

THE VICTORY OF ADWA AND THE SUBSEQUENT CHALLENGES TO ETHIOPIAN STATEHOOD

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There are certain events in history which assume special significance, in as much as they terminate one historical process, and inaugurate another. The Battle of Adwa of 1896, in which the Italian army was overwhelmingly defeated by the Ethiopians, is one such an event. The immense struggle Ethiopia waged against the forces of colonialism and imperialism of the 19th century, in order to maintain its independence, are all vividly recorded in history. And Adwa is one of them. The Ethiopians won that historic battle because of a combination of factors, not least that of the existence of a vibrant nationalism, which reinforced the feeling of intense pride in Ethiopia's past, and in hopes for its future-nationalism which predates the birth of European nationalism itself. Superior organizational and fighting skills; the advantages of a home terrain; successful penetration of the enemy's military intelligence, and the support provided by France and Russia, should all be considered as contributory factors. Indeed, of the 17,700 soldiers Italy had deployed at Adwa-5,179 were killed, and 2,865 were taken prisoners, including majors Emilio De Bono and Pietro Badoglio, both of whom were to return to Northeast Africa forty years later, as commanders of Mussolini's Fascist army.¹

For too long, it was taken as an elementary axiom of Euclid, that European military science and fighting skills could always dispose of any number of so called "colored" warriors. In fact, the defeat of a white army by the "colored barbarians" of the world on a colonial battle field was simply unthinkable. It was regarded as a breach of an elementary law of nature. This was so because it never occurred to most Europeans that the same kind of nationalistic pride which drove them to expansion and conquest, might also inspire their victims to defend themselves with all the means at their disposal. To their shock and horror, Ethiopia did just that. 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."² In fact, it was the greatest defeat ever experienced by a European imperialist power in Africa prior to Abdel Kherirn's great victory over the Spanish in 1921. The Adwa disaster brought Italy's first colonial essay to a tragic close. Perhaps it was a merited defeat for a second class power, which had become puffed up with a vain and grandiose ambition because it accepted war as a test of its nationhood.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Thinking that Britain will be guided by Christian solidarity, the Emperor Tewodros (1855-1868) had written a letter to Queen Victoria in 1862, requesting assistance against the Ottoman Turks who had occupied the Ethiopian coast, including the Port of Massawa. Ottoman occupation of Ethiopian territory was, however, of little concern to Britain. If anything, London had a deep interest in strengthening its relations with Istanbul with a view to using it as a valuable ally against Russia.

In their reluctance not to get involved in the dispute between the Ottomans and the Ethiopians, the British, therefore, left Tewodros' letter unanswered. The Ethiopian monarch felt deeply insulted, resulting in the imprisonment of a large number of Europeans in Ethiopia. In order to rescue these European captives, Queen Victoria dispatched 50,000 soldiers under Napier. The British army crushed the emperor's force, leading to his suicide.³ The consequence of this event on Ethiopia's stability and security was considerable.

As if that was not enough, some years later, Britain discovered that Ethiopia's assistance was crucial to help rescue Egyptians and Europeans who were cut off in the Sudan as a result of the Mahdist revolution in that country. Hewett was dispatched to Adwa to negotiate with Emperor Yohannes. The Ethiopian monarch expressed his willingness to assist in the task, but demanded the return of Ethiopian provinces under foreign control, including the port of Massawa. As a result, on June 3, 1884, a treaty involving Britain, Egypt and Ethiopia was signed at Adwa. The preamble of the treaty stated that it bound not only the contracting parties, but also their "heirs and successors".⁴

Ethiopia fulfilled all its obligations and helped relieve the besieged garrison. For the British, however, the country was only fit to be used and abused. Ethiopia fought the Mahdists at the behest of the British, but when the Mahdists attacked it in retaliation, and the Emperor Yohannes killed in battle in 1889, there was little sympathy, let alone support from London. Again, the consequence of this event on Ethiopia's stability and security was enormous.

ITALY'S INVOLVEMENT

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. In fact, 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. It was felt that an expansionist 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.

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 for expansion. By the time Italy woke up from its stupor, most of the juicy parts of Africa had been carved off by Belgium, Portugal, Britain, France and Germany. 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. A Lazarist missionary named Giuseppe Sapeto, acting as the agent of the Rubattino Shipping Company, had bought the Red Sea port of Assab for 8,000 MT dollars from a local chief, named Hassan ben Ahmed Ibrahim, on November 15, 1869.⁵ 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 conducting international trade. In 1882—the year in which France took over Tunisia—the Italian Government bought the Rubattino Company's possessions and claims in Assab. No sooner had the government done that than Rome discovered that the acquisition of the 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 Port of Massawa in 1885. This task was largely accomplished through British diplomatic and technical support. The takeover of the port of Massawa by the Italians was, for the Ethiopians, a simple manifestation of British guile, subterfuge, and duplicity, and a violation of the Adwa Treaty of 1884. Why did Britain do that?

Competition between the European colonial powers was a familiar feature of the 19th century. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1868 had given the Red Sea region a new strategic importance. In inviting Italy to take over Massawa, Britain was encouraging Italy's colonial ambitions with a view to using it as a counter-weight to France. 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 also the maximum diplomatic support of the Russians. Hence, three months after the ratification of the Adwa Treaty, the British started sounding out about an eventual Italian occupation of Massawa.⁷

The Italians moved into Massawa and gradually extended their possessions over the hinterland. Subsequently, they 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.⁵

Ras Alula (1845-1897), Governor of the provinces of Seraie and Hamassien of today's Eritrea, had brought a temporary halt to their expansion by defeating them at Dogali in 1887. But they soon recovered and continued their expansion into the interior. 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, and from Milazzo to Volturno."⁹

To that end, the Italians successfully exploited the internal conditions in Ethiopia, supporting Menelik against Yohannes in order to gain in him a sympathetic ally. In 1889, they concluded the Treaty of Wuchalle with Menelik. Article 17 of the Treaty stated: "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].¹⁰

The interpretation of this article led to a rift. Italy interpreted the Treaty as giving it the southern boundaries of present day Eritrea and even claimed that Ethiopia had willingly become an Italian protectorate. Menelik vehemently denounced the Italians, including their interpretation of the article, paid off his debts, tore down the treaty as null and void, and was ready for action.

Apart from the Ethiopian people, who were united behind him, Menelik had also the support of the French. After all, Italy was invited by the British to take over Massawa. It was Italy which was supposed 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.¹¹ The Russians too stood behind him. General Baratieri had boasted that "he would bring Menelik to Rome in a cage."¹² However, when the much expected war began, it culminated with the disastrous defeat of the Italians at Adwa. Italy sued for peace, and a peace treaty was signed in Addis Abeba 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.¹³ Ras Alula had requested that he be permitted to follow the Italians in hot pursuit and evict them once and for all from Ethiopian soil a request which was flatly rejected by Menelik. 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.¹⁴

In such an eventuality, it is difficult to see how Britain, which, in the span of only sixteen years, undermined Ethiopian nationalism and Ethiopian national security three times, and which invited the Italians to take over the Ethiopian coast for its own strategic designs, would have remained indifferent to Rome's utter humiliation. It should also be noted that in order to safeguard British

interests in Northeast Africa, London had already signed with Italy the agreements of 1891 and 1894, to which it was committed.¹⁵

Nevertheless, in a world in which only the strong are respected, the European powers were only too eager to establish diplomatic relations with Ethiopia. It was also after the outcome of Adwa that the various European powers expressed their deep interest in negotiating boundary treaties with the triumphant and victorious Ethiopian state.

THREATS TO ETHIOPIAN STATEHOOD

Boundary treaties or no treaties, it seems that it was after Adwa that the decision was made to counter Ethiopian nationalism before matters could go out of hand. After all, the inspiring example of Ethiopia's struggle against the forces of colonialism, especially to neighboring African countries, could not be dismissed lightly.

In point of fact, the Italians had conceived a political scheme in order to deal with recalcitrant Ethiopia. The aim of the scheme was designed to undermine Ethiopian nationalism, and in the process, to disintegrate the Ethiopian state. There were two aspects to the strategy. The first scheme centered on encouraging centrifugal tendencies in the various provinces with a view to disintegrate the center. This scheme involved arming dissident elements and encouraging provincial governors to undermine the authority of the state. The Italians called this scheme "politica tigrinia". The other strategy was aimed at promoting their economic, political, commercial and strategic interests through the agency of the central government. The Italians called this scheme "politica sciona". Shoa and Tigray were rivals for power and influence in 19th century Ethiopia. If the former could be won over to friendship, the latter, which was nearer, and therefore more dangerous, could be managed with guns, or so they thought. Italy thus designed to play 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. Thanks to Ethiopian nationalism, Tigray and Shoa were united in a common front against Italy and taught Rome a lesson that it was not to forget. It should be noted too that in varying degrees of success, nearly all the major powers which dealt with Ethiopia have used either politica tigrina, or politica sciona. To be sure, Mussolini's 1932 decision in favor of politica tigrina and the subsequent subversive activities the Italians conducted in Ethiopia from Eritrea became a contributory cause to the Italo-Ethiopian war of 1936-1941. As mentioned earlier, the major European powers had never reconciled themselves to Ethiopia's independence. If anything, ten years after the Battle of Adwa-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-Djibouti railway was to go to France. The Blue Nile area was allowed to Britain. The rest of Ethiopia was assigned to Italy.¹⁶

Since this treaty was never officially abrogated, it continued to influence the thinking of the major colonial powers of the day. Subsequently, in the hope that its independence will be guaranteed by an international covenant, Ethiopia joined the League of Nations in 1923. While Ethiopia's fate at the hands of the League of Nations constitutes a sad chapter in international relations, the infinitely greater crimes committed by Britain and France against Ethiopia, constitute a big chapter in the history of international treachery. Ethiopia made no threats, mobilized no troops, and issued no proclamations. Yet, that innocent country and its defenseless people were, in what appeared to be an orchestrated vendetta, sacrificed at the altar of political expediency to appease the aggressors.

"If Italy had 6,000 more soldiers at Adwa," claimed Mussolini, "the result could have been very different." And so to avenge the Adwa debacle, Italy was allowed to transport 500,000 mechanized troops through the Suez Canal. But when it came to Ethiopia's use, the canal was closed. Italy was armed to the teeth with the most devastating weapons of the period. Yet, even

from excess government stocks in England, Ethiopia was refused permission to buy even six airplanes, which it only needed for legitimate self-defense. By invoking Article 10 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, Ethiopia asked for a loan of ten million pounds from the League, Britain and France opposed the loan. Despite treaty obligations, the French too denied Ethiopia the use of the Addis Abeba-Djibouti railway. When Italy carried out its unprovoked military aggression against Ethiopia, and when defenseless Ethiopians were being massacred in thousands by the use of mustard and poison gas, the European powers of the time remained silent and indifferent. No doubt, Ethiopia was not prepared for that horrible war. Its military triumphs over its foreign adversaries of the 19th century, including Egypt, Mahdist Sudan, and Italy, had made it excessively confident in itself and in its own institutions. Complacency and preservation of the status quo had become the order of the day. On the other hand, since defeats in war generally provide a stimulus for change, between 1896 and 1936, Italy had carried out the necessary structural reforms. It had built the industrial base of its economy, and when it attacked Ethiopia in 1936, it did so, with modern weapons largely produced by Italian industry- airplanes, tanks, rockets, machine guns, mustard gas, and so on. In contrast, since Ethiopia had remained at a stand still, even the weapons it used to defend itself in 1936 were not different from those utilized in 1896, forcing it to awake to a disagreeable reality.

The Ethiopian people suffered immensely. To men and women of peace and justice the world over, the unprovoked Italian aggression against Ethiopia was abominable and odious. But to Africans and black people in particular, the premeditated Fascist aggression was of special concern. In fact, Ethiopia's destruction symbolized to them the final victory of the whites over blacks. They protested with all the means at their disposal. Some of them volunteered their services. Colonel John C. Robinson from Chicago, and Herbert Julian from Harlem, both of whom were qualified pilots, for example, went to Ethiopia and joined the Imperial Ethiopian Air Force to fight the Italians.¹⁷ Another six pilots had volunteered, but because the Government of President Franklin Roosevelt felt that enlistment of American citizens in the Ethiopian armed forces would constitute an infringement of US neutrality law, they were refused passports.¹⁸ On September 4, 1936, some 9,000 Americans, most of whom were black Americans, staged a rally in New York and tore apart a huge effigy of Mussolini.¹⁹

Dr Kwameh Nkrumah of Ghana, who was then a student in Britain confessed: "As long as Ethiopia was free, we all hoped that Africa will one day be free." Similarly, Ahmed Sekou Toure of Guinea was speaking for many Africans when he said: "The Ethiopian people are a great people-an African people, who fought bravely for the independence of Africa from colonialism and imperialism, and the preservation of freedom. Even though Africa was crushed by colonialism, because of Ethiopia, our presence in international councils was felt."²⁰

David Dacko of the CAR also noted: Ethiopia has taught us to be masters of our continent, and to throw back from African soil all foreign powers. Ethiopia's example could not be immediately followed because colonialism was careful not to give publicity to Ethiopia's courageous struggle."²¹

However, even when after five years of bitter struggle (1936-1941), the Italian Fascists left the country, Britain still wanted to establish a so called "protectorate" over Ethiopia. The British authorities who ruled Ethiopia (1941-1946), practiced "politica tigrina", and did whatever they could to undermine Ethiopian nationalism. They promoted a scheme that was designed to unite Eritrea with Tigray as an independent state; the incorporation of lowland Eritrea into neighboring Anglo-Egyptian Sudan; annexing Ethiopia's Ogaden province into Somaliland; and so on.²² As the Emperor Haile Selassie noted in his memoir: The British brought us enormous difficulties, that in the guise of advancing racial and tribal concerns, they advanced some proposals inconsistent with our independence. We made a bitter struggle to wrest our country from the jaws of the lion.²³

Even today, the same policy of subverting and undermining Ethiopian nationalism has continued without let-up. The position taken by eighteen donor governments including the British in

support of the system of apartheid and bantustanization of the Ethiopian society by a sinister and misguided regime is a case in point. Britain itself has its own problems in Scotland, Ireland and Wales. France has to grapple with Brittany and Corsica. Spain has to contend with the Basques. Belgium has its Walloons and Flemings. Canada has to reckon with the problem of Quebec, and so on. Yet, none of them would even consider the bantustanization of their respective societies. But when it comes to Ethiopia, it is a different story. A self-respecting country has been converted into an ethnic laboratory for the benefit of anthropologists and tarzan movie makers. The very same powers also cynically claim that Ethiopia is moving in the "right" direction. Ethiopia gave birth to African nationalism and also inspired the Ras Tefferian Movement in the West Indies. The establishment of the headquarters of the U.N Economic Commission for Africa and the Organization of African Unity in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Abeba was not without reason. The fact that the national flags of most African countries are modeled after the Ethiopian flag is not also by accident. They are all fitting tributes to the struggle ceaselessly waged by Ethiopia for national independence, territorial integrity, national sovereignty and for sovereign equality of all nations - principles that have now become part and parcel of international law. Having waged a relentless struggle for a place in the sun, such a nation and a people that have come so far, cannot simply disappear from history. The temporary set back must be reversed. Ethiopia must speak with one voice, as it has always done, and must assume its respectable place in international councils.

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