may haunt their makers and bring down upon them the combined fury of the Ethiopian people.

The right of "nationalities" to secede from Ethiopia proclaimed in Article 39 of the Constitution of the FDRE may be a paraphrase of European rhetoric, but the roots of the problem of secession have their origins in the creation of the Italian colony in the late 19th century. One can but speculate about the different course Ethiopian history might have taken had Emperor Menilek dispelled the Italians from the land of the Habasha.

Like the Italians under Baratieri, the present government seeks to divide and conquer its opposition. Some leaders of the political opposition have taken the bait and succumbed to the old national pastime of seeking personal advancement through intrigue. Although the TPLF and EPRDF applaud their efforts, most Ethiopians who want real democracy in their country have grown tired of demagogues' games. What will it take to convince opposition leaders that the present threat to all is something so serious that they must combine against it and not seek to exploit it to their own ends? Where is today's Menilek who can persuade the political opposition that the times demand cooperation rather than conspiracy? Where is the national flame that unites peasants and metropolitans from every background and from every part of the country against a common foe and for the good of Ethiopia? And where are today's Taytus, "warrior queens," with their exhortations for victory? The legacy of the Battle of Adowa is a powerful beacon for the inheritors of an independent and proud Ethiopia. Can its light lead all Ethiopians to come together to bring the blessings of democracy to their homeland?

In 1896, increased Italian military action steadily aroused the nationalism of Ethiopia and the chances of exploiting her feudalism and dividing her nobles was correspondingly diminished.<sup>18</sup> Today, one can hope that as government repression increases, it will steadily arouse Ethiopians' spirit of nationalism and the chances of exploiting ethnicity and dividing the country will correspondingly be diminished.

Perhaps the Emperor Menilek captured best the spirit that might motivate all freedom loving Ethiopians to get involved in efforts to bring democracy to their homeland by peaceful means. In a wax and gold laden statement, just as pertinent now as it was 100 year ago, said Menilek: "If powers at a distance come forward to partition Ethiopia between them, I do not intend to be an indifferent spectator."<sup>19</sup>

## NOTES

1. Getachew Mekasha, "The Battle of Adwa Remembered," Ethiopian Review, March 1995, p. 18.
2. Donald N. Levine, Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 12.
3. Bahru Zewde, 2-Q.f~ Ethiopia 1855-1974 (London: James Currey, 1991), 75.
4. Getachew, P. 19.
5. Richard Greenfield, Ethiopia: A New Political History (London: Pall Mall Press, 1965), 120.

6. Anthony Mockler, Haile Selassie's War: The Italian-Ethiopian Campaign, 1935-1941 (New York: Random House, 1984), xxxix.
7. Bahru, 77.
8. Chris Prouty, Empress Taytu and Menilek II: Ethiopia 1883-1910 (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1986), 155-161.
9. Getachew, p. 21. Numbers of combatants engaged, killed, wounded, and captured, as well as accounts of spoils, vary in different accounts of the battle.
10. Mockler, xxxii.
11. Greenfield, 123.
12. Greenfield, 119.
13. Bahru, 84, 2229.
14. Prouty, 181-183.
15. Levine, 12-14.
16. Edward Ullendorff, The Ethiopians: An Introduction to Country (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 37.
17. Bahru, 79.
18. Greenfield, 199.
19. Quoted in Greenfield, 118.

