



በግራዚያኒ ትእዛዝ ከተረሸኑት ኢትዮጵያውን መከከል አንዱ በሽህ ውረድ

### **Tigrean Ethnonationalists and Historical Revisionism**

The TPLF which began its anti-Amhara struggle by revising the history of Ethiopia and misrepresenting its mortal enemies the Amharas has this to say in its political program which was adopted at its second congress in 1983. This program was adopted by the time Aregawi Berhe, who currently masquerades as an opposition leader (European bureau chief of the United Ethiopian Democratic Coalition), was one of the top bosses of the organization.

**“Heavy taxation was levied on the people and hundreds of thousands of Menelik’s army deliberately sent without food provisions plundered the villages of Tigray. Within a short period the economic and social conditions of Tigray deteriorated sharply<sup>45</sup>”.**

Aregawi, Tecola and all those Tigreans who subscribe to TPLF’s ethnicist historical reading and interpretation accuse Menelik for having sold out Eritrea in order to weaken Tigreans living in Tigray and those across the Mereb Mellash (Eritrea since 1890). At the same time they all accuse Menelik for sending “hundreds of thousands of his army to Tigray without any food provisions in order to plunder the villages of Tigray”. Is this not a contradiction in terms? Even if one was to accept the allegations of Tigrean ethnonationalists about the evil machinations of emperor Menelik against the people of Tigray, did this army of Menelik which was recruited and mobilized from almost all nooks and corners of Ethiopia spare other regions of Ethiopia through which it had traveled on its long journey from southern Ethiopia, Shoa to northern Ethiopia (Wello, Gojjam, Gondar)? Or should we assume that Menelik’s army was transported by air from Shoa and dropped on Tigray so that it could pillage the villages of Tigray? What would

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<sup>45</sup> - TPLF’s political program adopted at the second congress: 1983

Tigrean ethnonationalists say about this? Far from being deliberately pillaged by Menelik's army, by the time of the Adwa campaign, Tigray and all of north Ethiopia had not even smarted from the great famine of 1888-1892 which had devastated northern Ethiopia following the cattle disease which was introduced into Ethiopia by the Italians. As such there was nothing to be pillaged in Tigray. In fact it was thanks to the strategic thinking and military genius of emperor Menelik who put in place granaries and food supplies all along the route leading to north Ethiopia including Tigray that the food needs of Menelik's army could be met and the victory at Adwa became a reality.

Months ahead of the war, Menelik had moved food supplies from the newly incorporated southern Ethiopian provinces to the north in order to support the massive force that was to defend northern Ethiopia. The expansion of Menelik's territory in the south, south west and south east for which the TPLF and those gathered at the July 1, 1991 conference had demonized Menelik and the Amhara people, was the single most important factor in guaranteeing the success of Ethiopia's victory over Italian colonialist assault. Without the human and logistical support of the newly incorporated southern provinces which "provided the resources to establish granaries in many provinces, including Tigre", the Adwa victory would have been unthinkable<sup>46</sup>. Writing on this very subject, Richard Pankhurst has the following to say about Menelik's effort in securing the necessary war provisions ahead of time.

**"These reserves were to prove of great value to Menelik's forces during the subsequent fighting with the Italians in 1895 and 1896, and thus played their part in overcoming the legacy of famine<sup>47</sup>".**

This is a fact, which is lost on Tigrean ethnonationalists of all hues and cries. In fact it was the material (food provisions) resource from the newly incorporated southern territories (for which Menelik is pilloried by Tigrean nationalists) which helped Menelik's army in carrying out the Herculean task of defending the independence of Ethiopia by defeating the Italians at Adwa. Had Menelik not been able to expand his territory by incorporating southern, western and eastern Ethiopia at that time, the victory of Adwa would have been unthinkable. This is because at that time the resource base of northern Ethiopia, which had been weakened by the great famine of 1888-1892, was not such as to sustain the huge Ethiopian fighting forces for months. That is why we call the great patriotic exploits of Ethiopian patriots at Adwa the victory of people from all nooks and corners of Ethiopia, whose sweat and blood had gone into making that glorious victory over European colonialism a shining chapter in the annals of Ethiopia's long history. The shrill noise Tigrean ethnonationalist hate-mongers are making about the heavy price Tigreans paid by supporting the hundreds of thousands of Menelik's army,

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<sup>46</sup> - Harold Marcus, The Life and Times of Emperor Menelik II – 1844 – 1913

<sup>47</sup> - Richard Pankhurst, The Great Ethiopian Famine of 1888-1892

which were allegedly sent without food provisions sounds hollow in the face of such stark historical truths.

The following is what Harold Marcus wrote in summing up Menelik's effort in forging the unity and the independence of Ethiopia:

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**“As king of Shoa, Menelik had exploited the south and south west to purchase weapons; as emperor he used its wealth to bolster the north's sagging economy. This done he turned his attention to the dignified survival of the empire's independence”<sup>48</sup>,**

What is contradictory, if paroxal, about the Tigrean ethnonationalists is the fact that while they cry foul about Menelik's alleged refusal to liberate Eritrea, they simultaneously accuse this same Menelik for having sent hundreds of thousands of his troops into Tigray to pillage the people of Tigray. For any sane person it is not difficult to conclude the added burden Menelik's army could have meant to the population of Tigray had Menelik decided to stay there longer than he did in his effort to drive the Italians from Eritrea. It is not difficult to imagine what Tigrean nationalists may have to say if Menelik's army had stayed even longer than it did. The moral of all this is the following. Tigrean ethnonationalists grew up being fed upon the dire diet of hatred for anything Amharas have done. They feel very inferior to the Amharas with regard to the role some of their ancestors have played in Ethiopian history and during the Italian colonization of Eritrea. Their inability to see Menelik as a fellow Ethiopian has prevented them in appreciating what Ethiopians have collectively achieved in Adwa as a source of collective national pride. It is this sense of feeling inferior vis a vis the Amhara which forced TPLF leaders and their Tigrean intellectuals to shamelessly claim in 1996 that the Adwa victory<sup>49</sup> was an exclusive Tigrean victory. This has only made Tigrean ethnonationalists a laughing stock.

Amharas, unlike Tigrean ethnonationalists, have never been brought up believing that Alula or Yohannes were their enemies. Amharas have always learned to take pride in what all great Ethiopian leaders have done as Ethiopians irrespective of the particular ethnic group or region they came from. One can easily glean this from the various patriotic songs and poems Amharas have composed in memory of Ethiopian giants by way of immortalizing these Ethiopian heroes irrespective of their ethnic origins. The following poem<sup>50</sup>, which was written in 1935 by the famous Ethiopian artist Agegnehu Engida, attests to this fact.

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<sup>48</sup> - Richard Pankhurst, The Great Ethiopian Famine of 1888-1892

<sup>49</sup> - One such Tigrean ethnicist is Kifle Abraham (a Tigrean who grew up in Godnar city) and had the effrontery to claim the Adwa victory as a being an exclusive Tigrean victory during his speech presented at the Adwa centenary in 1996. Here we see how Tigrean nationalists not only claim the lion's share of Ethiopia's wealth today, but also try to appropriate for themselves all the glorious aspect of Ethiopian history (such as the Adwa victory) that is a product of a collective sacrifice of all Ethiopians.

<sup>50</sup> - Quoted from the monumental book *Zikre Neger* written by Bilaten Geta Mahteme Selassie Wolde Meskel, 1970

እንጹጥ ነገ አሉ የተዳሊ በር  
አምስት ሺህ ገዳይ በአንድ ቀን ጅምበር

Here follows the English translation of the Amharic couplet coined in honor of Ras Alula, one of Ethiopia's best military strategists from Tigrai.

**How are you Alula the door of Tedali  
The one who kills five thousand (enemy force) in a day**

The problem of Tigrean ethnonationalists is their failure to reconcile themselves with a pan Ethiopian identity they can rightly belong to like any one Ethiopian. For them pan Ethiopian identity represents the Amharas they very much resent and hate. It makes them feel they have no part in it. The Amharas have never claimed for themselves alone the struggle waged to liberate Ethiopia from the clutches of Italian fascists during Ethiopia's occupation (1936-1941) although they paid disproportionate price in the fascist Italian onslaught that particularly targeted the Amharas during the 1936-1941 periods<sup>51</sup>. In fact the government of emperor Haile Selassie, who has been dubbed Amhara by Tigrean and other ethnonationalist, was generous enough not to execute the greatest Ethiopian traitor Dejazmatch Haile Selassie Gugsa of Tigrai who was kept in house arrest in southwestern Ethiopia whereas the defiantly patriotic and fiery luminaries such as Belatta Takele Wolde Hawaryat and Dejazmatch Belai Zeleke (both Amharas) were sentenced to death. Does this not say something about the ethnic-blind nature of Haile Selassie's regime where loyalty to the personal authority of the emperor counted more than anything else contrary to the allegation of Tigrean ethnonationalists who hold the view that Haile Selassie's regime served the Amharas?

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<sup>51</sup> - According to Alberto Sbacchi, "During the Duke of Aosta's administration, poison gas bombs were employed mostly in the Amhara and Shoa governorates, by General Ugo Cavallero, chief of the Armed Forces in the Italian East Africa who supported Graziani's actions to wipe out the patriots". For a detailed account of such atrocities, the reader is advised to refer to Sbacchi's book entitled "**Legacy of Bitterness, Ethiopia and Fascist Italy, 1935-1941**"



ሀይለስላሴ ጉግሳ

ኢትዮጵያን ከከዳ በሁዋላ ከጣሊያን የተሸለመውን ልብስና መሳሪያ ሲያስመርቅ።

አንዳንድ በሰራውና በአደረገው የማይረሳ መስጠትነት ታሪክ ሲያስታውሰው፡ ትውልድ ሲያመሰግነው ይኖራል። እንደ ደጃዝማች ሀይለስላሴ ጉግሳ ያሉት ግን እንደ ልጃቻቸው እንደነ መለስ በከዳትና አገርን አሳልፎ በመስጠት የታወቁ ሆነው ይኖራሉ።

**THE JUSTIFICATION FOR NOT EJECTING ITALIANS FROM ERITREA**

Time and again foreign observers and Ethiopian historians, who wrote eyewitness accounts of the situation that led Emperor Menelik and his military leaders to settle for peace over continuation of the war, gave convincing reasons. Notwithstanding all such eye account witnesses, some elements within the Tigryan and Eritrean elites have continued to perpetuate the myth that Menelik sold Eritrea to Italians. True, the decision to cede part of Ethiopian territory remains a scar on Ethiopian history. However, there were plausible reasons and factors that compelled Menelik to agree to the border demarcation, which was a culmination of the process of loss of control over Eritrea that has begun to unfold during the reign of Yohannes. From Menelik’s point of view, it was a strategy of protecting larger parts of Ethiopia by giving up some. “It was necessary to amputate the part for safety of the larger body<sup>52</sup>.”

For the record, almost all historians and observers agree on the combination of the following accounts for Menelik’s decision not to go all the way into Eritrea following his victory at Adwa:

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<sup>52</sup> - Solomon Gashaw, Adowa Victory Centenary Conference Proceedings.

- 1 - Before and after the conclusion of the Adowa campaign, the problems of supplying provisions to a large army became acute to the extent of dictating the movement of soldiers. The decision not to march to Hamasein was influenced more by the problem of provision than by the preference for a favorable terrain for combat.
- 2 - Four days later after the Italian defeat, the remnant of Italian soldiers were regrouping inside Eritrea. The Italian government committed four million lire and General Balderisa and his 15,000 soldiers were unloading at Massaawa. It was widely believed that the local population would have supported the 15,000 fresh troops and 5,000 Italians inside Eritrea against Menelik's army.
- 3 - The Ethiopian voluntary army was on the road for eight months. The army was exhausted, hungry, and suffering from all sorts of ailments. Its ability to fight on under the circumstances was questionable.
- 4 - The large Ethiopian armies of that time used to rely on the rural folk and that lean northern country, whose resource base was depleted by the 1888-1892 Great Ethiopian Famine, was not able to support such a huge army. Towards the end of the month, Menelik was forced to send a third of his army away to provision for themselves elsewhere.
- 5 - Cholera epidemic swept the country and killed many people and there was wide spread famine.
- 6 - Had Menelik decided for an all out war, Britain and other European nations could not have remained indifferent to Italy's humiliation. In order to safeguard its colonial interest in the Sudan and strategic design, Britain had signed a treaty with Italy to which it was committed. This could have given Britain a pretext to assist Italian forces in resisting and defeating Menelik's army in side Eritrea thereby guaranteeing the colonialization of Ethiopia by the British and Italy.
- 7 - Encroachment by the British, the French and Egyptians in the East and South East and security risk they posed on whole country was another factor, which had to be considered by Menelik.
- 8 - Menelik was aware of the strategic and logistic problems emperor Yohannes and Ras Alulua faced. 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 at Sahati. The same reason that prevented Yohannes and Alula to dislodge Italy from Eritrea was taken into consideration. That reason was an assessment of Ethiopia's ability to fight on and preserve its independence while surrounded by imperialist forces.

**“It is erroneous, thus, to judge the past with the influence of the present day military strategic thinking and concept<sup>53</sup>.”**

In the views of Paul Henze:

**“Emperor Menelik’s defeat of the Italian invaders at Adwa gave him an opportunity to regain Eritrea. He chose instead to compromise – let Italy retain its colony in return for a peaceful stance toward Ethiopia, securing a stable northern frontier while he concentrated on rounding out Ethiopia’s borders in the South. Menelik thus confirmed Eritrea’s “loss” to Ethiopia. Some Tigrayans have never forgiven him. The if’s of history are incalculable, but Menelik’s decision was not casual or irrational. He was a pragmatist. If he had devoted his energies to expanding Ethiopia’s ill-defined frontiers in the north, he might never have been able to stabilize the south and consolidate control over the empire. Ethiopia might then have fallen victim to European colonialism from all sides<sup>54</sup>.”**

**“The large Ethiopian armies living on the country, and that lean northern country, were in almost desperate case. Towards the end of the month Menelik was forced to send a third of his army away to provision for themselves elsewhere<sup>55</sup>.”**

The British military historian Berkley said the following about the war:

**“If Barateieri had waited another week, perhaps even another day, Menelik’s army might have been broken up and Ethiopia might have fallen piecemeal before Italian penetration<sup>56</sup>.”**

Professor Bahru Zewde echoed similar sentiments: “Yet, in the immediate aftermath, the Gundet and Gura victories were to remain hollow. Yohannes persisted in policy of restraint. He followed up his victory not with a march to Massawa, but with letters to Victoria and Ismail once again suing for peace. He renounced the military option either because his army was in no condition to continue the fighting, or because he feared further military action would antagonize the European governments. Thus began Yohannes’s diplomatic efforts to crown his victory with a peace treaty – something that was to elude him for almost a decade<sup>57</sup>”. Yet, Tecola Hagos and the other hypocrites expected Menelik to perform a miracle with the limitations he encountered. A hypocrite

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<sup>53</sup> - Solomon Gashaw, Adwa Victory Centenary Conference Proceedings, 1996, p. 138]

<sup>54</sup> - - Paul Henze, Eritrea’s War, p.215

<sup>55</sup> - - Margery Perham, The Government of Ethiopia. P.57.

<sup>56</sup> - Berkeley, G.H., The Campaign of Adowa and the Rise of Menelik, 1902

<sup>57</sup> - Bahru Zewde, A History of Modern Ethiopia

at least appreciates goodness enough to imitate it. Tecola sees no goodness in anything Sahle-Selassie, Tewodros, Menelik, Haile-Selassie and Amharas did because he considers them the enemies of Tigrayans. If Tecola was presiding in a court of laws to render justice, Emperor Yohannes would be forgiven for seeking diplomatic solution but Menelik-the Amhara king should be tried as “common criminal” for using the same method.



**ወደ ጦር ሚዳ**

በመደቡ ራስጌ ሰቅሎ ያኖረውን  
 አወላልቆ ጦርን ናስማስር ብረቱን  
 ወልውሎ እንደገና አስማምቶ ገጣጥሞ  
 ጥይቱን አጉርሶ ቃታውን ለጉሞ  
 በረዥም መቀነት ሽብ አርን ወገቡን  
 በመቀነቱ ላይ ደርቦ ዝናፍን  
 ሚስትና ልጆቹን ስሞ ተሰናብቶ  
 ሂደ ገሰገሰ የባላገር ስንቁን በስልጅ አገገቶ  
 (ዶክተር አሉላ ዋሴ)

Professor Rubenson writes the following:

**“In a conversation with one of the survivors at Adowa 25 years ago, I asked what they had done after the battle, if they had celebrated, and his reply was: “We had no food”. My own assessment is that “the great famine” was a contributing factor if not one of the main reasons why the Italians succeeded in establishing their colony of Eritrea<sup>58</sup>”.** Therefore, Menelik’s predicament cannot be objectively appreciated by a Tigrean ethnonationalist sitting in an Ivory Tower and consuming American hamburgers. It is not easy for an idea to squeeze itself into a head that is filled with prejudice and hatred.

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<sup>58</sup> - Sven Rubenson, The Survival of Ethiopian Independence



As the foregoing accounts show, none other than Tigrayan ethno-nationalists characterized Menelik as a “common criminal” for not pursuing the remaining Italians beyond Tigray proper. Even the racist British military historians Berkeley and Augustus Wylde, who called the gallant Ethiopian heroes of Adowa “*barbarians hordes and half savages*”, had better things to write about Menelik than the Tigrayan ethnonationalists. At the very least Berkeley, sympathetic to the Italian cause, was an eyewitness to the battle, and documented the event. He was also in a better position to be a good character witness than the ethno-nationalists who rely on hearsay and word of mouth accounts of Adowa which for the most part have been contaminated with prejudice and ethnic hatred.

Unlike the homegrown hatemonger ethno-nationalists, the racist Berkely was more gracious in complimenting Menelik’s leadership and his achievements at the battlefield:

***“From the broader standpoint of politics and history, it seems possible that is [the Battle of Adowa] heralds the rise of a new power in Africa – we are reminded that the natives of that continent may yet become a military factor worthy of our closest attention. The suggestion has ever been made – absurd as it appears at present – that this is the first revolt of the Dark Continent against domineering Europe ”***<sup>59</sup>.

In the words of Bahru Zewede:

***“Thus, eight months after the war, Menelik had been able to achieve more than Yohannes had been able to do in eight years after the Battles of Gundat and Gura. Moreover, viewed in the African context, the Ethiopians had won recognition of their independence by force of arms. They had stemmed the tide of colonialism. The future of Ethiopia became different from that of the rest of Africa. This had its impact not only on the political economy of the country, but also on the psychology of its people ”***<sup>60</sup>.

What Bahru Zewde is alluding to are the successes of Menelik both on the war and diplomatic fronts. Margery Perham corroborated this when she wrote:

***“Ethiopia, instead of being surrounded as she always had been by the wilderness of Islam, or of savagery, suddenly found European governments on all sides of her. She had Italian Eritrea on the North, Italian, British, and French Somaliland took firm shape on the east with British East Africa on the south, the Ugandan protectorate to the Southwest. The result of Adowa was that Menelik’s new neighbors and other European powers were obliged to take him very seriously ”***<sup>61</sup>.

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<sup>59</sup> - Berkely, The Battle of Adowa

<sup>60</sup> - Bahru Zewede, A Modern History of Ethiopia.

<sup>61</sup> - Margery Perham, The Government of Ethiopia. P.59