

# ***Spirit vs. War-machine: A Patriotic Resistance to Italian Occupation of Ethiopia (1936-1941)***

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## ***Introduction***

For the second time in forty years, a European power, Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935. Until this time, Ethiopia was a traditional polity with a predominantly feudal socio-political system, while Italy was an industrialized nation under the Fascist regime of Benito Mussolini. The invasion was conducted with the most advanced military organization and hardware - vast killing machine - against a spirited people of an old nation. In defiance of the occupation that ensued, the Ethiopians were engaged for five years in a multi-dimensional 'patriotic resistance' to drive the invaders out of their country, while the Ethiopian Emperor, Haile Selassie was engaged in an outmatched diplomatic struggle from exile. It was a resistance against many odds, including indifference from the League of Nations and the Western countries.

This paper will look into the resistance that was launched to counter a five-year long Italian occupation in Ethiopia. It is intended here to reconsider the nature and impact of this resistance and highlight some aspects of its role in 'redefining Ethiopia': its internal policy and its position in the global community since the start of World War II. The paper will commence with a brief historical background to the resistance in which national, religious and traditional values that drew together millions of people into the resistance are narrated. Then the occupation itself and the resistance it triggered shall be discussed. This will be followed by the actual resistance as it unfolded, focusing on momentous aspects of its features. Finally, I dwell on how the resistance came to an abrupt end as result of the intervening external factor without which the resistance would probably have continued as long as the invaders tormented the nationhood of Ethiopia.

## ***Why Resistance: Historical Background of Ethiopian Nationhood***

It is beyond the scope of this paper to narrate the history of Ethiopia's nationhood. A brief sketch of this history, however, is provided in order to better grasp the essence of the resistance, as it was nurtured by the larger section of the population with strong notions of cultural identity and nationhood.

Its reign stretching as far as South Yemen across the Red Sea, the recorded history of Ethiopia as a state dates from the third century A.D., when it was known as the kingdom of Aksum. Around 340 the Aksumite kings adopted Orthodox Christianity,<sup>1</sup> which quickly became the religion of the inhabitants and provided the symbolism and substance of the royal ideology. For almost seven centuries, the empire gradually expanded over the Ethiopian highlands thereby giving form and structure to the longstanding Ethiopian state.

The aggressive expansion of Islam after the seventh century led to a loss of international trade routes and revenues for Aksum and a decline in its regional influence. In the tenth century, a revolt by an Agew queen, Yodit, from further south, led to the demise of the Aksum state. Yet, the kingship was reconstituted by the Christian Zagwe dynasty located in the Agew country (10<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century). In 1270 the Ethiopian state, now located further to the south revived on the basis of a restyled Aksumite royal ideology with Yekuno Amlak as the king, who claimed to have descended from the last Aksumite ruler, Dil Naod.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kobishchanov, Y. M., 1979: 59.

<sup>2</sup> Sergew Habte Selassie, 1972: 289.

Not so long however, the expansion of Islam from the north (Ottoman Empire), and especially the assault of 'Imam' Ahmed ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi in 1527-1543 dealt another devastating blow to the Ethiopian Christian Empire, its population, resources, religious culture and architecture.<sup>1</sup> After Ahmed's defeat in 1543 it recovered only slowly. Immediately afterwards, the Oromo migrations from the south brought another great challenge. It forced a periodic shift of the political center, and a transformation of central Ethiopia's civilization. The gradual loss of dynamism of the centralized state in turn gave rise to the emergence of local kings and princes, often entangled in violent rivalry for supremacy (1760-1855). This tumultuous period known as the "era of princes" adversely weakened the Ethiopian state leaving it a position vulnerable to external attack.

In 1855 a powerful emperor, Tewodros II (r. 1855-1868) introduced the vision of a unified and modern Ethiopia. He managed to set up then a semblance of a central state and collected royal revenue from the northern regions. While challenging the encroachment of the Egyptians in the coastal area, Tewodros, at the same time, came into collision with the British when he took hostage and locked up a number of obscure European missionaries. The British sent an expeditionary force with superior arms, and besieged his mountain fortress Maqdala, where Tewodros, encircled by the British and his offers for negotiation refused, on 13 April 1868 took his life rather than surrender to the invader.<sup>2</sup> His patriotic action remained a print of bravery to future generations.

After a brief interlude, Emperor Tewodros was succeeded by Emperor Yohannes (r. 1872-1889). He too had to fight against the Egyptians and later the Italians who had maintained the dream of conquering Ethiopia. On 26 January 1887, at the Battle of Dogali (some 30 k.m. south of the Red Sea coast, Massawa), the Italians suffered their first defeat at the hands of Ras (= *chief*)<sup>3</sup> Alula Ingida, Yohannes' general. At last, towards the end of his reign, Yohannes himself had to march to stop the invading Sudanese Mahdists in the western part of the country, where he finally died at the Battle of Metemma on 12 March 1889.<sup>4</sup> His successor Emperor Menelik (r. 1889-1913) who grew up amid the patriotic encounters of both Tewodros and Yohannes was also a patriotic and modernizing leader. He too defeated the Italians at Adwa in 1896 with a resounding victory that haunted the Italians until 1935. Why Menelik did not pursue the broken Italian army until they relinquished the land they named Eritrea since their occupation in January 1, 1890, however, is still a riddle. Yet, to challenge the unbridled ambition of the foreign invaders he was fully engaged in the competition with France, Italy and Great Britain to expand territorial influence in the Horn of Africa, incorporating a large number of previously autonomous regions into the empire.<sup>5</sup> The last of the emperors, Haile Selassie (r. 1930-1974) too had to fight the Italian invasion (an issue taken on here). Although he had to face defeat on the battle ground in 1936, he continued the struggle from exile and finally saw victory in 1941 when Italy was defeated in all fronts.

These last four emperors more or less maintained a similar vision of creating a unified and stronger Ethiopia in order to counter the challenges posed by external forces, mainly that of the resource-hungry Europeans. Loyalty to the Ethiopian state coupled with adherence to religious edifice was expounded in this process unlike the Europeans who concentrated on industrialization. Associated with ancient historical referents, the effects of this long history of struggle against series of invaders evidently procured an assertive sense of national identity which would play upon the invaders of a sovereign nation, as we shall see next.

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus, H. G., 1994: 32-34.

<sup>2</sup> Prouty, C., 1986: 10-11.

<sup>3</sup> For a glossary of Ethiopian titles used in this paper, see Appendix 1.

<sup>4</sup> Zewde Gabre Sellassie, 1975, Conti-Rossini C., 1937: 461-462.

<sup>5</sup> Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, 1994.

## ***The Invasion and Occupation***

The longstanding ambition of Italy to colonize Ethiopia was reinforced by its desire to avenge its defeat at Dogali and later at Adwa. "As early as 1925, Mussolini gave orders for military preparation with a view of waging war against Ethiopia, but not until 1934 did plans for the conquest of Ethiopia receive his full attention. The preparation involved huge sums of money, and quantities of trucks, tanks, artillery, aero planes, and stockpiling of poison gas, to ensure Italy's military superiority.<sup>1</sup> In fact, "De Bono's two visits to Eritrea in 1932 were more of military reconnaissance than a simple tour of inspection by the Minister for the Colonies".<sup>2</sup> The Wälwäl "incident" of 5 December 1934, where Italian and Ethiopian forces clashed inside Ethiopian territory over the line of the Ethiopia's eastern frontier was by no means the cause of the Italian invasion. Mussolini's fervor for a major onslaught on Ethiopia for a greater empire became obvious "... when he proclaimed that he was ready to declare war on Great Britain and France rather than give up the conquest of Ethiopia".<sup>3</sup> As if the memory of 40 years old victory at Adwa would stop fresh Italian offensive, the Ethiopians appeared to have done little or nothing comparable to the Italian fascists' preparation for war. Now, Ethiopians had to face one of the gravest offensives in their history.

Within two years the final preparation for the conquest of Ethiopia was completed under the trusteeship of Marshal Emilio De Bono, commissioner of colonies, who was sent to lead the invasion as commander in chief of the Northern Front, with nine divisions of 250,000 white combatants and 150,000 Africans from Libya, Italian Somaliland and Eritrea, collectively called *askaris*. Supported by 300 aircraft under his direct command, he had to advance from Asmara, Eritrea southwards into the hinterland of Ethiopia. On the Southern Front, one division with 100 aircrafts under Marshal R. Graziani was deployed to head northwards. The aircrafts were carrying not only piles of bombs but also poison gas for which the Ethiopians had no defense. The Italian plan was to converge at Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia, within the shortest possible time, so that pressure for a negotiated settlement by the League of Nations, of which Ethiopia had been a member since 1923, could be avoided.

Although the Ethiopian army was estimated to be not more than 300,000 foot soldiers, the bulk of it was not even a regular army and was mobilized by regional *Rases* or Princes whose horizontal relationship with each other was undefined and in many cases competitive. Such an army congregated only when there was a call from the Emperor and as history had it, Ethiopians often stood united when foreign enemies threatened to invade their independence. Emperor Haile Selassie was the commander-in-chief of the national army. But the lack of modern means of communication thwarted him from establishing a centralized command to coordinate the war of defense in the vast mountainous country. Tactically, this had an outstanding advantage for the invaders who were to coordinate and concentrate their forces as situations demanded. The disparity in the possession of armaments was ridiculously high. "The Ethiopian army was equipped with 200 pieces of light artillery, 1000 machine guns and rifles with 150 rounds per person".<sup>4</sup> Logistics were self-supplied except for small ammunition and bombshells that were provided only sporadically. With a few exceptions amongst those who had traveled abroad, Ethiopians knew nothing about armored vehicles, tanks and bomber aircraft. What brought them together to confront a muscular enemy was a strong self-image of national pride, a love of freedom and specific ideals of human dignity they nurtured through a long history of nationhood. The determination to remain independent and defend their specific cultural and

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<sup>1</sup> Sbacchi, A. 1985: 7-8.

<sup>2</sup> Mockler, A. 1984: 41.

<sup>3</sup> Aron, R. 1966: 67.

<sup>4</sup> Chambers, F. P. 1962: 409.

religious values was manifested in their prayers, folk music and war songs, carried through the war and the resistance that followed. It was common to praise the gorges and mountains as allies in the defense of the country.

Early in October 1935 the Italians made a swift advance towards Adwa, which was 30 kms from the colonial frontier that divided Eritrea from Tigray, the northern region of Ethiopia. The limited Ethiopian forces at Adwa were not only outnumbered but also could not withstand the long range shelling from the howitzers, the deadly machine guns from the tanks and the raining bombs from the air. Before they made any serious engagement, they were ordered to withdraw in order to save their forces for a well thought-out defensive tactic deep in the country. On 6 October 1935, Adwa, where 40 years ago, an Italian army under four generals was crushed, fell into the hands of the Italians. The seizure of Adwa gave the invaders some slight psychological relief from the humiliating defeat they had suffered at Dogali and Adwa in 1887 and 1896 respectively, yet for those on the front the war was just beginning and De Bono decide to advance with caution. A month later, on 8 November 1935, Mekele, the capital of Tigray came under the control of the Italians. Mussolini who was infuriated by the slow pace of the campaign replaced De Bono with another Marshal, Pietro Badoglio who was chief of staff of the Italian army. Following instructions from Rome, Badoglio resorted to harsh military tactics, including the raining of mustard gas from the air over Ethiopian troops and civilian areas, to score a quick victory. Thousands perished by this poison gas. Mustard gas had been banned in 1925 by the Geneva Convention, to which Ethiopia and Italy were signatories.

Frontal engagement became untenable for the Ethiopians, yet in a different setting, the resistance was emerging as guerrilla warfare – an irregular form of waging war or what US generals nowadays call “asymmetrical warfare”. Despite fire and air superiority accompanied by the mustard gas bombings, the Ethiopian rebels and resistance fighters, who came to be known as ‘Patriots’ (locally called *Arbegnoch*<sup>1</sup>), began to regroup in their respective districts under their local leaders and began to confront the enemy. A series of major battles were waged over a period of three months: 15 December 1935 at Shiré and Enda-Baguna, 20-24 January 1936 at Worsege-Tembien, 27-29 February at Workamba and Abiyadi-Tembien, 1-3 March at Selekhekha, 12-15 of March at Emba Aradom and all the way to Mount Alage. The battles were intense and the determination of the Ethiopians was tested against all odds. In his autobiography, the Emperor later wrote: “Although the Italians were superior to us in modern arms, our soldiers had the advantage in terms of courage. While our soldiers, who had won the battles in the Tambien and Shiré regions, were fighting with obsolete rifles like the Fusil Gras, they yet managed to capture more than 300 machine-guns and many cannons and tanks”.<sup>2</sup> Marshal P. Badoglio, on the other hand, estimated the number of Italian casualties in the Shire region alone as follows: “Our losses, including dead and wounded, were: 63 officers, 894 Italians, 12 Eritreans. The losses of the enemy as ascertained on the field were about 4,000; to these must be added those inflicted by aircraft during the pursuit, the total of which was estimated at over 3,000”.<sup>3</sup> This battlefield in the district of Shiré was just one of the several fronts in the province of Tigray and was lead by *Ras Imru*, governor of Gojjam province, who later retreated to Gore, southwest Ethiopia. Virtually the whole of Tigray had become a battleground for six months consecutively.

Although the frontal war was in favor of the invaders, on 31 March 1936 at Maichew and Lake Ashangé, the Emperor’s main force put up a tenacious resistance, but at the end of the day, failing to stand up to the aerial bombardment, the Ethiopians were forced to retreat further south towards Dessie, the provincial capital of Wollo. Dessie fell into the hands of the Italians on 4 April 1936 after three days of long and bloody battle. Unable to regroup and launch a counter-offensive, the Emperor and his remaining forces headed for Addis

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<sup>1</sup> Arbegnoch (singular Arbegna) means partisan or in the Ethiopian case, patriot fighting the invaders of the country. Clandestine fighter was also known as ‘Wust Arbegna’.

<sup>2</sup> Haile Selassie I, 1976: 263.

<sup>3</sup> Badoglio, P. 1937: 119.

Ababa, the capital city. The Battle of Maichew where the Emperor had assembled his greatest force, eventually, turned out to be the end of the conventional confrontation and the official beginning of the “Patriots’ resistance movement which appeared to have already started behind the enemy lines.

On the southern and southeast fronts, however, the battle remained intense, with the forces of Ras Desta’s, *Dejazmach* Nesibu, and *Dejazmach* Mekonnen, governors of Sidamo, Harar and Illubabor Regions respectively, deterring the northward movement of Marshal Graziani’s forces, who had vowed to deliver Ethiopia to Mussolini “... with the Ethiopians or without them”.<sup>1</sup> Graziani’s statement, though wild and crude, was a reflection of Italy’s ongoing policy of resettling its overcrowded farmers in the fertile lands of Ethiopia. Graziani, not contented with showering the Ethiopians with bombs and mustard gas, also resorted to the massacring of non-combatant villagers with his tanks and armored vehicles, as was seen during battles in the Ogaden in early 1936. Appalled by such barbaric Italian war tactics, 900 well armed Eritrean *askaris*, deserted to the Ethiopian side to fight back the colonialists. Previously, in mid-December 1935, 400 Eritreans had already joined the forces of Ras Imru on the Shiré front.<sup>2</sup> These desertions revealed the extent to which the acts of the fascists were abhorred and that deep inside many Eritreans harbored sympathy for Ethiopia and the anti-colonial cause.

While Graziani was contained in the south-eastern front, Emperor Haile Selassie was unable to check the advancing Badoglio from the north. The Emperor retreated from Dessie and arrived in his capital Addis Ababa in the morning of 30 April 1936, only to depart three days later on his way to exile. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of May 1936 Addis Ababa fell into the hands of the invaders without any meaningful of resistance but amid chaos and looting triggered by the Emperor’s departure. Italy declared victory but the resistance was on its way. However, “In reality the success of the invasion of Ethiopia resulted from the Italians achieving huge material superiority, maintained by efficient logistical support to counterbalance the greater individual motivation of Ethiopian troops”.<sup>3</sup>

As it turned out to be, now, the war was taking a different course. The day the Emperor arrived in his capital, he had hastily convened an assembly of his ministers and nobles and two important agreements were reached right there:

(a) The Emperor had to go abroad to present Ethiopia’s deplorable case to the League of Nations and (b) the seat of the government had to move to Gore, south west of Addis Ababa, and *Bitweded* Wolde-Tsadik Goshu would be the regent. While the first decision called for a diplomatic and political struggle, the second one in effect meant the launching of a resistance against the Italian occupation and aimed at regaining independence. Yet, many of the younger patriots, aware of the ensuing authority gap caused by the Emperor’s absence, had not approved of his departure into exile. “Even the young Crown Prince had been suggesting to his own followers – to *Dejazmach* Fikremariam and *Dejazmach* Gurassu - that he should abandon his father and go with them as *shifita* to the hills (Mockler 1984: 135). But as the decision of the Emperor could not be contested, the resistance - *shifinnet* (= ‘banditry’) - had to commence without him.”<sup>4</sup>

### ***Resistance to Occupation Begins***

Now the war was entering a new phase. By the time the invading army put Addis Ababa under its control and Mussolini on 9 May 1936 declared Ethiopia part of the Italian Empire, only a portion of the northern part of the country was under their influence or control. “Five months after the defeat of Emperor Haile Selassie, Badoglio and Graziani controlled only

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<sup>1</sup> Del Boca, A. 1969: 113.

<sup>2</sup> Nega Negegn, 1993 E.C. i.e. 2001: 73. (E.C. denotes Ethiopian Calendar which is a Julian one and when reckoned up comes to 7 years and 4 months behind the Gregorian.

<sup>3</sup> Nicolle, D. 1997: 42. Illustrated by Raffaele Ruggeri

<sup>4</sup> For the meaning of *shifinnet*, a brief elaboration is given below.

one third of the country”, Sbacchi noted.<sup>1</sup> After the Battle of Maichew and the retreat of the Emperor, it took no time for the resistance to commence. Under local chiefs, many patriotic groups were formed and immediately went to what they call “*chaka*” (literally the bush) of their localities from where they initiated the resistance. Throughout the occupied land the patriots became active and an ongoing nuisance to the Italians all over the country.

As the resistance was mounting, it was clear from the start the country could not be effectively occupied or colonized. On the other hand, Mussolini exerted repeated pressure on his marshals in the frontlines to demonstrate a swift and profound victory over the would-be colony of Ethiopia so that his rivals (Britain and France) would recognize Italy’s might. This meant the total destruction of any resisting force. Yet, the pace of his modern army remained frustratingly, if not cautiously slow as a result of the resistance it had to encounter every day. In the years to follow, the Italians had to fear what comes from every gorge, hill, mountain or village i.e. “the bush” and also from within the occupied towns.

For many Ethiopians, the occupation of their land and the subsequent fleeing of their Emperor to exile meant the loss of their dignity and identity as a nation. It also meant the threat to or destruction of their traditional values and institutions, and more so disruption of their life of which they were proud. The common motto at the time became ‘*Tenes! atenesam woy, Hager siwrer zim telaleh woy*’, which meant: ‘Rise up! Oh rise up!, you cannot sit idle when the country is ravaged’. In connection with this motto, the author and eye witness Haddis Alemayehu, in his book of personal recollections called *Tezeta*, gives a list of poems, poetic calls and war songs, like ‘*Bälew attilim woy! Tekur anbesa aydellehim woy*’, meaning: ‘Get him, aren’t you a black lion?’.<sup>2</sup>

It appeared no time was spared to wage the war of resistance in defiance of the occupation. While the conventional battles were still raging deep in the southeast, Tigray, the first occupied province of northern Ethiopia, had already become a battleground for the invaders and patriots. The patriots operated in small groups, not far from their respective localities. *Dejazmach* Gebrehiwet Mesheha, *Dejazmach* Abbai Kahsay, *Dejazmach* Tesfay Medebai, *Fitawrari* Tessema Tesfay, *Dejazmach* Gizaw, *Dejazmach* Taffere, *Agafari* Birru, Kassa Sibhat, *Kegnazmach* Abbera Adale and on the women’s side *Woizero* Kebedech Seyoum and *Woizero* Desta Gebre-Mikael were some of the prominent resistance leaders, independently operating from Adwa in the north to Maichew in the south of Tigray. *Dejazmach* Gebrehiwet Mesheha, for instance, shuttled between Shiguashugi in Geraalta, central Tigray and Lemalimo across the Tekeze River to attack enemy troops from ambush. As a matter of fact, acquiring arms by ambush was a favorite undertaking of all patriots. They were also engaged in various activities such as rolling down huge rocks from mountains and cliffs when enemy convoys passed by, disrupting their communication systems by capturing their messengers and later cutting telephone lines, setting fire to anything under enemy control, like offices and fuel or ammunition depots by firing from a long distance, and harassing or killing enemy collaborators.

As the activities of the patriots in Tigray escalated, the Italians began deploying more and more detachments to the spots of resistance but depleting their main force that was pushing southwards. The patriots, now referred to as *shiftas* (bandit) by the Italians, were liable to be hunted down. The equivalent word for *shifita* could be bandit or an outlaw, but the concept *shifita* in Ethiopian traditional context is much broader than what the Italians wanted it to mean. To be a *shifita* means to rebel against someone in authority or an establishment that had failed to render justice. It was also generally accepted as a means of bringing grievance to the attention of the public in order to gain sympathy when higher authorities had failed to deliver what was customary. Usually a *shifita* emerged from the enlightened or noble class and disposed some sort of critical vision on the social order. This enabled him/her to express, in words or in action, the real or perceived injustices and the

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid, 1985: 34.

<sup>2</sup> Haddis Alemayohu (a patriot in his own rights), 1985: 151-163.

responses to it. So the commitment to deliver justice that was initially denied is embedded in the concept of *shifta*, although a *shifta* may not necessarily be free from wrongdoing. Thus *shiftinnet* (being a *shifta*), as one form of 'conflict resolution' and in its diverse forms, had an important social function.<sup>1</sup>

In Ethiopia, enlightened and assertive individuals, who started as *shiftas* had risen to the level of kingship, legitimizing the concept of *shifta*. Two late nineteenth-century *shiftas*, Kassa Hailu of Gondar and Kahsai Mircha of Tigray, had passed through this political evolution to become Emperors Tewodros and Yohannes in succession. Thus "... the *shiftas* formed the military elite and became the core of the resistance, using their military skills against the Italians".<sup>2</sup> A *shifta*, however, whose acts surpass the socially acceptable norms would be called *t'era-shifta* (ordinary bandit) and would be regarded as a highwayman or a malefactor and would be denied the affection of the people. The Italians understandably preferred to deal with the patriots by calling them *t'era-shiftas* of the criminal type. Nevertheless, to be described as a *shifta* especially in the event of the Italian occupation was an honor to an Ethiopian and this was how the resistance started and spread. Among the commonly sung lyrical poems in the region at that time goes:

*'Adi tefiu, adi'do yewaal'ye,  
Beti Hatsur akiblini meneshiraye,  
Ne'merebey iye ne'merebey!'*

*'In a lost country, you cannot stay a day,  
through the fence, throw me the gun,  
I should go to Merebe, oh my Merebe!'*<sup>3</sup>

Another song written by a patriot in the central region goes as follows:

*"From the bean fields,  
Let us go to the virgin lands;  
From this endless plain,  
Let climb uninhabited mountains.  
Or like a bandit with a rifle,  
Run together to Adabai River in the gorges.  
Or like a crow, a swan, fly in the air over the prairie."*<sup>4</sup>

There were many such popular songs, which were in effect traditional calls for resistance *before* the formal call came. Officially, though, on 9 December 1935, Ras Mulugeta Yigezu, the Ethiopian minister of war at the time, issued an order to all the chiefs of northern Ethiopia to carry on with 'patriotic resistance against the Italians for taking away the independence of Ethiopia', Sbacchi wrote.<sup>5</sup> Guerrilla warfare, which had been basically the tactic of the *shifta*, was underway in the north where the enemy had assumed "full control".

Following the departure of the Emperor to exile and the fall of Addis Ababa to the Italians on 5 May 1936, the *Rases*, *Dejazmaches* and all other notables had withdrawn to their respective localities or familiar areas within close range of Addis Ababa. They were situated in strategic villages, safe to recover from the exhaustion of eight months of war, and able to reorganise their forces for the next phase of the patriotic fight. These villages were also logistically well-situated, in that the leaders were able to follow events in the capital that could allow them to launch attacks. Ras Abebe Aregay was in Ankober, *Dejazmach* Balcha Safo in Gurage Land, *Dejazmach* Zewdu Asfaw in Mullo, *Blatta* Takele Wolde-Hawariat in Limmu, the Ras Kassa brothers (Abera, Asfaw-Wosen, and Wond-Wosen) in Selale, and Haile Mariam Mamo was engaged in hit-and-run tactics inside and around the city. With

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<sup>1</sup> Fernyhough, T. 1982:

<sup>2</sup> Sbacchi, A. 1997:

<sup>3</sup> Merebe is a long river-gorge that provides shelter to a *shifta* and from where he or she could launch an attack over the enemy.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Tilahun Tassew, 2011, p.10

<sup>5</sup> Ibid: 165.

more than 10,000 troops, Abera, the son of *Ras Kassa* who had accompanied the emperor into exile, had been entrusted by the emperor to co-ordinate the resistance in that region and was doing his best to accomplish it. On 21 June 1936 for instance, he held a meeting of some Patriotic leaders, including the Patriarch of Wollo, Abune Pet'ros, at Debre Libanos, the renowned monastery dating from 1312, located some 70 km. north of Addis Ababa. They made a plan to storm enemy stations inside the capital. The attempt was repulsed because of lack of effective means of transportation and radio communication that prevented a co-ordinated assault from taking place. As the information about the attempted attack on Addis Ababa reached the Italians, they encircled the city with barbed wire and thirty-eight cement forts. People and traffic could come into the city only through ten gates, Sbacchi observed.<sup>1</sup> This was indicative of the need for more precautions against resistance activity. However, sporadic attacks by the different groups continued to dominate the battle scene around Addis Ababa.

Goré, in southeast Ethiopia, now the seat of the displaced government run by the elder regent, *Bitweded Wolde Tsadik Goshu* was far from within easy reach and never had been effective in providing nation-wide leadership to the resistance. The *Rases* and governors began to act independently i.e. without the Emperor's directives whom they considered as the legitimate leader and an able commander. Indeed, for most of them the unexpected departure of the authoritative emperor into exile had created a gap nobody seemed to be able to fill. The few *Rases*, like Imru in Wollega and Desta in Sidamo, who had made a very long retreat from the northern frontline to the southern rear near Goré, were exhausted. They could neither realize effective mobility nor acquire the resources to keep their troops intact. Yet their acts of defiance in itself helped to inspire others far away in resisting the occupation and "thus, they were capable of continuously 'distracting the Italians' mind and attention"<sup>2</sup>. For them, intelligibly it was a transition period from conventional warfare to guerrilla warfare, one form of resistance.

### ***The Spread of the Resistance***

The prospect of conventional war gradually faded away, but the spirit of resistance persisted. A quite different attitude of defiance and conduct of attacks began to surface from many quarters. The entire membership of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Ethiopian Women's Volunteer Service Association (EWVSA) and the Black Lion Organisation, leaving aside the many small groupings of individuals, appeared in the forefront of the resistance. The range of their activities was broad, including plain assaults on anything Italian, attack of its top leaders and also providing all round underground support to the patriots in the villages and mountains.

#### **(a) The Role of the Church**

The Orthodox Church, which was historically an integral part of the Ethiopian state, began to play a pivotal role in broadening the dimension of the resistance. The Church took it as an everyday obligation, inside and outside the church, to renounce the incursion of Italian invaders in a free country with a sovereign state. Passages from the Bible were frequently cited to invoke national sentiment and loyalty. The verse "Ethiopia shall stretch out her hands unto God" (in Psalms 68:31) was reiterated in daily prayers. It was interpreted to mean Ethiopia's self-government as recognised by the Almighty deserved all the rights of a free nation, and the Christian world should stand by her side. Guided by such a deep-rooted belief, *Abune Petros*, the Bishop of Wollo, marched in the streets of Addis Ababa denouncing the Italian occupation and calling the people to keep on fighting for their

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid: 170.

<sup>2</sup> Salome Gabre-Egziabher, 1969: 70. Salome, an Eritrea woman by descent, had made a profound research in bringing to the limelight the participation of thousands of Eritrean patriots against the Italian invasion.



independence. “Cursed shall they be these who bowed to the cruel invaders”, he reiterated. Many people came out of their houses and began to follow him. Soon, the Bishop was apprehended and on 30 July 1936 shot dead by a firing squad in a public square where his monument now stands.

The killing of a bishop was unimaginable and unheard of before in Ethiopia. It indeed shocked the nation, arousing the indignation of the people and especially of the clergy. Defiance of Italian rule was mounting in different forms, but these reactions did not stop the Italians. They proceeded to execute monks, priests and deacons in many monasteries and churches, expecting submission. “On 21 May 1937, General P. Maletti had executed in the monastery of Debre Libanos alone 297 monks”, wrote Sbacchi.<sup>1</sup> Five days later, more priests and deacons were massacred in a nearby church of Debre Birhan, followed by other executions and repression. Yet, the numerous monasteries and churches of Ethiopia continued to be centres of resistance, propaganda and sanctuaries for the patriots.

### **(b) The Role of Women**

The participation of women in the resistance was also notable. Historically, women had been active participants in previous wars of defending the country. Not long ago, Empress Taytu together with her husband Emperor Menilik had marched to the battle front of Adwa 1896 and played a crucial role in bringing about the defeat of the Italians. Chris Prouty writes that Taytu had organised thousands of women, including Zewditu, her step daughter and later empress (1916-1928), and Azalech, her cousin, and strengthened the defence lines by supplying water and taking care of the wounded.<sup>2</sup> She was also a military tactician whose device brought the defeat of the Italians at the battle of Mekele a month earlier before the battle of Adwa in 1896 elaborated Nega Tegegn.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Ethiopian women had a reputation to uphold, not only side by side but also undertaking a leading role, in defending the national cause. Only a few exemplary women will be mentioned here.<sup>4</sup>

*Woizero* Shawaragad Gadle had turned the EWVSA, which was under the patronage of Princess Tenagne-Work, daughter of the Emperor, into a clandestine movement of resistance. The women in this association were involved in scores of activities, ranging from supplying medicine, bandages, cloth and ammunition bought or stolen from Italian troops to the patriots in the field, to giving shelter and forge pass papers for the active patriots to travel inside enemy-controlled territory. Some of the women gathered military intelligence and few of them, indeed, planned military operations. It was Shawaragad Gadle, “who laid the groundwork for the storming of the Italian garrison at Addis Alem”.<sup>5</sup> During this time, the term ‘*Yewist Arbegna*’ - meaning clandestine patriot – was coined.

In the countryside not only did women prepare *quanta* (dried meat), *qollo* (roasted cereals), Besso (instant cereal powder) and various foodstuffs that may be called as ‘dry rations’ in modern military jargon, but also sharpened swords and shuttled between the zones of operation and their houses. They also “... sent down from various slopes avalanches of stones, not heeding the shower of bombs that were coming down from the air and women like *Woizero* Fantaye actually fought on the battlefields’ (G. Tafere in Salome 1969: 78).<sup>6</sup> In her documentary study, Salome Gabre Egziabher provides a list of leading 64 women patriots of the resistance. She also gave a list of prominent patriots from every region, including hundreds from Eritrea.

Historically, it was customary for married couples to join the resistance army and often find themselves far away from their homes for years. ‘When *Dejazmach* Habtemariam, a

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<sup>1</sup> 1985: 195.

<sup>2</sup> 1986: 156-157.

<sup>3</sup> Major general Nega Tegegn, 2001: 35-36.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed narration on role of women in the defense of the Mother land, see Minale 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Bahru Zewde, 1991: 72, Sbacchi, 1997: 180.

<sup>6</sup> Gerima Tafere in Salome G.E., 1969: 78.

commander in the eastern front was too sick to lead the battles in the Ogaden desert in April 1936, his wife, equally a leading patriot, took over commanding his troops'.<sup>1</sup> 'Woizero Wagaye and her husband *Lij* Bitew, the secretary of *Ras* Imru, have been together all the way from the northern front of Shire to the southern front in Wolega and many other married couples too were participating continuously in the patriotic resistance' (Haddis Alemayehu, *EthC*.1984: 180). John Spencer adds to the list of 'women freedom fighters, Kebedech Seyoum, Qelemework Tilahun, Sliva Reyed Gadle, Laqetch Demissew, Qonjit Abinet, Likelesh Beyene and Abebech Cherkos'.<sup>2</sup> Two well educated women, Sinedu Gebru and Tsige Mengesha, were as well members of the patriotic Black Lion Organization, Asrat explains their broad role.<sup>3</sup>

### (c) The Role of Intellectuals and Cadets

In Addis Ababa, a dynamic group of patriotic intellectuals and young army officers were organizing an underground movement later to be called the Black Lion Organisation (BLO). It was composed of young intellectuals from various schools, including the recently established Holetta Military College. Some of BLO prominent leaders were Dr. Alemwork Beyene, a veterinary surgeon, Yilma Deressa, a graduate of The London School of Economics, Belay Haile-Ab and Kifle Nesibu, both Holetta graduates. There were also Fekade-Selassie Hiruy and the Workeneh brothers, three of them British-educated. Their aim was much broader than any other group in the resistance. They had a constitution and were poised to undertake urban and rural guerrilla warfare. Their constitution reflected the political motivation and the commitment they had.

"Among the most striking features of the constitution were: the affirmation of the supremacy of political over military command, the provision for the human treatment of prisoners and the non-molestation of the peasantry, the prohibition of exile, and the injunction of suicide rather than capture by the enemy".<sup>4</sup>

Detachments of this group engaged the enemy in and outside the city in various theatres of operation. One of their spectacular actions was the burning of three planes in the night of 26 June 1936, in Bonaya, Nek'emte, where twelve out of the thirteen Italian officials were killed, including the Italian deputy Viceroy to Ethiopia, Air Marshall Magliocco. The only survivor was Father M. Borello whose role was to guide and give the blessing of the expedition that was short lived. They were on a mission to exploit Oromo resentment towards the Amhara-dominated Ethiopian state and pave the way of expansion through Dejazmach Habte Mariam of Nek'emte, who showed them signals of collaboration some days earlier. While negotiations were underway, 'the daring assault on the Italian high ranking officials was performed by four members of the Black Lion organisation, namely Colonel Belay Haile-Ab, Maj. Matias Gameda, Captain Yosef Nesibu and Captain Benyam Nesibu who returned safely to their unit'.<sup>5</sup> This daring operation infuriated Graziani and led him to order blanket bombardment of Nekemté and its environs. It was an insane massacre where hundreds of all age were killed and maimed. History books refer to it as the Nekemté Massacre. What seemed to be a successful expedition for the Italians initially evaporated amid great disaster in an area thought to be cooperative.

The impact of the bombardment and the negative attitude of people in that region, however, forced most of the patriots to abandon the area in search of a more favourable one, while the older patriots began retiring to remote places. *Ras* Desta Damtew, the son-in-law of Emperor Haile Selassie and commander of the southern patriots, withdrew to Arbagoma, but was encircled by three columns of Italian infantry under General Navarrini aided by 50

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<sup>1</sup> Mockler, 1984: 128.

<sup>2</sup> 1984: 82.

<sup>3</sup> Asrat Abraham in Enku, 6<sup>th</sup>, 091, Genbote 2005 (E.C.), p.11

<sup>4</sup> Taddasa cited in Bahru Zewde, 1993: 281.

<sup>5</sup> Nega Tegegn, 2001: 71.

airplanes. After much of fierce fighting, Ras Desta escaped to Eya, Buttajira where he was captured, only to be executed by firing squad shortly afterwards. The Italians estimated Ethiopian losses at 4,000 of whom 1,600 were executed by firing squad (Sbacchi, 1985:189). The Italians thought that the defeat and later the execution of Ras Desta would kill the fervour of the resistance, but this proved wrong, as more people were putting themselves on the side of the patriots.

### ***The Resistance Intensified***

As the Italians were intensifying their terror to subdue the spirit of the patriots, the resistance conversely was mushrooming in the cities as in the country side. On 19 February 1937, Marshal Graziani together with his dignitaries and guests of honour were celebrating the birth of the Prince of Naples in the capital, Addis Ababa, in front of the Viceroy's palace. Two young Ethiopians from Eritrea, Abraham Deboch, who worked for the Italian Political Office at Addis Ababa and Moges Asgedom, a clerk in the Municipal Office, approached the podium and threw seven hand grenades, killing three Italian officers and wounding 52 of them. General Liotta, commander of the Italian Air Force lost his right eye and leg, but Graziani to whom the attack was mainly intended, was only wounded with some 300 splinters.

Although Moges and Abraham escaped to join the patriots in Wolkait and their aide Tadelech Estifanos, Abraham's wife left a day earlier to the monastery of Debre Libanos, the city however turned into an orgy of terror. Graziani had ordered retaliatory measures to be carried out. The Italian soldiers went out killing anybody in sight, burning houses including churches like St. George and brutally clubbing even children to death. Even the sick ones who were laying in bed were not spared. 4000 houses with whatever was inside were burned.<sup>1</sup> The scene was so horrible that even 'Mussolini forbade this draconian measure for fear of negative world public opinion'.<sup>2</sup> The attack launched by Moges and Abraham at the heart of the invaders' citadel gave a moral boost to the entire people under occupation and particularly to the patriots. The barbaric retaliatory measures taken by the invaders in the city only further widened the already existing gap between the Ethiopian people and Fascist Italians.

No wonder, the new mode of resistance was growing in scope and popularity throughout the country. Yohannes Saomerjibashian, a young Ethiopian of Armenian descent, started an underground paper known as the 'Pillar of Ethiopian Light'. *Blata Kidane Mariam* formed a clandestine movement of Ethiopian youths and closely worked with the women's organisation in resistance activities. Printed by Yohannes and distributed systematically by youth organised by *Blata Kidane Mariam*, leaflets that called for an uprising against the Fascists were appearing in the city public squares now and then. The railway line linking Addis Ababa to the port of Djibouti was attacked frequently. Travelling in armoured train and escorted by a squadron of planes, A. Lessona, Minister of Colonies and C. Gigli, Italian Minister for Public Works were ambushed by the Ethiopian patriots at Akaki, not far from Addis Ababa on 12 October 1936. Evelyn Waugh who travelled from Djibouti to Addis Ababa via Harar by train during that year and managed to interview Graziani later on observed the frustration of the invaders and wrote "there was a machine-gun section posted at the front of the train; another at the rear. From Awash to Addis the line was heavily guarded".<sup>3</sup>

Although not coordinated, the resistance was everywhere in numerous forms and tenacity. Haile Mariam Mamo was well known for his hit and run tactics around Addis Ababa. In Gojam, the professed *Shifta* Belay Zeleke and his rival Hailu Belaw, who although at times

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<sup>1</sup> Belay Giday Ameha, 1990 E.C., p. 108.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid: 190.

<sup>3</sup> 1984: 226.

also raided each other's territory, inflicted heavy damage on Italian troops in mobility or stationed. In Begemder, Yohannes Iyasu and Asfaw Bogale were fighting the well-equipped enemy on many fronts with superb skill. A successful attack in Bellesa, for instance, forced Governor O. Mezzetti to retreat to Gondar, the capital of Begemder only to find similar unrest there. In short the resistance actually proliferated nationwide. The different groups of patriots were, however, operating on their own, some in the traditional way and others employing the modern tactics. There was no unified command structure. In most provinces of Ethiopia including Tigray, Gondar, Gojam, Showa, Wollo, Arusi and Wollega, similar acts of resistance were observed. Eritreans too were joining the resistance in big numbers. Some 400 Eritreans abandoned the invaders on the Shire Front alone, where the Italians had the upper hand, and joined the retreating Ras Imru. Eritrean Patriots like *Ken*. Andom Tesfatsion joined the resistance movement in Wolkait-Tsegede and was killed fighting the Italians.<sup>1</sup>

Resistance on the economic front was also visible as Ethiopians loved to discredit the Italian money, the Lire. People continued to make their transactions with Maria Theresa thalers, the original Austrian dollar, although the Italians had declared the Lire to be the monetary unit of currency upon their arrival. The Italians had to pay Ethiopian laborers at the platinum mines at Yubdo in thalers because they would not accept lire. Furthermore, when authorities forced the laborers to accept paper money (the Lire) there was massive desertion and the local market almost ceased to exist as commerce went elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Such crippling resistance inflated the already rising Italian occupation cost and severely devalued the Lire. A Maria Theresa Thaler could be obtained from the Royal Mint in London for 6.50 lire in 1937 and sold for 13.50 lire in Ethiopia.<sup>3</sup>

The spirit of the resistance echoed also through some cities of Italy. Ethiopians who were taken there either as prisoners or interpreters were expected to be moulding in the Italian thinking. Among the 400 notables and their families who were deported to Italy through Massawa in the summer of 1937, was the young Zerai Derres working as an aide. 'Zerai Derres, an Eritrean interpreter of the exiled *Rases*, on 13 June 1938, in front of the monument of the fallen heroes of Dogali in Rome, pronounced words in favor of Haile Selassie. In an attempt to stop him several persons were wounded', (Sbacchi, 1985:138).<sup>4</sup> Abdisa Agga (later Colonel), suspected accomplice of Abraham Deboch and Moges Asgedom who attempted to kill Graziani, was taken to Libya as a prisoner. When the German army was defeated in Libya, Abdisa Agga, together with other British, Greek, Yugoslav and Albanian prisoners, was transferred to a prison in Italy. In Italy, Abdisa succeeded in breaking out from prison. Since his escape, he was engaged in a guerrilla warfare in the northern mountains of Italy, where he met Marshal Tito, a resistance leader in Yugoslavia. 'Abdisa fought the Fascists in their own land until he returned to Ethiopia after the liberation' (Nega Tegegn, 2001:96-97).<sup>5</sup> The wind of resistance had begun to blow beyond the borders of the country wherever Ethiopians were found.

Mussolini realised the resistance swelling in Ethiopia, despite the appalling tactics of repression unleashed by Graziani. He then replaced Graziani at the end of 1937, with another viceroy, Amadeo U. Duke of Aosta whom he thought would take a more 'pacifying approach' as governor and would likewise contain the fomenting Ethiopian rebellion. In an effort to try completely different tactics, the new viceroy began to engage into dialogue with the *Rases* and other rebel leaders and to negotiations their surrender. He offered money, titles and posts in his administration. He also employed the tactic of divide-and-rule among the independently acting *rases* and few other leaders. In fact a few opportunist leaders like *Dejazmach* Haile Sellassie Gugsu of Tigray, *Ras* Hailu Teke Haimanot of Gojam, *Ras* Gebrehiwet Michael, *Dejazmach* Amde Ali, *Dejazmach* Ayalew Birru, *Dejazmach*

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<sup>1</sup> Nega Tegegn, 2001; 73.

<sup>2</sup> Riva in Schaefer, 1996: 99.

<sup>3</sup> Pankhurst in *ibid*: 120.

<sup>4</sup> Sbacchi, 1985: 138.

<sup>5</sup> Nega, *ibid*: 96-97.

Habtemichael, Afework Gebreyesus, Mengesha Wube and some other low ranking chiefs responded positively, but the great majority of the patriots, the Church, women's organisations, the intellectuals and the youth who subsequently joined the resistance remained defiant. Some of the patriots made use of the negotiation scheme to buy time until they get favourable moments to strike back and not to surrender. The famous patriot, "Abebe Aregay negotiated his possible surrender with the Italians. Historians generally, interpret this episode as mere diversion to buy time for his exhausted troops".<sup>1</sup> Guerrilla bands led by, like Zewde Asfaw with 100, Abebe Aregay with 45, kebedech Seyoum (wife of Abera kassa) with 40, Mesfin Seleshi with 30 followers continued to make the well-entrenched Italians in Addis Ababa permanently uneasy. The provinces remained insecure as ever for the invaders. Gerasu Duki on the Jimma road, *Fit*. Taffera on the Nekemte road, Gebre Hiwet Meshesha in the Lemelimo Gorge, Tesfay Medebai in the Merebe Gorge, Belay Zeleke in the Nile Gorge, each commanding 500 to 3000 armed patriots, made life in rural Ethiopia a hazard for the Italians.

As the granting of titles, bribes and negotiations failed to bring the resistance under control, the commander-in-chief of the Italian forces at the time, General Ugo Cavallero convinced the viceroy Duke of Aosta that "the Graziani method" would bring the desired result.<sup>2</sup> And that was full-scale military campaign and sheer terror. Cavallero built road connections between strategic spots linked with chains of forts – still a visible Italian legacy in Ethiopia. From 1938 to mid 1939 Cavallero's army was engaged executing the "Graziani Method" in what seemed to be an endless war of terror and attrition, but to no avail. The resistance continued on all fronts.

### ***Acts of Collaboration***

Exploiting differences among rival regional leaders (princes and rases) was one of the dubious tactics Italians employed to quell the expanding resistance. In this regard, the Italians had found a few collaborators in the Ethiopian nobility, not so much of mere opportunism but largely because of their ambitions and claim to power for which the Italians pretended to back. Although superior force was the ultimate means upon which the Italians relied to execute their invasion and sustain their occupation of Ethiopia, they had been looking for collaborators ever since they began preparations for the invasion of Ethiopia. Their long stay in nearby Eritrea had helped them to closely study, contact and recruit collaborators to their long thought objective. They had focused on three aspects of conflicts to be manipulated within the Ethiopian society - rivalry among the different contending leaders, the Christian-Moslem traditional hostility and the resentment of the Southern and northern people towards the central government for the unfair appropriation of their land and rejection of their demand for autonomy respectively.

Some well-known initial collaborators were Ras Hailu Tekle Haimanot of Gojam, Dejazmach Haile Selassie Gugsa of Tigray, Dejazmach Hosana Jote of Oromia and Sultan Muhamed Jaja Yayu Hanfre of Afar.<sup>3</sup> They were all rivals of Emperor Haile Selassie in the power politics of Ethiopia. For instance, Dejazmach Haile Selassie, whose father was the grandson of Emperor Yohannes forsook regaining the throne of his great grandfather with the support of the Italians. Thus he put his followers at the service of the Italians. Ras Hailu, the son of Negus (King) Tekle Haimanot of Gojam, who was opposed to Emperor Haile Selassie's rise to power had also anticipated to govern Gojam without any imperial intervention if he would collaborate with Italians. Both received arms and money from the Italians for their service but not the power and prestige they had dreamed of. Some other low ranking nobles also collaborated with the Italians induced by similar expectations. One such collaborator was Teklu Meshesha who was awarded the title of Dejazmach by the

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<sup>1</sup> Konjit Abinet in McClellan, 1996: 61.

<sup>2</sup> Sbacchi, 1997: 190.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 1985; Belay Giday, 1990 E.C.

Italians. However, once in power, “Mussolini ordered ‘No power to the masses’. Italy, he said, would not rule Ethiopia on a *metayer* basis by sharing power with the Ethiopian nobles”.<sup>1</sup>

With the promise of resuscitating the Moslem states like that of Harar and reinstating Oromo kingdoms like that of Abba Jifar and Abba Jobir Abdullah, which were incorporated by previous Ethiopian conquests, the Italians gained substantial collaboration from the Moslems in the lowlands and the Oromos in the south and eastern highlands. Abba Jobir, who once was imprisoned in Addis Ababa by the Ethiopian government for opposing the deployment of its soldiers to collect taxes in his region, joined the Italians to fight the patriots.

Across the major instances of collaboration, there was the feeling of victimisation spurred by the Emperor’s drive to centralise authority and prevail over regional powers. Such was the main reason for the notable figures to indulge in collaboration with the enemy. Although these acts of collaboration had facilitated the objectives of the invaders in some ways, however, essentially their acts of collaboration were meant to secure the power they had lost under the reign of the Emperor. “Certainly they acted to protect their own interests, but these actions were not necessarily opportunistic. Instead, they reflected a long tradition of rivalry and tension between centre and periphery, particularly at times when the centre was perceived as weak or vulnerable”.<sup>2</sup>

Paradoxically, though few in number there were some high-spirited Europeans and Americans whose disgust at the whole purpose of occupation caused them to come to Ethiopia and fight the fascist invaders. One of them was Alcendro Del Bayo,<sup>3</sup> a Cuban pilot of a Spanish descent who fought as a combat soldier on the side of the Ethiopian patriots. His skill as a pilot was not utilized for Ethiopia had no fighter planes. On the propaganda front, many foreigners stood on the side of Ethiopia and worked hard to expose the war crimes committed by the Italian invaders. One such prolific writer was Sylvia Pankhurst, a British woman, who was publishing an English journal “*New Times and Ethiopia News*”. These people remained in the minds and hearts of the Ethiopian people for they stood on the side of the just cause the Ethiopians were yearning for.

### ***The End of the Resistance***

In a turn of events, Mussolini embarked on what was later to prove the most fatal ventures in his fascist career. He signed a pact with Nazi-Germany and entered the Second World War on 10 June 1940. Britain and France, both accustomed to diplomatic rivalry with Italy in the colonial partition of East Africa, now turned out to be the arch-enemies of Italy and her Axis partner, Germany. This new alliance of world forces came as a salutary gift for Ethiopia. Emperor Haile Selassie, whose repeated cry for help was brushed off by the world powers and by the League of Nations for five years to this day, now found a roaring answer but certainly for tactical reasons. This twist of events brought all support needed to drive the Italian invaders out of Ethiopia. All types of support to the resistance began to flow not only from England where he lived in exile, but also from the other Allied Powers as well. Now that support was flowing in, the patriots were in position to launch fresh offensives all over the country. Finally, his return back to Ethiopia had to be synchronised with the British offensive that was planned to drive out the Italians from the region.

The British organised the Emperor’s journey via Khartoum, Sudan from where he would start mobilising patriots in exile and advance inside. When he arrived in Khartoum on 3 July

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<sup>1</sup> Sbacchi, 1985: 134.

<sup>2</sup> Taylor in McClellan: 1996: 63.

<sup>3</sup> A. Del Bayo, in 1937 had published his experience of Ethiopia’s anti-fascist struggle memoirs. This book was translated from its original Spanish to Amharic (one of Ethiopia’s languages) by Dr. Tesfay Mokonnen Bayleyegn who coined the name “Red Lion” for such western freedom fighters (analogous to the Black Lion).

1940, he received numerous messages of support from the prominent patriotic leaders in the field. Yet, he was not sure how the people he left with the Fascist Italians five years ago would receive him. Possible rebellions in Gojam, the Ogaden and Eritrea and more serious, the republican ideals of Takele Wolde Hawariat and the dynamic intellectuals in the resistance were some of the threats that the Emperor needed to address. Since June 1940, an intensive propaganda was under way on behalf of the Emperor to ameliorate conditions of his return, led by the British journalist George Steer.

On 30 January 1941, the day Haile Selassie crossed the border with Sudan on his way to Ethiopia accompanied by General Orde Wingate and the Patriots, he declared that there would be no retaliation against the Italians. This declaration was considered as the official cessation of the resistance although nobody was sure how the Italians were going to respond. Soon the Duke of Aosta and his army retired to the strategic pass of Amba Alagie in Tigray, leaving Addis Ababa to the patriots who were in nearby mountains and inside the city and to the British general Alan Cunningham who was pushing his way from Kenya to Addis Ababa. On 6 April 1941, Addis Ababa was liberated without any type of confrontation and a month later, on 5 May 1941 Emperor Haile Selassie entered Addis Ababa. His rule was restored and he remained on his throne for the next 33 years.

Although combined forces of the patriots and detachments of the British army rooted out the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, it nevertheless left an impressive memory of indigenous Ethiopian resistance. What people vividly remember to this day is the gruesome conduct of the invaders, on one hand and the endurance and heroic struggle of the patriots, on the other hand. Another interesting realisation was the extent to which the new ideas that emerged as a result of the occupation had shaken the traditional institutions and the divine myth of the emperor's might. Many also reckoned and related their patriotic struggle to the war in Europe where the atrocities and avarice of the common enemies, i.e. Axis forces, had to be rooted out.

In the wake of their defeat and withdrawal from Ethiopia, the Italians were expecting vengeful measures from the Ethiopians, who had suffered brutal oppression for five consecutive years at their hands. It was normal for the fascists to think that way as the horror they unleashed was beyond limits. The God fearing Ethiopians, however, had a forgiving take. What we saw in the constitution of the Black Lion Organization - the provision for the human treatment of prisoners – was actually put into practice. On top of this, the Emperor declared not to inflict damage on the Italians in retreat, for which he received a letter of gratitude from world leaders including President Theodore Roosevelt of the USA. Once the occupation was over, however, more than the declaration of the Emperor, the traditional prudence based on religious culture of tolerance and dignity overwhelmed the Ethiopians' reaction towards the ruthless enemy. As no measure of vindictiveness was taking place, many Italians were impressed and some decided to stay while most of them left in disgrace.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

The Italian invasion (1935) and occupation (1936-41) of Ethiopia was conducted by one of the most modern and strongest armies by European standards at the time. Conventional military theories and diplomatic maneuvers were employed to their extreme limits against an army that did not have even a working central command structure, let alone modern weaponry systems and diplomatic backing. The Italian invaders unleashed unprecedented level of violence both from the ground, as well as from the air for which the Ethiopians had no defenses whatsoever and caused huge losses in death and wounded. In the beginning of the occupation, the collapse of the Ethiopian army before Mussolini's war machine followed by the flight of the Emperor into exile made many to believe that the fate of a longstanding independent nation was doomed. Possible emergence of any patriotic resistance also looked far-fetched. "Mussolini's dream, one shared by the Italian people

and constantly reiterated in the press, that millions of Italians would be able to find land and work in Ethiopia”<sup>1</sup> seemed to gain ground.

But the Ethiopians were poised to fight back. The Italians indeed controlled the major towns, yet they could in no way gain control over the vast Ethiopian countryside where the resistance was gathering momentum. Despite unbridled fascist terror, intended to force them into submission, the majority of Ethiopians drew upon their sense of freedom and pride, and were mentally prepared to resist the exceedingly superior forces that threatened their sovereign rights as an independent nation, historical identity, religion and culture.

The Ethiopians decided to fight back even without the Emperor, who some said should have been there as a symbol of unity. Thus the conventional Italian war of occupation was confronted with an informal, open-ended and community-based resistance. The traditional form of resistance, *shiftinnet*, now found a new terrain to spread widely and a new enemy to counter, this time with a much broader popular support. Unlike the old *shiftinnet* inspired by rebellious nobles or a few politically ambitious individuals, the anti-Italian resistance drew upon all sectors of Ethiopian society: the peasantry, the nobility, the clergy, the intellectuals, women and the youth alike. “From this point resistance was no longer an aristocratic affair”<sup>2</sup> but in fact ‘serendipitous’, as Schaefer rightly observed. For the Italians, however, the resistance was an act of violence by ‘irrational out-laws’ or *shiftas*, who deserved to be hunted down, flogged, and publicly hanged or shot by a firing squad. This was their tactic of creating a state of fear and submission. Despite the untold atrocities and repression of a peace and independence loving people, the Italians never achieved the desired result.

While the resistance expanded in scope and tenacity, the Italian human and material cost was growing, and driving the Italians to be more furious. Not only was the whole objective of their occupation thwarted but also “Never in their quinquennium of rule did the fascists feel secure in Ethiopia, and their anxiety came to border on neurosis”.<sup>3</sup> To the relief of the Ethiopians, Italy entered the Second World War on the side of Germany, and the allied forces began to pour in support to bolster the resistance in Ethiopia. This sudden twist was an opportunist move rather than an act of principle. In any event, the Italians were defeated; hence the resistance, which had already mushroomed nation-wide, came to an abrupt end.

The five years of Italian occupation also shook traditional feudal Ethiopia to a certain extent. The impact the occupation had created in the traditional thinking of Ethiopians was widely felt and many studious individuals like Takel Wolde Hawariat began to ponder over, among other matter, the weaknesses of their monarchical government and their possible remedies to be found in republican system. Publicly, people began to ask why they were defeated initially in their own terrain in the first place while the previous generation had crushed the same invaders forty years ago at Adwa, and what type of government would stand such an invasion if it could occur in the future. As McClellan puts it, “It was an event that swept away old myths and created opportunity for Ethiopians to re-examine the nature and meaning of their state. For Ethiopia, the war highlighted a need to move fully into the modern world”.<sup>4</sup> The fact that Ethiopia had failed to repulse the predatory Italian invasion in itself proved that the country had a long way to go, among other things, in building up a modern system of self-defense.

But, given the whole purpose of the invasion and occupation, and the attendant brutality, there was another aspect to what the ‘modern world’ constituted in the context of the Ethiopian conception as a free and sovereign nation that had to face unprovoked aggression. While the need to move into the modern world was deemed essential, there

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<sup>1</sup>Schaefer, 1996: 103.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid: 89.

<sup>3</sup>Marcus, 1994: 148.

<sup>4</sup>1996:57.



also emerged a rethinking on the so-called modernity itself. "Is this a sine qua non of modernity?" was a common question among the reform seeking intellectuals.

In the first place, there was no doubt that it was basically Italy's aggressive nationalistic and ravenous colonial ambition that led to the invasion and occupation of Ethiopia. Secondly, both the invasion and the occupation had been executed in the most barbaric and violent manner to disown someone's common land. As a result, the perception of the Ethiopians was that if this guise was what constituted the 'modern world', people should reject it. Why Ethiopians have to be attracted savagely by a 'modern' nation was indeed a riddle? Understandably, the essence of the resistance was to safeguard the independence, religion and cultural identity of Ethiopia, all resting in the domain of the past as heritage. The traditional past, for most Ethiopians, was therefore not as bad as the "modern" present with the disposition of the Italians around. In both cases, the *raison d'être* of the motivation for change towards the mission behind the Italian occupation was rather negative. So, one can hardly see a positive impact of Italy's modernity on Ethiopia's traditionality.

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## Appendix 1

Traditional Ethiopian titles; they denote military as well as civilian administration ranking.

- Ras – Chief of a region, below the emperor, head of regional army
- Dejazmach (Dejazmach) – Duke or Commander of the Front
- Fitawrari (Fit.) – Commander of the Advance Guard
- Kegnazmach (Keg.) – Commander of the Right Wing
- Gerazmach (Gir.) – Commander of the Left Wing
- Balambaras (Bal.) – Guardian of a Frontier or Ruler of a Fort
- Blata – Chief of Staff, Executive at Court
- Basha – Chief of Riflemen, Customs Official
- Bitweded (Bit.) – Beloved, trustee of the emperor
- Lij – Young nobleman
- Enderasie (Enr.) – Viceroy
- Woizero – Title for woman, Lady
- Abun – Bishop, patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church