



*Detail from a late 17th-century religious triptych. The Virgin Mary is especially venerated by Ethiopian Coptic Christians, who believe her to be not only the mother of Jesus Christ but also of God the Father.*

# Ethiopia

“Revolutionary Ethiopia or death” was the choice offered to Ethiopians by their chief of state, Mengistu Haile Mariam, last September, on the 10th anniversary of the revolution that ended the rule of Emperor Haile Selassie I. Such rhetoric is not unusual in postcolonial Africa, known for its cycles of coups and countercoups. But Ethiopia is different. The revolution ended a monarchy that had ruled an independent Ethiopia for almost 2,000 years. Dissatisfied with the pace of change under Haile Selassie, Mengistu and his associates have tried to forge a modern Marxist state overnight. Using terror and coercion, they have met with no great success. Why? Here, Paul Henze suggests that history may offer some explanations.

*by Paul B. Henze*

Addis Ababa (New Flower) takes the airborne traveler by surprise. Coming in from the north, one flies first up the narrow, green Egyptian valley of the Nile, then over the barren Nubian Desert in the Sudan. Across the Ethiopian border, the desert rises to a high plateau, broken by deep gorges. On the plateau is a patchwork of grain fields and thatched-roof farmsteads that continues for hundreds of miles. Its pastoral character gives little hint that a city of 1.3 million inhabitants is nearby, just over the Entoto mountain range, with its 11,000-foot heights clothed in dark cedar and eucalyptus. As the jetliner crosses the highest ridge, there, out of nowhere, appears Ethiopia's capital.

Ramshackle shanties with tin roofs spread out on the lower slopes; clusters of modern concrete-and-glass buildings anchor the city center, laced by broad avenues that dwindle into twisting dirt paths on the outskirts.

Little would seem to have changed during the last 10 years. The cool, thin mountain air—at over 8,000 feet, Addis Ababa is the highest city in Africa—still carries the scent of the eucalyptus groves scattered throughout the city. Street boys and beggars continue to jostle pedestrians on Churchill Avenue, which connects the railway station and city hall. Hawkers in the Mer-

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cato—a vast market built during the 1935–41 Italian occupation—peddle crosses and icons to tourists. Old men wearing a sort of jodphurs and the *shamma*, a white cotton toga, still bow toward the National Palace as they did during the times of Emperor Haile Selassie.

But inside the palace there is no longer an emperor. And here and there in Addis Ababa is evidence of the 1974 revolution that saw Haile Selassie's 44-year rule ended by a group of soldiers known as the Derg—the word for “committee” in Ge'ez, the ancient Semitic tongue still used by Ethiopia's Orthodox priests.

Haile Selassie's National Palace is today the site of the annual Revolution Day (September 12) reception. A 12-foot-high statue of Lenin stands between the palace and Africa Hall, headquarters of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. Revolution Square, formerly Holy Cross Square, boasts a new pink granite sculpture of Karl Marx. Above, giant portraits of Lenin, Marx, and Engels—floodlit at night—beam down approvingly.

Even so, the trappings of socialism have not changed the character of the capital; everything there, as novelist Evelyn Waugh noted in 1930, is “haphazard and incongruous.” High-rise apartments loom over back yards crowded with chickens and goats. Donkeys laden with firewood trot down Entoto Avenue among Fiat automobiles, Honda motor scooters, and Mercedes buses.

For the privileged, the Hilton Hotel has remained the social center of the capital. Government officials, American and German businessmen, and diplomats of various nationalities gather around its swimming pool, enjoying the view the hotel affords of the city. Revolution or no revolution, Addis Ababa is still the “Capital of Africa”: a designation it has earned as the site of 68 embassies, several United Nations offices, and the headquarters of the Organization of African Unity, over whose establishment Haile Selassie presided in 1963.

One begins to wonder: How has the 1974 revolution affected Ethiopia? The Derg promised equality, political freedom, and rapid economic development. Land reform, introduced immediately, has undoubtedly made many of Ethiopia's 32.9 million citizens more equal. New schools and expanded rural health services have improved life in much of the country.

But Ethiopians enjoy no political freedom. All opposition is

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*Despite its pro-Soviet stance, the Derg has yet to provide the USSR with permanent port facilities on Ethiopia's 628-mile Red Sea coastline.*

illegal. The state controls Addis Ababa's two daily newspapers, as well as a host of other publications. Publishing anything without official permission is against the law. Perhaps as many as 100,000 Ethiopians have died in revolutionary violence, an equal number in continuing regional strife. More than one million have fled to neighboring Djibouti, Somalia, and the Sudan.\* Derg chairman Lt. Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam, a former artillery officer, has been Ethiopia's official chief of state since early 1977. His two predecessors died in Derg shoot-outs. In short, like most African countries, Ethiopia has yet to see a new dawn of liberty.

\*In the United States, there are some 40,000 Ethiopian exiles, concentrated in New York City, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C. Most are highly educated; many, nevertheless, drive taxicabs and operate restaurants.

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The economy, instead of expanding under "revolutionary socialism," has stagnated. With an annual income per capita of \$140, Ethiopia remains one of the world's poorest nations. Industry is embryonic—cement is one of Ethiopia's few nonagricultural products—and industrial output grew by only two percent last year, versus eight percent a year during the 1960s. Agriculture accounted for almost half of Ethiopia's estimated 1982 gross domestic product, and for 90 percent of the nation's exports (mostly coffee and hides). Almost anything can be grown in Ethiopia; it is the potential breadbasket of Africa. But land reform has brought no surge in productivity. A drought in the northern highlands—as severe as the one that Haile Selassie tried to ignore in 1973—has left many Ethiopians struggling just to feed themselves. The average Ethiopian born today will live to the age of 46. Even a citizen of Bangladesh can expect to live three years longer.

The resources that might have been used to improve agriculture or to build factories instead support a 250,000-man army, Africa's third largest. Backed by the Russians, the Ethiopians defeated the invading Somalis in a 1977 war for control of the Ogaden region in the south. But rebels in the northern provinces of Eritrea, Tigre, and Gonder still confront the government with what Chairman Mengistu has labeled "a life-or-death struggle to safeguard . . . our revolutionary motherland." Military spending consumed some 10 percent of the 1982 budget, and the civil wars show no signs of abating.

Lesser peoples might have disintegrated in the face of such pressures. But 2,500 years of recorded history attest to the staying power of Ethiopian culture, a culture protected by a remote and rugged geography, nurtured by an ancient religion, and preserved by a resilient highland race.

## I

### LAYERS OF TIME

If history were like petroleum, extracted from the earth and refined for profit, Ethiopia would be one of the richest countries in the world. Its "proven reserves" are great and the probability of further extensive finds is high. Two hundred miles northeast of Addis Ababa, a parched lake-bed in the Afar Triangle has yielded one of the oldest collections of near human ancestors. Here, in 1974, the American paleontologist Donald Johanson

came upon the three-million-year-old remains of a female hominid who died in her twenties. Subsequent discoveries by Johanson and others led to the designation of a new forebear of modern man, *Australopithecus afarensis*.

Most of the major paleontological finds in Ethiopia are located within or near the Great Rift Valley—the “cradle,” many paleontologists believe, of ancient man. Stretching from Mozambique through the Red Sea to Israel, the valley bisects Ethiopia diagonally, like a crack in a plate.

The two “halves” of the plate are the Eastern and Western highlands. Together, the highlands account for almost two-thirds of Ethiopia’s territory. In the east, they slope down through grasslands and desert to the Somali border. In the west, the descent is less gradual, dropping off through deep gorges into the Sudan. The Ethiopian portion of the Rift Valley begins at Lake Turkana and continues as a string of lakes until it widens in the northeast to form the Danakil Depression, the lowest point in Africa and one of the hottest areas in the world—a lunar-like wasteland where temperatures commonly rise above 130 degrees.

### Christianity Plus

Not far beyond the Danakil Depression lies the Red Sea, on whose shores Ethiopia’s recorded history begins. Egyptian texts chronicle voyages to the “Land of Punt,” somewhere in the Horn of Africa, around 2300 B.C. The works of Homer contain no fewer than five references to Ethiopia, which he described in the *Odyssey* as “at Earth’s two verges, in sunset lands and lands of the rising sun.” The name Ethiopia itself is Greek, meaning “country of people with burnt faces.”

Legend, in many cases, does double duty as history. Scattered references to Ethiopia occur in the Old Testament, including the tale of the Queen of Sheba’s visit to King Solomon. The *Kebra Nagast* (The glory of kings), an Ethiopian epic of the 14th century A.D., formalized the story. According to this version, Solomon seduced the Queen, who later gave birth to a son, Menelik I. Thus began the so-called Solomonic Dynasty that would rule Ethiopia until Haile Selassie’s fall in 1974.

Where did the Ethiopians come from? Many historians believe that Arab colonists crossed the Red Sea from Yemen during the first millenium B.C. and established a powerful state at Axum, in the present-day Ethiopian province of Tigre. Ethiopians still proudly point to their Semitic light skin, thin lips and noses, and wavy hair; dark skin is disdained—so much so that Derg chairman Mengistu’s dark complexion is

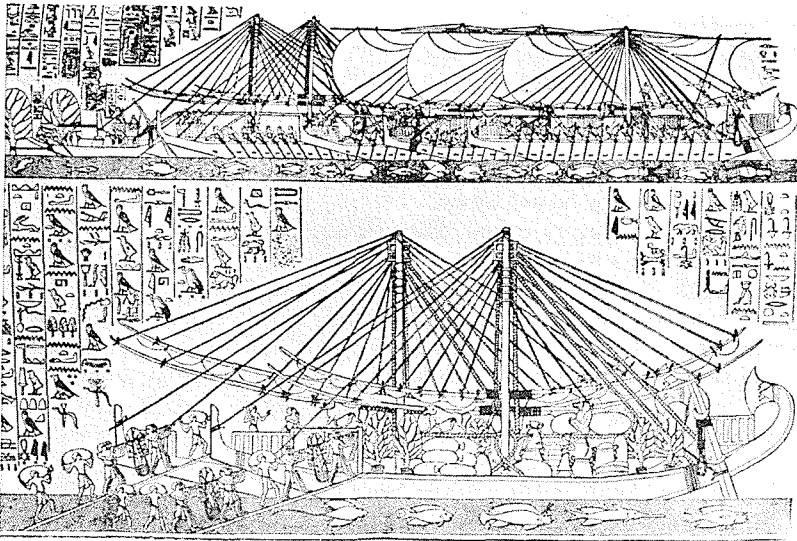
lightened in official photographs.

Huge stone obelisks, deep underground tombs, and large reservoirs (one popularly called the Queen of Sheba's bath) still attest to Axum's ancient glory. When emissaries from Axum visited the Roman emperor Diocletian during the third century A.D., they did so, in the words of the Latin writer Heliodorus, "not as tributaries but [as] friends and allies."

For later generations of Ethiopians, the most important development in Axum's long history—extending from roughly 500 B.C. to A.D. 900—was the fourth-century conversion of its inhabitants from Judaism and paganism to Christianity.

The first evidence of Christianity dates from the reign of the emperor Ezana, who ruled from approximately 325 to 355 A.D. One of his inscriptions, written in Greek, commemorates a campaign against the Nuba (in central Sudan) and attributes his success to the "faith of God and the power of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost." The new religion gained ground with the arrival of the so-called Nine Syrian Saints at the end of the fifth century. The holy men founded churches and monasteries throughout northern Ethiopia and translated the Scriptures into Ge'ez.

By the sixth century A.D., Christianity was entrenched in the



*Seeking incense and spices, the pharaohs sent fleets to the Land of Punt, described in the ancient Egyptian Book of the Night as "close to the Land of Outnet and the Eastern Sea."*

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northeastern portion of the kingdom and slowly spreading south. The new religion's adaptability eased its popular acceptance. Tied closely to Egypt's Coptic Christian Church, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church also incorporated elements of Judaism and paganism that persist today. The ritual of circumcision takes place on the eighth day after birth—the same as in Judaism. Ethiopian Christians do not eat pork. Widespread still is use of the pagan *lelafa sedeq*, a parchment scroll tied to the body at death in order to guide it on the way to heaven.

### An African Rarity

The Orthodox Church came to exert an overwhelming influence on everyday life in Ethiopia. Pilgrimages to sacred springs, lakes, and caves attracted large crowds. Holy days mandating fasts were, and are, strictly observed. Peasants even now refer to days by their corresponding saint's name rather than by their number. The 23rd of each month, for example, is known as Giyorgis, after Saint George, Ethiopia's patron saint.\* Monasteries such as the one at Debra Libanos, established during the 13th century, were centers of learning and literacy.

While the titular patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was always an Egyptian appointed by the Patriarch of Alexandria (a practice that persisted until 1959), native Ethiopian monastic leaders wielded the real power. Emperors were both sovereigns of the nation and defenders of a faith—a status reflected in one of Haile Selassie's titles: Elect of God. Emperors such as Zara Yakob (1434–68) enforced orthodoxy. During his reign, he not only expanded the empire's boundaries but also reformed the church, putting to death his own sons for flirting with paganism.

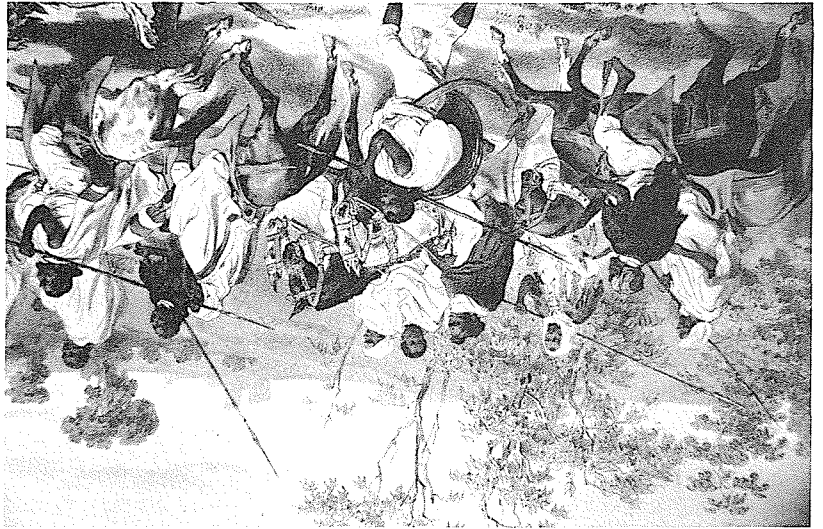
The gravest threat to Ethiopian Christianity was Islam, which developed across the Red Sea in Arabia during the seventh century. Early Muslims, persecuted in Arabia, took refuge in Axum. The prophet Mohammed appreciated this hospitality and reputedly cautioned his followers, "Leave the Abyssinians in peace, as long as they do not take the offensive."

But Mohammed's injunction did not stop Arab Muslims from gradually populating the Red Sea coast. They soon overran Egypt, the Sudan, and a large portion of what is now Somalia. Eventually, they would sweep across North Africa and up into

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\*The Ethiopian calendar has 365 days distributed over 12 months of 30 days each; an additional month with five (or, in a leap year, six) days occurs at the end of each year. Because it is based on the Julian rather than the Gregorian scheme, the Ethiopian calendar is also eight years behind ours.





An 1840 rendition of an Ethiopian raiding party. Bloody battles between rival tribes were common; some 70 years earlier the Englishman James Bruce had recoiled at the "horrid cruelties" practiced by Ethiopian warriors.

Spain. Thus, the Muslims cut off Ethiopia from the European world to the north as well as from the Middle East. "Encom- passed on all sides by the enemies of their religion," observed British historian Edward Gibbon in 1781, "the Ethiopians slept near a thousand years, forgetful of the world, by whom they were forgotten."

Axum's days as the capital of ancient Ethiopia ended with its destruction during the 10th century by Judith, Queen of the Falashas, an unassimilated local tribe that adhered to Judaism. [see box, p. 108]; but Christianity remained strong in Ethiopia. Missionaries, monks, traders, settlers, and adventurers moved southward from a declining Axum.

Today, the central plateau to which they migrated is the heart of Ethiopia. Much of its people's dominance can be attributed to what the British historian Arnold Toynbee called "the virtual impregnability" of its topography. In the rugged Semien region—the "roof of Africa"—rises Ras Dashen, at 14,782 feet, Ethiopia's highest peak. Most of the plateau lies between 6,000 and 10,000 feet. Deep gorges carved by erosion make every *amba*, or mesa, a challenge to ascend, let alone attack. Axumite Christians gradually expanded into these areas,

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mingled with the peoples already there and, over generations, became the Amhara. They and the more northerly Tigreans remain the country's two most important Semitic peoples. Smaller tribes also lived on the plateau, some, like the Falashas, retaining their identity to this day, others mixing with the Amhara and Tigreans.

Life in the central highlands mirrored, in some respects, the feudal pattern of medieval Europe. Most of the high plains and *ambas* had come under the (wooden) plow; the fertile soil supported wheat, barley, and *teff*, an indigenous grain used to make *injera*, the spongy, flat bread eaten by all Ethiopians. The inhabitants of scattered settlements gathered weekly at markets and rural churches to trade, worship, gossip, and drink.

Distinct social classes evolved, from slaves to nobles. Peasants who tilled their own land ranked near the top. Potters, metalsmiths, and tanners ranked near the slaves. The emperor rewarded loyalty with titles and military rank, a practice that resulted in considerable social mobility.

Thus, by the 15th century, society in the central highlands of Ethiopia—unlike that in other regions of black Africa—amounted to far more than a conglomeration of primitive, illiterate tribes. Anchored by a church and an established monarchy and supported by well-developed agricultural communities, Ethiopia had developed a solid cultural and political identity as a nation. While from time to time Ethiopian society incorporated customs from the tribes it absorbed, the integrity of its basic institutions remained. Historian Margery Perham has compared Ethiopia to “a rock-pool high up on the [sea]shore . . . filled at intervals by the tide of influence from the great world.”

### Newcomers

Events during the 16th century unleashed a wave of foreign influences that severely tested the durability and resilience of Ethiopian civilization. The first convulsion came in 1529, when Ahmad Grañ (“the Left-handed”), emir of Harer, led a Muslim expedition into Ethiopia from Harer in the east. He laid waste to the highlands, forcibly converting Christians and burning churches and monasteries.

Emergency help came from an entirely unexpected source: the Portuguese. Intrigued by reports of a mysterious kingdom in the Near East, supposedly ruled by a Christian king named Prester John, King John II of Portugal had sent an envoy in 1487 to find this mythical land. The envoy, Pedro de Covilham, arrived in Ethiopia in 1493, becoming a trusted adviser to the emperor.

### ETHIOPIA'S BLACK JEWS

In 1973, the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel, Ovadia Yossef, declared the Falashas of Ethiopia to be descended from the lost Hebrew tribe of Dan. By acknowledging Ethiopia's 30,000 "black Jews" to be, in fact, real Jews, Yossef ended a century-long debate among rabbinical scholars and opened the door for Falasha immigration to Israel under the 1950 Law of Return, which offers Israeli citizenship to all Jews.

The origins of the Falashas—the name means "exile" in Amharic—are obscure. The Falashas themselves claim descent from the Jewish companions of Emperor Menelik I, reputed son of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Scholars trace the Falashas back to the Agau, one of the earliest known tribes in Ethiopia. By their reckoning, Judaism was imported during the first millennium B.C. either by Arabian Jews from across the Red Sea, or by Egyptian Jews traveling south along the Nile.

The Falashas lived autonomously in the Semien Mountains near Lake Tana for almost 1,000 years. A visiting Spaniard noted during the 12th century that they were "not subject to the rule of others, and they have towns and fortresses on the top of mountains." But 400 years later, the Emperor Susenyos conquered the Falashas. Those who were not sold as slaves were denied the right to own land and forced to enter the lowly professions of potter, blacksmith, stonemason, and silversmith.

Help came during the 19th and 20th centuries, from European Jews. In 1924, a French Jew, Jacques Faitlovitch, opened Ethiopia's first Jewish boarding school (in Addis Ababa). But foreign aid could not overcome the long hostility between Falashas and Christians. As late as the 1950s, Christian peasants occasionally beat or killed Falashas, whom they believed turned into hyenas at night and dug up the dead.

Falashas sought aid from Israel after its creation in 1948. An open letter to Jewish organizations from the Falashas asked, "Why should our tribe be considered less than the rest of Jewry?" But the Israelis were loath to pressure Haile Selassie—one of Israel's few African allies—into allowing the Falashas to leave. For his part, the Emperor saw the Falashas as valuable physical evidence of his own descent from Solomon.

After the 1974 revolution, the Derg allowed some Falashas to emigrate (in return for Israeli small arms). But pressure from Ethiopia's Arab allies, notably Libya, soon curbed the exodus. Life in Israel has not been easy for the Falashas, who retain their old customs; women, for example, are confined to special huts during menstruation. Unable to speak Hebrew and unfamiliar with modern ways, many of the 5,000 émigrés are poverty-stricken. While the Falashas in Israel may have escaped the hardships of life in Ethiopia, they have yet to find the Promised Land.

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Other Portuguese followed. Unable to stop Grañ's depredations, the Ethiopians turned to Portugal for help. Four hundred Portuguese musketeers proved decisive in gaining a 1543 victory against the Muslim invaders. Thus began Europe's involvement, of sorts, in Ethiopian affairs.

The Arabian Muslims and the Portuguese were not the only newcomers to Ethiopia. Exhausted by the struggle against Grañ, the Amhara-Tigre elite could not check a massive influx of Oromo tribesmen into Ethiopia's heartland. These nomadic cattle herders migrated from the grazing lands of southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya during the 16th century. Some Oromo put down roots and became farmers, embracing Christianity and intermarrying with Amhara. Others resisted assimilation. Their leaders became a major force in regional politics. Today, the Oromo are the largest ethnic group in the Ethiopian population.

### **The Ambitions of Tewodros II**

Reeling from the consequences of the Muslim invasion, the Ethiopian monarchy's power and prestige declined during the 17th and 18th centuries. The peripheral provinces of the empire slipped away. A steady succession of explorers and emissaries from Italy, Britain, Spain, Sweden, and France made their way to Ethiopia, intent on planting their flags. The country seemed destined to dissolve or to become yet another European protectorate. But this did not happen.

Traditionally, change in Ethiopia has come in bursts, with great men playing a catalytic role. Under Ezana, Axum expanded and embraced Christianity. During the 15th century, Zara Yakob crushed the Muslims and reformed both church and state. Now, beginning in the mid-19th century, three ambitious rulers would follow one upon another, each determined to unite and modernize a fragmented and feudal empire.

The first, Tewodros II, ascended the throne in 1855. Walter Plowden, the British consul at the time, described him as "vigorous in all manly exercises . . . his personal and moral daring are boundless." Such qualities enabled Tewodros to subdue local chieftains and to restore a strong central government. Meanwhile, he sought European help to develop his country's economy and, in the form of guns and gunsmiths, to counter the Muslims on his borders. He even proposed to the Russian tsar Alexander II that Ethiopia and Russia combine forces to liberate Jerusalem.

Ultimately, however, Tewodros's impatience and ambition—and his concern for Ethiopia's cultural integrity—led to his

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undoing. In 1862, when European missionaries tried to convert members of the Jewish Falashas, Tewodros ordered the clerics imprisoned. The British consul joined them in jail when he protested. News of the hostages caused an uproar in Britain. Led by Lt. Gen. Sir Robert Napier, an expeditionary force of 64,000 men, 44 elephants, and some 12,000 mules arrived at Tewodros's mountain fortress of Magdala in April 1868. After a disastrous defeat by the British, the emperor released his prisoners. Intent on making an example of the upstart emperor, the British then stormed the citadel; they found Tewodros sprawled on the ground, a gaping wound in the back of his head. Next to his body lay a pistol inscribed to him in happier days by Queen Victoria.

### Triumph at Adowa

The British did not stay on. Indeed, disenchanted with the high cost of the expedition, and seeing no economic or strategic opportunities, they took care, as General Napier later put it, to remove "every possible official channel through which we might be involved in [future] complications with that country." Ethiopia remained—unlike Kenya, Uganda, and the Sudan—free of foreign domination.

By the 1890s, Emperor Menelik II—who had been a rival and former prisoner of Tewodros—had realized Tewodros's dream of a united Ethiopian empire. He conquered the Muslim city of Harer and subjugated both the southern Oromo and the inhabitants of the southwestern coffee-growing region of Kefa (whence comes the English word for coffee). The lowland negroid tribes of the far west—long regarded by highlanders as *shankallas*, the Amharic equivalent of "niggers"—were also brought into the fold.

Menelik next had to face foreigners determined to establish themselves in Ethiopia. In 1885, the Italians—newcomers in the Scramble for Africa—occupied the Red Sea port of Massawa and then advanced into Ethiopia's northern highlands, taking possession of a region that they christened Eritrea. Talks between the emperor and the Italians failed. Menelik mobilized his tribesmen, declaring: "Today, you who are strong, give me your strength, and you who are weak, help me by prayer."

In March 1896, superior Ethiopian strength crushed the Italians in the rocky terrain near the village of Adowa. One-third of General Oreste Baratieri's 18,000 Italians perished. With the help of Russian advisers and European arms (including 10,000 Italian rifles) Menelik's forces had achieved a victory that stunned Europe. Adowa Day, March 2, has been celebrated since

by Ethiopians as a national holiday. Menelik then made peace with the Italians, permitting them to keep Eritrea, which for the next half century insulated Ethiopia from the Muslim regions to the north and west.

France, Britain, and Italy now treated Menelik with respect. When the Somali coast bordering Ethiopia was divided among them, Ethiopia received its interior—the Ogaden. (In this division lay the seeds of discord between Ethiopia and modern Somalia, which became independent in 1960.) The Great Powers also sent foreign legations to Menelik's capital of Addis Ababa, founded in 1886. Guided by advisers such as Alfred Ilg, a Swiss engineer who became one of Menelik's most trusted counselors, Menelik built the nation's first public school and introduced smallpox vaccination. In 1905, with the help of European financiers, the state's Bank of Abyssinia opened for business. The Russian Red Cross founded Addis Ababa's first hospital.

Unfortunately, a series of strokes crippled Menelik before he could further his ambitious plans. Lij Iyasu, his grandson, followed him on the throne in 1913. The young man soon became involved in Muslim intrigues. The nobility and clergy accused him of abandoning Christianity and rebelled. In 1916, Menelik's daughter Zauditu became empress. Under her as prince regent was Ras Tafari Makonnen, a young man who had a clear vision for his country.

## II

### THE REIGN OF HAILE SELASSIE

Ras Tafari Makonnen—who would take the name Haile Selassie (“Power of the Trinity”) at his coronation—dominated Ethiopia for 58 years. He was born near the city of Harer, where his father, Menelik's most trusted general, was governor. Tafari studied in Harer under a Jesuit priest, learning both European history and French. His father, who had traveled to Europe in 1889, taught the young Tafari to appreciate the importance of modern technology as well as Western political and social ideals.

The young prince regent's slight physique and lack of charisma invited the scorn of many of his countrymen—at first. But his quiet demeanor masked a keen mind and an iron will. “Do not underestimate . . . Tafari,” an unsuccessful rival once observed, “He creeps like a mouse, but he has jaws like a lion.”

Tafari's attempts to modernize Ethiopia faced formidable obstacles. The apparatus of the government in Addis Ababa was

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rudimentary. What education there was took place primarily in church schools. The country had few roads. Transport was mostly by mule, horse, or camel. Salt bars still served as currency. The throne and the church together owned one-third of the land, and subsistence agriculture allowed the export of only coffee and hides. Slavery thrived in remote parts of the country.

In their African colonies, the European powers variously assumed the "white man's burden" of economic development. Ethiopia had to do it alone. Today, in the age of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Food and Agricultural Organization, it is easy to forget the scarcity of capital and expert advice that prevailed in the undeveloped world 50 years ago. Measured with that in mind, Ethiopia's gains under the Lion of Judah were substantial.

To attract aid and to ensure protection, Tafari cultivated strong ties with the outer world. In 1923, after promising to suppress slavery, Ethiopia won admission to the League of Nations. Among other innovations, a chapter of Ethiopian Boy Scouts was begun. American Presbyterian missionaries established a 160-bed hospital at Addis Ababa in 1923. A contingent of Belgians trained and armed the police.



*Haile Selassie I,  
seen shortly after  
his coronation  
in 1930.*

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On a 1924 tour of Europe, the young prince regent struck the London *Times* as a man "of considerable enlightenment." Others were impressed by his large entourage, which included a private traveling zoo with lions. Tafari returned with ideas for change at home; he also dispatched bright young Ethiopians to universities in England, France, and the United States.

But Tafari had to move slowly. Radical change, he knew, would alienate the conservative clergy and rural tribal aristocracy, and could lead to his downfall. "Ethiopia is like Sleeping Beauty," Tafari told a French journalist in 1933. "We must take great care . . . not to overwhelm her with changes."

### **Mussolini's Revenge**

With the death of Empress Zauditu in 1930, Tafari became Emperor Haile Selassie I, riding to his coronation in a carriage that had once belonged to Kaiser Wilhelm I. His coronation illustrated vividly the gulf between the promise and the reality of modernity in his nation. Policemen obligingly donned new uniforms for the ceremony, but they refused to wear shoes. Lepers and beggars were hastily evacuated from Addis Ababa to hide them from the eyes of foreign dignitaries—a practice still followed in revolutionary Ethiopia.

Still, genuine improvements did take place. In 1931, the new emperor gave his countrymen a constitution that established a two-chamber parliament. The emperor retained real power, but the constitution helped to weaken Ethiopia's feudal array of warring tribal chieftains. To establish a civil service, Haile Selassie recruited advisers from Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States—countries with no territorial interests in Ethiopia. (One American, a former U.S. Treasury employee named Everett A. Colson, served as Haile Selassie's chief financial adviser.) A small contingent of Russian refugees from the 1917 revolution helped to staff Ethiopia's fledgling ministries.

The emperor had many other plans. But before he could pursue them, the Italians intervened. Thirty-nine years after Adowa, Benito Mussolini was determined to carve an Italian empire out of Africa. Some 100,000 Italian troops began moving across the Eritrea-Ethiopia border at 5:00 A.M. on October 2, 1935. To oppose Italian tanks, aircraft, and poison gas, Haile Selassie fielded an army of 100,000 men who lacked modern equipment and training. Despite a gallant resistance, the Ethiopians soon gave way before the Italian advance.

Haile Selassie escaped to Djibouti on May 2, 1936. Addis Ababa fell three days later. The League of Nations, by which the emperor



### THE OLD TESTAMENT MEETS THE NEW WORLD

"Bonds of close friendship have been established between our two governments, and I express the earnest hope that these bonds will . . . [result] in greater commerce and more frequent intercourse between Abyssinia and the United States." Thus, in 1919, did President Woodrow Wilson greet the first Ethiopian envoys to the United States; they had been dispatched from Africa by Prince Regent Ras Tafari Makonnen, the future Haile Selassie I.

The link between the United States and Ethiopia was slow to develop. Even before Emperor Menelik's 1896 victory over the Italians at Adowa, the French, British, and Russians had been expanding their influence in Ethiopia. Not until 1904, however, were diplomatic ties established between the United States and Ethiopia; business at the U.S. consulate at Addis Ababa was so slow that the post was shut down in 1907. A report by the State Department two years later noted that "the evidences are entirely lacking of any . . . trade opportunities."

The 1919 Ethiopian delegation to the United States came to congratulate President Wilson on the recent Allied victory in World War I—and to solicit U.S. private investment in Ethiopia. Clad in costumes of red velvet embroidered in gold, and wearing jeweled turbans, the envoys presented President Wilson with tusks of ivory, gold boxes, and letters from Prince Regent Ras Tafari and Empress Zauditu.

But racial tensions in the United States—riots had flared in Chicago and Washington, D.C—cast a shadow over the Ethiopians' tour. At one point, the envoys were barred from the National Democratic Club in New York because, as one member put it, "They're black; we'll not have black men eating here."

Proud of their Semitic heritage and their 2,500-year history, the visiting Ethiopians, as Howard University historian Joseph Harris has noted, "were indignant about the label of 'Negro'." For American blacks, however, the Ethiopians' visit was "a rare opportunity . . . to identify with . . . an independent African country." Black newspapers gave extensive coverage to the visitors, who were invited to speak at, among other places, Harlem's Metropolitan Church. The Ethiopians in turn recruited black American physicians, teachers, and technicians to assist in the development of Ethiopia. During the 1935–36 Italo-Ethiopian war, several prominent American blacks—including aviator Herbert Julian, "the Black Eagle of Harlem"—volunteered to fight the Italians.

"Ethiopianism" continued to inspire blacks in America and elsewhere to fight for greater civil rights. And racial prejudice notwithstanding, Haile Selassie saw U.S. friendship as a useful counterweight to European influences and fostered an alliance that endured until his overthrow in 1974.

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had set much store, imposed only ineffective sanctions against Italy. As King Victor Emmanuele III was being proclaimed Emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie spoke before the League on June 30, 1936, in Geneva and warned, prophetically, "It is us today. It will be you tomorrow." The emperor's eloquence won him worldwide applause and sympathy, but not much else. The London *Times* summed it up: "For the little good it can do him now, Haile Selassie has and will hold a high place in history."

### Helping the Yanks

Ethiopian guerrillas refused to accept Italian rule without a struggle. Mussolini, in turn, authorized brutal reprisals. Marshall Rodolfo Graziani, the viceroy of occupied Ethiopia, avenged a 1937 attempt on his life by executing all Ethiopian high school and university graduates.

Italian rule was bloody but brief. Soon after Italy entered World War II in June 1940, British troops—bolstered by a large contingent of South Africans—struck from the Sudan, Kenya, and British Somaliland (part of present-day Somalia). Five years to the day after the Italian capture of Addis Ababa, Haile Selassie returned to his capital, riding in an Alfa Romeo abandoned by the Italians. "Today," he announced, "is the beginning of a new era in the history of Ethiopia."

Haile Selassie picked up where he had left off. The Italian occupation, grim as it was, had also given Ethiopia a 4,000-mile road network and numerous hospitals, post offices, and public buildings. The emperor forgave Fascist brutalities and asked individual Italian settlers to stay. Many of them did, establishing restaurants, hotels, and successful businesses, including a brewery that produced Melotti, long one of the more popular Ethiopian beers.

The emperor sent a new generation of students abroad and established the University College of Addis Ababa in 1950, with instructors drawn from Britain, Sweden, and the United States. In 1955, a revived constitution defined and expanded the rights of Ethiopians (though without limiting the emperor's real power). To broaden Ethiopia's economic base, Haile Selassie sought help from foreign companies, inviting Trans World Airlines to set up Ethiopian Airlines (EAL) in 1946 and a Dutch firm, HVA-Ethiopia, in 1950 to develop sugar plantations in the Awash River valley. The Fuji Spinning Company of Japan helped to double the output of the Cotton Company of Ethiopia.

Haile Selassie's speech before the League of Nations in 1936 not only brought the emperor world recognition but also helped to ensure postwar assistance from Western Europe, the United

States, and the Soviet Union. Besides providing economic aid, the United States signed a defense-cooperation treaty with Ethiopia in 1953, formalizing the U.S. presence at Kagnev Telecommunications Station in Asmera. During the 1960s, Ethiopia hosted the largest single contingent of U.S. Peace Corps volunteers. West Germany sent textbooks and teachers. The Soviet Union, which had once denounced Haile Selassie as “not the Lion of Judah but the jackal of American imperialism,” invited him to Moscow for a visit in 1959 and sent him home with an IL-14 helicopter and a credit line of \$100 million.

Some 5,000 men from Ethiopia’s crack Imperial Bodyguard fought alongside United Nations troops in Korea, where the commander of the U.S. Army’s Seventh Division praised their “outstanding proficiency and unfaltering dependability in combat.” Haile Selassie moved to the forefront of the pan-African movement, hosting a Conference of Independent African States in 1962 and proposing an African Development Bank (founded in 1963). At President John F. Kennedy’s funeral, the little emperor marched with the front rank of world leaders.

Still, the 20th century touched only a small fraction of all Ethiopians. For the 90 percent of the citizenry who lived in the countryside, life’s goal remained *sarto mablat*—“having worked,



*Ethiopian soldiers in 1935. They faced the Italians led by Rodolfo Graziani, whose cruelty earned him the title “Butcher of East Africa.”*

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to eat." Like the urban laborers of Menelik's time, who refused to use wheelbarrows, most highland farmers continued to till the soil with plows pulled by oxen. To this day, as sociologist Donald Levine has noted, the Ethiopian peasant is deeply conservative and "tends to feel that [innovation] is immoral."

Given such attitudes, it is not surprising that for most of his life, Haile Selassie was ahead of his time. During the 1960s, however, the times began to catch up. The educated new classes that the emperor himself had created—students, military officers, intellectuals, workers, the small but growing bourgeoisie—began demanding more extensive political reforms and faster economic development.

### Resentful Children

In 1960, such discontent was expressed in an abortive coup. Led by Germame Newaye, a provincial governor educated at Columbia University, troops of the Imperial Bodyguard seized the imperial palace while Haile Selassie was off visiting Brazil. Loyal Army units put down the coup and Germame Newaye committed suicide. Haile Selassie sadly observed that "trees that are planted do not always bear the desired fruit."

As the 1960s went on, the emperor's "trees" grew. In an Africa that acquired the appearance of political freedom overnight, young Ethiopian technocrats with degrees from Oxford, Cambridge, or Harvard were embarrassed by an emperor whose authority derived from Solomonic legend. Many were also frustrated by the fact that, despite the emperor's efforts, Ethiopia remained one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world. Its 1969 income per capita was \$60. Only seven percent of the population could read; a mere 10 percent of all eligible children were in school.

Disenchanted with an economy that failed to provide them with prestigious jobs, and susceptible to leftist rhetoric, students at Haile Selassie I University led riots that closed down the school in 1969. Denouncing U.S. "imperialism," they attacked Peace Corps volunteers, causing the withdrawal of most of the American staff that same year. The old emperor was perplexed. He had treated his students like a loving father: Time and time again, he had met with students arrested by the security forces and released them in return for promises of better behavior.

The 1960s brought another headache for Haile Selassie: Eritrea. Ethiopians saw Eritrea as part of their historical empire. But ever since Italy had established it as a colony in 1890, Eritrea and Ethiopia had gone separate ways. Eritrea on the aver-

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age enjoyed a superior educational system and faster economic development. After the Italian defeat in World War II, Britain had occupied Eritrea under a mandate of the United Nations, which was charged with disposing of Eritrea "in accordance with the wishes of a majority of the population." In a province with eight major nationalities and several languages and religions, those wishes were difficult to ascertain. So, in 1952, Eritrea was joined to Ethiopia in a federation; 10 years later, it was incorporated fully as Ethiopia's 14th province.

While many Eritreans took jobs in other regions of Ethiopia as teachers, technicians, or businessmen, not all Eritreans were satisfied. Some fled abroad and joined separatist groups such as the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), which became active during the 1960s. Financed and trained by China, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, Syria, and Iraq, Eritrean gunmen during the 1960s hijacked EAL jets in Frankfurt and Karachi, and staged raids in the city of Asmera. Haile Selassie's recognition of China in 1971 ended Chinese support for the Eritreans; the strength of the insurgency ebbed. Half of the emperor's army of 45,000 was able to contain the rebellion. Much of the rest was busy patrolling the Somalia-Ethiopia border, where disputes between the two nations over the Ogaden periodically erupted into armed clashes.

These conditions, although serious, did not alarm the government ministers in Addis Ababa or the majority of the rural populace. No new conflicts existed among Ethiopia's many nationalities. Muslims and Christians lived more amicably in Ethiopia than anywhere else in the Horn of Africa. Insurgency notwithstanding, Eritreans still traveled to Addis Ababa to work in government and industry. True, there was an atmosphere of impending change; Haile Selassie was, after all, mortal. But most Ethiopians were optimistic and thought that, with a little time and patience, any change might occur without undue turmoil. They were wrong.

### III

## EMPIRE IN FERMENT

The year 1973 was not a good one for the 81-year-old King of Kings. A stroke paralyzed his son and successor, Crown Prince Asfa Wossen, casting doubt on the monarchy's durability. In the northern highlands, 500 people were dying each day as a result of famine brought on by a three-year drought. Government attempts to suppress news of the famine led to severe criticism

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from Ethiopians both inside and outside the government.

Events outside Ethiopia created more problems. Burdened by Vietnam and Watergate, U.S. influence declined, and with it the prestige of Ethiopia's U.S.-educated elite and of Haile Selassie himself. The outbreak of the Arab-Israeli War led to the December 1973 oil price hike by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries. During February 1974, taxi drivers protesting higher fuel prices were joined by teachers and others demanding better wages in a strike that crippled Addis Ababa.

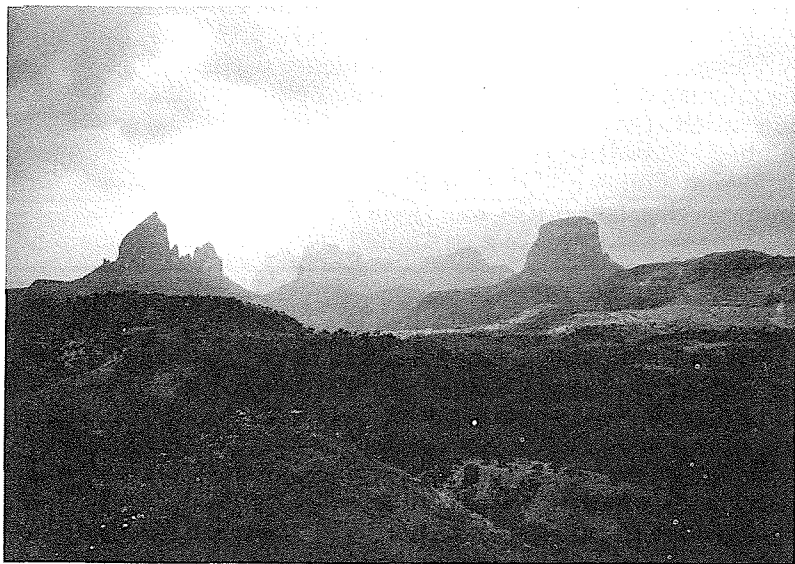
### The Lion Dies

Meanwhile, dissatisfaction spread to the military. Troops of the Second Division, weary of low pay, poor living conditions, and stalemate in Eritrea, arrested their officers and took control of Asmera. They sent a 22-point petition to the emperor, complaining, among other things, that "ministers have too many Mercedes automobiles."

The cracks widened. At February's end, Selassie's cabinet resigned in the face of popular pressure. Flushed with success, teachers, enlisted men, students, and municipal workers peppered the new cabinet with demands for higher pay, a new constitution, and land reform. The Ethiopian press joined in: An editorial in the *Ethiopian Herald* called for "a transition [that] is not only a change of names and faces but . . . [also] of concepts."

The country was slipping out of control. Alarmed, the dissidents in the armed forces decided to step in. In April, representatives from all branches of the military formed the Armed Forces Coordinating Committee, or Derg. By midsummer, the Derg had arrested 200 former ministers and other high officials, charging that they had "betrayed" the emperor and were responsible for the disastrous famine. The government was reorganized, but as the Derg swallowed more and more members of Haile Selassie's inner circle, it became apparent that the emperor's days were numbered.

In the early hours of September 12, 1974—New Year's Day in Ethiopia—three representatives from the Derg arrived at the National Palace to take Emperor Haile Selassie to Army headquarters. The emperor retained his customary dignity, momentarily hesitating only when he saw that he was to ride in a blue Volkswagen. "From today," began a Derg statement, "His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie has been deposed from office." Confined to Menelik's former palace, the King of Kings, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Elect of God Haile Selassie I died on August 27, 1975.



*The Semien Mountains in northern Ethiopia's Gonder Province. Despite such rugged terrain, some 65 percent of Ethiopia's land is arable.*

Ethiopia's ruling Derg is today avowedly Marxist. How it got that way is a matter of debate. Clearly, the Soviet Union had been active in Ethiopia during the 1960s; in 1969, three Soviet "diplomats" were expelled from Ethiopia for passing money and Marxist literature to students. But before the revolution, it would have been impossible to identify any overt pro-Soviet, procommunist, or even prosocialist Ethiopian organization (barring some few groups of students and intellectuals). And thanks to the secrecy of the postrevolutionary Derg—which rarely discloses the number or identity of its members—the sources of its political ideology, and its reasons for adopting it, remain unclear.

What is clear is that the Derg introduced "Ethiopian socialism" soon after the emperor was out of the way. In March 1975, sweeping rural land reform was decreed; 50,000 students were sent to the countryside to "transmit the values of the revolution." In the cities, families could keep one dwelling; all other property reverted to the state. *Kebelles*, neighborhood committees modeled on those in Cuba, administered nationalized property in cities and towns. The Derg also nationalized banks, insurance companies, and most foreign investments.

Before the arrival of "Ethiopian socialism," the revolution had

been remarkably nonviolent. Indeed, in June 1974 Abiy Gobegna, Ethiopia's most popular novelist, had declared, "How proud I am of my country—all this change and no blood." The Derg soon disappointed him. On November 23, 1974, 59 former officials were executed. In the years that followed, the Derg unleashed what it called the Red Terror to crush all opposition. In March 1977, after the radical Marxist Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (PRP) accused the Derg of fostering military dictatorship, Derg vice-chairman Atnafu Abate armed the *kebelles*, ordering them to "cleanse the city of these undesirable elements." Some 300 students were killed in one day, a Derg spokesman observing that "being young is no excuse for being reactionary."

But discerning who was radical or reactionary was no easy matter. Nor was it clear who really ran the Derg. A February 1977 shoot-out that ended with the death of Derg chairman General Teferi Banti and eight other Derg members brought Lt. Col. Mengistu to power. Long-rumored to be the man in charge, Mengistu consolidated his position by executing Atnafu in November 1977 for "placing the interests of Ethiopia above the interests of socialism."

As the new chairman, Mengistu had his hands full. Much of the country was in open rebellion against the central government. Somali president Mohammed Siad Barre had decided that Ethiopia was falling apart and was preparing to attack. Ever since the former colonies of British and Italian Somaliland had merged in 1960 to form the Somali Republic, the Somalis had claimed the largely Somali-inhabited Ogaden region (as well as parts of Kenya and Djibouti).

### Enter Fidel Castro

During the 1960s, the Russians had begun arms shipments to the Somalis. A 1974 USSR–Somalia friendship treaty provided Somalia with more T-55 tanks, MiG jets, and some 4,000 Soviet "advisers." By July 1977, when Somali troops—thinly disguised as guerrillas—fanned across the Somalia-Ethiopia border, the Soviet Union had delivered more than \$500 million worth of equipment. In contrast, despite the Derg's praise for Moscow-style "socialism," no significant Soviet aid had been sent to Ethiopia. Up until a year after Haile Selassie's death, in fact, the United States continued to be Ethiopia's main source of military hardware.\*

\*Over a period of 25 years, the United States supplied Ethiopia with \$287 million in military aid, including F-5E fighter-bombers. More than 3,000 Ethiopian officers were trained in the United States; among them, ironically, was Mengistu.



But Congress soon grew reluctant to support the bloody-minded Derg. Citing human-rights abuses, the White House in 1977 suspended ammunition deliveries. In response, Mengistu expelled the 46-member U.S. Military Advisory Assistance Group and closed down the U.S. Information Service office.

The Soviets eagerly exploited the growing estrangement. The chance of a foothold in one of Africa's oldest independent nations—with two ports on the Red Sea coast superior to facilities at Berbera in Somalia—was more enticing than Moscow's stake in Somalia. Facing a threat similar to the one posed by Ahmad Grañ's invasion 450 years before, Mengistu turned to Moscow for help. During November 1977, the Russians began their largest overseas airlift, ferrying more than \$1 billion worth of aircraft, tanks, rocket launchers, helicopters, ammunition, vehicles, and other materiel. Fidel Castro sent a total of 17,000 Cuban troops to provide a "defensive shield [for] the Ethiopian revolution." Jilted, the Somalis evicted their Soviet "advisers." By March 1978, the Ethiopians had recaptured the Ogaden, and the battered Somalis had withdrawn. An uneasy truce between the two nations has prevailed ever since.

Meanwhile, the Eritrean insurgents had not been idle. In



*Despite the large turnout on annual Revolution Day (September 12) parades in Addis Ababa, communist ideology has yet to attract ordinary Ethiopians, who often joke about the new "bearded trinity" of Lenin, Marx, and Engels.*

fact, they met with more success than the Somalis. By early 1978, the insurgents—dominated now by the Marxist Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF)—controlled 90 percent of Eritrea and had Massawa and Asmera under siege.

The Marxist Derg has adamantly refused to negotiate with the Marxist EPLF. And despite periodic infusions of Russian equipment, repeated offensives against the EPLF have failed. One reason: Castro refused to let Cuban troops fight guerrillas whom Cuba had once trained. Skeptical Ethiopians see more sinister motives behind Castro's refusal to help. As long as the situation in Eritrea festers, the Derg will remain dependent on Moscow for military aid. Today, the EPLF still ties down 100,000 of Mengistu's troops.

### **Confounding Marx**

On the surface, Ethiopia in 1984 appears similar to many another Soviet client. Fidel Castro came to celebrate Revolution Day in September 1978; two months later Mengistu went to Moscow to sign a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union. East Germans, Bulgarians, and North Koreans sent specialists to advise the security services, the government press, and the ministry of agriculture. Now, Ethiopia's 30,000 television sets bring viewers programs from Moscow such as "Comrade Andropov's Contribution to World Peace."

But ordinary Ethiopians do their best to make the Soviet contingent in the country, 1,500 strong, feel uncomfortable. The Soviet embassy continually complains that "hooligans" insult its people in the streets and treat them poorly in shops. Mengistu himself has hardly been a supine disciple. He has stubbornly adhered to his own schedule for setting up the Communist Party that the Russians had been demanding since 1978. Only this past September was the party finally established. Bureaucrats and military officers, not peasants or workers, fill its ranks.

A Communist Party, however, does not a communist country make. Examples from Ethiopia's history suggest that ideology imposed from above rarely takes root below. During the 16th century, after the Portuguese saved Ethiopia from the Muslims, Portuguese missionaries came to convert the Ethiopians from their Orthodox Christianity to Catholicism. Success seemed theirs in 1622, when the emperor Susenyos agreed to accept the Roman faith. But the Ethiopian populace balked. The native clergy and members of the imperial family rebelled. In 1632, Susenyos was forced to abdicate in favor of his son, who promptly expelled the Jesuits. Mengistu speaks often of Ethio-

pian history. Has he pondered this lesson?

In order to remain in power, Mengistu, like Haile Selassie before him, must satisfy rising expectations. With a population that is increasing by 2.5 percent every year, becoming more literate, and clamoring for jobs and a higher standard of living, that will not be easy. Well-managed enterprises such as EAL—which recently purchased two Boeing 767s—and the successful Telecommunications Authority demonstrate that Ethiopians have a talent for modern technology. But the war in Eritrea, which is home to one-third of Ethiopia's industrial base, has not helped.

Agriculture, Ethiopia's economic mainstay, is also slipping. The Derg continues to push collectivization schemes that Ethiopian peasants resist. Large state farms produce a scant six percent of the nation's grain but receive 90 percent of all agricultural investment. The current famine has seriously depleted grain reserves. The United States alone is supplying \$26.6 million in emergency food aid in 1984.

Ethiopia now runs a current account deficit of almost \$700 million. This is double that of five years ago. To make up the shortfall, the Derg has turned to the assets that Ethiopia has in abundance: history and scenery. The Ethiopian Tourist Commission touts trips to "Africa's best-kept secret"—the Bale Mountains National Park, with its giant cedars, exotic birdlife, and the rare mountain nyala antelope. Schools in Addis Ababa now train Ethiopians as guides, waiters, and room clerks. Near the city's Revolution Square, a site has been cleared for a new Sheraton Hotel. And in the city of Gonder, once the imperial capital, the recently opened Goha Hotel looks down from a mountain top upon the seven palaces built for the emperors of the 17th and 18th centuries.

In the end, it is Ethiopia's culture that endures. Marx might wince to discover that church attendance in Ethiopia is higher than it has ever been. But then he would probably be astonished to hear Mengistu claiming to be a Marxist. One must not forget that a genuine revolution occurred in Ethiopia in 1974. Until a small military clique took over, the makers of the revolution aimed only to speed the pace of reform and make Ethiopian society more open and pluralistic. Quite the opposite has happened. But little in Ethiopia's long history suggests that the present unhappy course is irreversible.



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## BACKGROUND BOOKS

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### ETHIOPIA

"Ethiopia has been looked upon [by Westerners] as a terribly remote land; a home of pristine piety; a magnificent kingdom; an outpost of savagery; or a bastion of African independence." So writes sociologist Donald N. Levine in his comprehensive **Greater Ethiopia** (Univ. of Chicago, 1974, cloth & paper). Often neglected by foreign analysts, he observes, are the Ethiopians themselves.

There are more than 20 major Ethiopian tribes. Yet, despite the differences among such tribes as the nomadic Danakil, the sedentary Wollamo, the age-ranked Konso, and the patrilineal Somali, Levine explains, they all share similar cultural traits. For example, almost all Ethiopians—whether pagan, Muslim, Jewish, or Coptic Christian—are monotheistic.

Commerce, intermarriage, and warfare brought these tribes into contact with one another, inaugurating ties that have endured through the ages. The farming Amhara, for example, have come to depend on Afar tribesmen for the mining of salt, on Muslims for trade, and on the Falashas for clay pots, leather goods, and silver work. The Dorze—famed for their weaving skill—must procure the *kalacha*, a forehead ornament worn as a symbol of rank, from the Konso.

Some tribes, notably the Amhara and the Tigre, have usually dominated others. An ethnic pecking order persists in Ethiopia even today. In Edmund P. Murray's novel **Kulubi** (Crown, 1973), the tale of an American journalist in Ethiopia, one character explains, "If you see a man with a donkey, you can be sure he's an Oromo. . . . If a man has camels,

he's a Danakil; if he's herding cattle, he's a Somali. . . . If he's an Amhara, he has a Volkswagen."

Those interested in the early history of the Amhara and the Tigre should turn to archaeologist Yuri M. Kobishchanov's **Axum** (Pa. State Univ., 1979), the most thorough volume on the subject, and to David Buxton's richly illustrated volume, **The Abyssinians** (Praeger, 1970, cloth; 1972, paper). "Abyssinia," he points out, is a corruption of "Habesha," the South Arabian word for Ethiopia.

The Amhara are known for their subtlety. The title of Donald N. Levine's analysis of Amhara society, **Wax and Gold** (Univ. of Chicago, 1965, cloth; 1972, paper), is also the name of a favorite form of Amhara poetry, in which all expressions have two meanings, the superficial and the real. As Levine notes, "when [an Amhara] talks, his words often carry double-entendres as a matter of course."

By all accounts, there are few pastimes that an Ethiopian, rich or poor, enjoys more than a clever discussion or a lengthy argument. In **The Government of Ethiopia** (Faber & Faber, 1948), a scholarly examination of Ethiopia's political and economic institutions during the early years of Haile Selassie's reign, historian Margery Perham writes that "litigation was a favourite amusement. . . . Parties in civil and even minor criminal disputes would call upon a passerby to decide the issue between them under a tree, and these informal roadside courts might last for hours. . . ."

Despite this penchant for debate, ordinary Ethiopians were not drawn to politics after World War II until

the onset of the revolution that toppled Haile Selassie in 1974. In **Ethiopia: The Modernization of Autocracy** (Cornell, 1970, cloth; 1971, paper), historian Robert L. Hess notes that there was no external threat or colonial regime to stir the nationalist spirit that animated politics in other African nations after 1945.

The emperor encouraged some political participation, but he reserved real power for himself. Political sci-

entist Christopher S. Clapham explains the bizarre workings of **Haile Selassie's Government** (Praeger, 1969) and describes the emperor's prudent strategy of *shum shir*—moving cabinet ministers from post to post to keep them from developing their own constituencies. Loyalty, rather than efficiency, determined imperial favor.

The Byzantine intrigue of Haile Selassie's court is detailed by the Polish

### ETHIOPIAN JOURNEYS

In *Orlando Furioso* (1516) the Italian Renaissance poet Ludovico Ariosto describes a visit to Prester John, the mythical ruler of Ethiopia, in whose palace "pearls and gems of passing price / Were sprinkled on the pavements here and there."

Such flights of fancy were commonplace in early European descriptions of Ethiopia, as of the rest of Africa. Eyewitness accounts were often no more accurate. In **Travelers in Ethiopia** (Oxford, 1965, cloth & paper), historian Richard Pankhurst quotes the 16th-century Venetian, Alessandro Zorzi, as saying that the Ethiopians "live to a great age, up to 150 years, [and] they never in old age lose their sight." One of the first reliable accounts of life in Ethiopia is the Englishman James Bruce's eight-volume **Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile** (Robinson, 1790; Horizon, 1964). During his four-year (1769–72) sojourn in Ethiopia, Bruce crisscrossed the country by horse, noting the "singularities which prevailed in this barbarous country."

Most later European travelers tended to paint Ethiopians in primitive colors. In his three-volume **The Highlands of Aethiopia** (Longman, 1844), Major W. Cornwallis Harris, a British envoy, concluded that the Ethiopian Emperor Sahle Selassie was subject to "the insatiable love of plunder inherent in the breast of every savage." Far more amusing but no less malicious is Evelyn Waugh's chronicle of Haile Selassie's 1930 coronation in **When the Going Was Good** (Greenwood, 1934; Little, Brown, 1984, cloth & paper). At one native celebration, Waugh witnessed "guests . . . quite stupefied with food and drink. . . . The chiefs were hoisted onto their mules by their retainers and remained there blinking and smiling. . . . Others, lacking support, rolled contentedly in the dust."

Waugh's account was the last of the great Ethiopian travelogues. Shortly after its publication, Benito Mussolini's attempts to "civilize" Ethiopia through conquest brought the country out of isolation and onto the world stage. To political scientists and anthropologists, Ethiopia was now open for serious study.

journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski in **The Emperor** (Harcourt, 1983, cloth; Vintage, 1984, paper), a compilation of post-1974 interviews with former members of the imperial household.

Every morning, Haile Selassie strolled in his garden, feeding his caged lions and leopards and hearing reports from court informers and spies, each pitted against the others: "Tired, looking as if they hadn't slept, they acted under feverish stress, pursuing their victims. . . . They had no shield but the emperor, and the emperor could undo them all with one wave of his hand."

Even so, the emperor's network failed to avert the 1974 revolution that saw him unseated by a group of noncommissioned officers. The spirit that animated the Ethiopian revolution, at least in its early stages, is best captured in B. M. Sahle Sellasie's novel **Firebrands** (Longman, 1979, cloth & paper). The hero, an idealistic Amhara ex-student, joins a state corporation as an auditor, wanting only to contribute to the progress of his country. Disillusioned by chronic nepotism and corruption, he assaults his boss and is imprisoned. He is finally set free during the civil unrest of February 1974, "when the forces of oppression and those of liberation met in an open clash."

The novel's heady rhetoric obscures the bloody struggles for power that went on between the military rulers of the revolutionary Derg and the civilian opposition. In **The Ethiopian Revolution** (New Left Books, 1982, cloth & paper), political sci-

tists Fred Halliday and Marina Molyneux describe the havoc in revolutionary Ethiopia and note that from 1976 to 1978, some 30,000 civilians were imprisoned and several thousand killed.

Within the Derg itself, disagreement over the best response to the separatist movement in the northern province of Eritrea led to violence. The faction of Derg chairman General Aman Andom, himself an Eritrean, advocated negotiating with the rebels. But Aman Andom died in a shoot-out with the forces of Lt. Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam, the present chairman of the Derg, who has since launched annual (ineffectual) offensives against the Eritreans. Richard Sherman's **Eritrea: The Unfinished Revolution** (Praeger, 1980, cloth & paper) provides a good guide to the origins of that continuing conflict. However, political scientist Haggai Erlich's **The Struggle over Eritrea** (Hoover, 1983, cloth & paper) is the most up-to-date volume.

Much has happened in the turbulent 10 years since the revolution. In **Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution** (Holmes & Meier, 1978, cloth; 1983, paper), *Washington Post* correspondent David Ottaway and political scientist Marina Ottaway observe that in destroying "an antiquated and oppressive system, the Ethiopian revolution had met its goal." But the Derg's continuing political repression and Ethiopia's dim economic performance suggest that the creation of a free and prosperous society lies far in the future.



EDITOR'S NOTE: Some of the titles in this essay were suggested by Professor Edmond D. Keller of the Department of Black Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara.