

## ARMS FOR ADWA: MENILEK'S ACQUISITION OF WEAPONS THROUGH HARER

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Although many factors, including a superior number of soldiers, helped to ensure victory at Adwa, Ethiopia's vast quantity of modern weapons was crucial to success.<sup>1</sup> Menilek had actively sought European arms and ammunition to aid his rivalry with Emperor Yohannes from the late 1870s, and after rising to the Emperorship himself he continued to acquire the foreign weaponry later used so effectively against the Italians at Adwa. The trade through Harer comprised one of his most important sources, and the wealth of the newly conquered southern regions helped defray the costs of the expensive imports. In this presentation, I will discuss the political rivalries of European powers along the Red Sea coast which promoted the building of Menilek's arsenals, and the role of Harer in the process.

Menilek realized the importance of modern weapons to his political maneuvers, and tried to obtain them at least as early as 1872. He also appreciated the need to tap new sources of wealth in order to pay for them, a need which contributed to his southern marches. In addition, he began outfitting sizable caravans to the coast to ensure greater and more reliable access to the sea. More and better weapons facilitated his southern campaigns and the booty they provided enabled him to purchase more weapons.<sup>2</sup> This cycle helped Menilek to build the power base that later guaranteed his claim to the emperorship.

In the mid-1880s, the collapse of Egyptian power in the Red Sea, the rise of the Sudanese Mahdi and subsequent European competition for political and economic influence marked an increased availability and growing quantity of firearms in the Horn. In exchange for Ethiopian cooperation in evacuating Egyptian forces from the western Sudan, Britain and Egypt agreed in June, 1884, to allow Yohannes free transit of arms and ammunition through Mitsawa.<sup>3</sup> Britain nevertheless did not intend for Ethiopia or France to take over the territories abandoned by Egypt, instead encouraging Italy to do so. The latter, late to join the rush to acquire African territories, was happy to oblige. Less than a year later Italy occupied Mitsawa and prohibited further arms imports to Yohannes, whose presence in the north was inimical to Italian desires for expansion there.

Along the coast, the French were anxious to curtail Italy's strength, and the British were in turn concerned to minimize French influence. In 1884-1885, France colonized Obok and Tajura, and the British took Zayla and Berbera.<sup>4</sup> The British, previously enjoying a monopoly of control over the arms trade which went through their ports at Aden and Zayla, were alarmed at the possibility of unlimited amounts of weapons being routed through French or Italian territories, as well as the loss of tax revenues such traffic would entail. British authorities therefore sought to limit arms shipments, arguing that the arms trade encouraged<sup>1</sup>

1 Since many of the weapons that Menilek obtained were obsolete by European standards, in this paper I intend the term 'modern' to be relative to Ethiopia at the time.

2 Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994, pg. 75, 77-78.

3 Article I of the "Hewett Agreement" stated that "from the date of the signing of this treaty, there shall be free transit through Massawah, to and from Abyssinia, for all goods, including arms and ammunition, under British protection." (FO 1/31, 'Treaty Between Great Britain, Egypt and Abyssinia, 3 June 1884')

4 In the face of likely war with China, the French also sought to establish a refuelling station in the Red Sea since British neutrality prevented French warships from utilizing British-controlled ports there. Harold G. Marcus, *The Life and Times of Menilek 1: Ethiopia, 1844-1913*, Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press, Inc., 1995: 75.

the slave trade and that an increase in weapons imports ran the danger of arming "uncivilized tribes."<sup>5</sup> Italy was reluctant to agree to limitations, owing to a desired alliance with Menilek against Yohannes. France conceded to restrict imports to agents who had been issued official licences, but granted such permissions liberally, with an eye to the larger dream of a united French Africa stretching from the west of the continent to the east and to protect French economic interests in the region. French circumvention of the agreements, and ensuing British fears of their 'legitimate' Zayla trade being diverted to the French ports through which arms were being imported, led to the collapse of regulations by 1889. Ironically, when the British began permitting the arms trade through Zayla they argued that doing so would undermine the slave trade.<sup>6</sup>

Settled in Mitsawa, and eager to subdue the Emperor and secure control of northern Ethiopia, the Italians sought an alliance with King Menilek and supplied him with thousands of rifles. In 1883, 2,000 Remingtons were delivered; in 1884, 5,000 Wetterlies were brought to the king and a contract was signed for 50,000 new Remingtons, to be shipped over the following 10 years; and in 1886, Menilek received "more weapons and ammunition than ever before at anyone time."<sup>7</sup> In 1888, after Menilek's capture of Harer and subsequent Italian unease over the potential for greater French influence on the king through the arms trade, at least 10,000 Remingtons "with 200,000 cartridges, 5,000 other rifles, and 400,000 Wetterly cartridges" arrived; in 1889, the Italians made a further gift of 5,000 rifles and 1,000,000 Wetterly cartridges. After the signing of the Treaty of Wichale in May, 1889, Ras Makonnen went to Rome, where King Umberto gave him 39,000 rifles and 28 cannon, and where the Ethiopian apparently purchased 2,000,000 cartridges.<sup>8</sup>

Egypt's withdrawal from Harer in 1885 had caused Menilek to begin considering conquering the city, both to prevent a European power from doing so and to secure access to the coast for communication and trade. Delayed by campaigns elsewhere, he finally occupied Harer in January, 1887.<sup>9</sup> In the process, he took possession of the arsenal left behind by the Egyptians, which included a few Krupp cannon, between 1,200 and 10,000 rifles, and between 600,000 and 3,000,000 rounds of ammunition; he reduced the period for travelling from Shewa to the coast from "50 or 60 days to only about 35;" and he frightened the Italians into increasing their gifts of weapons in order to prevent French dominance in the arms trade." He thus established control over the trade entrepot through which enormous quantities of arms and ammunition were imported in the years leading up to the Battle of Adwa. Under Ras Makonnen's governorship, the majority of Shewa's trade was routed through Harer and the arms trade flourished, with the French ports growing financially dependent upon it. "Better weapons" became available at "lower prices," duties were raised, and by September "the arms traffic in Harer overshadowed all other commerce."<sup>10</sup>

5 Theodore Natsoulas, "Arthur Rimbaud: Trade and Politics in Northeast Africa, 1880-1891, Part II," *Northeast African Studies*, 3, 3 (1981-82): 44.

6 Richard Pankhurst, *Economic History of Ethiopia: 1800-1935*, Addis Ababa: Haile Sellassie I University Press, 1968: 596. Marcus, *History of Ethiopia*, pg. 597.

7 Harold G. Marcus, *Life and Times*, 63, 73-74, 87; Richard Pankhurst, "Linguistic and Cultural Data on the Penetration of Fire-Arms into Ethiopia," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 9, 1 (1971): 71.

8 Pankhurst, *Economic History*, pp. 596-597.

9 See Richard A. Caulk, "The Occupation of Harer: January 1887," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 9, 2 (1971): 1-20; and R. Caulk, "Menilek's Conquest and Local Leaders in Harar," paper presented to a conference of the History Society of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, June 1975.

10 Alfred Bardey put the number at two (Alfred Bardey, *Barr-Adjam: Souvenirs d'Afrique Orientale, 1880-1887*, Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1981: 334), as did Paulitschke (Jonathan Miran, *L'Occupation Egyptienne de Harar (1875-1885)*, Memoire de Diplôme de Recherche et d'Etudes Appliquées Est-Africaines et Malgaches, Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales, Paris, June 1993: 132). Richard Pankhurst, citing official British correspondence, among other sources, counts six (Pankhurst, *Economic History*, 593).

11 Pankhurst, *Economic History*, pg. 593.

12 Marcus, *History of Ethiopia*, pg. 84; Pankhurst, *Economic History*, pg. 410.

Although Greeks, Armenians and others participated, French merchants were the most important arms and ammunition traders in Harer, importing their goods from Obok, Tajura, and later Jibuti.<sup>3</sup> Between '882 and 1884, at least 200 breech-loaders, 2000 muskets, 10,300 rifles, and tons of ammunition were shipped inland. In 1887, 1,000 Remingtons and between 30,000 and 300,000 cartridges arrived in Tajura.<sup>4</sup> In 1888, a British agent reported that Saviour<sup>8</sup> had taken "125 loads of rifles and military stores" to Harer and that not much later "fifty camel-loads of rifles [had] left Jibuti ... [and] there were still seventy-five loads of arms and ammunition awaiting the arrival of camels." The same year, a Greek allegedly brought in 2,000 rifles through Jibuti, and A. M. Bremond another 2,000.<sup>5</sup> In the early 1890's, Chefneux imported "ten quick-firing rifles" and Bremond 1,000 rifles. British intelligence reports enumerated 60,000 rifles in transit, including quick-firing models, possibly Hotchkiss, and mountain guns and machine guns, and a ship from Marseilles transported "30 tons of war material" to Jibuti. In 1893, it was estimated that 1,000 camels were regularly used in the trade from Jibuti and Zayla to Harer, carrying about 25,000 rifles a year, an amount which "exceeded the number of Italian troops in Africa." In 1894, the Italian Ambassador in London reported an active arms trade at Obok, including two recent shipments, one of 3,000 rifles.<sup>6</sup>

The most common type of rifle which the French imported was the *tusil gras*, which in 1874 replaced the classic Chassepot, but which was rendered obsolete by the Lebel in 1893. In Ethiopia, they came to be called L.H."1 t. (fuzigera), CD<"1 t. (wejagera), ro.{"1 t. (wajigera), ro;"1 t. (wajagera) and h-1:"1 t. (ujegera), among others. The *tusil gras* was so common that its cartridges were used as small currency and its name worked its way into children's games.<sup>7</sup> Other late nineteenth century rifle types included Remingtons (often called Sniders), Chassepots, Wetterlies, Winchesters, Lee-Metfords, Lebel, Mausers, Manlichers, Vetterli-Vitalis, Berdans and various pistols, although I am not sure if all these were used at Adwa or arrived later.<sup>8</sup> The diversity was remarkable enough that in the mid-twentieth century Doody noted: "The whole area was a paradise for the collector of vintage weapons; few places in the world can show such infinite variety." <sup>19</sup>

The visibility of the arms trade with Ethiopia varied with the climate of political relations between the European powers, but it continued unabated regardless. Though possibly apocryphal, a story told by Avidas Terzian suggests one way by which this was accomplished.<sup>20</sup> Mr. Terzian related that his father, Sarkis Terzian, resident in Harer and a friend of King Menilek, arranged for transporting the Egyptian arsenal to Shewa after the conquest of Harer. Menilek then requested Terzian to obtain more weapons. The Armenian travelled to Marseilles, where he purchased, with gold and ivory, 80,000 *tusil gras*, 33 pieces of artillery and a machine-gun.<sup>21</sup> Owing to prohibitions on the arms trade following the General Act of Berlin (1885), however, France was not willing to transport the weapons itself and suggested that he discuss the matter with the Belgians.

In Liege, Belgium's weapons center, Terzian packed the arms, including 80,000 sabres purchased there, in metal-lined, wooden boxes. The Belgians shipped the crates to Rotterdam, Holland, where they were loaded on a Dutch ship going to Java. En route, this ship entered the Gulf of Tajura, which owing to French connivance was conveniently free of British, Italian and French patrolboats, and dumped the

13 The most important French traders included Soleillet, Leon Chefneux. and Armand Savoure. as well as lesser figures like the well known poet Arthur Rimbaud. (Theodore Natsoulas, "Arthur Rimbaud," pg. 44).

14 Pankhurst, *Economic History*, pp. 593-594

15 Pankhurst, *Economic History*, pg. 596.

16 Pankhurst. *Economic History*, pp. 599-600.

17 Richard Pankhurst, "Linguistic and Cultural Data," pp. 72-73.

18 Richard Pankhurst, "Linguistic and Cultural Data," pp. 70-77.

19 Asquod in: Richard Pankhurst, "Linguistic and Cultural Data," pg. 77.

20 Interview of Avidas Terzian, Addis Abeba, 15 May 1994.

21 Pankhurst notes that "Italian intelligence reported that the Armenian, Sarkis Terzian. was active in the summer of 1896 buying weapons in Belgium, payment being made in ivory and gold..." (Pankhurst, *Economic History*, pg. 602). am not sure if this is the same trip his son discussed.

crates in the sea, as close to shore as possible. That night, when the tide had receded, the goods were brought to the coast. Though it is surprising to consider that such a valuable cargo would be off-loaded into the sea, the sending of foreign agents, supplied with gold and ivory, to Europe demonstrates the lengths to which Menilek was prepared to go in order to obtain weapons, and suggests one way in which illicit goods may have been smuggled into Ethiopia at the time.

In the few years preceding the Battle of Adwa the arms trade grew further. Menilek's Swiss friend and advisor, Alfred Ilg, went to Paris to buy arms. Chefneux provided guns left over from the Franco-Madagascar war, as well as more quick-firing rifles. Savoure added more of the latter. 135 cases of rifles and loads of ammunition were obtained from Russia, and a French ship landed at least 250,000 cartridges at Jibuti. British officials estimated 7,000 rifles were imported from Belgium.<sup>22</sup> Undoubtedly, there were many other consignments as well, which will only be revealed by a purposeful combing of the archival records and first-hand accounts.<sup>23</sup>

Above, in a general way, I discussed weapons, weapon types, and amounts of ammunition, but there are other points which a more detailed study must take into consideration. Arms producers operating under one name produced rifles of various calibers. Remington, for example, sold manufacturing rights to a number of different countries, which then churned out their own Remington models. Although they were all called 'Remingtons,' their bullet casings were not always interchangeable, even in rifles of the same caliber.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, it can be quite misleading to list numbers of arms and ammunition and to infer military strength from them. Though tedious, in an ideal world the appropriate exercise for doing so would be to correlate available weapon types (including calibers and countries of production) with available ammunition types.<sup>25</sup>

That said, by the time of the Battle of Adwa Menilek's troops were clearly well armed:

Vanderheyem saw no less than 40 Hotchkiss guns and half a dozen machine-guns at the palace and reported that Ras Makonnen had perhaps a further 10 cannon, though the other major chiefs had no more than two each. In November, Piano and Traversi estimated that there were 82,000 rifles in the country (54,000 in the hands of Menilek, 10,000 with Ras Makonnen, 7,000 with Ras Mangasha), as well as 5 1/2 million cartridges, all but half a million of which were in the Emperor's possession; Donaldson Smith, who also saw large numbers of Remingtons and French breech-loaders in the possession of the Ethiopians, aptly commented: "any nation attacking them would have its hands full."<sup>26</sup>

Pre-war Italian estimates of the number of Ethiopian guns varied from 50,000-100,000, with additional reports of cannon, machine-guns and heavy artillery. The Italians could only boast of 17,000 soldiers, including about 10,500 Italians, all of whom sported a total of less than 15,000 rifles. If nothing else, the disparity in these numbers reflects the depth of Italian prejudice toward and ignorance of Ethiopians' fighting abilities. But how wrong they were: on 1 March 1896, within four hours of the start of battle the

<sup>22</sup> Pankhurst, *Economic History*, pg. 600.

<sup>23</sup> Although Ethiopians did manufacture a limited number of cartridges, their own production was of limited significance.

<sup>24</sup> For example, compare the caliber, base and casing sizes for the following models:

Remington	(Egyptian)	.433	11x50R
	(Spanish)	.433	11x58R
	(Danish)	.45	?

*Fusil Gras* (1874) .433 11x60R

<sup>25</sup> I have based this paragraph on conversations with Mr. Ed Carlin, an authority on arms and the arms trade in Northeast Africa. Any errors in representation, however, are mine.

<sup>26</sup> Pankhurst, *Economic History*, pg. 600.

<sup>27</sup> Pankhurst, *Economic History*, pg. 602. The full importance of these numbers cannot be realized without documenting the types and quality of weapons both sides were using.

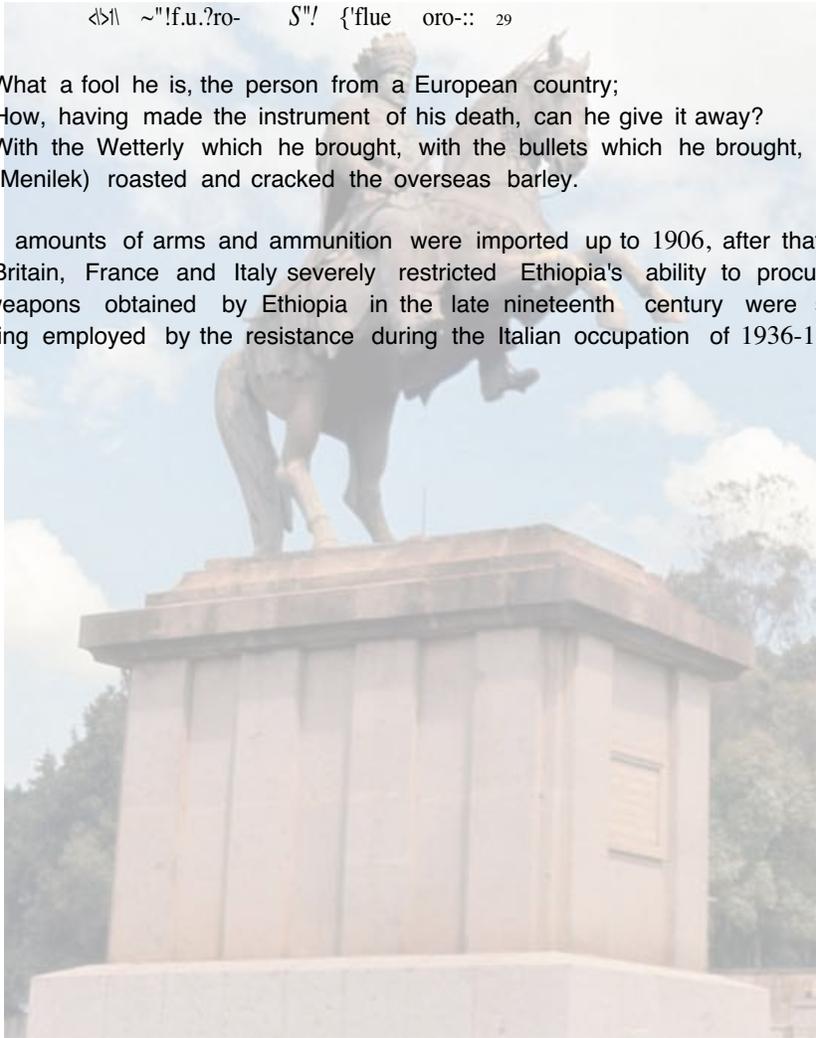
outcome was obvious, and by the end of fighting Italy had "lost 70 percent of its forces, an incredible disaster for a modern army."<sup>28</sup>

Although Menilek began obtaining modern weaponry more than a decade and a half before becoming Emperor and although the Italians themselves supplied a huge quantity of arms to him, his arsenal could not have attained its size or quality without his control of Harer, beginning in 1887. The tribute and booty from his southern marches provided the wherewithal to reimburse arms merchants, and Harer was well-situated on the trade routes leading to sea ports controlled by the French, who were willing to cooperate with Menilek in order to counter British and Italian influence in Ethiopia. Furthermore, the French assistance spurred the Italians to increase their own gifts and sales of arms to Menilek, further strengthening his forces. That the modern weapons thus supplied were crucial to Ethiopia's victory at Adwa, and the irony of their origins, is well attested in the famous Amharic poem:

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What a fool he is, the person from a European country;  
 How, having made the instrument of his death, can he give it away?  
 With the Wetterly which he brought, with the bullets which he brought,  
 (Menilek) roasted and cracked the overseas barley.

Although massive amounts of arms and ammunition were imported up to 1906, after that year agreements between Great Britain, France and Italy severely restricted Ethiopia's ability to procure military goods. Therefore, the weapons obtained by Ethiopia in the late nineteenth century were significant beyond Adwa as well, being employed by the resistance during the Italian occupation of 1936-1941.<sup>22</sup>



<sup>28</sup> Marcus, *History of Ethiopia*, pg. 99.