

THE LOGISTIC BASE AND MILITARY STRATEGY OF THE ETHIOPIAN ARMY: THE CAMPAIGN AND BATTLE OF ADWA

Tsegaye Tegenu

Department of History, Uppsala University
Uppsala, Sweden

INTRODUCTION

The battle of Adwa, a battle with significant national and international consequences, occupies a unique place in Ethiopian and African historiography. The background and the events leading to the battle have been explained mainly from the perspectives of diplomatic and political history. These perspectives emphasize the military doctrines of Ethiopia (national ideology and military missions), the skillful diplomacy of the Emperors in the acquisition of war materials and the making of allies, the capacity and readiness of the Ethiopian army to undergo the hardships of the war. Indeed, these factors have been emphasized so much so that in some circles they are considered the determining factors for the outcome and aftermath of the battle.

This article attempts to explain the background and aftermath of the battle of Adwa from the perspective of the resource system of the Ethiopian state and its culture of military strategy. In brief, the article addresses the acquisition and use concretely defined the strategic tasks of the armed forces. Within this framework, the paper attempts to address two central issues: first, why Emperor Menelik was victorious, and secondly, why he could not continue his military success and drive the Italians out of Eritrea?

A central premise of this paper is that the scale of military operation and the ways and means of preparing for a war, depends on the type and size of the economy and the military resources of a state. A military strategy which fails to consider the military-economic resources of a state and the capabilities of the enemy results in adventurism and, as a rule, ultimately suffers defeat.

A second premise of this article is that the Ethiopian army was based on two qualitatively different types of resource acquisition and allocation systems during the second half of the nineteenth century. The first type of logistic system was based on the *riste gult* system which was geographically entrenched in what was commonly called *mesafint hager*, namely the present day highlands of Eritrea, the region of Tigray, Gonder, Gonam, and Wello. The rest of Ethiopia was under the second type of resource system, namely the *gebbar maderiya* system, which formed the basis of the fiscal and military organization of Emperor Menelik's government. The battles against the British military expedition at Meqdela (1868), against Egypt at Gundet (1875) and Gura (1876), against Italy at Dogali (1887), and against the Mahdist Sudan at Metemma (1889) were conducted based on the *riste gult* system, while the battle of Adwa against Italy (1896) was based mainly on the *gebbar maderiya* system.

The social and ethnic origins, the identity of the troops which participated in all these battles, were similar. All were drawn from the various ethnic groups and constituted members of the military nobility, regional aristocracy, and peasantry. However, there was a difference in the manner of administering and using the human and material resources for the war. The troops of Adwa were recruited through the *gebbar maderiya* system, with its methods of remuneration, revenue administration, and provisioning that was in harmony with the economy.

METHODS AND MEANS OF TROOP REMUNERATION

In the *riste gult* system, the peasant community and *gultenya* was the primary source for providing the logistic base of the state. Peasants who owned land communally paid the expenses for

keeping *zemach* soldiers and supplied provisions, in addition to the payment of the ordinary and the extraordinary land taxes.

With this method it was difficult to put troops on permanent footing. The battles of Meqdela, Gundet, Gura, Dogali and Metemma were based on a precarious resource system. It is not difficult to see the desperate effort of the kings to overcome the fiscal limits of the system to fight against external aggression.

In the *gebbar maderiya* system, which was the economic basis of the imperial troops of Menelik, ordinary land tax was not privatized. It was under the direct control and administration of the king. It served as the most important source of revenue for the imperial army. In this system, land tax was fixed to fulfill the requirements of an army. Compared to the *riste gult* system, the revenue produced by the *gebbar maderiya* fiscal system was considerable. By the end of the nineteenth century, Menelik could collect about MT\$ (Maria Theresa Taler or *bin'*) 6,820,355 from ordinary and extraordinary land tax. From provincial contributions and the customs offices of Addis Ababa and Harar, he received revenue amounting to MT Taler or *birr* 3,131,428. The total court and army revenue of Emperor Menelik was estimated at MT Taler or *birr* 9,951,783.

The figure excludes revenue from the *mesafint hager* of the northern regions under the *riste gult* system, and sources of income such as commercial fees. It also did not include a great number of state lands which could be used for remunerating the troops. State land could be granted as pension to retired soldiers or it could be sold to gain money for the state treasury. In the region of Shewa, for instance, there were about 17,716 *maderiya* lands allocated for soldiers.

The MT Taler or *birr* 10 million annual revenue of Emperor Menelik's government was administered by a central system, either through the imperial court or the office of the governor general. The revenue was used to remunerate troops in the form of *qelleb* and *demoz*. This type of payment was often made to imperial court troops while provincial troops only received grain payment.

Part of the government revenue was used for another type of remuneration called *qutr gebbar*. The soldiers were given numbered *gebbar* (counted *gebbars*), particularly in the regions where the land was not surveyed, and collected the ordinary land tax themselves. A certain amount of the revenue was allocated for the recruitment of auxiliary troops, who performed tasks essential for the success of the campaign. Generally, they were referred to as *gindebell*, but they often qualified for specific tasks. The auxiliary function included transportation of cannon and machine guns, tents, *terada* pole, and food staff.

A large number of mules, horses and donkeys were raised both under the administration of the imperial court and at the local level. The king's cavalry was called *feres zebenya* and was maintained by the domain system, which included the land of *balderas* and probably the land of *iqa bet*. Those of the provincial cavalry called *balager feresenya* (or *wereda gindebe/-*), were recruited at the district level, and consisted of the *balabbat* who served as a cavalry force in exchange for tax exemption. During the campaign of Adwa, the *wereda gindebell* that followed the Emperor were estimated between 7000 and 8000.

PATTERNS OF MOBILIZATION AND PLANNING OF THE ADWA CAMPAIGN

In spite of communication and transport problems, in a matter of two months after the call for total mobilization on September 17, 1895, more than 100,000 soldiers were assembled in Addis Ababa, Were Illu, Ashenge, and Mekele. When the call for mobilization was issued, the imperial court, the provincial governors and the soldiers were expected to bring their own supplies. The

superintendents of the palace, the *azzaj*, took the responsibility of packing the provisions for the king.

Thousands of sheep and cattle were brought to the campaign to be slaughtered for troop consumption. In addition to the preparation made by the *azzaj* of the palace, district and local governors or *mislene* (meaning "in my place") and *gulf gezz*, who were responsible for the administration of land taxes belonging to the palace, were also ordered to prepare provisions at intervals on the direction of the march.

During the campaign, soldiers were supposed to bring *sinq* from their own sources which would last for about twenty days. The food consisted of *quanta* (dried meat), flour, *qitta* (bread), *shimbra* grain, *dabbo qolo* and *besso*. These food items do not get spoiled easily and could be kept for a longer period. Ranking officers also brought with them male and female servants, the men to fetch firewood and forage for the animals, the women to prepare food and drinks.

The system of provisioning was organized on the principle of self-sufficiency, with different sources. The court and the provincial governors depended largely on sources drawn from their *madbet*. For the ordinary soldiers, during the campaign a *gebbar* who held one *gasha* land was obliged to provide five *qunna* of grain, and, one *gundo* of honey on his own donkey. The task of feeding a large number of horses, mules, cattle, sheep and other transport animals was enormous. During the campaign, feeding responsibility of the animals was left to the *beqlo tebbaqi* himself. Usually campaigns were called after the rainy season was over and when it was time to find abundant grass. During the campaign, tents were pitched in areas with abundant grass and water to feed the animals.

In Ethiopia, the theatre of military preparation was an aspect of the culture, and hence is not surprising that a considerable amount of resources efficiently was mobilized for the battle of Adwa. The preparation of the war in a limited period involved the whole country. It was done mainly through the *gebbar maderiya* system, which supplied the armed forces with everything necessary for waging military operations and protecting the country from foreign aggression. Preparation for the war was only one component of the military art.

PLANNING AND EXECUTION OF THE WAR

During this period, Italy's military strategy was based on the policy of acquiring a vast territory for settlement of the landless Italians and a source of raw materials for its export industries. The colonial power had an aggressive expansionist policy which was to be achieved by military conquest.

After the death of Emperor Yohannes, taking advantage of the conflict of the regional aristocracies, Italy expanded its aggression, occupying the highlands of Eritrea. Because of the great famine that plagued the country, Emperor Menelik could not mobilize his forces to check Italy's advance. This gave Italy the opportunity to continue further its aggression. By occupying more territories on the highlands, and crossing the Mereb river, the Italian army chased out *Ras Mengesha*, the ruler of Tigray. They had almost established full control over the region.

Italy's military strategy was advanced through the occupation of more territory, and the establishment of defense posts on occupied strategic areas and towns. Italy also increased its military capacity. Baratieri, the commander of the Italian army and governor of the colony, had obtained an additional budget of four million lire and ten thousand trained soldiers. Ethiopia's military strategy during this period was defined by its policy of achieving the unity and consolidation of the imperial *gizat*, and attaining access to the Red Sea. The strategic goal was to engage the main force of the enemy far north in the territory of the Mereb Millash. The mission

was to destroy, defeat, or capture enemy troops and arsenal. In its military objective and method of conducting the war, the Ethiopian army purposely avoided sequential encounter, and the building of fortification post for a prolonged war. Ethiopia's military objectives were based on the urgency of bringing the main enemy force to engagement and getting a decisive victory.

Problems of provisions, the alignment of forces in the ruling class, the supply of weapons (both in quantity and quality) in favour of the enemy were the major constraints which played significant roles in the making of such a strategic goal. Emperor Menelik had to follow two strategic lines to achieve the stated military goal: first, the creation of a coalition of internal forces, and second, the organization and planning of the campaign.

Prior to the engagement, Emperor Menelik had established the common objectives among the regional princes of northern Ethiopia and defined the conditions for their participation in the war. He resolved the problem he had with *Ras Mengesha Yahannes*; he also concluded agreement with the princes of Gojjam, Begemder, Wag, and Wello. The *rases* agreed to send their troops, to provide their *gizat* as supply areas, and to assist in any way needed. He was thus able to lineup the troops of the princes, which amounted about one-third of the mobilized forces. Even at the last days of the war, *Ras Sibhat* and *Dejjazmach Hagos* who formerly allied with the Italian forces came back to the Ethiopian side and attacked the Italian column behind the rear.

The coalition of the *rases* resulted in a common plan of actions and the creation of a single command led by the Emperor himself and his delegates. The Italian military leadership counted on exploiting the internal conflicts. It envisaged rebellion or the neutrality of the regional princes, but this was a major mistake.

Strategically, Emperor Menelik succeeded in establishing an efficient and skillful organization and in planning the campaign. Indeed, the Ethiopian military leaders and troops had the established long tradition of mastering the high art of mobilization under difficult conditions.

The march to Adwa was relatively a long one, taking almost 5 months. The ground covered at a given day depended on the nature of the road. In the final phase, the rate of advance was dictated more by security concern and the need for supplies. In most areas, as the road was covered with forest and heavy stones, the troops were forced to march divided. In some areas, such as the designated route to May Weyni, the road was so narrow and precipitous that troops had to cross one river twenty eight times.

The long march was orderly. Since it was possible to encounter the enemy en route, march formation included forward detachment (to achieve security in the front and serve as covering force), the main body, and the logistic unit. The march formation was organized with regard to a rapid deployment of forces into combat formation. The plan for the march was prepared by the high military leadership consisting of the *rases* and order was given by or with consent of the Emperor. A coherent campaign plan was prepared based on the strategic objectives of the engagement, the examination of coalition of the internal forces, the degree of mobilization, the long distance of the march, and the goals and position of the enemy. Space will not allow to discuss the details on each of the orders, directives, directions and instruction given by the Emperor and the higher command of the *rases* to control the movement of troops and their execution in combat action.

Two months after the mobilization proclamation, and one month after the march from Addis Ababa, the pattern of mobilization (planning of the war) appeared as follows: The first section consisted of troops left behind at Addis Ababa to look after security in the absence of the Emperor. Before he left Addis Ababa, the Emperor ordered *Ras Darge*, *Degazmach Haile Mariam* and *Wehni Azzaj Weide Tsadik* to remain behind and look after the state administration and security.

The second segment consisted of troops assigned to look after boarder security. The Emperor ordered Abba Jifar of Jimma, *Dejjazmach* Gebre Egziabhere of Leqa-Wellega, *Dejjazmach* Jote and *Kawo* Tona of Welamo (Welayitta) to return and keep order in the south western Ethiopia.

The third section was a group of the imperial army sent to open another front on the eastern front. While at Wichalle (Wello), the Emperor sent a message to *Ras* Weide Giorigis, governor of Kefa and *Ras* Tesemma, governor of Ilubbabor who had stayed behind, to march to Awsa (eastern boarder) instead of coming to meet him at Ashenge. Emperor Menelik sent forces to the eastern boarder, for Italy had began to supply local forces with guns and artilleries to instigate internal rebellion.

The fourth section consisted of the main military force dispatched north to engage the main enemy force. When the Emperor was at Werre Illu, he ordered the forces of *Ras* Mikael, hereditary governor of Wello: *Ras* Wele, brother of Empress Tayitu; *Ras* *Bitwedded* Mengesha of Tigray; *Ras* Mekonnen; *Ras* Alula; *Wagshum* Guangul; *Dejjach* Weide; *Fitawrari* Gebeyyehu, *Fitawrari* Tekle, *Uqe Mekuas* Adnew; and *Qeniyazmach* Taffese to engage the Italian force in a battle.

The fifth armed group consisted of the force of the Emperor and the Empress who stayed behind as reserves. The army of the Emperor was led by *Fitawrari* Habte Giorgis, commander of the imperial army, *Fitawrari* Gebeyyehu, and artillery commanders such as *Bejironed* Balcha, and *Liqe Mekuas* Abate, and *Uqe Mekuas* Adnew, commander of the cavalry. The total number of troops of the Emperor and the Empress was estimated at about 41,000 men.

The plan had envisaged the various courses open to the enemy and considered guarding boarders, opening another front at Awsa, and giving emphasis on strategic reserves of the armed forces. The plan evaluated the chances of success and predicted both the enemy's probable responses and the main changes which could occur in such cases.

TYPES AND METHODS OF COMBAT ACTIONS

The campaign plan, adopted by the Emperor and the *rases*, was not actually an operational plan. Control of troop movements and actual conducting of engagements in war were left to the initiation of the *rases*. They did so following the course of action determined by the Emperor and the council of the *rases*.

The Ethiopian campaign plan dealt with measures taken in the mobilization and movement of troops far deep into the enemy territory by passing a small detachment force posted as defense. The military action of the Ethiopian armed forces was basically a strategic offensive accomplished through the opening of two fronts to defeat the main groupings of enemy troops deep into its own territory.

The battle of Adwa can be called a meeting engagement, which is a type of offensive combat. It was a clash of troops of the two sides advancing toward each other. From the outset, both sides attempted to carry out the assigned missions by means of a strategic offensive. The Italians defeated and chased out the forces of *Ras* Mengesha and took important areas in the region of TiQray to defend their stronghold in Eritrea. The Ethiopian forces conducted a long march north to penetrate deep into the enemy zone and engage its main force. At Adwa there was a rapid closing in of the two sides. Italy took the initiative and made a surprise attack through the rapid commitment of its main forces, attacking the center and the flankS Of me EthiOpian army, to give it a sudden blow. But Italy could not sustain the initiative.

The Italians had an operational plan with a detailed combat action. It was drawn up by Baratieri, the Italian commander jointly with his senior commanders. The operational plan elaborated the performance of each unit, their mission, their position, the direction of their main attack, and their mutual support. This operational plan failed to conceptualize (i.e., grouping) of the Ethiopian forces. In the Ethiopian strategic culture, the conducting of engagement was left to the freedom of the commander and the initiative of the soldiers. Even if the Ethiopian troops were not in a combat form, the laying out of campaign and the position of the troops was in such a structure that made combat formation of troops very rapid.

The Ethiopian way of military camping had an in-built defense mechanism and flexibility for the maneuver of troops to counter attack. Traditionally, at camping, forces were organized at least in eight-order (*denb*) taking position with specific task: front camp, *inderase*, *balemual*; guard camp, left camp, right camp, rear back camp, and *aggafari*.

Each camp had at least two or three units and was commanded by a *shaleqa*, who held a title that had strategic combat functions. For instance, the front camp and the left camp were commanded by a *degazmach* who covers the center and the rear part in time of combat. The *inderase* and the guard camps were commanded by title holders of *grazmach* whose units were assigned to attack the right flank of the enemy. The *balemual*, the rear and left camps were commanded by *shaleqas* who had the title of *qeniyazmach* and during combat their forces were assigned to hit the left flanks of the enemy. The camp of the *aggafari* was led by a *shaleqa* who had the title of *fitawrari*, responsible for frontal advance attack.

In combat action, camp commanders were expected to maneuver the troops in positions of left, right, center and rear as indicated by the strategic functions of the title. The maneuver is often accomplished by a close envelopment of the enemy flanks. Though the Ethiopian army was surprised, it was not difficult to search for a favorable position with respect to the enemy and to advance and make regrouping if the need arose.

The very structural formation of troops was flexible enough for the rapid maneuvering of troops in a moon-like shape, the essence of which was attacking the outer flanks of the enemy while concentrating superior force in the middle for a subsequent annihilation.

It seemed that Baratieri's plan did not focus in the response of the structural formation and combat initiative of the Ethiopian troops. It mainly emphasized the method of employing weapons (effective use of his firepower), following the European style of warfare. In the Italian style of warfare, reliance was on firepower. Improvements in firearms (lighter and rapid firing guns, for instance) and changing battle tactics (line formation, and shoulder-to-shoulder drill for volley technics) were designed to increase and to ensure effective and maximum firepower; however, weapons were only effective when employed in a strictly disciplined way.

In the Ethiopian context, there was no tradition of reliance on fire power. Until the second half of the nineteenth century, firearms played a limited roll in battles. Their numbers were limited and their qualities were relatively poor as most of them belonged to earlier periods. Therefore, there was no dependence on the effective use of fire arms; thus no linear battle formation and no need for drill. The Ethiopian style stressed more on mobility and maneuver than on linear formation and on rank co-ordination. It was designed for short and decisive battle than for siege warfare. There was reliance on mass maneuver and a fast-moving confrontation involving cavalry and infantry forces. Battlefield tactics depended much on identifying the weakest links of the enemy. Actions were not characterized by battle formations rather they were dominated by individual initiatives, mobility and energy. Leadership and morale were ingredients important for success.

WHY THE BATTLE OF ADWA WAS A SUCCESS?

The Italian force lost the battle of Adwa not because of a tactical error, though chances play a great role in the outcome of a battle. The main reason was that in many ways they did not know the enemy they were confronting. Based on the general and strategic goal of the war and considering the budget constraints of the Italian government, Baratier's preparation for the war and its planning was optimal. However, from the outset, they had no good knowledge of the response capability of the Ethiopian army, the military thinking of its commanders and the operational culture. During their preparation for the war, they counted on exploiting the internal conflicts between the princes, and, they encouraged internal rebellion and/or neutrality. They failed to see that the Ethiopian aristocracy had by this time built a system in which all could benefit. For instance, Emperor Menelik had never collected or demanded annual revenue from the regional princes of the north. As discussed above, Emperor Menelik was wealthier than Tewodros or Yohannes, and the imperial army had sufficient resources. The Italian military leadership never expected Emperor Menelik to raise such a considerable number of forces. Their estimation was 30,000 men, but through the *gebbar maderiya* system, the Emperor alone could mobilize two thirds of the combat force in the shortest possible time in spite of the problems of communication, transport and the rainy season.

The Italian experience was limited to the sporadic engagement of troops raised by the *riste gult* system. This gave them the wrong understanding of the capacity of the *gebbar maderiya* system.

Finally, their operational plan was conceived in the battle thinking and style of the European system, which could not predict the greater mobility, individual initiative and rapid maneuvering capability that characterized the Ethiopian troop formation. Italy needed more resources than its budget allowed, and a better understanding of the Ethiopian strategic lines and art of military operation, if it wanted to achieve its colonial policy.

Emperor Menelik, on the other hand, could not continue his military success to dislodge the Italians out of Ethiopia. It was not possible to establish a *gebbar maderiya* system in northern Ethiopia owing to the historical conditions. It was difficult to reform the *riste gult* system in such a way that would give the state independence in the control of resources. Tewodros and Yohannes had tried it, and working out of the system led to the tragic end of Tewodros. Emperor Menelik, though he could not inject fiscal and military reforms in the *riste gult* system, following the tradition, in 1889/90, he had appointed *Oejjazmach* Meshesha as governor of Serae and Akale Guzay to hinder the advance of the Italian, who were stationed in Asmara, in the province of Hamasen. His move was opposed by *Res Mengesha* who saw him as an intruder in his imperial privilege. *Oejjazmach* Meshesha was disarmed, and later when he fought against the Italians he received no support.

The presence of imperial power in the north needed *gebbar maderiya* system to support it. Imperial troops had to be remunerated and provided with provisions to carry out their tasks. Since the economy was non-moneterized, they were not paid in cash. Food and other supplies had to be brought through the direct control of the labor and product of the peasantry. The organized interests of the *rist* peasants and the local *gultenya*, and above them the regional princes, prevented the establishment of such a system. The appointment of an imperial governor became difficult, and the sending of troops during the great famine that scourged people and cattle alike was impossible. When troops were sent, as was done by the campaign of Adwa, it was not without experiencing difficulties.

In the last days of the battle, the problems of supplying provisions to a large army became acute to the extent of dictating the movement of soldiers. The decision to march to Hamasen was influenced more by the problem of provision than by the preference for a favorable terrain for

combat. The economy and the local and regional interests kept by the *riste gult* system practically made it difficult to station an imperial army in the north. The remnant Italian soldiers were gathering at Addigrat. The Italian government had already committed four million lire and 10,000 soldiers who were expected to arrive at Massawa and relieve the 5,000 Italian soldiers encircled on eastern Qesela (Kassala). In addition, as discussed in the campaign plan, the king had envisaged a problem of internal security, and fear from the adjacent colonial powers of Britain and France.

Interestingly enough, earlier military threats were now sneaking back and posing constraint, and forcing Emperor Menelik to follow the strategic culture of Emperor Yohannes and Ras Alula. In spite of their victory and concentration of troops, Yohannes and Alula could not dislodge the Egyptian forces, and then the Italians which they defeated at Dogali, and which they threatened it at Sahati. Emperor Menelik, in spite of his success in the making of the *gebbar maderiya* system, the form of the economy and the *riste gult* system compelled him to accept the *status quo*. What the colonial case of Eritrea shows was the weakness and the problem of the *riste gult* system to withstand the increasing challenge of a colonial aggression. The interplay of factors specific to a given polity govern the way in which it formulates strategy. The way modern Ethiopia makes its strategy differs from Emperor Menelik's Ethiopia. The economy, the fiscal and military organizations of the state were different. It is erroneous, thus, to judge the past with the influence of the present day military strategic thinking and concept. Military strategy is a peculiar national culture belonging to a definite historical period.

