

THE GENIUS OF ADWA: MENELIK II, CONSENSUS BUILDER AND MASTER MOBILIZER

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Adwa was an immense surprise and a bewildering shock for the European world. It marked a unique reversal in the Age of Imperialism. Throughout that century of colonial conquest and domination, a European army had never been faced with this kind of humiliating defeat. This was a situation in which an entire army had been wiped out. The myth of white supremacy which had been carefully constructed over a period of a century was successfully challenged. A contemporary British historian who had followed the Adwa campaign closely considered it the greatest event of the time and observed that "this is the first revolt of the Dark Continent against domineering Europe."¹ The French newspaper *La Liberte* lamented that "all European countries will now be obliged to make a place" for the Ethiopians who have stepped forth "ready to play, in the Dark Continent, the role of Japan in the Far East." The French President, Felix Faure who had ignored Menelik's plea for a closer political and economic alliance in 1895 responded shortly after the Adwa victory that France recognizes the independence of the Ethiopian Empire without reservations and that he was willing to negotiate on the basis of Menelik's proposal.² The great Pan-Africanist writer, George Padmore noted: "Menelik the first black ruler to defeat a great white power became the subject of every chancellory of Europe ... all the great powers were jostling each other to win the favor of the "Conquering Lion of Judah."³

Black newspapers in America declared the victory as "advantageous to blacks allover the world." As one historian put it, the victory of the Ethiopians over the Italians

"like many events in the Afro-American experience, became a kind of folk story that was well known to all blacks and passed among individuals within the black community in beauty parlors and barber shops, at church congregations, at various meetings and gatherings, and in family circles.,⁴ In the word's of another African American writer, " Adwa signaled the coming of a new day for African people and identified Ethiopia as God's chosen instrument for black redemption."⁵ The Christian Century, an influential black religious periodical wrote in an editorial entitled "Capturing and Holding Adwa" that Ethiopian victory produced throughout the world new appreciation of race, intellect and power.⁶ A Polish traveler who was then in Somalia wrote in 1900 that the Somali displayed "race-pride on the victory of their neighbors over a great European power."⁷

None in Europe was prepared for this surprise. The victory of a European force was never doubted. European hegemony over the non-European world was almost complete at the end of the nineteenth century. Some 90% of the African continent had fallen into the hands of one or

1 G.F.H. Berkeley, The Campaign of Adwa and the Rise of Menelik (London, 1935, 2nd Edition).

2 Documents Diplomatiques Francais, le serie, XII, no. 99, and XIII, no. 159.

3 George Padmore, "Abyssinia - The Last of Free Africa," The Crisis, Vol. 44, no. 5 (May 1936).

4 Sylvia M. Jacobs, The African Nexus: Black Perspectives on the European Partitioning of Africa. 1880-1920 (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1981), pp. 194-196.

5 William R. Scott, The Sons of Sheba's Race: Afro-Americans and the Italo-Ethiopian War. 1935-1941 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 21.

6 Cited in ibid., p. 31.

7 J. Potocki, Sport in Somaliland: being an account of a Hunting Trip in that Region (London: R. Ward, 1900), p.88.

the other European powers. The myth of European invincibility was carefully cultivated to convince the colonial sUbjects of the futility of resistance. Indigenous authorities in most areas of Africa and Asia were crushed or intimidated and manipulated to sign away their sovereignty.

Italy's plan on Ethiopia followed the familiar course of action pursued by the old hands - Britain and France. The method had worked for them almost without fail and it was believed to work for Italy as well. Little did Italy realize at the time that Ethiopia would defy the conventional wisdom that Europe had built about the other races. The Italians believed, as did the rest of Europe in those days, that Africans were incapable of developing loyalties which transcended narrow localities and sectarian interests. It was a widely held axiom that "Africans have no fatherland."⁸ In the absence of an overriding loyalty to a higher ideal the fragmented elite could be bribed and intimidated and when necessary used against each other to advance European interests.

It was on the basis of this assumption that Italy worked out her plans on Ethiopia. When she put forward her claims of protectorateship over Ethiopia, Italy assumed that Menelik, like most of his contemporaries in Africa and Asia, would be owed by European power and give in to Italian promises, bribery, or intimidation. Even if he refused to play along, the Italians calculated that he would eventually be left with few options when the rest of Europe recognizes Italy's claim as was the custom in those days. If the worst comes to the worst, the Italians thought, they would work on the country's restive nobility whose tribal and regionalist instinct, the Italians believed would persuade them to rally behind Italy to destroy Menelik and central authority in the country.

This strategy of subversion was given particular attention when Rome realized that Menelik was a hard nut to crack. Ignoring the numerous Italian missions that flocked to convince him of the harmless nature of Article XVII, Menelik had declared to all heads of European states: "Because God gave me the crown and the power that I should protect the land of my forefathers, I terminate and nullify this treaty ... My kingdom is an independent kingdom and I seek no one's protection."⁹

The die was cast. Italy embarked on a whole scale campaign of espionage and subversion. The architect of the strategy, Prime Minister Francesco Crispi, instructed General Baratieri, the Italian Governor in Eritrea and commander of the forces there:

Menelik's inexcusable behavior compels [us] to prepare from now on a defense plan. As we did with Minilik against Yohannis, we should now encourage pretenders against Minilik. Mengesha in Tigre, Mekonnen in Harar, have, besides personal ambitions, serious grounds [for]hatred [and] revenge against the Emperor. If Minilik disappears, the empire would be divided into two kingdoms, one in the north, another in the south, under Italy's lofty protection, not to exclude other for us better combinations.¹⁰

Accordingly, numerous Italian Agents were sent all over the countryside to fan personal and communal rivalries and sectarian animosities. Two of the well known agents Cesare Nerazzini and Petro Filter were sent to Harar to work on Ras Makonnen. Makonnen was told that as a grandson of Sahle Selassie there was nothing that would prevent him from making himself Negus over Harar and that Italy was prepared to provide him with arms and troops through Zeila. When Mekonnen refused to be moved, the Italian Foreign Minister instructed Saratieri to warn Mekonnen that should he refuse to oblige Italy they would send their forces to attack him from the east, and that

⁸ Cited in Sven Rubenson, The Survival of Ethiopian Independence (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 410.

⁹Ibid., p. 394.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 399. See also, La Prima Guerra d'Africa, p. 394; and Conti Rossini, Italia ed EtiQI2ia dal trattato d'Ucciali alia battaglia di Adua (Rome, 1935), p. 105, for the extensive Italian subversive activities throughout Ethiopia in the few years preceding the Battle of Adwa •

they have already secured British permission to use the port of Zeila for that purpose. The Foreign Minister warned, "Mekonnen should think of his future. He has to choose between Menelik who could be eliminated soon and the Eternal Power Italy."¹¹

This approach baffled Ras Mekonen so much that he called Negadras Afework, one of the few European educated Ethiopians and asked him "Tell me Afework, you have been to their country and you know them well. Are these Italians all fools like Nerazzini?" The Amharic term the Ras used for a fool was *delago*.¹²

This same Nerazzini had earlier tried to persuade Ras Mengesha Yohannes to ally with the Italians and had succeeded in arranging talks between Ras Mengesha and General Baratieri at the Mereb River.

Gustavo Bianci and Augusto Sallimbeni were busy in Gojjam telling Negus Tekle Haimanot that he should not miss this opportunity; while others were sent to Aussa to incite Sultan Muhammad Anfari; to Wag and Lasta to arouse Wagshum Birru, brother of the former Emperor Tekle Giyorgis. Even the monks of Aksum were targets of this campaign of subversion. General Baratieri bragged that Echage Tewflos and the Aksum clergy were his tools.¹³ Not even the Emperor's Gibi was spared from this infiltration. It is well documented that two of Menelik's interpreters, Grazmach Yoseph and Ato Gabriel, were in the pay of the Italian agent Traversi. Menelik's confidant and special envoy to Moscow, the Russian Nikolai Leontif was approached by the Italian Ambassador in Moscow and promised 2 million *lire* if he could help them against Menelik.¹⁴

All of these agents flooded Asmara and Rome with reports of their success and since Italian officials wanted the Ethiopians to do the fighting for them so bad, they attached high premium on these reports of the imminent disintegration of centralized authority. As Sven Rubenson has remarked "misled by their wishful thinking, the Italians saw allies everywhere."¹⁵ A short time before Menelik issued the proclamation of the campaign of Adwa, Baratieri sent the following Telegram to Rome:

All the Races in the country are divided. Each is absorbed with his own interests. The king of Gojam is secretly a sworn enemy of Menelik. Mengesha is waiting for an opportune moment to jump the fence. Ras Mikael is negotiating with us. Mekonnen is sabotaging Menelik's war effort and has promised us to rebel against the Emperor once the fighting starts.¹⁶

Italian experts on Ethiopian affairs confirmed this Italian strategy based on "Ethiopian disunity." Traversi, chief of the Italian mission in Addis, thought that Ethiopia was "in appearance a colossus" but without substance. Col. Piano called her a "colossus with feet of clay." Luigi Cappuci wrote,

No one is satisfied with the actual situation ... the present situation exists by dint of inertia; with the first clash, everything will go to pieces; a European conqueror

11 Oreste Baratieri, Memorie d'Africa, 1892-1896 (Torino, 1898), p. 358.

12 Afework Gebre Iyesus, pagmawi Atse Menelik [Amharic] (Rome, 1901 Eth. C.), pp. 94-95.

13 Baratieri, Memorie d'Africa, pp. 247-258, 356-358.

14 La Prima Guerra d'Africa, p. 370.

15 Rubenson, Survival of Ethiopian Independence, p. 399.

16 GeMral Baratieri to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Feb. 3. 1895. quoted in Paulos Gnogno, Atse Menelik, (Addis Ababa: Bole Printing Press, 1984 Eth. C.), p. 164.

... will have the country for himself and the way is prepared; soldiers and chiefs will join him.¹⁷

This was the Italian view of Ethiopia and the Ethiopians - the Ethiopians whom Prime Minister Crispi characterized in a letter to King Umberto as "a barbaric people that is not fit to exist." Blinded by nineteenth century racist bias, the Italians failed to notice the strong heritage of national consciousness that was apparent among Ethiopians. They confused internal dissension and rivalry with lack of commitment to a nation and mutual heritage. They failed to note that this people had a much longer tradition of statehood and shared history than Italy itself and that in the process of its long existence the diverse peoples of the country have built collective identities that needed to be jealously guarded. Pride in country and the values and traditions it represented, were deeply imbedded in the national psyche.

As the late nineteenth century Russian traveler Alexander K. Bulatovich observed, "The reliability of the foundation of the Ethiopian state comes from the deep feeling of lawfulness and the consciousness of the people."¹⁸ Belief in values that were greater and loftier than the personal and sectarian interests and concerns was widely spread. Many considered themselves as custodians of an honored tradition and were willing to pay the maximum sacrifice to ensure its continuity. When Ras Mengesha Yohannes (whom the Italians were expecting to defect to their side), was advised to retreat further to the south after the Italian army had crossed the Mereb, he responded that he would "take up Tewodros's example and lay my life for my country" than retreat in the face of Italian advance.¹⁹ There is also the striking story of Dejazmach Guangul Zegeye, a rebel against the Emperor Menelik. When he heard of the Italian advance and the Emperor's campaign orders he sent the following appeal to the Emperor: "Janhoy, I have rebelled against you because of personal disagreements with you. Now that my country is threatened by an outside enemy, let us set aside our differences and allow me to fight my enemy with you." Dejazmach Guangul was granted amnesty and participated in the campaign.²⁰ This, I think, is a clear proof of the recognition of the existence of a supreme cause which transcends all other considerations and commands the obedience of one and all. Contemporary Ethiopian writers including Tsehafi Taezaz Gebre Selassie and the Emperor's own secretary Grazmach Yoseph have left us with vivid description of the manifestation of sacrifice and heroism.

It wasn't just the able and the fit that fought at Adwa. There were women, monks, nuns, the aged and the infirm. Ras Wolde Mikael Solomon of Hamasien, who by then could hardly stand on his feet, insisted on participating in the campaign. We are told that he dragged himself into the heat of the battle and fought with grim determination, holding the hands of his servant when he could no longer support himself. Ras Dereso of Gojjam, another octogenarian did the same.

This fierce commitment to the honor of the country was manifested more strongly in the person of the Emperor who considered himself as custodian of the trust of the nation and the Empress Taitu. Taitu's response to the Italian envoy Count Antonelli at the peak of the diplomatic controversy was: "As you, we also ought to respect our dignity. You wish Ethiopia to be represented before the other Powers as your protectorate, but this shall never be."²¹ At the time when Italy had started massing troops on the Mereb side, Menelik wrote to his confidant, the

¹⁷ Quoted in Rubenson, Survival of Ethiopian Independence, p. 399.

¹⁸ Alexander K. Bulatovich, With the Armies of Menelik II: Journal of an expedition from Ethiopia to Lake Rudolf (Saint Petersburg, 1900) [trans. Richard Seltzer].

¹⁹ Baratieri, Memorie d'Africa, pp. 213-215.

²⁰ Paulos Gnogno, Ate Menelik, p. 167.

²¹ Documenti Diplomatici, No. XVII (1890-91), Part 3, p. 71. Cited in Ernest Work, Ethiopia a Pawn in European Diplomacy (New York: Macmillan Co., 1936), p. 118.

Swiss, Alfred Ilg, "We will never accept Italian Protectorateship even if the whole of the Italian population was to come against us let alone a few thousand soldiers."

In the final analysis, what assured the outcome of Adwa was not strong protestations and mere display of patriotic sentiments, but the adequate preparations that preceded it. In this regard, the Ethiopians displayed a much greater aptitude than Italy which had set out to civilize the "barbaric Abyssinians." The talent and genius displayed by Menelik had few parallels.

First and foremost it can, I think, be boldly stated that Menelik's personality was a crucial factor. His genial character, his tolerance, kindness and fairness is attested by many observers, both local and foreign. Menelik was not conceited and did not rush to judgement. He was a good listener. He was humane in his handling of political opponents, and would give precedence to peaceful resolution of difference than force even when he was sure of victory.

Menelik did not like to gloat over his victory. He avoided an over-kill when dealing with political rivals. In most cases he focused on what he can do in the future with his former enemies than dwell on past enmity. He avoided humiliating the defeated and in most instances accorded them a welcome fit for a brother. When Kao Tona, the ruler of Wollayita who resisted Menelik, was brought to him wounded, the Emperor took off his own *shema* and cleaned the wound himself. At the end of the campaign in Wollayita he gathered the local notables and declared: "I have appointed for you my son Tona .."²² We have also the case with Negus Tekle Haymanot of Gojjam. The two had fought at Embabo. The Gollam force was routed and Tekle Haymanot was severely wounded. Menelik personally took care of Tekle Haymanot, handled him with all the dignity and honor due to a king and by doing so won the eternal friendship and loyalty of Negus Tekle Haymanot. Imam Muhammad Ali [the later Negus Mikaelj was at one time a sworn enemy of Menelik. Menelik handled him with so much patience and tact that finally he succeeded in marrying him to his daughter Shewareged.

Here in lies the secret of the success of Menelik. His fair, tolerant and just rule won him the hearts and minds of his people and the local *balabats* of the country. While the Italians were waiting for the mass defection of the chiefs, the entire country was firmly glued to the Emperor. When the final day arrived, an unprecedented surge of national unity flooded the country. Instead of fragmenting into its component parts, as the Italians had predicted, the nation stood solidly behind the Emperor. As the Italian writer Conti Rossini observed, "one had to look back to the pre-Gragn period in Ethiopian history to find a comparative sense of solidarity among its diverse people."²³

Negus Tekle Haymanot came all the way from Gojjam and re-affirmed his friendship and loyalty to Menelik. Ras Mangasha Yohannes and Ras Alula, the hero of Dogali, whom the Italians were sure of winning to their side, frustrated this expectations, and instead marched to Addis Ababa for reconciliation with Menelik.

Menelik's kindness and his competent leadership made it difficult even for the most reluctant vassal to justify dissension. Even those who had openly sided with the enemy chose to "die with their Emperor defending the country and the true faith." These were the words of Ras Sebhat who together with Dejazmach Hagos Teferi and hundreds of followers joined the Ethiopian force at the crucial moment.²⁴ Most Tigrean notables who had earlier joined the Italians for a variety of reasons began to flock to the Ethiopian side. According to a contemporary observer, the

²² Quoted in Paulos Gnogno, Ate Menelik, p. 389.

²³ Conti Rossini, Italia ed Etiopia.

²⁴ Tsehafi Taezaz Gebre Selassie, Tarik Zemen Ze Dagmawi Menelik Neguse Negast Ze Ethiopia [Amharic] (Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam Printing Press, 1959 Eth. C.), p. 254.

prevailing view among these group was "though we eat their money, we will not fight our country and our king."²⁵

Menelik's genius was adequately displayed not only in holding the nation together but in building its military capacity. Menelik was fully aware of the superior Italian military and diplomatic muscle and prepared a well worked out plan to undermine it. In the diplomatic field he successfully contested Italy's claims in European forums. He used every imaginable division within the European state system and managed to keep a few powers including France and Russia on his side for a while. Italy's hope of getting its version of Article XVII accepted in European circles was frustrated through Menelik's astute diplomacy and persistent effort.

More importantly, the Ethiopian leadership was able to use the greed and rivalry among European powers to build its military arsenal. Menelik fully utilized his extended contacts and friendship with foreign governments, private companies and individual Europeans to purchase the war materials, which of course, was a crucial factor in the victory at Adwa. Menelik accomplished this in spite of the fact that the country was ravaged by the Great Famine at the time. Realizing that Tigray which had been hit the hardest by the famine could not support his massive force, The Emperor attempted to ease the problems of logistics by setting up supply storage all along the campaign route.

A master of prudence, Menelik waited when waiting was necessary. He knew that the costs of defeat was incalculable, and hence he was inclined to err on the side of delay. When he felt certain that the basic preparations were accomplished he issued his famous *Zemecha Awaj*.

It was this extraordinary leadership and the dogged determination of its people to preserve its national heritage which saved the day at Adwa. The enemy they confronted was formidable. It could not have been challenged by anyone tribe or region. It took the undivided devotion and resources of the entire country. Had Ethiopians been mobilized behind their parochial, tribal entities, as the current ethnic elites urge the country's people to do; had Ethiopia's diverse people denied their loyalty and commitment to the common ideal; that place of pride in history would have been lost. It is this capacity of creating one ideal out of the many that makes Adwa significant and Ethiopians unique in the annals of the history of the non-European world of the nineteenth century.

Recently I read an article written by a TPLF retainer on how Adwa should be remembered.²⁶ He is a member of the National Committee for the Commemoration of the Centennial of the Battle of Adwa organized by the TPLF Government. The writer argues that patriotism should be divorced from commitment to the unity of the nation and decries those that oppose the trend toward national dissolution. The writer does not of course explain how it is possible to develop an Ethiopian patriotism that rejects Ethiopia. He is in effect arguing for a patriotism that exists only in the mind of a nihilist. One cannot build a patriotism while destroying the very foundation on which it grows.

Adwa is a glittering example of what a patriotism grounded on firm belief in the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country can accomplish. The country needs that now more than ever. The challenges of centrifugal tendencies, grinding poverty and the absence of the rule of law can only be successfully overcome with the kind of self-sacrifice and sense of mission born out of genuine patriotism. This can be fostered only when we are able to maintain the country.

²⁵ Grazmach Yosef to Mondon-Vidailhet, 31 March 1896. Cited in Rubenson, Survival of Ethiopian Independence, p.405.

²⁶ Samuel Assefa, "The Possibilities of Patriotism: Reflections on the Contemporary Significance of the Battle of Adwa," distributed through Ethiolist [electronic media], 8 Feb., 1996.

Whether Ethiopians who have managed the challenges of the nineteenth century so remarkably well will once again rise up to the occasion and attain their proper place in the history of the twenty-first century will largely depend on how successfully they resist the dangers of national deconstruction and ethnic fragmentation. To date Ethiopianism has shown a remarkable resilience and there is reason to believe that this resilience will see the country through one of its most difficult periods in its history.

