

LIKE HO CHI MINH! LIKE CHE GUEVARA!
THE REVOLUTIONARY LEFT IN ETHIOPIA, 1969-1979

IAN SCOTT HORST



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To the memory of “The Generation”

A luta continua

*“You know sometimes it is not that good to get old and get to see such disasters,
but I still believe the monsters will perish.”—Hama Tuma*

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Foreword

This work focuses on the people and politics of a vital but neglected chapter of revolutionary history, the Ethiopian revolution of 1974. It is my intention to tell as much of this story of the Ethiopian revolutionary left as possible in the voices of its participants. This volume makes extended use of original documents, memoirs and analyses written by the participants themselves, framed by my own narrative and analysis as an American leftist who watched much of this history unfold from afar.

In 1976 I began an abortive college education at the University of Chicago. Exposed to the anti-Vietnam-war movement in my childhood years (among other things my parents opened up our apartment to bloody refugees from the 1968 police riot at the Chicago Democratic Convention), I found myself drawn to the constellation of small socialist and communist organizations on campus. While this was well toward the end of one of the more fruitful periods of leftwing organizing in recent American memory, I resolutely joined a succession of leftist groups, and received a hands-on education in revolutionary theory and organizing. Eventually I would come to think of myself as a cadre level member of one organization, before burning out toward the end of the Reagan years. My personal activism and organizational involvement have ebbed and flowed over the decades since, but I have never lost sight of the hope for a world liberated from oppression and exploitation.

At the University of Chicago I first encountered both the Ethiopian Students' Union in North America (ESUNA) and Eritreans for Liberation in North America (EFLNA). Attending various solidarity programs, I learned of a revolution being waged by people my age and just a little older. I was utterly inspired and awed by stories of young people facing down death in a way we American leftists could mostly only imagine. This marked the beginning of my lifelong interest in the Ethiopian revolution and especially in the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Party, one of the largest mass communist parties the African continent has ever seen. Many of the original documents I consulted for

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this research I first read when they were published, and I've carted them around among my papers over the decades since. My first attempt at pulling together a narrative of the Ethiopian revolution was an uncompleted pamphlet draft in the early 1980s. In the past few years, the left's casual misunderstanding of the events of 1970s Ethiopia—or in some cases, insidious misrepresentation—called out to me for redress. The deeper I dug into the history, the more compelling I found it; the more I wanted to share what I learned, and so the idea for a research project and ultimately this book was kindled.

I would be presumptuous to label myself as any kind of “expert” on Ethiopia; indeed I am an entry-level student. However, as a life-long participant in some small corners of the international communist movement, this story is rich with debates and experiences that resonate with my own, and in relying on my own judgment learned in years of movement discussion and activism I hope to reflect some of the political vitality of this past historical moment. I hope this work serves as an invitation to deepen a discussion of what happened not so many years ago in order to help illuminate paths forward for all those seeking a better world in Ethiopia, in the United States, indeed anywhere on the planet a struggle against injustice remains the order of the day. I intend here not to lecture Ethiopians on their own history, but to invite the western left to engage with this vital story; to heed its lessons; and above all to rectify its failures in objectifying Africans in struggle as idealized cyphers for their own political agendas.

My goal in presenting this history in the form of original documents and testimonies is to put the reader into the middle of the political moment: to confront them with the issues and events in the way the participants themselves were; to recognize the human agency that shaped what are now pages in history. This volume is not a replacement for other works containing mountains of important data and statistics, rather it is a call to reorient the historical perspective. If people are the motive force in world history, let us retell the story from the point of view of those people who dared to attempt revolution under extraordinary circumstances of sacrifice and solidarity.

I strongly urge interested readers to dig deeper into the works I have cited herein, to excavate the documentary history further, and to contribute to making this important story relevant and visible. Although many of the memoirs and personal histories I consulted were originally printed by small presses and as such are out of print or hard to come by, all of them are worth tracking down for the rich depth of detail I could only skim off for this project. I am deeply grateful to everyone responsible for the works included in my bibliography.

In the course of my research I have learned that there are many open wounds among those with a memory of the events documented herein. I have encountered grief, anger, pain, loss, nostalgia; and confronted desires for resolution, for vengeance, for recognition, for explanations of the inexplicable, for meaning. I have also encountered accusations of complicity and betrayal, of hidden hands and conspiracies still unearthed, and of willful deception and the rewriting of history. With all due respect to the strong feelings of many decent people who feel the historical record is inaccurate or incomplete, I have mostly chosen to ignore such claims that seem unsubstantiated by documentary evidence. I have no doubt that time, new evidence, and sources blocked to me by my lamentable illiteracy in Amharic or Tigrinya, might require correction of the historical record. Surely this volume will not be the last word on the subject.

I want to express sincere gratitude to friends and helpers with this task:

Thanks to my friend and comrade Doug Enaa Greene for two years of reading drafts, for offering support and encouragement.

My most profound gratitude to Iyasou Alemayehu/Hama Tuma and Samuel Andreas Agassie.

Many thanks for research assistance to John Mellors, Paul Saba and The Encyclopedia of Anti-Revisionism Online, Alex Akin at Bolerium Books, Bradley Duncan and his R.F. Kampfer Revolutionary Archive in Philadelphia, Michael Pugliese from Leftbook, and archivist and memoirist Ayalew Yimam. Thanks to the Tamiment Collection at the library of New York University, the International Institute of Social History

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in Amsterdam, the utterly indispensable Marxist Internet Archive, and Datenbankprojekt “Materialien zur Analyse von Opposition” (MAO) in Berlin. Thanks to YaTewlid.com for the EPRP/*Democracia* and *Gob* archives. Thanks to Wikileaks and its Public Library of US Diplomacy and to the Wilson Center Digital Archive: information wants to be free. Thanks for translation assistance to Eric Burton and Leander Michel. Thanks to the many friends and acquaintances who offered support and whose expressed anticipation of this project really helped me complete it.

Thanks for corrections and suggestions from insightful and helpful draft-readers in the radical and publishing worlds. Surely unlimited additional research avenues would enrich these pages; it is with a few degrees of regret I choose to share this investigation in its current state knowing there is more to be excavated, more to be said and understood. I’m choosing to meet the uncertainty delivered by the pandemic moment in which we all find ourselves by pushing forward now. In the end I offer gratitude and encouragement to Christophe Kistler and everybody associated with the new Foreign Languages Press for providing a home for this work, and for their commitment to keeping revolutionary theory in print and accessible to new, 21st-century revolutionaries.

Finally, thanks to my partner, Jesse Sklar, for love and support. Thanks to my late mother, Paula Fitzgerald Wilkes, who helped me learn how to think and armed me with a moral imperative. Respect to the ancestors and martyrs. And special thanks to the wise and mysterious Ethiopian woman Carla “*la Africana*” Cosme, *Oba Irawo ibaye*, for reminding me that everything in this wondrous life is connected.

Another world is possible.

Ian Scott Horst
Brooklyn, New York
Plague-time, 2020

Glossary and Notes

Transliteration of Amharic (and Tigrinya) words and names is historically inconsistent. I have tried to pick the most common English transliterations while noting alternate spellings where possible. In quotations I will leave names as spelled by the author, which may conflict with my general usage.

Abyot—“Revolution” in Amharic. An underground group and newspaper in Ethiopia ca. 1974 that merged with EPRP; later, the name of the EPRP Foreign Section’s journal published in Europe. (Also *Abeyot*, *Abiyot*)

Abyot Tebeka—“Revolutionary Guards,” localized militia during the “Red Terror,” that functioned as death squads

AETU—Association of Ethiopian Trade Unions

Anjas—factionalists or splitters from the EPRP

Bandas—Quislings, traitors. From the Amharic word for Ethiopians who collaborated with Italian colonialism during the occupation of the late 1930s.

CC—Central Committee; in Leninist usage, a representative leadership body that meets periodically to steer activity and formulate political line outside of a party congress. Since its members might be geographically disparate, convening a CC meeting would be a serious undertaking. See also PB.

CELU—Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions

CLP—Communist Labor Party of the United States of North America (Originally the California Communist League; also CLPUSNA). Published *The People’s Tribune*.

COPWE—Commission to Organize the Party of Workers of Ethiopia, successor to *Emaledh*. See also WPE.

Derg—“Committee” in Amharic, short for the Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, Police and Territorial Army. The *Derg* (also *Darg*, *Dergue*, *Derge*, *Dirg*) was a secretive committee of military officers formed in 1974. While not strictly accurate, the term is often used to

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refer the government led by Mengistu and his predecessors from 1974 to 1991. (See PMAC)

EDU—Ethiopian Democratic Union, the rightist opposition lead by *Ras Mengesha Seyoum*

EFLNA—Eritreans for Liberation in North America (pro-EPLF)

ELAMA—Ethiopian Revolutionary Proletarian Union (the EPRP clandestine labor union)

ELF—Eritrean Liberation Front; sometimes referred to as “*Jebha*”

Emaledb—Union of Ethiopian Marxist-Leninist Organizations (UEMLO, also called “Common Front of Marxist-Leninist Organizations”). A coalition of pro-Derg leftist organizations including *Meison*, *Seded*, *WazLig*, *Echaat* and *Malerid*. All but *Seded* were eventually purged and it was set aside in favor of COPWE in 1979. Publication: *Yehibret Demts (Voice of Unity)*

EPLF—Eritrean People’s Liberation Front, a split from ELF; originally ELF–PLF, the Eritrean Liberation Front–Popular Liberation Forces; sometimes referred to as “*Shabia*”

EPLO—Ethiopian People’s Liberation Organization, predecessor to EPRP (Note: there is some dispute over the accuracy of this name, but this is as Kiflu Tadesse records it; others suggest the name was ROLE, Revolutionary Organization for the Liberation of Ethiopia.)

EPMG—Ethiopian Provisional Military Government, US Embassy usage for PMAC

EPRA—Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Army (see EPRP)

EPRP—Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party. Publications: *Democracia*, *Lab Ader*, *Abyot*. Rarely referred to by its Amharic acronym, “*Thapa*”

EPRDF—Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (the coalition led by the TPLF that overthrew the *Derg* in 1991 and administered Ethiopia until recently; *not* related to EPRP)

EPRYL—Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Youth League (see EPRP)

ESM—Ethiopian Student Movement

ESUE—Ethiopian Student Union in Europe

ESUNA—Ethiopian Students’ Union in North America (Originally ESANA, the Ethiopian Student Association in North America)

Kebele—Official neighborhood association

Malerid—Marxist-Leninist Revolutionary Organization, a small split from EPRP

Meison—Amharic acronym for the All-Ethiopian Socialist Movement founded by Haile Fida (Also AESM, *Me’isone*, *Maeson*) Publications included *Voice of the Broad Masses (Ye Sefiw Hizbe Demts)*, *New Ethiopia*

Nebelbal—The “Flame Brigade,” an elite unit within the Ethiopian military said to have been Israeli trained.

PB—Political Bureau, or *Politburo*. In Leninist usage, a small standing leadership body that can make day-to-day decisions but focuses on the political/theoretical leadership of a party. See also CC.

PMAC—The Provisional Military Administrative Council, the military junta that ruled Ethiopia. Actually included both members and non-members of the literal *Derg*. Also, EPMG, PMG.

POMOA—The Provisional Office for Mass Organization Affairs, the committee set up by the *Derg* to manage its relationship with the civilian left. Publication, *Abyotawit Ityopia*. The leadership of POMOA was often referred to somewhat unofficially as the “*Politburo*.”

Seded—Revolutionary Brushfire, a secretive leftist cadre organization set up by Mengistu within the ranks of the military government. (Also *Abyotawit Seded*)

TPLF—Tigray People’s Liberation Front; sometimes referred to as “*Woyanne*”

UEMLO—see *Emaledh*

USUAA—University Students Union of Addis Ababa

WPE—The Workers Party of Ethiopia, the state Communist Party established in 1984 and chaired by Mengistu Haile Mariam.

WWFES—World-Wide Federation of Ethiopian Students

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WazLig—The Proletarian League, a communist organization founded by Senay Likke (also *Woz* League, Labor League, Workers League or simply League)

Yekatit 66 School—A cadre school operated by POMOA named after the February 1974 revolution

Zemetcha—National Development Campaign

A Note on Ethiopian Names: Ethiopians are generally referred to by their given names. Last names are not family names, but the given names of their fathers. Correct alphabetization is by first name. Unsurprisingly for a culture of clandestine organizing under life or death threats, Ethiopian revolutionaries made extensive use of pseudonyms, especially when it came to signing printed articles. Many “by lines” in various publications are pseudonyms: two key names “Tilahun Takele” is a pseudonym for several members of the Algeria group including Berhane Meskel Redda, and “Babile Tola” is a pseudonym for a collective of EPRP veterans writing shortly after the *Derg* was overthrown including Iyasou Alemayehu.

A Note on the Ethiopian Calendar: The Ethiopic calendar (EC) is one of the historical legacies of Christianity in Ethiopia, though it is used in a secular context as well as liturgically. A year consists of thirteen months, one of them very short, with a new year observed on September 11 of the Gregorian calendar (GC) now commonly used in most countries. However, the EC year is—depending on the month—numerically seven to eight years behind the GC. Thus, September 11, 2016 GC, is the first day of the month of *Meskerem*, New Year’s Day 2009 EC. Dates given herein will be in GC, except and as noted in citations as originally used.

So, in “*Yekatit* Revolution,” *Yekatit* refers to the month in EC year 1966 corresponding to February 8 to March 9, 1974 GC.

A Word About Truth: This volume relies on the partisan writings of participants in the heat of struggle and the fallible, corruptible memories and agendas of humans. Arriving at an understanding of what actually happened is a subjective process involving perception and choice colored by one’s own values and politics. No doubt some will reject or dispute the evidence and views presented here. Let such a possibility be a call to continue and deepen the investigation of the Ethiopian revolution as part of moving forward the struggle for justice and liberation in Ethiopia and elsewhere.

Introduction

The Black Vietnam

“The Ethiopian Revolution has been spontaneous in the sense that nobody determined in advance the date on which it was to break out; therefore, there were no advance preparations in terms of organization and education.... In Ethiopia... there was neither a classical Marxist-Leninist Party nor a civilian revolutionary movement. There wasn't even any secret military group, such as Nasser's Free Officers in Egypt.... The most surprising thing about the Ethiopian Revolution was that the leadership was taken by the armed forces. Such a surprise had a hidden logic: it had to be the army or no one. If not, Ethiopia would have become a society without any social order at all.”

—Cuban Communist Party Central Committee member Raúl Valdés Vivó¹

The above narrative summarizes a kind of leftist conventional wisdom about the Ethiopian revolution.

The problem is, it's really *not* what actually happened.

Most people know that there was a military coup in Ethiopia in 1974 that called itself a revolution and ended badly, but most people don't know that there were competing underground revolutionary movements there with deep roots in 1960s student activism. These groups were largely secret until 1975. Of the two biggest, one opposed the military regime, one supported it. Both were eventually drowned in blood by it. Those who chalk the Ethiopian story up to another real-world reason why socialism doesn't work, miss the extraordinary success of a student-led movement transforming itself into a mass revolutionary movement capable of contending for popular power. The true story is of a mass movement, fueled by dedicated cadres of avowed revolutionaries, whose work was hijacked and ultimately beheaded by

¹ *Ethiopia's Revolution (la revolución desconocida)*, 1977, pp. 34-37.

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the military. It's not a demonstration of the failure of socialism, but of those who misuse the *liberatory* ideals of socialism in the service of something else.

The barest outline of facts says that in 1974, the East African nation of Ethiopia was indeed swept up in revolution. Following a period of intense civil unrest, a military regime deposed the emperor Haile Selassie, consolidated power and proclaimed a socialist state on the wreckage of a hundreds-of-years-old monarchy. Ethiopia became a hot flashpoint of cold war conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States while settling into a period of authoritarian rule marked by bloody repression of dissent, intense famine and seething liberation struggles from oppressed national minorities.

Today, over two decades after the fall of that avowedly Marxist military regime at the hands of a coalition led by a different set of avowed Marxists promising the resolution of injustice within Ethiopia's complex ethnic web, Ethiopia remains burdened by conflict and unrest. The national questions continue to fester and dominate; and authoritarian rule now sponsored by the United States continues to stifle dissent. Where feudal property relations balanced with a rarified domestic bureaucratic capitalism gave way to attempts at state consolidation of the economy, neocolonialism and neoliberalism have now descended on the country, jeopardizing the fruitful birthrights of Ethiopia's growing population for the profit of Chinese and European entrepreneurs, and American and Saudi global and regional hegemons.

Ethiopia's 1970s revolutionary era might seem like a closed chapter of ever more distant twentieth-century history, but for those looking to understand the revolutionary process, a reexamination of this often overlooked or mischaracterized revolution today reveals details not entirely understood outside the country at the time. And if what was occurring in Ethiopia seemed opaque to outsiders, one must in part fault the likes of Valdés Vivó, who in propagandizing for the Cuban government—then engaged in running interference for the Soviet Union by proffering massive military assistance to the besieged regime—was playing out his own two-bit part commandeering the revolution's narrative.

A number of important analyses were certainly published during the years of the Ethiopian revolution and military rule. Some, like Nega Ayele and John Markakis's masterful *Class and Revolution in Ethiopia*, described in detail the social forces in Ethiopian society that birthed the revolution. Nega and Markakis studied and explained the class dynamic that exploded in 1974 and remained skeptical about the military's role in the revolution. Indeed Nega, in fact also a behind-the-scenes leader of the opposition Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party, paid for his point of view with his life at the hands of a government death squad. Other writers including David and Marina Ottaway, Fred Halliday and Maxine Molyneux, and René Lefort, were more generous to the military regime and attempted to explain how this new "revolution from above" marked a significant development in the history of socialism. These histories, while not completely erasing the most problematic aspects of *Derg*-era Ethiopia (Note: *Derg* is Amharic for "committee," and is the name commonly used, somewhat inaccurately, for the military regime), objectively served as apologia for a cruel and brutal regime that ultimately collapsed around the same time as the Soviet Union and its (other) satellite regimes.

Many of these works are filled with useful details and insights. But in the years since the fall of the *Derg*, a lot of new information has come to light. Veterans of the revolutionary era—for many, more accurately called survivors—have begun to record their experiences, and many of these have made their way to print in English. Former activists have begun to document the history of once closed or clandestine organizing efforts. Documents from the U.S. State Department's Addis Ababa listening post and the dusty cabinets of the Kremlin and East Berlin have been declassified and published. The verdict of these new revelations, and of many original sources ignored or frankly dismissed at the time by observers looking to cast the *Derg* and its leadership in a positive light for a variety of motives, is something quite different than what our Cuban "observer" suggests in the epigraph above.

If those past works on the Ethiopian revolutionary period suffer from lenient attitudes toward the *Derg* and theoretical revisionism, the

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many intelligent histories of the period that have appeared since the fall of the *Derg* are tarnished by the anti-communism of the modern post-Cold War moment and a rejection of the ideological “bathwater” in which the Ethiopian revolutionary movement formulated its vision of a better world for the Ethiopian people. Marxism is now often recalled as the alien sin at the root of all the horror and conflict in Ethiopia’s recent past. We must re-tell this story from the beginning, with the presumption that the truths, understandings and solutions posited by revolutionary theory were—and more challengingly, remain—legitimate avenues for human liberation and social progress, despite the disappointments, distortions and tragedies we might watch unfold.

Even as the Ethiopian experience is added to the list of revolutions long undone, we can see in its triumphs and tragedies a remarkable story of young Africans daring to take the wheel of history in their hands. The truth is that Ethiopian revolutionaries had been preparing for the 1974 revolution for years, and when the moment of societal rupture occurred, an entire generation intervened to shape the course of that revolution. The children of Ethiopia’s relatively privileged classes joined with the nation’s small but important working classes, with its peasants, with its rank-and-file soldiers, in an atmosphere of rapid and dramatic mass politicization in a country where politics had previously been the reserve of a nobility known for its genteel subservience to an absolute monarch.

In contrast to narratives that falsely doom the nations of the global south once termed “the third world” to imperialist subjugation, neocolonial victimization, neoliberal super-exploitation and corruption, or nationalist military brutality, we find an actual story of brave women and men who dared visualize a society based on mass participatory democracy, justice and egalitarianism, and then laid down their lives for what they believed. The Ethiopian revolution is not a study in historical tides but rather a messy story of complicated human agency attempting to manipulate material levers of class struggle.

In contrast to what Valdés Vivó and others claimed, the Ethiopian Revolution was actually a remarkable display of the relationship of ded-

icated activists to a living revolutionary upsurge, an engaged, awakened population, and the unknowably fickle vicissitudes of unfolding history. In fact the parallels to the Russian revolutionary epoch that began in the late 19th-century and culminated in October 1917 are dramatic, albeit mightily telescoped. In this light, the actions of revolutionary Cuba and much of the world's left in choosing sides in the revolution make a statement about the left's absorption of historical lessons that is less than flattering.

The dominant narrative suggests that American-trained military officers, *totally without documented leftist bonafides*, attempted a sweeping social revolution by seizing and redirecting the existing machinery of the state in which they served, without asking how this obvious contradiction was overcome? No, it simply didn't happen that way. The enemies of revolution in Ethiopia like the United States were constantly looking for signs that the Ethiopian revolution was being puppeteered from Moscow or Beijing. And no, that's not what happened either, certainly not at first.

In a very real way, the Ethiopian revolution was the *only* actual revolution produced by the wave of youth radicalization that swept Europe and North America in the 1960s. For all the red banners temporarily raised in Paris or Chicago, it was in Addis Ababa that they actually took root. The pro-westernism of Haile Selassie exposed the youth of an otherwise isolated, often anachronistic country to the cutting edge of radical ideas. The Ethiopian student movement fed off that new left's excitement and its hunger for social liberation, and then applied what they learned when a conjuncture of events opened up a previously scarcely imaginable opportunity.

Tragically, most of the world's new leftists couldn't have been bothered to pay attention. Even more tragically, many of those who did pay attention rationalized away the destruction of a generation of revolutionaries by a military regime which had become adept at the vast but empty wielding of revolutionary symbols and phrases like so many theatrical props. Gory events including mass rape and torture—drawing some observers to make comparisons to the later genocide in

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Rwanda—to this day induce shrugs or shrill recitals of jargon-filled rhetoric from some on the left whose apologies for the now-departed Ethiopian military regime cry out to be confronted by the reality of what actually happened.

Students of revolutionary tradition would do well to engage in an investigation of one of the most important revolutions on the African continent; events that took place a mere forty to fifty years ago but somehow threaten to slip into the dim past. Indeed for those interested in examining the continued relevance of Marxism's revolutionary potential in this post-Soviet but not post-capitalist century, the Ethiopian experience is as rich in detail as the revolutions in Russian, China, Vietnam or Cuba that have long been the staple of studious scrutiny and debate on the left.

This work is a step into that necessary and rewarding investigation.

The Ethiopian revolution is steeped in tragedy and disappointment, to be sure. But it is not ancient, dead history. The cast of characters of the Ethiopian revolution is full of heroes and rogues, and many of its figures live on in popular memory. Ethiopian people still discuss the generation that had such monumental impact on their nation. That generation is not the great-grandparents of ancestral recall, but the generation of parents, aunts and uncles, older sisters and brothers, still fondly remembered even though so many of them disappeared so abruptly four decades ago.

Tilahun Gizaw. Walleign Mekonnen. Martha Mebrahtu. Berhane Meskel Redda. Haile Fida. Mesfin Habtu. Meles Tekle. Senay Likke. Tesfaye Debessay. Nega Ayele. Daro Negash. Markos Hagos. Kiflu Teferra. Getachew Maru. Girmachew Lemma. Tito Hiruy. Nigist Adane.

These names of saints and sinners and so many others are remembered today: sometimes with grief, sometimes with anger, but always with a melancholic sense of what might have happened had the most courageous and forward-looking souls of a generation not been consumed by the violence of the times.

In focusing on events in Ethiopia as eddies and flows in a world story, those previous studies of the Ethiopian revolution distorted, neglected,

and in many cases denied the granular reality that they were trying to frame in the service of an ultimately cynical superpower propaganda war. For example the once hugely influential *Middle East Research and Information Project* ran a piece that simply *denied* the agency of Ethiopian revolutionaries: “The post hoc claims by MEISON and EPRP to have been in existence prior to 1974 are not convincing. For a detailed and sharp look at these movements see the Ottaways’ volume. See also Rene Lefort, and Halliday and Molyneux, for different appreciations of the political stances and the reality of claims.”² This is a remarkable denial, in some ways worse than Valdés Vivó’s for its specificity.

At the close of the 1970s, a supporter of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party wrote in a review of then current literary reportage, that the revolution’s first chroniclers were blinded by the presence of larger-than-life figures like Ethiopia’s Lt. Colonel Mengistu:

Like Vivo, the Ottaways give exaggerated importance to the role of individuals. Unable to explain the situation in which various classes united to wage a revolutionary struggle, they resort to the argument that the “revolution was spontaneous” while ignoring the basic question—how come the various classes and social groups (within whom were no class struggles, according to the authors) confronted one another or united to wage a common battle against other classes? ...For the Ottaways and Vivo, the Ethiopian people do not exist except perhaps as secondary characters in a drama of great individuals. The uninformed reader who wants to understand about the Ethiopian revolution will benefit little from the book by the Ottaways.³

Now, decades later, it’s time to correct the record.

The answers to our inquiry are to be found in the documents and words of the participants themselves. When Ethiopian student revolu-

² Patrick Gilkes in *MERIP Reports* 106, “Building Ethiopia’s Revolutionary Party,” May/June 1982.

³ Mulugeta Osman, “Books post-1974 Ethiopia,” *Ethiopian Marxist Review*, 1980.

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tionaries called their country “the Black Vietnam,” they were as serious as the generation of clandestine Russian revolutionaries who have been the subject of extensive study for a century now. They left records of their own political debates as extensive as those left by Russian, Chinese and Cuban revolutions, and those who have lived to testify about their own experiences are now making sure that their own stories are not lost to time.

Let us return now to 1969, to a world engulfed in fire and hope. Let the voices of a generation be heard!

“Hail the Ethiopian Peoples’ Struggle! Long Live Black Vietnam!!”⁴

⁴ From “The Socio-Political Reality and the Ethiopian Peoples’ Struggle in Perspective,” in *Ethiopia Uncovered*, by the Ethiopian Students in Benelux, December 1971, p. 62.

Chapter 1

1969, The Commitment

*“Like Ho Chi Minh, Like Che Guevara,
Oh guerrilla, rise to arms. Oh guerrilla, rise to arms.”*
— “Fano Tesemara,” revolutionary song of the Ethiopian
student movement, late 1960s/early 1970s

*Oriana Fallaci: “Do you mean to say that freedom of speech, of
the press, couldn’t be tolerated here?”*

*Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia: “Freedom, freedom....
Emperor Menelik and Our Father, both illuminated men,
examined this word in their day and studied these problems
closely. They raised them, in fact, and granted many concessions
to the people. Later on We granted further concessions. We have
already mentioned that We it was who abolished slavery. But,
We repeat, some things are good for the people and others are
not. It is necessary to know Our people to realize this. It is nec-
essary to proceed slowly, cautiously, to be a watchful father for
one’s children.”—from an interview published in the Chica-
go Tribune, June 24, 1973*

Flight to the Future

On August 12 1969, in a corner of the ancient African empire of Ethiopia, seven radical students hijacked a small DC-3 airplane leaving the provincial Ethiopian town of Bahir Dar. At gunpoint they diverted the plane from its original destination of Asmara in the province of Eritrea and ordered it to Khartoum in neighboring Sudan. Led by a veteran of the Ethiopian student movement named Berhane Meskel Redda, the group of students hoped to avoid the rigorous security of an international flight. They made the short flight without incident, and landed in Ethiopia’s northwestern neighbor, then ruled by the erratic

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but avowedly radical Colonel Gaafar Nimeiry.

This was the year a photogenic young Palestinian woman named Leila Khaled hijacked a flight from Rome to Tel Aviv on behalf of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, energizing the militant wing of the Palestinian resistance and grabbing front-page headlines across the globe; this was back when airplane hijackings were known for their propaganda value and not their body count. Separatist rebels in Eritrea organized under the auspices of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) had already used hijacking as a tool for publicizing their struggle, and so it seemed logical that this tactic would be embraced by yet another nascent radical movement.

Berhane Meskel Redda and his comrades—Iyasou Alemayehu, Amanuel Gebre Yesus, Haile Yesus, Welde Semayat, Abdissa Ayana, Benyam Adane, and Gezahegn Endale—were not yet, anyway, professional revolutionaries representing an organization, but they had made a decision to leave the student life behind and commit to lives of struggle.

Few dared to dream it so, but the Ethiopian Revolution had begun.

According to hijacker Ammanuel Gebre Yesus, “The flight was local and having studied the route, fuel capacity and that there were no security agents we planned well. Two of us boarded the plane in Bahr Dar, some in Gondar. We were armed with pistols not to use but to give orders. We forced the plane to Khartoum knowing that the communist authorities in Khartoum would not reject us.”⁵ According to the *Ethiopian Herald*, quite probably with less than precision accuracy, “the students made a statement at Khartoum that they were communist disciples of Mao Tse Tung and had forced the pilot to change course and land at Khartoum airport so that they could continue their journey to Communist China.”⁶

The former radical students found that joining the struggle was not to be a simple thing. The Sudanese government was not, in fact, particularly welcoming to the young lawbreakers, detaining them for

⁵ From *Game Changers of Identity Politics*, p. 81.

⁶ *Ethiopian Herald*, August 13, 1969, cited in *Game Changers of Identity Politics*, p. 85.

some months. Eventually they found their way to revolutionary Algeria, a kind of sanctuary hub for revolutionary exiles from across the globe, and began to talk about their trip home. Their audience was not just themselves, a small group of exiles hobnobbing in the Casbah of Algiers with everyone from the US Black Panther Party to liberation movements from Angola, the Canary Islands, and Guiné-Bissau, but a growing worldwide diaspora of Ethiopian students who were organized, intensely political, and increasingly revolutionary.

Elaine Klein was an American expatriate also living in Algiers, serving as a kind of liaison between the Algerian government and members of these liberation groups, especially the American Black Panthers. She remembers:

When a group of seven Ethiopian students, young opponents of Haile Selassie's regime, arrived at my office at the Ministry of Information and stood around my desk, I felt moved to see a group of comrades who had succeeded in a revolutionary act but were in danger of losing their way. They had hijacked a plane to Sudan whose authorities bundled them off to Algiers, a city for which they were unprepared. Their plan had been to make their way to East Germany or China. I helped them with the accreditation as well as translation, and introduced them to other English-speaking militants and refugees.⁷

There was an urgency to the moment, a sense of embracing history: The young radicals in Algiers had joined a worldwide fraternity of revolution. A photo taken in 1970 or 1971 shows some of the young Ethiopian exiles at a reception for the Chinese ambassador: on one end of a row of chairs sit Benyam Adane and Iyasou Alemayehu; Elaine Klein, a translator and a Mao-suit-clad Chinese official sit in the middle; the controversial exiled Black Panther Minister of Information Eldridge Cleaver listens intently on the far end. The Ethiopian revolutionaries were well positioned to build for what was coming.

⁷ Elaine Mokhtefi, *Algiers, Third World Capital*, p. 69.

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In August 1969, every corner of the world was aflame with revolution. Above all, two extraordinary struggles pitting common people against one of the most powerful superpowers the world had ever known captured the imaginations of people all over the world who dreamed of bettering their lives and defeating the predations of global imperialism.

In the jungles and rice paddies of South Vietnam the fighters of the National Liberation Front waged valiant resistance against the mightiest military machine on the planet, the United States of America. Backed by their comrades from the North, and inspired by the visage of the aging lifelong revolutionary Ho Chi Minh, they displayed courage and determination in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds. Across Latin America, urban and rural guerrillas organized and armed themselves in clandestinity following the example of recently martyred Argentine/Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara, killed not two years before at the hands of a CIA-led counterinsurgency force in Bolivia. Che had won renown in the shocking victory of the Cuban revolution on the very doorstep of imperialism, and then proceeded to criss-cross the globe rallying liberation movements to the common cause of struggle against imperialism with a spirit of selflessness and heroic commitment and dedication. The enemy seemed obvious, and so did the solution. And despite occasional setbacks like the one that cost Che his life, it seemed like revolutionary victory was an inevitable horizon.

In People's China, millions of red-book-waving young people were filling China's streets and plazas in the cultural revolution, attempting to shake the most populous socialist country back onto a revolutionary path. Across Africa, armed liberation movements were building their forces against the last die-hard colonial powers, liberating territory and dreaming of egalitarian societies free of foreign invaders and parasites. China offered sanctuary, training and arms to representatives of those liberation movements, and in place of the Soviet rhetoric about "peaceful coexistence" with the capitalist west, offered loud and militant rhetoric urging unity in struggle against American imperialism.

Inside the United States, after witnessing the murder of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and watching the civil rights movement

finally break on the rocks of the possible, the African-American community was enthralled by the rise of the militant Black Panther Party, reimagining what African heritage meant, envisioning something called Black Power, and questioning the platitudes of non-violent resistance that had dominated the movement for over a decade.

The Campus Crucibles

Across Europe and North America, after the almost magical, transformative year 1968 when the foundations of global capitalism seemed to groan and creak with suddenly obvious weakness from Paris to Chicago (and not only politically but culturally), young people were talking revolution. 1969 found student militants confronting the realities of a world which they felt was not really as they had been promised. In the United States, students organized under the seemingly benign moniker of Students for a Democratic Society began investigating Marxism and forming factions committed to far more than campus politics or even burning draft cards.

Something similar had been brewing among university students in Ethiopia, despite the relative privilege of the layer of society with access to higher education. This new generation of young people were not content to compete for advantage in the stratified and tightly controlled feudal society of Ethiopia as dominated by Emperor Haile Selassie for much of the century.

It had long been a priority of the Ethiopian nobility to raise their children with prestigious—and useful—higher educations that would be recognized anywhere in the world. And as the growing privileged middle class developed, the Ethiopian state actually developed its own national infrastructure of higher education and incentivized the best and brightest students to seek education abroad throughout the 1960s, hopefully to return armed with technical and scientific skills and wisdom. But being the 1960s, even though political parties were banned in Ethiopia, politics soon came to dominate the conversations of Ethiopian students; and there was vital cross-fertilization between the students who pursued their education in Ethiopia and those who went

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abroad. It was not just technocratic knowledge being shared, but the ideologies of revolution. They were not just young people listening to American soul music and Ethiopian jazz while proudly growing out Afro hairstyles, they were on a mission to change the world. The small band of hijackers were the fruit of that homegrown student milieu; they were not the first and certainly not the last Ethiopian students to see themselves as potential freedom fighters.

Ethiopian student activists studying abroad in the United States noted:

The new direction of the Student Movement finds no more eloquent testimony than in the propaganda of the Student Movement this year. The propaganda of the Student Movement at home has been national in dimension and revolutionary in content. Peasants, workers, the rank and file of the soldiery and priesthood, prostitutes and other destitute groups in the towns were addressed exclusively. Each piece of political propaganda evidences painful awareness of the plight of the dispossessed masses as well as their might.⁸

As other Ethiopian students wrote two years later about the year the hijackers took their fateful trip:

The year 1969 was the year of the greatest achievements and the greatest sacrifice; for more than six months the University, all the schools in the capital as well as in most of the provinces were closed while students continued staging demonstrations, distributing revolutionary leaflets among the people, carrying some forms of “urban guerrilla warfare” (such as destroying with petrol bombs the building and vehicles of reactionary and brutal feudalists and that of the U.S. imperialists; destroying and disfiguring the statue if [sic] the Autocrat.) The fascist regime mobilized all its

⁸ From “Forward” to *The Liberation of the Imperial Ethiopian Government Embassy in Washington, D.C., July 1969, A Documentary*. WWUES/ESUNA, p. 3.

police forces, secret police and some units of the army to suppress the student rebellion; it murdered many students; expelled hundreds of students from the schools; imprisoned and sentenced to long and short-term imprisonment more than 30 student leaders and militants.⁹

The students continued,

In the meantime, the political consciousness and the ideological clarity of students has reached new heights. The cross-currents of the Third World revolutions and the national liberation movements as well as the liberation struggles of the oppressed nationalities in Eritrea, Oga-den, Bale, Arussi, Borena etc., the peasant insurrection of Gojjam have spurred Ethiopian students to study the Ethiopian society with scientific tools and to find the best strategy and tactics to bring about the inevitable emancipation of the peoples of Ethiopia.¹⁰

The gradual awakening of Ethiopian students to radicalism over the course of the sixties paralleled what happened to students in Europe and America over the same period, but had some important Ethiopian characteristics. An attempted coup against the emperor (and its bloody suppression) in 1960 seems to have served to belie the invincibility and inevitability of the imperial regime, and caused a generation of students to mull the modernization and decolonization sweeping the African continent. By late 1964, a semi-clandestine group of students calling itself “The University College Liberation Front” began meeting and organizing in Addis Ababa. Popularly known as “The Croco-

⁹ Ethiopian Students in Benelux, “Part III, The Socio-Political Reality and the Ethiopian Peoples’ Struggle in Perspective,” *Ethiopia Uncovered*, December 1971, p. 57; much of this text also appears as “The Ethiopian Student Movement—Some Critical Remarks” in ESUNA’s *Struggle*, Vol. 1, No. 4, June 1971. While it is unsigned, veteran student activist and historian Fentahun Tiruneh confidently ascribes this text to the exiles in Algiers: see *The Ethiopian Students*, p. 12 and elsewhere.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

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dile Society,” its early members included Zeru Kehishen¹¹ who would come to be associated with the Algiers group. The leader of the 1969 hijacking, Berhane Meskel Redda, seems to have joined the group by 1965. Berhane had already established himself as an anti-imperialist voice among students: In 1963, he became a target of some controversy for saying, “There is a cloud of Yankee Campus Imperialism hovering in the skies of our College. We are to send back this cloud across the Atlantic Ocean.”¹²

The year 1965 brought a game changer: a 2,000-strong demonstration against the regime instigated by The Crocodile Society, and fired up by the oratory of Berhane Meskel Redda: “For the first time in Ethiopia’s history the students exclusively on their own initiative, demonstrated against the Autocracy and the feudal system, holding high an unconcealed political and revolutionary banner: ‘Land to the Tiller’. They demanded ‘An End to Serfdom’; they demanded land-reform-‘land re-distribution’ that must result in the emancipation of 90% of the people, the peasantry’.”¹³ Zeru and Berhane were among the nine students suspended from the university for fifteen months for their role in the demonstration and for generally “violating university regulations.”¹⁴ The “Land to the Tiller” demonstration marked the most radical open expression of civil dissent the country had yet faced. It didn’t stop there.

“In 1966 they demanded ‘Destroy All Concentration Camps’; in 1967 they demanded the abolition of the law that violated the democratic rights of peaceful assembly and demonstration; in 1968 they demanded the suppression of imperialist culture; in 1969 they called for ‘Universal Education’, the democratization of education and the expulsion of the ‘Peace Corps.’”¹⁵ And they began regular anti-imperialist celebrations such as an annual “Vietnam Day” and “Cuba Day.”

¹¹ See Bahru Zewde, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia*, p. 112.

¹² Quoted in Bahru Zewde, *ibid*, p. 115.

¹³ “The Ethiopian Student Movement—Some Critical Remarks” in ESUNA’s *Struggle*, Vol. I, No. 4, June 1971, p. 52.

¹⁴ See Fentahun Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Students*, frontispiece .

¹⁵ Ethiopian Students in Benelux, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

In 1967, the students formed the University Students Union of Addis Ababa, USUAA, and launched a journal in Amharic and English entitled *Struggle (Tage)*. Thus, as student movement veteran Ghelawdewos Araia points out, “in a country with no democratic tradition, students were to shoulder a mammoth historical task and advocate the cause of the masses.”¹⁶

The radicalism consolidated throughout the Ethiopian student diaspora. In 1968, the Ethiopian Students Union in Europe (ESUE) publication *Tiglachin* started to carry a Maoist motto, “Revolutionary intellectual—integrate with the masses, learn from them, and teach them in turn.”¹⁷ Shortly after the 1968 Berlin congress of ESUE, an Ethiopian academic and linguist studying in France named Haile Fida—recently exposed to the massive social upheaval there—secretly formed with some comrades the All-Ethiopian Socialist Movement, known by its Amharic abbreviation as *Meison*. *Meison* quietly recruited its cadre by invitation from the diaspora student movement while remaining hidden in plain sight.

Young people began to look forward to higher education as an opening for political education and activism. As one young man tells it, it was not a secret what was happening among the students. Ayalew Yimam arrived in Addis Ababa in the late 1960s to go to university.

Outside, I came across a few young boys who carried *lustro*-shoeshine boxes. I turned to one of the boys and asked, “Where can I find books?”... “Are you a university student?” the second boy asked. “I’m going to start now.” “Oh, communist books are in the alley that way,” the first boy said.¹⁸

A 1968 statement by the World-Wide Union of Ethiopian Students issued a solidarity statement to a Vietnam Solidarity conference that reveals the global radical atmosphere in which the Ethiopian stu-

¹⁶ Ghelawdewos Araia, *Ethiopia*, p. 62.

¹⁷ Ayalew Yimam, *The Ethiopian Student Movement and the National Question*, p. 15.

¹⁸ Ayalew Yimam, *Yankee Go Home*, p. 17.

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dent movement was swiftly maturing:

Believing that US government is a war criminal in Vietnam murdering and slaughtering heroic people of Vietnam who are fighting for national salvation.... Realizing that the so called US aid is a tyrannical instrument for plundering and subverting the economic development of recipient countries... Believing that the US government does not protect the rights of the Afro American of the USA, [We] ...Support with all things we can master the heroic people of Vietnam to see that the American aggressors are shamefully defeated, Alert all the people of the world to defend themselves against US aggression, cultural, political, economic and military as well, Support Stokely Carmichael and the Black Power Organization, we confirm our resolute determination to fight American imperialism and its running dogs. Down with US imperialism and its lackeys! ... Vietnam Is Our Example.¹⁹

The blazing conflict in Vietnam had struck an emotional chord with the young Ethiopians. The violence by American troops against Vietnamese civilians echoed the pacification campaigns waged by the Ethiopian government against ethnic and peasant rebels in various corners of the empire. Student activist Ayalew Yimam recalls the chants at a student movement gathering for Vietnam Day. "Vietnam Today! Ethiopia Tomorrow! American Out of Vietnam! ...Yankee, Yankee, Yankee, Go Home! Go Home Go Home!"²⁰

At one Vietnam Day protest, an effigy of the American President was raised. "As the students chanted the slogans, the fire and smoke rose to the sky. With the most boisterous noise of hundreds of students; buildings applauded with resounding echoes; the effigy of President Johnson and the American flag were consumed."²¹ At a demonstration

¹⁹ WWFES Flyer, "Solidarity! Solidarity..." Feb. 2, 1968.

²⁰ Ayalew Yimam, *Yankee Go Home*, p. 18.

²¹ Ayalew, *ibid.*, p. 19 .

a year or two later, chants were widened: “America out of Vietnam! America out of Ethiopia! ...Free Black Panther Fighters! Freedom for the Black Panther Party! Viva Vietcong!”²²

By 1969, the student movement was upping the ante. It organized a worldwide wave of embassy occupations. It saw these as dry runs for consolidating the organizational abilities of the student radicals. Embassies were seized, conferences were held for the press, and then the occupations were dispersed and students arrested. After the Washington DC embassy occupation, students wrote:

Through these actions, the Ethiopian Student Movement has revealed the oppression endured by the Ethiopian people under Haile Selassie’s regime. Varied as the demands are, they all serve to articulate the heavy indictment drawn by the Ethiopian people against the tyrannical order.... The inescapability of social revolution has been affirmed as the only condition under which feudal oppression and imperialist domination can be defeated. The elementary but unavoidable truth that only the people can liberate the people has won acceptance.... To facilitate the march to the country-side, it is essential that a revolutionary organization be established. The foundation of a national liberation front will lend strength to the trends already underway. It shall be the work of such an organization to mediate between revolutionary theory and practice, between student and peasant and worker movements, between the city and the country-side, between the past and the future of our struggle. It is of the very nature of revolutionary practice to usher in new historic possibilities, new tasks and new men. We must now embark on this endeavor assigned to us by history.²³

²² Ayalew, *ibid.*, p. 35.

²³ From WWUES, *The Liberation of the Imperial Ethiopian Government Embassy*, 1969 ESANA, p. 1–3. It’s worth noting that organizers of these protests included activists like Alem Habtu and Dessalegn Rahmato who would not go on to become hardcore Marxist-Leninists, as well as some who would.

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Kiflu Tadesse, then a student in Europe, later a revolutionary organizer and eventually a chronicler of the movement, writes,

The militant group was becoming more radicalized. The Cuban Revolution of 1959, and, in particular, Che Guevara, one of the charismatic leaders of the struggle, had some influence on the thinking of the activists.... The activists had immersed themselves in the student of Marxist theory, driven by an intense desire to understand their own society as a prelude to changing it. Class theory was the dominant analytical perspective within which Ethiopia was analyzed. The works by revolutionaries such as Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara, and Ho Chi Minh, now available in a special place at the library, were avidly read for guidance.²⁴

How hard the students studied. They formed study groups and memorized key texts. They became conversant in the classics of Marxism-Leninism as well as in more modern interpreters of radical ideology. This was as true of those students at home as well as ones studying abroad in the USA, in Europe, in the Middle East, even in the Soviet Union. And so the movement began to throw up new leaders to join the ranks of those who had already paid for their commitments with time out of school or even in prison.

Two charismatic figures came to prominence. One, Walleign Mekonnen, was 24 years old in 1969. He studied political science at Addis Ababa University. After joining the movement he soon evinced a talent for political leadership, and as a result became a magnet for repression based on his daring writings and oratory. Hailu Issaias, a schoolmate, remembers:

He was in the graduating class when I was a mere freshman. From a distance, any perspective proximity, Waleign was a tall, handsome young man in his early 20s with an aquiline nose, and dignified gait. I had, on a number of occasions,

²⁴ Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation (Part 1)*, p. 45.

heard him making impromptu speeches and forwarding suggestions or amending motion at the student rallies, sit-down strikes, general assemblies and other at the Ras Mekonnen Hall when prominent figures visited the University. He seized on every given opportunity to enlighten them on the prevalent realities in Ethiopia.²⁵

The other was Martha Mebrahtu, ethnically Eritrean and the daughter of a general. A brilliant prodigy who entered medical school when she was 15 years old, she became one of the notable women involved in the radical ESM. Ayalew Yimam recalls seeing both Wallelign Makonnen and Martha Mebrahtu present at various actions organized by the university students.

Former student activist Netsanet Mengistu remembers Martha for her compassion. “Women were eager to offer succor to those students in need of help and assistance. In 1969 students, especially those from the rural areas, had withdrawn from the University and were without food and shelter. It was at this time that Marta Mebratu, accompanied by two students, got in touch with us to enlist our help.... Both Marta Mebratu and Adanech Kidanemariam were well politicized ...we considered them the epitome of courage.”²⁶

In April 1969, Wallelign wrote an utterly scandalous article for the USUAA journal. Entitled *La Awaju Awaj* (“Proclamation on the Proclaimer”), it was seen as an unprecedented personal attack on none other than Haile Selassie himself. The emperor had issued a proclamation in response to a student strike for educational reform. Wallelign mocked the emperor’s tone and message. “We have been ordered to resume classes.... No way! Do they think we are cattle they can herd in and out at will?”²⁷ Wallelign and several others were arrested and (again, for some) expelled. Along with Wallelign, Zeru Kehishen, Berhane

²⁵ Hailu Issaias, *Reminiscence: Wallelign Mekonnen*, walilegnfordemocracia.com.

²⁶ Netsanet Mengistu, in Bahru Zewde, editor, *Documenting the Ethiopian Student Movement*, p. 118–120.

²⁷ Quoted in Bahru Zewde, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia*, p. 156.

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Meskel Redda, Fentahun Tiruneh, Mesfin Habtu, and Henock Kifle²⁸ were shipped off to prison; though some were pardoned and released almost immediately. A young secondary school student who had been arrested for defacing a statue of the Emperor, Abdul Mohamed, was befriended by the slightly older activists in prison, and recalls an initiation into revolutionary studies, reading Fanon, Castro, EH Carr, Regis Debray, Edgar Snow, and Sweezy & Huberman.²⁹

Abdul remembers August 1969 clearly. “What gave vitality to our discussions and made our stay in prison less bleak was the hijacking of the plane. I recall that on the last Sunday preceding the hijacking, Berhane Meskel had come to the prison for a visit. Walelign was the one who Berhane Meskel talked to at length. I am sure he made no mention of the impending hijacking to Walelign, though I believe that Walelign suspected that some important event was imminent.”³⁰ Wallelign and the remaining student prisoners were amnestied shortly afterwards, in September. By then veteran activist Berhane Meskel Redda was out of the country.

The imperial government was obviously deeply concerned at what its campuses had become. Its amnesty on imprisoned activists proved a futile gesture. The transformation of students into hijackers marked a redline of determination for both the imperial government and the student movement. The onset of the academic year 1969–1970 was to be marked by an almost immediate collision between the growing radical student community and the government.

Dr. Ghelawdewos Araia, a freshman in 1969, remembers that the school year began with the election of a new head of the student body, a popular young man named Tilahun Gizaw. Tilahun embodied the contradiction at the root of the student movement: born into a privileged family with royal ties, he had become a student of revolution and

²⁸ Henock Kifle had secretly already been recruited to join the fledgling *Meison*, a rare but key member of the underground group inside Ethiopia. See Bahru Zewde, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia*, p. 161.

²⁹ See Bahru Zewde, *Documenting the Ethiopian Student Movement*, p. 97.

³⁰ Abdul Mohamed, in Bahru Zewde, editor, *Documenting the Ethiopian Student Movement*, p. 99.

a fiery orator:

I still have a clear picture of the inauguration of Tilahun Gizaw, when the X-mass Hall (*Lideta Adarash*) was completely packed, when the president-elect introduced Zeru Kihishen (a veteran of the ESM) as “an old man”, and when he said, “if a mouse is cornered by a cat, it will react”—an analogy of students and the Government. For me and other freshmen who had just joined Haile Selassie University, campus politics was a turning point. We were actually “baptized with fire” At least for me, it was a fundamental transformation in my thinking after I was exposed to “Purge of Feudal Legacy,” the editorial of the November 1969 (Vol. V, No. 2) issue of *Struggle*. The latter had carried a number of important articles including the “Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia,” by Walleign Mekonnen. Gezahegn Bekle condemned the “Green Berets” film by way of supporting the struggle of the Vietnamese people, and Terefe Belay showed his concern over the ever growing link between German espionage and the Ethiopian police; Abraham Gebre Egziabiher wrote about the battle cry of Ho Chi Minh and Ernesto “Che” Guevara. The editor-in-chief of *Struggle* was Yohannes Kifle; the English editor was Nega Ayele and taught me Political Science in the Faculty of Arts; Amharic editor was Yohannes WoldeAregay. The editorial board included a body of bright and militant students: . . . Walleign Mekonnen, Mesfin Habtu, [and others].³¹

The article by Walleign Mekonnen printed in that issue of the USUAA’s journal produced a shock wave. Not only did the article explicitly call for a revolution against the empire (and it wasn’t the only piece in that journal to do so), it challenged many of the central assumptions about the ethnic unity of the nation itself. Walleign’s essay was entitled,

³¹ Dr. Ghelawdewos Araia, “Ethiopian Students: Heroic, but Unfortunate Class in History,” 2001, eastafrikanforum.com.

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“On the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia.” It read in part:

We have reached a new stage in the development of the student movement, a level where Socialism as a student ideology has been taken for granted, and reaction with all its window dressing is on the defensive. The contradictory forces are no more revolution versus reform, but correct scientific Socialism versus perversion and fadism. The Socialist forces in the student movement till now have found it very risky and inconvenient to bring into the open certain fundamental questions because of their fear of being misunderstood. One of the delicate issues which has not yet been resolved up to now is the Question of Nationalities—some people call it ridiculously tribalism—but I prefer to call it nationalism.... What are the Ethiopian people composed of? I stress on the word peoples because sociologically speaking at this stage Ethiopia is not really one nation. It is made up of a dozen nationalities with their own languages, ways of dressing, history, social organization and territorial entity.³²

The government saw Walleign’s essay as a subversive declaration effectively offering moral legitimation to separatist rebels; the movement in turn was forced to confront the nature of the Ethiopian nation and its numerous regional identities: Suddenly a discussion of what Marxists have termed “the national question” became a central wedge issue inside the student movement. In truth, Walleign’s essay is still having dramatic ramifications in Ethiopia today, fifty years later.

A breaking point was approaching.

The First Martyr

A German television camera crew captured and preserved one of

³² Walleign Mekonnen, “On the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia,” USUAA, *Struggle*, November 1969. This document, now widely available, is also reprinted in Ayalew Yimam’s collection of documents, *The Ethiopian Student Movement and The National Question*.

Tilahun Gizaw's speeches before the student body. His presence is both warm and commanding; he speaks in English to a cheering crowd. "The only way out is not religious prayer or constitutional prayer [but a] protracted and systematized armed struggle." Tilahun continued by challenging those skeptical about the movement adopting a strategy of implied violence. "It is violence, too, ladies and gentlemen when the students are harassed and mercilessly tortured... it is also violence when German-made tear-gasses are used on peaceful workers and students for the simple reason that they wanted to express their grievances by marching in the streets. It is also violence when villages in Gojjam, Eritrea, Arussi and Bale are ruthlessly bombarded: women, children, men."³³ As Tilahun finishes his speech, the camera records him overcome by emotion, as the crowd starts singing "*Fano tesemara, fano tesemara.*"

Young Abdul Mohamed, released from prison, remembers more of Tilahun's words: "I remember President-elect Tilahun's famous speech: 'Che Guevara said, "where are you, the people of Bolivia?" and I say to the Ethiopian people, "Where are you?"' The Assembly was in an uproar."³⁴ The student movement felt energized and powerful with its new, revolutionary leadership. Alas, they were not the only ones listening.

On December 28, 1969, Tilahun Gizaw was assassinated; everyone's immediate presumption was that those responsible were government agents. Ghelawdewos Araia recalls:

Tilahun was shot by a sniper while walking with his brother and fiancée at the cross-like intersection of Afincho Ber near Sidist Kilo campus. The news was quickly disseminated through memos written by USUAA leaders and by word of mouth. To this day, I have a fresh memory of what happened on December 28 and the following day. Almost every evening the bars and tea rooms in the vicinity of the

³³ Posted on Youtube; transcription by ISH. www.youtube.com/watch?v=aCupqvAtRkk.

³⁴ Abdul Mohamed, in Bahru Zewde, editor, *Documenting the Ethiopian Student Movement*, p. 101.

various campuses were packed by students watching TV at the Mekane Iyesus Amist Kilo Cafe. At about 9:30 p.m., we heard that Tilahun was shot and we immediately rushed to the Haile Selassie Hospital where he was taken “for treatment”. Contrary to medical ethics, Tilahun did not get the necessary treatment and finally died at about mid-night. Between 10 p.m. and 12 a.m. the number of students that gathered at the Hospital grew fast; it easily turned into a mob, broke into the Hospital and entered where Tilahun’s body was laying on a stretcher. Two things that I encountered at the moment, and which I can never forget, are the socks that Tilahun was wearing (all his body was covered by a blanket except his feet) and Goit’om Berhe crying. Goit’om was one of the militant students from Law School who moderated the presidential debate at Arat Kilo Science Campus... (this event was shot and recorded by a German TV crew) on November 4, 1969.”³⁵

Another eyewitness recalls:

It was a cold, chilly night... when we heard that brother Tilahun had been shot down.... We rushed to the hospital where he had been taken by other brothers. We were told he was still alive! The hospital was surrounded by hundreds of students already.... There he lay in the operating theatre without being given any kind of medical treatment. The doctors in the Haile Selassie I Hospital were informed of the murder and were ordered not even to administer “first aid”. In fact, the surgeon on duty received a phone call from the palace.... A few minutes later the doctor announced he had “passed away”! Thus, the fascists took their first toll after three months of war propaganda against the emergent Ethiopian Revolution. Following the announcement his

³⁵ Dr. Ghelawdewos Araia, “Ethiopian Students: Heroic, But Unfortunate Class in History,” 2001, eastafrikanforum.com.

grief-stricken comrades broke into the operation room and took the body of the slain patriot of the Ethiopian Revolution to the faculty of medicine. A doctor from the Menelik II Hospital and two professors in the faculty of medicine operated on the body to take out the bullets.”³⁶

Students gathered the next day. Walleign Mekonnen gave a speech to an assembled crowd from a fourth-floor window. “Brothers and sisters, comrades, gather together. Come closer, let them see our strength, let them see our unity. Unity is power!”³⁷

The rage and grief of the students turned an initially mournful gathering into a militant political demonstration, 25,000 strong. It was met by the brute force of the state. An eyewitness continues,

There was another mass slaughter, massacre and savagery by the feudo-fascists. By no coincidence the scene of the massacre was the place where Graziani undertook the massacre of young Ethiopian patriots in 1935.... Students from all over Addis Ababa marched to the University campus singing revolutionary songs and mourning the death of the hero of the Ethiopian people. More than thirty thousand students and the sympathetic public gathered.... At exactly 12 o'clock, the fascist police force began blocking the traffic from and to the university campus. The policemen were equipped with automatic rifles supplied by the Neo-Nazi American Military advisors and the Israeli Zionists. At 1:00 p.m., 7 trucks full of the Imperial bodyguard soldiers arrived at the campus. They were equipped with modern automatic weapons: tripod machine-guns, bayonets and what-not. They closed all the gates.... Suddenly, the colonel ordered his men to open fire. Suddenly thousands of grieved mourners came under rattling machine gun fire. Professors, students. And

³⁶ “Eyewitness Account of the December 1969 Massacre,” *Ethiopian Students Solidarity Day 28–29 Dec.*, published by the Ethiopian Students Union in Europe – Holland Section.

³⁷ Quoted in Ayalew Yimam, *Yankee Go Home*, p. 39.

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girls, too, ran right and left in a desperate frenzy.... The mercenary-minded fascist brutes bayoneted and bulleted defenseless students savagely. They brutally bayoneted girls on their breasts and buttocks. They barbarously murder 6th and 8th grade elementary school boys.... It took them three days to remove the blood from the ground after the massacre. Over thirty students were killed and hundreds were heavily injured.... As Fred Hampton of the Black Panther Party stated, "You can kill revolutionaries but you cannot kill a revolution."³⁸

The next day the military conducted raids on classrooms, killing and wounding more students. Curfews and martial law were declared. Tilahun Gizaw had become a martyr of the movement.

As Ethiopian students wrote in 1978, looking back on those days, "December 1969 became the Sharpeville³⁹ of Ethiopia. This fascist orgy of terror exposed the limitless cruelty and ferocious depravity of the regime. The hitherto paternal image of the autocrat, Haile Selassie, was starkly exposed. The people realized the level of brazen bestiality that the ruling classes could come down to in their frenzied efforts to crush the popular movement out of existence."⁴⁰

The movement was faced with hard choices. With repression ruling the day, the tasks of organization became increasingly urgent for the student revolutionaries. It was clear that building a student union was not enough.

As one veteran of those times reminisced,

...The student movement could not continue on the path it had traveled so far. Accordingly, it had to change into a

³⁸ "Eyewitness Account of the December 1969 Massacre," *Ethiopian Students Solidarity Day 28–29 Dec.*, published by the Ethiopian Students Union in Europe – Holland Section.

³⁹ Sharpeville was the site of a 1960 massacre in *apartheid*-era South Africa that is remembered as catalyzing the struggle against racial segregation and white minority rule.

⁴⁰ "Martyrs Day Remembered," in WWFES, *Forward*, Vol. 2., No.4, January 1978.

revolutionary movement. Armed struggle could start only once a communist party had been set up, and a communist party had to go through a given process before it emerged as a reality. The first task is to raise the public awareness in Marxism. To achieve this, Marxist study circles had to be set up.... The study group gave us a good opportunity to develop strong ties with Mesfin Habtu, with whom we exchanged literature. Mesfin further advised us that all those who can leave for Europe or America should do so because the organized forces were located in those two places. He was of the opinion that that rallying those forces would go a long way in expediting the question of armed struggle and revolution.⁴¹

The thoughts of many turned to exile. Teshome Mitiku was a member of the popular band Soul Ekos in 1969. Interviewed by journalist Martha Z. Tegegn in 2010, his story is emblematic of the hard choices faced by people with a social conscience in that moment. Teshome recalled,

I left the country on January 27, 1970. The last few years of the 1960s was a very critical time in Ethiopia. Even though the music scene was upbeat, there was also an undercurrent of social discontent. We were not political at all, but we were very popular at the time and people used to come from all corners to watch us. I believe the security people had an eye on us. So, at the end what happened was that we did a show at the Haile Selassie University in Addis Ababa. That was, as I recall, the last major show I did in Ethiopia.... When Soul Ekos band was performing at the University, there were about four to five thousand people there.... [T]he army and the police were there keeping an eye on the kids.... [W]hen my turn came and I was warm-

⁴¹ Melaku Tegegn, in Bahru Zewde, editor, *Documenting the Ethiopian Student Movement*, pp. 71–72.

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ing up to do the usual popular songs, the crowd started to demand that I play *Fano Tesemara*. I replied “I cannot sing that right now, are you crazy?” *Fano Tesemara* was a political song (*Fano Tesemara ende Ho Chi Minh ende Che Guevara*). Then I said, “I can sing it for you but can you handle what’s gonna happen afterwards?” The kids shouted “yes Teshe come on.” And I said to them let me first sing *Almaz Min Eda New*. They would not have any of it. I mean they were demanding that I sing *Fano* first. Then I had to speak with the police about it. They were vigilantly watching, the army, the *Kibur Zebegna* (the imperial guard), all of them were there with their AK-47s. The security was literally on the stage. So I asked the army guy, “what do you want me to do now?” By then the students were already singing *Fano Tesemara* and they were saying *Meret larashu* (land to the tiller) and so on. I turned to the army captain again. He said “Go ahead, you can sing it.” The crowd went wild.... I was allowed to sing it, but that was the end of happy and innocent days for me.⁴²

The audience was exuberant but it cost Teshome dearly.

I never had any more peace after that. I was continuously harassed.... Then, once I was scheduled to perform at Zula club they came and took me to Sostegna tabia (3rd police station) and kept me for three days with all sorts of fabricated accusations. I had the sense that they were planning to put me away for good. That’s when I left Ethiopia.⁴³

The young Ethiopian radicals steeled their gaze and gritted their teeth.

We must unite with the masses; learn from them, teach

⁴² Martha Z. Tegegn, *Tadias Magazine*, “Part Two: Exclusive Interview with Ethiopian Legend Teshome Mitiku,” August 12, 2010. tadias.com

⁴³ *Ibid.*

them in turn. We must understand their attitudes, conditions, needs, aspirations. We must adopt their mode of life. We must devise appropriate ways of imparting a scientific world outlook to them. We must exert effort to develop a revolutionary theory appropriate to our conditions. We must find ways and means of establishing a national revolutionary organization to co-ordinate and lead the various forms of struggle waged on different fronts.⁴⁴

The future was coming for the young Ethiopian revolutionaries who dispersed to Algeria or to college campuses across the globe. It was coming for the students who stayed home, for the ones who left college life to go to work, and to the next generation of young people coming up. It would be beyond their dreams... and nightmares.

⁴⁴ ESUE, "A Message from ESUE to the 17th Congress of ESUNA," *Challenge*, Vol. 10, No. 1, February 1970, in Ayalew Yimam, *The Ethiopian Student Movement and the National Question*, p. 87).

Chapter 2

Countries Want Independence, Nations Want Liberation, and the People Want Revolution

“Of course the economic and cultural subjugation by the Amharas and their junior partners the Tigres is a historical accident. Amharas are not dominant because of inherent imperialist tendencies. The Oromos could have done it, the Wellamos [Wolaytas] could have done it and history proves they tried to do so. But that is not an excuse for the perpetuation of this situation. The immediate question is we must declare a stop to it. And we must build a genuine national-state. And what is this genuine national-state? It is a state in which all nationalities participate equally in state affairs, it is a state where every nationality is given equal opportunity to preserve and develop its language, its music and its history. It is a state where Amharas, Tigres, Oromos, Aderes [Harari], Somalis, Wollamos [Wolaytas], Gurages, etc. are treated equally. It is a state where no nation dominates another nation be it economically or culturally.”—Walleign Mekonnen, “On the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia”⁴⁵

“It is fairly obvious that one cannot bring about equality and democratic relations among nationalities apart from revolution and class struggle, which among other things require the involvement of all the peoples of the nationalities.... Those who want to solve the nationality question must see in earnest the link up of the national question with overall questions and the class struggle.”—World Wide Federation of Ethiopian Students (May 1978)⁴⁶

⁴⁵ In USUAA, *Struggle*, November 1969

⁴⁶ “Editorial Note,” in WWFES, *Struggle*, May 1978, in Ayalew Yimam, *The*

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“We must link the revolutionary struggle for socialism with a revolutionary programme on the national question.”—VI Lenin, “The Revolutionary Proletariat and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination.” (October 1915)

The Prisonhouse of Peoples

Ethiopia escaped the holocaust of European colonization until relatively late; Ethiopia didn't lose its sovereignty until a second Italian invasion in 1935, and then only for a few brutal years. Its mixture of feudal land system, intact native aristocracy, and nascent national capitalism was somewhat unique in the landscape of twentieth-century Africa.

The borders of Ethiopia were defined in relation to growing European encroachment in the horn of Africa in the late nineteenth century. During that period of intense consolidation of empires and nation states, alone among African peoples, an indigenous feudal aristocracy survived contact with the ravenous colonial powers of the great white north and forged its own independent nation-state despite being surrounded on all sides. The neighboring territories of the Somalis were divided up between Britain, France and Italy; Sudan and Kenya were occupied by Great Britain; and while the Italians had set their sights on the remainder of the region, they were forced to settle for adding the seacoast and highlands of Eritrea to their holdings in 1888.

The Ethiopian royalty acted with great diplomatic and military savvy, and when the emperor Menelik and his warrior-queen consort, the empress Taitu, defeated the Italians at Adwa in 1896, it was not just with swords and spears but with heavy guns in pitched battle. In truth the Ethiopian royalty had not just built up its own country, but its own multi-national empire. The Christian, Amharic-speaking nobility conquered its own portion of Somali territory; the Tigrinya-speaking regions to the north, home to the historic Axumite heartland full of stone castles and monasteries; territories inhabited by Muslim farm-

Ethiopian Student Movement and the National Question, p. 432.

ers and pastoralists; and the vast Oromo lands to the south. Like the empire of Tsarist Russia far to the north, the empire of Ethiopia became a patchwork of smaller, subjugated peoples speaking different languages, practicing different faiths and diverse cultural traditions. Russian revolutionaries would call the Russian empire a “prisonhouse of peoples,” and indeed this label is easily applied to the Ethiopian imperial state.

The Italians finally drove the nobility from power in the epically brutal invasion of 1935: According to one estimate seven percent of the Ethiopian population perished in the conflict. After years of fierce guerrilla resistance and the intervention of the British army, the Italians were largely defeated in Ethiopia and Eritrea in 1941. Emperor Haile Selassie, who had fled to safety in England during the war, was returned to power. In the north, the British first replaced the Italians as colonial occupiers of Eritrea, and then engineered a federation with Eritrea’s southern neighbor, turning power over to the Ethiopian monarchy. While there was certainly support among some Eritreans for unity, it was achieved over the protestations of a nascent Eritrean independence movement. Between 1952 and 1962, the Ethiopian government increasingly suppressed expressions of independent Eritrean identity, and in 1962 dissolved the federation and annexed the region outright.

The presence of so many nationalities inside the empire—Amhara, Tigrayan, Oromo, Eritrean, Afar, Somali, and many others—predictably became a source of conflict. While the elite classes included members of different nationalities, Christianity was the state religion and Amharic the state language. Regional uprisings and insurrections along with the occasional border war soon became the rule. Different forms of feudal land tenancy dispossessed the vast peasant populations in the north and the south of the country, in stark contrast to Ethiopia’s towns and cities which were becoming home to multi-national populations, the young but growing petty bourgeoisie, the mercantile classes, and a small but real proletariat. The nobility, backed by the military, professed benevolence but ruled this patchwork with a tight grip.

Outside of Eritrea, and more on that in a moment, Ethiopians had little experience of, or exposure to, the forms of political activity

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sanctioned by bourgeois democracies, something still abstract and aspirational in Ethiopia itself with its controlling, patronizing autocrat. No doubt this accounts for the radicalism of so many forward-looking Ethiopians in those days of imperial rule: Socialist ideas gained more traction in the late 1960s than the pro-Western ideologies furiously being spread by Americans. We have seen how radical students first identified feudal land ownership and imperialist predation as key political issues, but the complex realities of Ethiopia as a nation quickly brought an existential issue to bear, the so-called national question: that is, the rights of Ethiopia's many nationalities to self-determine their relations with each other and to the idea of a single Ethiopian state itself.

Walleign's 1969 essay was only an opening salvo in what would become a consuming issue for the movement.

The revolutionary students would confront this issue head on; it would become both a source of popular support and a nexus of sectarian division. While the nature of nations had long been a topic for radicals in Europe, to understand their own country Ethiopian radicals first had to confront decades of Eurocentric racist scholarship and patronizing anthropology that infantilized and objectified African realities. As one contribution to the intense discussions on the subject that would dominate the Ethiopian student movement in the early 1970s stated, "The problem with us 'educated' Ethiopians is that we have failed to discern the western racist, bourgeois propaganda that is systematically inculcated in our mind in the guise of modern 'scholarship'—political science, sociology, anthropology, etc. Western bourgeois education has made it a point to inculcate in our minds that Africa (Ethiopia included) is a tribal society; that every conflict in Africa today is a 'tribal' conflict, meaning that Africa still is a 'primitive' society."⁴⁷ And so they hoped to break free from ideas that had their root in rationalizations for colonization. Was Ethiopia as constituted in the post-war era inevitably a single nation or country?

During the fifty-year Italian occupation, tens of thousands of Ital-

⁴⁷ Tilahun Takele, "The National Question (Regionalism) in Ethiopia," *ESUNA Newsletter*, Vol. 1, No. 3 March 1971, in Ayalew Yimam, *The Ethiopian Student Movement and the National Question*, p. 141.

ian settlers had moved to Eritrea, with lasting impact on the country, which developed the kind of urban colonial civil infrastructure that movements elsewhere on the continent were eventually able to leverage as they gradually won independence. Eritrea itself was not ethnically homogenous, hosting different language and religious groups in its various regions. A labor movement existed, as did political parties, and a mass non-violent independence movement attempted to confront Ethiopian encroachment throughout the 1950s. But Eritrean civil servants and military officers soon became a backbone of the *Ethiopian* state as the emperor enacted his moderated, heavily controlled reforms after the war.

By 1970, the Eritrean Liberation Front had already been fighting Ethiopian troops for nearly a decade. The government's anti-insurgency campaign was often brutal and Eritrean villages were bombed and napalmed. Founded in 1961, the ELF won support especially among Eritrea's Muslim population, with less support from the region's Christians. The ELF rejected everything about historical Ethiopian sovereignty of Eritrea, suggesting even that Eritrean nationhood had been derailed after the war to serve the interests of imperialism and the regimes in its thrall. "Modern imperialism in tight control of the empire-state which Haile Selassie inherited demanded an outlet to the sea. And Ethiopia's 'legitimate need for adequate access to the sea' was precisely formulated by the USA and its satellites for the common imperialist interest."⁴⁸

Though the ELF sought—and received—military assistance from People's China, its backers included a number of Arab nationalist regimes, and its social radicalism was limited. The front split in 1970, spawning what became the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which quickly gained a reputation for being much more radical than the ELF, and less identified with the Muslim population. The EPLF eventually came to dominate, and its Chinese-trained leader Isaias Afewerki is today the leader of the independent Eritrean state.

⁴⁸ ELF Foreign Information Bureau, *The Eritrean Revolution: 16 Years of Armed Struggle*, Beirut, 1977, p. 23.

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But in the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was considerable division inside the Ethiopian radical movement about the nature of the Eritrean struggle. There were many Eritreans involved in the radical Ethiopian student movement, although the failure of the ESM to initially embrace Eritrean independence resulted in the development of a parallel radical Eritrean student movement in the diaspora, and radical Eritrean students inside the ESM in Addis Ababa were often inaccurately presumed to be primarily agents of the ELF.

Class issues criss-crossed political issues of nationality and ethnicity. A mass revolt in Tigray right after the route of the Italians in the early 1940s, the so-called first *woyane*, planted seeds of Tigrayan national identity that would eventually be exploited by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and lead to their military victory over the national government in 1991. Walleign Mekonnen held that the Tigrayan elite was a secondary oppressor class in Ethiopia right behind the Amhara elite. The apparently cultivated rumors later in the decade that Mengistu Haile-Mariam was a fruit of the union of a member of the Amhara nobility and a poor southerner would be used to imply he was both a man of the people and a natural-born ruler. Compounding complicated identity consciousness was the legacy of colonialism: Italian conscription of native mercenaries from minority populations as *askari* troops and the collaborations of regional *banda* aristocrats left behind ethnic suspicions. Could revolutionary organizing among Ethiopians be done simply on the basis of the class struggle as explicated by Marx and Engels? It turned out to not be that simple.

Before looking at how the Ethiopian left ultimately oriented toward the national question, let's examine how the movement gleaned its attitudes from Marxist-Leninist theory.

National Liberation/Social Liberation

The national question isn't a theoretical abstraction, but a key element of revolutionary strategy, most importantly for countries comprised of multiple nationalities, like both Russia and Ethiopia. National self-determination by itself isn't necessarily a revolutionary anti-capi-

talist notion, so how does it matrix in with demands and strategies that are? Is support for self-determination a question of intrinsic social justice, a strategic gesture to build trust and solidarity between majority and minority populations, a tactical way of undercutting non-socialist nationalism, or some combination of these things? What is a nation... to whom should self-determination apply? And why should revolutionaries who advocate class struggle address the issue at all?

First, let's dispense with the last issue. Russian revolutionary V.I. Lenin (1870–1924) was a commanding speaker, a master strategist, and a voluminous writer and polemicist. In the two decades before the successful October 1917 revolution, he guided his faction of the Russian revolutionary movement through existential challenges, including long periods of political exile. His writings were in effect textbooks for struggle consulted and debated by revolutionaries around the globe long after his death, and the Ethiopian student movement delved deeply into them. In those pre-internet days, they were widely available in cheap paperback editions published in dozens of languages out of Moscow and Beijing.

One of his most widely read texts, written in the early years of the twentieth century, was *What Is to Be Done?*, where he discussed organizing strategies for revolutionaries. In this text he lays the basis for why revolutionaries, what he then termed “Social-Democrats”⁴⁹ should look beyond simple class-struggle issues: “[T]he Social-Democrat’s ideal should not be the trade union secretary, but *the tribune of the people*, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects; who is able to generalise all these manifestations and produce a single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation; who is able to take advantage of every event, however small, in order to set forth *before all* his socialist convictions and his democratic demands, in order to clarify for *all* and everyone the world-historic significance

⁴⁹ Note that before 1917 “Social-Democrat” had a different implication than it does today. At the time it was a synonym for *revolutionary socialist* and was replaced in general usage with “communist” after the Russian October Revolution.

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of the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat.”⁵⁰ This crucial work by Lenin appears on the study lists distributed in the movement.⁵¹

So the tension in a Marxist-Leninist approach to the national question becomes how ideas of immediate social justice are tempered in the struggle strategically; the goal being not only to fight those specific expressions of oppression and exploitation, but also to steer struggles toward broader, lasting confrontations with class society on the path toward solutions of post-capitalism. Thus Marxists historically have sought a lever to transform what might be called “bourgeois democratic” struggles (struggles over minority rights, language recognition, etc.) into revolutionary ones that challenge the full social and political order.

Many national liberation struggles around the globe specifically had embraced Marxism because, especially in what might be called the “Maoist” vision being propagated by People’s China, it offered a synergy connecting and contextualizing national liberation with struggles for economic and political transformation. This is simplistically but clearly expressed in no less than the infamous 1972 Shanghai Communiqué: “Wherever there is oppression there is resistance. Countries want independence, nations want liberation and the people want revolution—this has become the irresistible trend of history.”⁵²

We will look at the details of how these arguments played out during the evolution of the Ethiopian Student Movement into a revolutionary movement in the next chapter, but material from the discussions of nations and their right to self-determination that would rock the movement in the early 1970s is a good starting point for understanding the issue itself.

Contributing to the discussion raging in the movement, the former students turned revolutionary exiles based in Algeria wrote a key

⁵⁰ VI Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?* 1901.

⁵¹ See for instance the reading list appended to the EPRP document “Communism Cannot Be Learned By Rote.”

⁵² Joint Communiqué of the People’s Republic of China and the United States of America; February 28, 1972; www.china-embassy.org/eng/zmgx/doc/ctc/t36255.htm.

document pseudonymously attributed to “Tilahun Takele.” According to Iyasou Alemayehu, “Tilahun” was chosen in honor of the martyred Tilahun Gizaw and “Takele” for resistance fighter *Dejazmach* Takele Woldehawariat; the article was written by three comrades including Berhane Meskel Redda, and approved by several others.⁵³ The document makes a systematic analysis of the Ethiopian situation: “We believe that the Ethiopian Empire is, in terms of historical development, more or less, passing through the period of ‘the final victory of capitalism over feudalism.’ Therefore, we recognize the ‘historical legitimacy’ of the national movements that are presently shaking our ‘prison of nations.’”⁵⁴

Tilahun Takele invokes the theoretical heavies of Marxism to make his points. He quotes Josef Stalin’s well-known 1913 definition of a nation to make the terms clear. “A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life and psychological makeup manifested in a common culture.”⁵⁵

An oppressed people who thusly constituted a nation were seen to be entitled to political self-determination. Tilahun continues, “Lenin makes it unequivocally clear that the right of self-determination includes the right of secession, the right of a nation to form an independent state. No one, who reads Lenin’s or Stalin’s, can ever have a doubt as to what Marx, Engels, Lenin or Stalin meant by the principle of ‘self-determination.’”⁵⁶

Does this *right* of self-determination mean that the *exercise* of that right was always the order of the day consistent with revolutionary strategy? Again quoting Stalin, “A nation has the right to arrange its life on autonomous lines. It even has the right to secede. But this does not mean that it should do so under all circumstances.”⁵⁷

⁵³ Personal conversation with Iyasou Alemayehu.

⁵⁴ Tilahun Takele, *op. cit.*, p. 135–6.

⁵⁵ Tilahun Takele, *op. Cit.*, p. 138; the original article is Josef Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question*, Vienna 1913.

⁵⁶ Tilahun Takele, *ibid.*, p. 145.

⁵⁷ Tilahun Takele, *ibid.*, p. 148.

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Marxists are known for embracing internationalism, as the *Communist Manifesto* puts it, “The working men have no country.”⁵⁸ So was this a contradiction?

Tilahun suggests it's not quite that simple. “How could Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin, of all people support the right of nations to secession when they were, on the other hand, the most committed advocates of the unity and integration of the world proletariat? The answer is simple. Briefly, it is precisely because they wanted to promote the genuine, equality and fraternal unity of the proletariat of all nations, the general unity of the oppressed toiling masses of all nations.”⁵⁹ He goes on to say that Lenin believed that cementing the fraternity of oppressed peoples is the goal, thus assuming a strategic nature in building multi-national alliances.

Lenin gets at this directly, in one of his own works on the national question, this one from 1915: “We demand freedom of self-determination, i.e., independence, i.e., freedom of secession for the oppressed nations, not because we have dreamt of splitting up the country economically, or of the ideal of small states, but, on the contrary, because we want large states and the closer unity and even fusion of nations, only on a truly democratic, truly internationalist basis, which is inconceivable without the freedom to secede.”⁶⁰ Thus Lenin advocates a dynamic, *dialectical* understanding of a complex and challenging issue.

Veteran of the Ethiopian left Worku Lakew has this insightful analysis:

Revolutions are about coining a popular demand which the current regime cannot possibly meet without undermining its very foundations and in the slogan “Land for the Tillers” (*Meraet Le Arashu*), the revolutionary movement found its voice.... Powerful as it was as a rallying cry and helped to

⁵⁸ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Chapter II; 1848.

⁵⁹ Tilahun Takele, *ibid.*, p. 150.

⁶⁰ V.I. Lenin, “The Revolutionary Proletariat and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination.” October 1915.

educate and organise millions of young people of successive cohorts at the university and in all educational institutions, that didn't account for the significance of the Ethiopian Revolution. That honour was reserved for another rallying cry; "freedom and the right to secession for the oppressed nations and nationalities of the empire." ... In fact, like land to the tiller, the slogan of freedom to secede for oppressed nations and nationalities was a tactical slogan designed to fault the fainthearted new elites of the hegemonic nation who are eager to replace the older elites and needed the revolutionary movement as their battering ram to achieve this objective.... So, when... Walelegne Mekonnen called for the right of secession of all the oppressed nations in the empire, the result of this [bugle] call was to lead to the same thing as what happened in Russia in 1905. It split the revolutionary forces into two camps and predictably as in Russia in 1905, the majority of the forces opted for the right to secession. It created two tectonic blocks of *Banda* (as in the collaborationist and traitorous Mensheviks) and *Tagay Arbegna* (patriotic revolutionaries and rebels).⁶¹

Lenin was clear on the dual nature of the self-determination demand as one of intrinsic justice and a tool for, almost paradoxically, building unity among diverse peoples he hoped to organize. It's an impulse of revolutionary democracy and anti-racist egalitarianism in a fairly profound way. From 1914:

We Social-Democrats are opposed to *all* nationalism and advocate democratic *centralism*. We are opposed to particularism, and are convinced that, *all other things being equal*, big states can solve the problems of economic progress and of the struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie far more effectively than small states can. But we value only voluntary ties, never compulsory ties. Wherever we

⁶¹ Worku Lakew, *Revolution, Love and Growing Up*, pp. 103–105.

see *compulsory* ties between nations we, while by no means insisting that every nation must secede, do *absolutely* and emphatically insist on the *right* of every nation to political self-determination, that is, to secession. To insist upon, to advocate, and to recognise this *right* is to insist on the equality of nations, to refuse to recognise *compulsory* ties, to oppose all state privileges for any nation whatsoever, and to cultivate a spirit of complete class solidarity in the workers of the different nations. The class solidarity of the workers of the different nations is strengthened by the substitution of voluntary ties for compulsory, feudalist and militarist ties. We value most of all the equality of nations in popular liberties and for socialism.⁶²

Walleign showed that he shared this dialectical grasp of the strategic and moral concerns as a revolutionary representing, in effect, a dominant nationality. He wrote,

I am for all of them, the ELF, the Bale movements, the Gojjam uprising, to the extent that they have challenged and weakened the existing regime, and have created areas of discontent to be harnessed later on by a genuine Socialist revolution. One thing is certain, I do not oppose these movements just because they are secessionists. There is nothing wrong with secessionism as such.... It is our backwardness and selfishness to ask a people to be partners in being exploited til you can catch up.⁶³

And Tilahun Takele concurs. "We believe that the recognition and support of the right of secession by revolutionary Ethiopians, especially those from the dominant nations, will foster trust and fraternity among the various nationalities."⁶⁴

⁶² V.I. Lenin, "On the Question of National Policy," April 1914.

⁶³ Walleign Mekonnen, *op. Cit.*, (also Ayalew, *The Ethiopian Student Movement and the National Question*, p. 76).

⁶⁴ Tilahun Takele, *op. Cit.*, p. 165.

The nascent revolutionary movement felt that it would be impossible under Ethiopian circumstances to advance the social struggle without studying and then addressing national oppression and then building a *multinational* revolutionary organization. From the students' 1971 document cited elsewhere: "In order to win the confidence of the various nationalities, the proletarian vanguard must be composed of ideologically clear, free from feudal and chauvenist mistifications [sic], and true revolutionary cadres from various nationalities."⁶⁵

Ultimately the Algiers grouping, as expressed in the Tilahun Takele document, did not advocate for the dissolution of Ethiopia as a national entity, they only recognized such dissolution as a supportable possibility. "Let it be clear at the outset, however, that our contention that Ethiopia is inhabited by various nations and nationalities *does not, necessarily, imply* that these nations and nationalities cannot and should not live within one multinational state."⁶⁶

For them, the exercise of the right of self determination was entirely consistent with a movement that sought to empower the people. "We believe that no such [revolutionary] organization can be established if it does not win the confidence of the various nationalities of the empire as well as of revolutionary cadres from various nationalities; the organization of the can achieve these ends only if it fully recognizes and supports the right of the various nationalities (including the right of secession)."⁶⁷

The People, United?

It shouldn't come as a surprise that these attitudes on the national question were not universally accepted within the Ethiopian student and revolutionary movements, despite their apparent grounding in Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy. Nor should it be a surprise that some members of national minority communities would feel skepticism and

⁶⁵ "The Socio-Political Reality and the Ethiopian Peoples' Struggle in Perspective," in *Ethiopia Uncovered*, by the Ethiopian Students in Benelux, December 1971, p. 62.

⁶⁶ Tilahun Takele, *ibid.*, p. 142.

⁶⁷ Tilahun Takele, *ibid.*, p. 161.

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mistrust. As the Ethiopian Students Union in Europe warned in 1971, “If the Amhara progressives attempt to preach [to] the Eritrean people about ‘unity,’ it will not work. If the Eritrean progressives attempt to convince the Amhara people about the ‘right of secession,’ they will not understand each other.”⁶⁸

Walleign Mekonnen noted that without an anti-capitalist aspect based on actually organizing the working and peasant classes, the existing movements already challenging imperial rule would not necessarily share the ultimate goals of the revolutionary movement:

Can the Eritrean Liberation Front and the Bale armed struggle achieve our goal? Not with their present aims and setup. Both these movements are exclusive in character, led by the local bourgeoisie in the first instance and the local feudal lords in the second. They do not have internationalist outlook, which is essential for our goal. They are perfectly right in declaring that there is national oppression. We do not quarrel with them in this score. But their intention is to stop here. They do not try to expand their struggle to the other nationalities. They do not attempt to make a broad-based assaulting on the foundations of the existing regime.... In short these movements are not led by peasants and workers. Therefore, they are not socialists.⁶⁹

What came to be known as “narrow nationalism,” that is, national minority consciousness that didn’t combine with social radicalism, would come to be a source of conflict.

We will examine the effect of these various divisions and how they unfolded in following chapters, but the positions of those who rejected this line of alignment with national liberation struggles are worth noting here. Many of those who opposed the direction suggested by Walleign and the Algiers grouping also invoked socialism and class strug-

⁶⁸ ESUE, *Tatek*, Sept-Dec 1971, translated in Fentahun Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Students*, p. 87.

⁶⁹ Walleign Mekonnen, *op. Cit.*, (also Ayalew, *The Ethiopian Student Movement and the National Question*, p. 75).

gle, but saw the national question as ultimately a diversion preventing national progress.

Tilahun Gizaw himself, the year before his election as head of the USUAA, invoked “tribalism” as a kind of threat to the students’ revolutionary ideology. Interviewed in 1968, he said,

I would like to point out the differences between socialism and tribalism. Whereas tribalism is confined to a certain area and [is] local oriented, socialism goes as far as all-embracing—internationalist. Seeing that these two beliefs are diametrically opposed to each other, students could never fall into error of trying to find both in the same person. As University students and prospective intellectuals, we must interpret the social structure of our society in terms of consisting of different classes and not different tribes.

Tilahun Gizaw goes on to suggest that “tribalism” obscures social realities and revolutionary tasks: “[It is] our duty as students to differentiate the real existence of tribalism and reflect this reality to the large majority of the Ethiopian people so that in the long-run, they will engage themselves in an armed struggle against the oppressive bourgeoisie.”⁷⁰

The Ethiopian Students’ Union in North America, ESUNA, actually voted to oppose separatist movements in 1969. Along these lines, respected student leader Hagos Gebre Yesus, based in the United States, wrote a statement in 1970 challenging everything about the national liberation line. “The way out from the dangers of divisive regionalism and ethnocentricity is to adopt socialism which by definition is one and the same act as being opposed to feudalism and imperialism.... The truly progressive Ethiopian must call on the toiling masses to unite nationally in order to more effectively combat the domination of feudalists and capitalists who, when all is said and done, maintain themselves in power in accordance with the supreme interests of their class

⁷⁰ USUAA, *Struggle*, Vol. 3, No. 1, December 9, 1968.

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and not purely ethnic, regional and religious exclusiveness.”⁷¹ While he did not deny the right of self-determination, he strongly cautioned for Ethiopian unity.

One of the strongest reactions to the Algiers group in the student movement was a response to “Tilahun Takele,” written by “Tumtu Lencho,” a pseudonym adopted by Andreas Eshete and the editors of the student publication *Challenge*.⁷² Tumtu Lencho harshly called the Tilahun Takele article “a rag”!⁷³

For Tumtu, the struggle for socialism effectively supersedes national liberation struggles once it gains recognition by the popular masses.

[T]he fact that the new era of proletarian revolution places a socialist program before the proletariat everywhere does not mean that the popular masses in the colonial and dependent countries in which bourgeois-democratic revolution is yet unaccomplished are to overlook or surpass democratic tasks. The changes effected in the agenda of the toiling masses of the backward countries in the proletarian revolution are quite complex.... Once socialism has become the order of the day and its main historical agents are recognized to be the toiling masses under the leadership of the proletariat, national demands, like all democratic demands, are secondary to the tasks of the socialist revolution.... Once we enter the era of the proletarian revolution, support for national demands that do not form part of the socialist revolution against capitalism and imperialism, and national movements that impair the united force of the oppressed of all nationalities led by the proletariat is out of

⁷¹ Hagos G. Yesus, “Problems of Regionalism in Ethiopia,” *Challenge*, Vol. 10, No. 1 Feb 1970, in Ayalew Yimam, *The Ethiopian Student Movement and the National Question*, p. 110.

⁷² See Bahru Zewde, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia*, p. 209.

⁷³ Tumtu Lencho, “The Question of Nationalities and Class Struggle in Ethiopia,” in ESUNA, *Challenge*, Vol. 11, No. 2, July 1971, reprinted in Ayalew Yimam, *The Ethiopian Student Movement and the National Question*, p. 201.

the question.⁷⁴

He advocates a kind of class reductionism that would not be unfamiliar to those in social movements today who argue that “intersectionality” is alien to the proletarian struggle. His statement is conclusive: “The application of the principle of self-determination is subordinate to the class struggle in Ethiopia.”⁷⁵

ESUNA leader Hagos Gebre Yesus wrote a series of heated polemics against the point of view espoused by the comrades in Algeria during the summer of 1971. In his message to Ethiopian students meeting in Canada, he wrote,

This brings us back to the question of the much abused but otherwise noble and necessary idea of self-determination. What exactly do we understand by it? Surely we cannot succumb to the “advice” that the boys in Algeria and their kind tender to us with so much sound and fury. We have seen what the substance of their argumentation is and what their “programme” would entail: a blueprint for virtual disintegration not merely of Ethiopia, but by extension at least, of any state or nation now in existence which would fit their “definition.”⁷⁶

As the 1970s progressed, there were signs that the line in support of national liberation was having a desired effect. For example, Eritrean students in the US issued a solidarity statement with an Ethiopian Students Union in North America congress in 1973. Its language bears some of the fruit that Walleign Mekonnen and Tilahun Takele anticipated.

It is an incontestable fact that the enemies of the Eritrean people are the feudal colonialism of Haile Selassie’s neo-

⁷⁴ Tumtu Lencho, *ibid.*, pp. 214–219.

⁷⁵ Tumtu Lencho, *ibid.*, p. 239.

⁷⁶ Hagos Gebre Yesus, “A Message to the Conference,” in *ESUNA Bi-Monthly*, No. 1, August 1971, p. 28.

colonial regime, bureaucratic capitalism, U.S. imperialism and Israeli zionism. It is also equally incontestable that the enemies of the Ethiopian people are feudal neocolonialism, bureaucratic capitalism, U.S. imperialism and Israeli zionism. Thus, the Eritrean and Ethiopian peoples face the same basic enemies and, consequently, they should coordinate their struggles against these common enemies. In recognition of this fundamental truth, it is important and necessary that Eritreans for Liberation in North America (E.F.L.) and the Ethiopian Students Union in North America (U.S.U.N.A [sic]) establish and strengthen a working alliance which will provide for more concrete expressions of mutual support and solidarity. Such a working alliance on a more concrete basis will operate to cement the militant comradeship of Eritreans and Ethiopians here and the revolutionary solidarity of the Eritrean and Ethiopian peoples.⁷⁷

French journalist René Lefort⁷⁸ notes two dynamics not apparently emphasized by the theoreticians of the national question in the student movement. First, that national minority identity, and with it the will to revolt—especially in those days among Eritreans—was *bolstered* by the repression of the imperial regime. Such resistance bred by repression was not easily set aside by government promises and platitudes, hardening the will of restless national minorities. Secondly, the relative political advancement of Eritrean society and the eventual distribution of ethnic Eritreans throughout Ethiopian government service and civil society had a profound influence on the development of the *Ethiopian* opposition movement. Not only would Ethiopian rebels come to rely on logistical support, training and international networking from the Eritrean Fronts, who were already establishing liberated zones of control; but

⁷⁷ EFL Solidarity Message to ESUNA, February 17, 1973, reprinted in EFLNA, *Liberation*, Vol. II No. 2, February 1973, p. 29.

⁷⁸ See René Lefort, *Ethiopia: An Heretical Revolution*, 1981/1983, pp. 41–43.

the political development of Eritrean society that was a byproduct of decades of Italian and British colonial rule would influence the organizational practices and democratic appetites of revolutionary Ethiopians.

For the volumes of debate generated by the Ethiopian student movement in its study of the question, and later by the revolutionary movements in practice, the national question in Ethiopia proved both a stubborn source of division and disunity as well as a focus of energy and resistance. It's safe to say that nobody's last word would quite meet the challenges of unfolding events.

Chapter 3

1970–1973, Getting Organized

“It must be clearly understood that the student movement will have to be superceded by a mass-based movement. When the student movement is transformed into a mass-based movement, when spontaneity is transformed into consciousness, when disorderly struggle is transformed into systematic struggle, student organizations will be transformed into a professional revolutionary organization and a part-time student leadership into a professional full-time leadership.... We say ‘basta’ to philistine cowardice and half-heartedness. We say ‘basta’ to petty bourgeois defeatism and opportunism. We recognize that there is only one way to liberation and that is revolutionary violence.... Seize the Time! And seize the Gun!”—Ethiopian Students’ Union in North America (ESUNA) Newsletter, December 1970⁷⁹

*“[I]t should have been the task of a revolutionary political party to seek solutions to the basic issues of the national question and of the revolution in Ethiopia. But because there are no such political forums present in Ethiopia as yet, the situation has imposed the responsibility on our Student Movement.”—Ethiopian Students Union in Europe, *Tatek*, Sept–Dec 1971⁸⁰*

“The Ethiopian people have now fully realized that only in Self-Reliance can a genuine Revolution be consummated and Salvation achieved. Long live Black Vietnam (yet to be)!”—Ethiopian Students in Benelux, December 1971⁸¹

⁷⁹ Quote reconstructed from Bahru Zewde, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia*, p. 180 and UPESUNA, *Unity and Struggle*, Vol. 1, No. 2, July 1977, p. 34.

⁸⁰ Translated in Fentahun Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Students*, p. 86.

⁸¹ from “Haile Selassie Kills Children for Sacrifice,” in *Ethiopia Uncovered*, by the Ethiopian Students in Benelux, December 1971.

A Struggle for Leadership

The willingness of the government to aim its guns at its own children shown at the end of 1969 marked a dramatic turn for the student movement, upping the stakes considerably. But since it seemed to prove what the most radical of the students had been saying all along, even that dramatic upswing in violent repression failed to stem the radicalization of young people. How to explain that rising tide, and how to make the most of it, became faultlines inside the ESM.

If they were nothing else, the increasingly fraught confrontations between the Ethiopian government and the radical student movement were a sign that both sides could see a horizon where confronting fundamental and existential political and social questions was unavoidable. Preparing for that moment was on everybody's mind. Inevitably, as students and activists formulated their next moves, the movement began to coalesce around contending poles of leadership.

There was new urgency in this contention, carried to the diaspora by recent arrivals recoiling from the dire events back home. Alem Habtu was watching what happened from his role as a leader of ESUNA in New York. He recalled, "The assassination of Tilahun Gizaw in December 1969 had a big impact on the student movement inside the country. What are we going to do? Are we going to sit with folded arms while the regime declares war on us? No, we should retaliate. Such was the prevalent attitude. The leading exponents of this were those who had recently come from Ethiopia, [including] my own brother Mesfin Habtu."⁸²

Not everyone shared this outlook. In what would become a familiar refrain, some in the movement, while ostensibly sharing its radical goals, accused its charismatic young leaders of acting like excited children who were following an ineffective path of immediate gratification. For example, the Tutu Lemcho document discussed in the previous chapter contains this analysis:

What the massacre revealed was that a movement based on

⁸² Alem Habtu in Bahru Zewde, editor, *Documenting the Ethiopian Student Movement*, p. 67.

students without any roots among the popular masses was like a reed that breaks at the first gust of wind. In essence, the student movement, dominated as it was by the children of the exploiting classes, was based on moral indignation; it was a movement of *enrages*—those with “righteous rage” but without real roots among the working masses and the poor. The tendency that was prevalent was a petit-bourgeois tendency; it was given to euphoria, easily excitable and deluded with the mirage of an instant revolution. Until and unless the children of the toiling masses themselves dominate and lead the struggle, the student movement will continue to be the domain of petit-bourgeois moralists and infantile leftists.... The petit-bourgeois elements, which were drawn to infantile leftism and anarchist rhetoric, were, of course, quickly disillusioned with student politics.⁸³

The authors went on to imply that their factional opponents were tailing the national liberation fronts as a way of both abdicating their own role and acknowledging the immature political situation in a back-handed way; in other words, of sidestepping what they saw as a necessary long-term perspective of radicalizing the Ethiopian proletariat with flashy rhetoric and irresponsible actions.

In various ways this difference of opinion would mark critically divergent responses to the unfolding of events that was to come. The two main contending poles for leadership became the slightly older generation of radical students who had been in the diaspora for a while who advocated a kind of long march approach to their goals, versus newer arrivals, who like the comrades in Algiers, treated building on the dynamic events in the country as an urgent task.

The Struggle at Home

Studying in Addis Ababa, Ayalew Yimam chose not to heed the

⁸³ Tumtu Lencho, “The Question of Nationalities and Class Struggle in Ethiopia,” in *ESUNA, Challenge*, Vol. 11, No. 2, July 1971, reprinted in Ayalew Yimam, *The Ethiopian Student Movement and the National Question*, p. 199.

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call to exile. The Autumn 1970 campus Vietnam Day protest that he recalls reveals the continuing ferment at home:

The student movement which was left to organize after the December massacre vented its anger and the molten rock was ignited for the future struggle. This time, the nonviolent African-American movement for democracy, equality and justice, had given way to the most militant and revolutionary youths and intellectuals of African-Americans. The Black Panther Party had become part of the revolutionary movement and it had garnered a worldwide support, including the Ethiopian student movement.... Newspaper and magazine clippings of revolutionaries like Angela Davis, Eldridge Cleaver, and Stokely Carmichael were held high on placards.... Songs of praise of freedom fighters like Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh and Che Guevara went on.... The question in everybody's mind was where the armed struggle would start, when the revolution would begin its birth pangs. The hope was high; confirmed and reaffirmed with the slogans and revolutionary songs.⁸⁴

The imperial government rightfully recognized an existential threat in the radicalized student movement. The contradictions were dramatic, as though history itself was accelerating a corrective move. In a country without political parties, somehow the royal patronage of an educated student class had allowed the creation a revolutionary milieu that embraced the victims of the obvious injustices and backwardnesses of Ethiopian society. Somehow a country where parliament was little more than a hobby for the nobility, students developed a highly organized political culture that took democracy and politics seriously. Somehow a country without freedom of the press had fostered a generation who fell in love with the revolutionary word and turned their student newsletters and academic journals into fiery publications of explicitly revolutionary debate. In a country where even the language of politics was

⁸⁴ Ayalew Yimam, *Yankee Go Home*, p. 48.

underdeveloped, the young scholars turned to English to be able as a language with revolutionary words and concepts lacking in the native tongues of Ethiopia. Somehow a kingdom in a continent filled with newly independent republics, despite embracing America and Europe in a leadership challenge to those surrounding advocates of “African Socialism,” found itself flooded with the same New Left subversion spreading like wildfire among American and European young people. This was not a tolerable situation for the Haile Selassie regime.

Arresting student ringleaders seemed inadequate; in the long run it only provoked extended protest and attracted notice from the likes of Amnesty International, which took a break from publicizing detainees behind the iron curtain to note the plight of Walleign Mekonnen.⁸⁵ In 1971, the emperor temporarily closed Addis Ababa University. But like a gorgon, the revolutionary spark kept spreading with each stroke of repression. University students continued to flood abroad, into the arms of the growing radical student diaspora. And rather than silence young people at home, the emperor’s actions inspired a younger generation of militant secondary school activists to fill the gap left by the closure of the university.

A widely circulated pamphlet from ESUNA captures the mood of the students in Ethiopia.

In spite of such unmitigated repression, the national uprising continues. With full support of their parents, many students have vowed never to return to government schools. It has become clear to all that even limited education is impossible as long as the regime survives. The student papers have been replaced by underground publications. Despite the growing persecution, student organizing continues with

⁸⁵ “In January four students who had been imprisoned since disturbances at Haile Selassie I University in ETHIOPIA in December 1969 were pardoned and released. One student, Walleign Mekonnen, who was arrested and amnestied in 1969 before being re-arrested at the close of that year, remained in prison, and his case was among those discussed with the Ethiopian authorities by John Humphreys of the International Secretariat when he visited Addis Ababa in February. Mekonnen was released in May 1971.” *Amnesty International Report, 1970–1971*, pp. 34–35.

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renewed strength. The Ethiopian Student Movement is, therefore, resolved to struggle until victory.⁸⁶

Makonon Getu was admitted to AAU in the fall of 1970. He was able to get in only one term before the Emperor shut down the university in early 1971. He recalls the political turmoil at the campus while he was there: “Once we were debating in the dining hall whether to ‘bombard the headquarters,’ the famous slogan coined by Mao Tse-tung during the Chinese cultural revolution. This was a call to march to the royal palace and bring it down. In response to this, one pacifist got up from his seat, stood on a table and said that he would not support a march to ‘bombard the headquarters.’ Some of the guys that were near him, brought him down and beat him for what he had dared to say.”⁸⁷ Makonon soon applied to a university in Sweden and joined the exodus.

The core of Ethiopian students who already felt themselves to be revolutionaries in waiting were divided over their next moves. In 1971 according to Kiflu Tadesse, at the time studying abroad at a university in the Soviet Union but politically aligned with Berhane Meskel’s exiles in Algiers⁸⁸, the Algeria group recommended that the university-age activists inside Ethiopia start disengaging from the student movement. But this happened during an upsurge in rebellious activity among high school students. “The younger generation of the university radicals, including Getachew Maru... and Girmatchew Lemma were disappointed by the position taken by the veteran activists. Some of them, especially the Getachew Maru group, formed a loose alliance with the high school activists, who by now had emerged as a powerful opposition movement.... It was this solidarity with the high school activists that resulted in the formation of a much younger group of revolutionary activists, later regrouped around the organ *Abyot*.”⁸⁹ Getachew Maru and Girmatchew Lemma were both figures to watch.

The failure of the first waves of radicals—many of them now over-

⁸⁶ ESUNA, *Repression in Ethiopia*, January 1971, p. 12.

⁸⁷ Makonon Getu, *The Undreamt*, p. 53.

⁸⁸ See Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation, Part 1*, p. 59 .

⁸⁹ Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation, Part 1*, pp. 59–60.

seas—to connect immediately with the next, younger wave, meant that when the 1974 revolutionary upsurge came around, the more organizationally and ideologically advanced were not in a position to provide early leadership to the various uprisings. Valuable months were lost while the exiles returned home and reconnected with the people in the streets and their organizations. More on that in following chapters.

Meanwhile, those high school students displayed a remarkably high level of political development. Activist Fentahun Tiruneh, who had been jailed during 1969, describes how the high school students carried on the struggle:

In 1971, when university students were under the tight control of the university administration and of the government police, secondary school students struck on May 24, 1971. They demanded that:

1. land be given to the tiller;
2. Anbassa Bus Company lower its fares for roundtrips;
3. the government lower prices of grain and butter;
4. the government close the camp where the poor were warehoused;
5. the doors of the university be open to the children of the poor.⁹⁰

As with their older brothers and sisters, their demands were hardly parochial, they reflected broad social awareness and reflected an understanding of the reins of power in the country. For instance, the Anbassa Bus Company was one of the many enterprises owned more or less directly by the emperor Haile Selassie himself; so these demands were aimed squarely at the government. Among these high school revolutionaries were a core of young activists who would go on to play leading roles in the upsurge of the next few years. They would also, sadly, be first in line for the waves of repression to come. One of these young

⁹⁰ Fentahun Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Students*, p. 75.

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activists was a young man named Tito Hiruy.

Tito attended the General Wingate School in Addis Ababa, a prestigious high school named after a British general who had helped fight off the Italian fascists. Numerous other figures in the movement were alumni of the school, including Haile Fida. According to one of his friends, Tito would hang around the local YMCA and try to meet fellow young people. “They would organize students in groups of four or five people, rent houses... and start Marxist-Leninist discussion groups.” Tito joined Getachew Maru’s *Abyot* group. “We would distribute those secret publications in schools. Secondary school students had by then become well-versed in such struggle tactics as boycotting classes, staging demonstrations, chanting popular slogans and songs in public, holding political discussions, hijacking aircraft, preparing Molotov cocktails and operating a mimeograph machine.”⁹¹

The end of 1972 was marred by a new tragedy for the consolidating movement. Walleign Mekonnen and Martha Mebrahtu had by then left their university studies, though both remained in Ethiopia. Walleign had spent more time in prison. Martha was talking, writing and organizing for a strong women’s liberation component to the radical movement. She organized events for women and wrote an article on “The Role of Women in Changing Society” which read in part, “Breaking the backbone of male chauvinism is breaking the same backbone of oppression of the peasant and working masses—our liberation and our responsible role is that of making a revolution and seizing state power and regaining economic and political control for the oppressed masses—half of whom are women.”⁹² She goes on to quote Ho Chi Minh, “The woman should not wait for a government or party decree to liberate her.”⁹³

On December 8, 1972, Martha and Walleign led a squad of seven activists in another hijacking attempt; this time on an international

⁹¹ Gedeon Wolde Amanuel, in Bahru Zewde, *Documenting the Ethiopian Student Movement*, p. 132.

⁹² “Comrade Martha: On Women and Revolution,” in EFLNA, *Liberation*, Vol. II, No. 5, June–July 1973, p. 6.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

flight, an Ethiopian 720 Fan Jet bound for Paris from Asmara. The squad was comprised of five men and two women; one of the hijackers was a veteran of a previous hijacking that had been carried out by the Eritrean Liberation Front.

The night before the hijacking, Martha penned a manifesto explaining her actions:

We, women of Ethiopia and Eritrea, have made our life ready to participate in a struggle and we would like to explain the nature of our struggle to our sisters and brothers all over the world. Our struggle demands a bitter sacrifice in order to liberate our oppressed and exploited people from the yokes of feudalism and imperialism. In this struggle we have to be bold and merciless. Our enemies can only understand such a language. We, women... must equally participate in the struggle for economic and social justice that our brothers have waged. We have a responsibility to become a formidable force in the revolutionary army.... We affirm our full support for the oppressed people of the world who are struggling to free themselves from imperialism, colonialism, neocolonialism and racism! We stand by the freedom fighters in Vietnam, Palestine, Guinea-Bissau and in other African and Latin American countries; we also support the civil rights leaders in North America. Victory to the popular struggle of the people! May the people's movement for freedom in both Ethiopia and Eritrea live forever! My sisters and my brothers, let's keep on fighting!⁹⁴

We are left with speculations about the hijacking. We know that Walleign Mekonnen was in contact with the consolidating revolutionary center in Algeria.⁹⁵ The multi-national backgrounds of the hijackers seems intentional: there were both Amharas and Eritreans in the

⁹⁴ Translated in "The Martha Manifesto: An Ethiopian woman's dream," by Elyas Mulu Kiros in *Pambazuka News* online, Nov. 23, 2011 (<https://www.pambazuka.org/governance/martha-manifesto-ethiopian-womans-dream>).

⁹⁵ See Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part 1*, p. 94.

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hijacking squad, and indeed some authorities attributed the hijacking to the EPLF, the relatively new and more socially radical split-off from the original Eritrean Liberation Front. A pro-EPLF publication called the hijacking “an internationalist action to herald the formation of an Ethiopian Liberation Front.”⁹⁶ An educated guess may be made that the hijacking had multiple goals: first, it’s probable that Walleign—and some of the others, no longer students—really wanted to get out of the country, and so it seems likely the flight was chosen not only for propaganda value but for its European destination. But secondly, if the hijacking was not an actual joint venture between the EPLF and a domestic cell of future EPLO supporters, it was certainly a vivid gesture of support to the Eritrean fronts; literal deeds backing up the political commitments to national liberation that would become a feature of the EPLO’s politics. There’s also a suggestion that the hijackers planned to demand a ransom which would go to fund revolutionary activities. While there is certainly an edge of resignation and heroic sacrifice in Martha’s manifesto, and it’s clear the hijackers were prepared to lay down their lives, it does not seem to have been an intentional suicide operation.

But a suicide operation it turned out to be. This time the authorities were ready for the hijacking, and in a bloody mid-air exchange, all seven were gunned down by undercover security agents during the violent outburst that damaged the plane but didn’t cause a crash; the plane was landed safely in Addis Ababa. One wonders if the government’s agents had been alerted to the presence of Ammanual Yohannes on the flight, who had previously hijacked a plane from Bahir Dar to Libya. In any case they had a full security detail lying in wait. One of the hijackers was shot while holding a hand grenade which fell loose and exploded, wounding one of the two women hijackers. Ultimately only one hijacker survived, Tadelech Kidane Mariam, one of the two female comrades, though she was badly wounded and subsequently imprisoned.⁹⁷ A grisly rumor circulating at the time had the security detail

⁹⁶ “Comrade Martha: On Women and Revolution,” in EFLNA, *Liberation*, Vol. II, No. 5, June–July 1973, p. 6.

⁹⁷ Tadelech went on to become Zeru Kehishen’s companion after his return to

tying the hijackers into seats and cutting their throats.⁹⁸

Along with their comrades, Walleign Mekonnen, a promising and eloquent revolutionary leader, and Martha Mebrahtu, frequently compared to the renowned African-American activist Angela Davis, were dead; and the movement went into a deep, rage-filled mourning.

The Times of London briefly profiled the two female hijackers:

Telafesh [sic], who may have survived the attempt, is said by friends to be a quiet girl and an unlikely person to be involved in such a venture. She left the University without completing her course at a time when many of the students were expelled. Until about a month ago she was working in an advertising agency in Addis Ababa, and had, uncharacteristically spoken approvingly of the shootings by Japanese at Lod airport in Israel. Martha, who died in the air battle, is said to have been the leader of the group and a very different character. She is the daughter of a senior Ethiopian military man, and is described as a good orator, attractive and extremely intelligent. She was a medical student who completed her course in 1971, but had remained in contact with the underground student movement.⁹⁹

The EPLF issued a long statement after the operation that doesn't exactly claim specific responsibility for the action, but certainly lauds it. It reads in part,

This deed which was done by the sons and daughters of the two neighbouring countries exemplifies the struggle of Eritreans against foreign, colonial rule and for our indepen-

Ethiopia.

⁹⁸ See Barbara W. Olson, *Gondar, Ethiopia, 1971–1975*, p. 187. She also writes that at one of the hijacker's funerals, "students demanded to have the coffin opened so family and friends could see the body, because of the rumors that his throat had been cut. Students attacked the coffin, trying to force it open, and one of them was killed."

⁹⁹ *The Times* (London), Thursday, December 14, 1972; compiled in "The hijacking," by Aida Kidane, ehrea.org, Nov, 19, 2005.

dence, and the struggle of Ethiopians to destroy Feudalism in essence, it was done in an internationalist spirit to oppose world imperialism.... These martyrs' performance of their national duties for the salvation of the people, for the benefit of oppressed people, rejecting linguistic, cultural and religious differences (and some apparent revolutionaries' sentiment of chauvinism) was a pioneering act for us. Its basis lies in a revolutionary duty linked by mutual benefit and standing upon an alliance sealed with blood.... They stood for a great aim; the price to be paid, had by necessity to be great and dear. The liberation of oppressed people is the sacred desire of genuine revolutionaries, and the price to be for it is one's life, that highest and most valuable sacrifice a human being can offer. It is for this reason that we do not regard the deaths of these beloved comrades as a sad fate but as an inspiring example.¹⁰⁰

The EPLF insisted that proffered solidarity always be on its own terms, and the statement is thus very specific on the relationship between the Ethiopian and Eritrean struggles: "A progressive Eritrean is he who struggles and renders assistance to the oppressed peoples of the world and the progressive Ethiopian is he who believes in the independent existence of Eritrea, and in our struggle and who has internationalist duties."¹⁰¹ This is clear reference to the deliberations on the national question within the ESM and the revolutionary movement. It is also further evidence that the hijackers at a bare minimum sympathized with the line being hammered out from Algiers.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Eritrean Popular Liberation Forces, "A New Chapter in Revolutionary Struggle"; compiled in "The hijacking," by Aida Kidane, ehrea.org, Nov, 19, 2005.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² An issue of *Challenge*, the newspaper of the quixotic U.S. communist group Progressive Labor Party, falsely reported that one of the killed hijackers was Getachew Maru. The erroneous mention, credited to a member of ESUNA, is interesting not so much for what it gets wrong, but for making it clear that Walleign and Getachew were widely seen to be connected. See "Ethiopian Cops Stage 'Hijacking' to Murder Student Leaders," PLP *Challenge*, January 25, 1973,

The statement eulogizes Walleign:

Walleign Mekonnen was twice imprisoned by the enemy (1969 and 1970). His first spell in prison ended by his being released due to his student comrades' support; his second, due to the consequences of his comrades' strength of purpose and the fear it caused in the progressive Ethiopian Students' Movement; he was a hero who, in the spirit of internationalism, worked to acquaint with and instill faith in the just cause of Eritrea among his comrades and people.¹⁰³

An interesting development was a joint demonstration in January 1973 in the United States. "Eritreans for Liberation in North America and the Ethiopian Students Union in North America co-sponsored a demonstration in Washington DC in protest of the brutal massacre of student activities aboard the Ethiopian Airlines plane on December 8th 1972. The demonstration aimed to further expose the totally oppressive nature of Haile Sellasie's feudal regime and its systematic massacre of all those who speak up for the liberation of the masses." The executive committees of the two groups, "recognizing the commonality of the enemies and [a]spirations of the Eritrean and Ethiopian peoples... agreed to begin and expand concrete efforts of mutual cooperation and support."¹⁰⁴

Songs were composed to the memory of the heroes Walleign and Martha. The loss of seven dedicated activists was a blow to the Algeria center's efforts inside the country; but the expanding ranks of the movement's martyrs added further determination to the young activists who kept organizing and building.

In late 1972 or early 1973, a freshman at university, Hiwot Tefera met revolutionary activist Getachew Maru for the first time. Their meeting was secretly arranged. She told him about leafletting as

p. 11

¹⁰³ Aida Kidane, *op. Cit.*

¹⁰⁴ EFLNA, "Demonstration in Washington, D.C.," in *Liberation*, Vol. 2, No. 1., January 1973, p. 26.

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a high school student and about her readings, “I liked the Black Panthers, Bobby Seale, Jesse Jackson, Hugh Newton, Stokely Carmichael, Eldridge Cleaver.... I admire Angela Davis. I have read *Soledad Brother* maybe five times and I still find it very moving.” He asked if he she would like to join an underground study circle on Marxism-Leninism. She said yes.¹⁰⁵

She described her studies with Getachew:

Getachew always gave me a book which he expected me to read and take notes and come for discussion.... I learned about the French, Russian, Chinese, Cuban and Vietnamese revolutions.... I recall reading a biography of Che.... It shook me to the core. I felt an instant identification with his affliction. My heart went out for the revolutionary icon who suffered from asthma. He was not just a guerrilla fighter to me serenaded in the streets and on campus but an afflicted man whose experience resonated with my own.”¹⁰⁶

They read Lenin. Mao. Fanon. Amilcar Cabral. Régis Debray. Even Magdoff, Huberman and Mandel. She joined Getachew’s underground organization, *Abyot*.

The fall of 1973 was marked by an increase in political activity on school campuses. There were waves of demonstrations and class boycotts. Hiwot Teffera was suspended for her activities, along with several friends including Meles Tekle, who she thought of as one of the “Vanguards of the student movement.”¹⁰⁷ Getachew Maru was arrested and jailed.

A fascinating observation comes from Barbara Olson, an American who worked as a teacher in northern Ethiopia in the early 1970s. “The students are a unified group, a fraternity that reaches down even into the seventh and eighth grades, and news travels fast. This huge brotherhood, one of the very few unified forces in Ethiopia except for

¹⁰⁵ Hiwot Teffera, *Tower in the Sky*, pp. 23–25.

¹⁰⁶ Hiwot Teffera, *ibid.*, pp. 48–49.

¹⁰⁷ Hiwot Teffera, *ibid.*, pp. 61.

the armed forces, has a good communications system. It is little wonder that the police find them so threatening.... No wonder that Haile Selassie's henchmen.... try to control the student leadership in Addis with spies, jail and assassination."¹⁰⁸ Student organizing was filling a social void.

Olson also reports a scene of police brutality against students gathering for an annual memorial for Tilahun Gizaw in Gondar in 1972.

As the students began their march towards the churches for prayer, police fired down on them from the brow of the hill. It is reported that the first volley went over their head, but as the march continued and some of the students threw rocks in reply, the police were ordered to shoot low at their feet and shins.... When the shooting began the students panicked, streamed across the highway and up into the hills.... The police rushed into a nearby school, Niget Kokeb, where they grabbed those students from their desks as they were doing their lessons.... The police broke into every house and arrested anyone who looked to be high school age.¹⁰⁹

Organizing in the Diaspora

The organizing on the ground at home was contributing to the tightening of contradictions inside the country, and laying the basis for what people hoped would become a mass movement of resistance against the imperial regime. This was crucial work. But the work transforming students into professional revolutionaries and jockeying for political and organizational leadership was largely taking place outside the country, in organizations built by Ethiopian students ostensibly engaged in higher education in Europe and America.

The ideological development of the ESM and the exodus of revolutionary students to universities abroad brought significant differences to the surface of the diaspora student community. Militancy wasn't

¹⁰⁸ Barbara W. Olson, *Gondar, Ethiopia 1971–1975* (2011), pp. 187-188.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

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exactly the issue; students in a number of countries had already organized embassy occupations to embarrass the imperial regime abroad. Nor was Marxism-Leninism *per se* the main divisive issue: many, many of the Ethiopian students abroad considered themselves communist revolutionaries, and in fact the attempt at transforming the movement was happening parallel to the European and American left throwing up new organizations not tied to the traditional Communist Parties. Thus the ideological ferment inside the Ethiopian movement was fed by the ideological ferment on the student left in general, even though the situation for those American and European students suddenly interested in revolution was certainly less dire. But how exactly to transform the movement from words into deeds was absolutely up for debate. The example of one Ethiopian student is illustrative.

Senay Likke was a chemical engineering student at the University of California at Berkeley.¹¹⁰ He joined the Ethiopian Students' Association (later Union) in North America in the 1960s and rose from the ranks to leadership in the group. But he also seems to have dabbled in the U.S. left: he is said to have been a cofounder of Nelson Peery's California Communist League, later the Communist Labor Party USNA¹¹¹. The CCL/CLP had politics somewhere between the hardline Stalinism of the early 1930s and the anti-revisionist Maoism sweeping the radical student world, a product of leader Peery's lifelong involvement in the communist movement but reflecting his disillusionment with the old Communist Party USA and his interest in intersecting radicalizing young people. Those young people were interested in fighting for Black liberation and against the U.S. war in Vietnam. Senay and some number of fellow Ethiopians stayed in close communication with the CCL/CLP, even sending greetings to the group's 1974 congress which transformed it from League to Party.

¹¹⁰ His 1973 paper "Heat capacities of aqueous sodium chloride, potassium chloride, magnesium chloride, magnesium sulfate, and sodium sulfate solutions between 80.deg. and 200.deg." completed with lab partner LeRoy A. Bramley remains mute testimony to his academic career; now available on the internet. (<https://pubs.acs.org/doi/pdf/10.1021/je60057a027>).

¹¹¹ See, for example, Fred Halliday & Maxine Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, p. 129.

Senay was not known for his political temperance. Fellow ESANA/ESUNA leader Alem Habtu, studying in New York City and living with a handful of other Ethiopian students in a flat on the city's upper west side, remembers Senay's appearance at the 1969 congress of ESANA in Philadelphia: "When Senay Lekke arrived from the Bay Area he was transformed from a garrulous person to a militant. During the course of an activists' meeting, which was held parallel with the Congress, he informed us that he had mastered the skill of concocting Molotov cocktails and suggested that this be put to use. He was studying chemical engineering. We were vehement in our opposition. Our protest was probably the last thing he expected."¹¹²

The next year, Senay was back to the annual congress with more radical proposals. Again, Alem Habtu recalls:

In the 1970 congress in Washington, DC, the focus was on imperialism in Ethiopia. On the sidelines of the congress, those of us in the executive council had to address an extraordinary challenge. The Bay Area chapter members under Senay Likke's leadership had a plan to go to Cuba for military training in preparation for their return to Ethiopia through "Bale, not Bole." To this end, they were all living in a spartan commune (except Senay) and were raising funds for the Cuba trip. We spent a couple of nights of exhaustive discussion on the limited (catalytic) role of students and on the necessary subjective and objective conditions for a revolutionary situation in Ethiopia in order to successfully dissuade them from their plan.¹¹³

Senay Likke's bold challenge, "Bale or Bole?" suggested that the movement needed to be planning its return trip home not via the Bole airport in Addis Ababa but via infiltration of the borders of a rebellious province as guerrillas. The question challenged the movement to con-

¹¹² Alem Habtu in Bahru Zewde, *Documenting the Ethiopian Student Movement*, p. 67.

¹¹³ Professor Alem Habtu, "The Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM): My Experiences in ESUNA, 1964–1971," paper self-published 2015.

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sider to what extent they were actually committed to armed struggle against the empire. As for Senay, he was not done with controversy after being rejected yet again by ESUNA. Nor was Senay the only figure trying to influence the direction of ESUNA.

In this period members and supporters of the group in Algeria established by the 1969 hijackers were traveling around the diaspora trying to build support for the founding of an actual revolutionary party. One of Alem Habtu's brother Mesfin's tasks upon his arrival in New York was clearly to advocate for the views of the Algeria center.¹¹⁴ And in Europe, Melaku Tegegn, studying at the time in the Netherlands, recalls a visit in 1970 from Gezahegn Endale, one of the original Algiers group: "Gezahegn did not beat around the bush. He said, 'We intend to form a revolutionary party. Are you for it?' We wholeheartedly agreed to the proposal. Then, presumably to put me to the test, he said, 'Although we believe in the setting up of a revolutionary party, in keeping with Ethiopian tradition, what is essential is to launch an armed struggle with a revolutionary character amongst the peasantry.'"¹¹⁵

The Algeria group was also not the only organized force conducting a clandestine organizing campaign. A strange intercontinental cat-and-mouse game was actually playing itself out as members of two competing centers communicated and debated with each other, neither understanding how far along their respective organizational plans had advanced. As the Algiers group laid its plans to found a revolutionary organization, Haile Fida revealed to various individuals outside his circle the existence of the group that he had founded in 1968, the All-Ethiopian Socialist Movement or *Meison*. According to Kiflu Tadesse, "The first signs of division within the movement became apparent in 1971 when Haile Fida visited Algiers to explore the possi-

¹¹⁴ The Ethiopian Revolution was a tale of extended family ties. Benyam Adane, one of the hijackers who set up the Algiers center was the nephew of Mesfin and Alem Habtu; ironically, Benyam's sister Nigist Adane, a pediatrician who had studied in Moscow (see Kiflu Tadesse's *The Generation, Part 2*, p. 54), went on to become a leader of the competing *Meison*. Getachew Maru's brother became a member of the military regime later in the 1970s. Other family ties abound.

¹¹⁵ Melaku Tegegn, in Bahru Zewde, *Documenting the Ethiopian Student Movement*, p. 74.

bility of collaboration. Haile offered financial assistance and invitation to join the group he and others had founded [in France] in 1968. In long discussions he had with Berhane Meskel, fundamental differences of opinion emerged.”¹¹⁶

In New York, two of Alem Habtu’s colleagues in ESUNA took him aside. “[I]n June 1971, Melesse Ayalew and Dessalegn Rahmato revealed to me for the first time that there was an underground organization named MEISON of which they and Hagos Gebre Yesus were members, but that they intended to resign from the organization due to ideological and political differences as soon as they complete coordination of their departure with ‘comrades’ at home who shared the same views as the North America trio.”¹¹⁷ This revelation was to cause some problems for the close-knit community of exiled students. The students were already well-versed in the security measures necessary for clandestine organizing, but the existence of actual organizations behind the Algeria group and around Haile Fida seem to have not been widely understood, and the repercussions of political differences was yet to concretely manifest.

Zeru Kehishen, considered an elder in the movement by virtue of his role in the Crocodile Society, had been corresponding with his old colleague Berhane Meskel in Algiers. According to Kiflu Tadesse, still studying in the Soviet Union but about to make his own trip to Algeria to connect with the exile center, Zeru had shared the papers Berhane sent to him in Addis with Wallelign Mekonnen and others, though they didn’t quite agree to form a formal organization yet with the Algiers comrades. In 1971 Zeru decided to travel to the U.S., stopping over in Algeria to meet with the comrades there.¹¹⁸

Kiflu Tadesse recounts,

In New York, Zeru Kehishen found a simmering conflict

¹¹⁶ Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation, Part 1*, p. 77.

¹¹⁷ Alem Habtu, “The Ethiopian Student Movement...” *op. Cit.*

¹¹⁸ See Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation*, p. 94. “In May 1971, a month before Kiflu Tadesse’s arrival in Algiers, another visitor, Zeru Kehishen, came from Addis Ababa. Zeru was on his way to the United States. He had corresponded with Berhane Meskel.”

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within ESUNA between the leadership and a group of younger radicals, many of them recent arrivals from Ethiopia. Among the new arrivals were Mesfin Habtu, Kiflu Teferra... and others. Mesfin Habtu played a leading role in organizing the EPRO¹¹⁹ and giving leadership to the struggle within the student movement in the United States. Contact had been established between New York and Algiers through Mesfin Habtu who corresponded with his nephew, Benyam Adane.¹²⁰

The organizational agendas of the Algerian revolutionary center, coupled with the agendas of the grouping around Haile Fida, mostly in Europe, proved to be moving focuses of conflict within the diaspora ESM throughout the period of 1970–1973, though this organizational root of the conflict was largely subterranean.

Things came to a head at a pair of 1971 student conferences. A fight broke out between Senay Likke, who had been ESUNA's national leader, along with several other slightly older activists, and the younger ones who were itching for faster progress in the development of revolutionary movement. The arena for these debates spanned the ESM in Europe and America.

The political issues were largely focused on the national question. It was here that the debate came to a head when the document by "Tilahun Takele," noted in the previous chapter, was counterposed to position papers from the older ESUNA leaders. Tilahun's article sums up the strategic view of the national question we have discussed: "We believe that the recognition and support of the right of secession by revolutionary Ethiopians, especially those from dominant nations, will foster trust and fraternity among the various nationalities. We believe that the support of the right to secession will, by itself, discourage secession."¹²¹ His opponents claimed, in a way that will be familiar to those

¹¹⁹ Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Organization, see details later in this chapter.

¹²⁰ Kiflu Tadesse, *op. Cit.*, p. 95).

¹²¹ Quoted in Zewde Bahru, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia*, p. 208. See Ayalew

following 21st-century debates on the left over identity politics, that “Tilahun” was capitulating to nationalism and failing to acknowledge the primacy of the class struggle over the national one.¹²²

The first meeting was the 11th Congress of the Ethiopian Student Union in Europe, ESUE, held in West Berlin in July 1971. Abdul Mohamed, imprisoned with Walleign and the others back home in 1969, was now a member of ESUNA. He recollects:

Our [ESUNA] delegate [to the 1971 ESUE Berlin Congress] was Mesfin Habtu. Both Andreas¹²³ and Berhane were present. The situation there contributed immensely to our decision concerning what measures we should take next. Mesfin had stopped over in Algeria on his way to Berlin. It would seem that he had held discussions there regarding the situation in America and an agreement had been reached. In retrospect, I believe that Mesfin was unhappy with both the agreement reached and the directives given. After his return from Algeria via Berlin, Mesfin had changed beyond all recognition.¹²⁴

The underlying tensions were obvious to Tedla Seyum, who also attended the congress: “The group that arrived from the US before the meeting cut an intimidating figure. Senay Lekke, who was barefooted and had on fatigues, resembled a hermit. I fancy myself a smoker, but Mesfin Habtu was puffing on an endless chain of cigarettes.... Those of us who lived in Europe were positively convinced that we were in the presence of lunatics.”¹²⁵

The Congress votes were won by the partisans of the Algeria cen-

Yimam, *The Ethiopian Student Movement and the National Question* for the entire document.

¹²² See Zewde Bahru, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia*, p. 209.

¹²³ Andreas Eshete, one of the writers behind the “Tumtu Lencho” response to “Tilahun Takele.”

¹²⁴ Abdul Mohamed, in Bahru Zewde, *Documenting the Ethiopian Student Movement*, p. 78.

¹²⁵ Tedla Seyum, in Bahru Zewde, *ibid.*, p. 114.

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ter; and ESUE voted to support the right of nations within Ethiopia to self determination.¹²⁶ ESUE was notoriously undemocratic and this was a major achievement, though it would not be the last word. According to Ayalew Yimam, “The ESUE leadership remained the untouchables of the student movement; self-criticism was unknown, and criticism from others was considered an insult—a challenge to the underground organization at that early age.”¹²⁷

The very next month, delegates headed to Los Angeles for the 19th Congress of ESUNA. However, there was immediate acrimony between the adherents of the “Tilahun Takele” document, ie, the supporters of the Algeria center, and the existing leadership of the Union led by Senay Likke. After only one day of contentious debate and parliamentary manipulation, Senay Likke led a walkout¹²⁸, causing ESUNA to split into two rival associations. Mesfin Habtu was elected president of the group that represented the newer, pro-Algiers activists.

The ESUNA split generated deep sectarianism and personal bitterness, and it simply proved impossible to patch things up. Alem Habtu remembers,

After the 1971 split, when the Senay group invited me to their caucus, I was the only one from the “old” leadership to advise them to rejoin the majority and struggle for their ideas as a minority group. As my brother, Mesfin Habtu was leading the majority, Senay Likke and some of his followers came up with the refrain, “blood is thicker than water.” They did so also because of my profound conflict with Senay Likke and Hagos Gebre Yesus on the publication of the so-called open letter in the 1971 *ESUNA Bi-Monthly* issue. Sensing the gravity of the rift that was occurring in the student movement, upon returning to New York, Alem and Mesfin agreed to work hard to call an extraordinary ESU-

¹²⁶ See Bahru Zewde, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia*, pp. 212–213.

¹²⁷ Ayalew Yimam, *The Ethiopian Student Movement and the National Question*, p. 17.

¹²⁸ See Bahru Zewde, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia*, p. 215.

NA congress around Christmas.”¹²⁹

According to Kiflu Tadesse, writing as a chronicler of the movement, “Sennay Likke left the organization along with the group’s funds and other property.”¹³⁰

Some of the vitriol at this time can be seen in a report issued by the Hagos Gebre Yesus-led executive council in August 1971, condemning those supporting the document from Algeria: “[T]hey can only confuse the weak minded, the unread and the unconscious. There are a number of reactionary and anarchic petty bourgeois ideological concepts that they are trying to spread, but time and social practice is indeed and will soon expose them for what they are.”¹³¹

The personal bad blood did nothing but fester. During the Summer congresses, Senay Likke and Hagos Gebre Yesus published some private correspondence of Mesfin Habtu that revealed his ties to the Algeria center. Meant to be damning, the correspondence is actually a fascinating peek into what the comrades in Algeria were up to. An excerpt of the correspondence from Benyam Adane in Algiers reads,

What we need at present is an organization big enough and that can keep its purity so as to enable it to surmount all the difficulties that will confront it. (I am discussing this in light of your attempted foco and the political forces that are cropping up in the arena of Ethiopian politics.) I can assure you one thing comrade—that we can form such an organization in less than a year. After all, despite the difficulties here, we have not slept and the sous terre Organization that has started inside has given me fantastic inspiration.¹³²

¹²⁹ Alem Habtu, “The Ethiopian Student Movement— *op. Cit.* p. 4.

¹³⁰ Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation, Part 1*, p. 95.

¹³¹ ESUNA Executive Council, “A Brief Report on a Current Problem,” in *ESUNA Bi-Monthly*, August 1971, p. 7.

¹³² Cited in “Open Letter,” without attribution, probably by Hagos Gebre Yesus or Senay Likke, in *ESUNA Bi-Monthly*, August 1971, p. 11. Alem Habtu says the letter was from Benyam Adane to Mesfin Habtu.

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According to Alem Habtu¹³³, who was then living with his brother Habtu and others in New York, the private correspondence was passed along to Senay Likke by one of the Haile Fida-connected roommates. Alem Habtu says that he felt compromised in sharing with Habtu the details of what he suspected happened by his pledge to keep the existence of *Meison* secret. Apparently deeply stressed by the general turn of events and brooding over a sense of personal betrayal, Mesfin Habtu committed suicide on November 1, 1971 in the New York apartment. He was 23.

Although his life was taken by his own hand, it was obvious that the high octane, high-stakes stress of organizing was at fault; Mesfin Habtu joined the ranks of the movement's martyrs. It was then up to Zeru Kehishen, who enrolled in a master's program at City University, to continue the work started by Mesfin in New York, connecting Ethiopians in the U.S. with the Algeria center.¹³⁴

The next year, ESUNA published an extraordinary pamphlet. Entitled *Hand Book on Elementary Notes on Revolution and Organization*, it was prepared by ESUNA's Executive Council in August 1972. Dedicated to Mesfin Habtu's memory and bearing his portrait, its near-fifty pages comprised a primer on to how to make a revolution; its bright red cover was clearly meant to evoke Mao's "Quotations," popularly known as the Red Book. A combination of original writing focused on Ethiopia and the ESM and, oddly, mostly uncredited snippets from revolutionary theorists like Mao, Lenin, and Ho Chi Minh, the *Hand Book* discusses everything from an evaluation of class society, the theoretical necessity of building a Marxist-Leninist party and the differences between a party and a mass organization, and the strategies for building both. It covers methods of clandestinity, the strategic need for armed struggle, and standards for behavior, even including a warning list of pitfalls for activists. Anyone who read this pamphlet would have had to do a double-take that this was a "student" publication. It was a major advance.

¹³³ See Alem Habtu, *The Ethiopian Student Movement*, *op. Cit.*

¹³⁴ See Kiflu Tadesse, *op. Cit.*, p. 96.

While the Algeria center did not initially represent a specific, public-facing party—or, in the language being used at the time, a Marxist-Leninist vanguard party—it became increasingly clear it was acting like one; and the stolen correspondence cited above makes clear the intent. A Provisional Organizing Committee consisting of Berhane Meskel, Benyam Adane and Iyasou Alemayehu was set up¹³⁵ to pave the way toward constructing a more formal organization. This committee started organizing circles of members among Ethiopian students in Europe, North America, the Middle East, and even several cities in the Soviet Union.¹³⁶

The shuttle diplomacy from Algiers did not just include roping together groups and individuals in the Ethiopian student diaspora, it was also engaged in building ties with other regional revolutionary players.

High on this list were the Eritreans. In December 1971, Berhane Meskel and Kiflu Tadesse flew to Baghdad to meet with representatives of the Eritrean Liberation Front.¹³⁷ The ELF had been founded in 1961 and was widely regarded with some suspicion in Ethiopia as being an agent of reactionary Arab states. Kiflu reports that this meeting was not productive, though they wound up maintaining relatively constructive relations over the period to come, perhaps because of the factionalism inside the *Eritrean* movement.

Osman Saleh Sabbe led a breakaway faction of the ELF called the Popular Liberation Forces that eventually adopted a much more left-wing face than the original front. The ELF-PLF eventually became the EPLF, and Osman himself was eventually forced out by Isaias Afewerki. The EPLF's relationship with Ethiopian revolutionaries was much more complex, as we will see, though at this period following the foiled hijacking that cost Walleign and Martha their lives, relations seemed cordial. A delegation from Algiers also visited Osman in Beirut at the

¹³⁵ See Kiflu Tadesse. *op. Cit.*, p. 78.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

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end of the year, and some grounds for cooperation was reached.¹³⁸

Finally it was time for the network of revolutionaries to take a qualitative step forward. Delegates were invited to West Berlin in April 1972 from the regions where the Algiers group had been building support to attend the founding congress of the Ethiopian Peoples' Liberation Organization (EPLO). Because of repression in the aftermath of the hijacking, no representatives from Ethiopia itself were able to attend. Only nine delegates, all male, attended the congress, including Berhane Meskel Redda, Iyasou Alemayehu, Tesfaye Debessay, Kiflu Tadesse, Kiflu Teferra, Mekonnen Jotte¹³⁹, Melaku Tegegn, Mohammad Mahfuz, and Abdissa Ayana¹⁴⁰. The delegates reached agreement on the issues that the center had been building support on, and most significantly, "Agreement was also reached on the ultimate goal of the revolution, the maximum program, which was to establish socialism in Ethiopia."¹⁴¹

In his incredibly comprehensive insider account of the group's founding and history, *The Generation*, congress participant Kiflu Tadesse reveals an extraordinary detail: "After a lengthy debate on the issue, especially after some discussion on how communist parties in other countries were formed, it was agreed that this first congress enter into the history of the organization as the First Communist Party of Ethiopia, a concealed core of the EPLO."¹⁴² By way of comparison, it's worth noting that the founding congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921 was attended by 13 men; the founding congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, the future Communist Party of the Soviet Union, was attended by nine men in 1898.

An initial structure of the organization was established. Berhane Meskel Redda was voted General Secretary. Seven people were chosen to make up a Central Committee (CC) of EPLO: Kiflu Teferra,

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 97.

¹³⁹ Mekonnen Jotte later switched allegiances to *Meison*, something that was not unheard of at that stage of the Ethiopian revolutionary movement.

¹⁴⁰ See Kiflu Tadesse, *op. Cit.*, p. 99

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 99.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 100.

Zeru Kehishen, Desta Tadesse, Kiflu Tadesse, Iyasou Alemayehu, Tesfaye Debessay and Berhane Meskel. They ranged in age from 23 to 30.¹⁴³ After the Congress, the delegates returned to the countries in which they were studying or working, and the work of building EPLO continued, though still very much underground. As we will see in the following chapter, the EPLO saw commencement of the armed struggle as only part of its future path; but before it could undertake qualitative steps in that direction, it needed money, arms and military training.

In the late sixties, ELF guerrillas had requested military support from the People's Republic of China; and delegations of Eritreans subsequently received military training and presumably arms. But despite some tentative inquiries, no socialist state seems to have provided direct support to EPLO. However, EPLO was successfully in petitioning the most radical of the Palestinian liberation organizations for help. At the time, Ethiopian revolutionary propaganda was highly focused on anti-imperialism, which targeted the United States, a prime backer of the Haile Selassie regime. But Israel was also a close ally of the emperor, and the role of Israel in training the repressive Ethiopian military made anti-Zionism a natural addition to the radical Ethiopians' anti-imperialism.

And so in a significant upping the ante of commitment, at the end of 1972 CC member Tesfaye Debessay traveled from Europe to U.S. to recruit volunteers for military training. Tesfaye was a well-liked activist who had been studying theology in Italy. The volunteers flew to Syria and Beirut to train with the Palestinians of the PFLP and DPFLP.¹⁴⁴ By late 1973, the Ethiopians had completed their training and prepared to return home to Ethiopia via Eritrea. Joining the volunteers in the Palestinian camps was Benyam Adane from the Algiers center.¹⁴⁵

Those who stayed behind in their host countries also upped the ante. According to Kiflu, in ESUNA, “some of the most dedicated indi-

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 101.

¹⁴⁴ Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and its split off, the Democratic Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, see Kiflu Tadesse, *op. Cit.*, p. 103.

¹⁴⁵ Kiflu Tadesse. Ibid., p. 103.

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viduals became proficient in karate and all studied the *Anarchist Cookbook* to learn how to concoct Molotov cocktails and the like.”¹⁴⁶ This just a matter of months after such practices had been derided as reckless and adventurist.

Movement unity continued to be a problem, however. As EPLO ranks expanded, *Meison* was also looking to recruit and consolidate, and this started to cause deeper ruptures in both the United States and Europe.

Alem Habtu, still in New York, recounts a visit from none other than *Meison*'s founder, Haile Fida himself. One of the interesting things revealed here is that Senay Likke and his followers did not turn into the arms of *Meison* when they walked out of ESUNA.

In April 1972, Haile Fida and Dr. Elihu Feleke (then president of ESUE) came to New York and met separately with both “old” and “new” ESUNA leaders [meaning the Senay and pro-EPLO factions, respectively—ed.]. Presumably, they wanted to have their own take on the field of play in North America. As an aside or not, Haile Fida met with MEISON members Melesse [Ayalew] and Dessalegn in the apartment they shared with me. Melesse told me that he had secured Haile Fida's consent to have me join the meeting, although I was not a member but was made privy to its existence in June 1971. A member of MEISON who was visiting from Addis and was staying with us also joined the meeting. Two items struck me at that meeting and have stayed with me ever since. One was that Haile Fida was asking Melesse and Dessalegn about whether or not they accept the MEISON Secretariat's directive to move to a neighboring country (Sudan). The two responded that they first wanted to discuss the substantive issues of the objective and subjective conditions for a revolutionary situation in Ethiopia, including “the national question.” Haile Fida

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 103.

insisted that they would have to accept the secretariat's directive first before substantive issues could be discussed. Due to this deadlock, no substantive discussion took place. Haile Fida impressed me as an organizational man, not as a reflective thinker. The second item was what transpired as a result of my persistent question of why ESUE abruptly told us to stop all communications with the Algeria group. Haile Fida finally said that he was afraid that an alliance would be created between the “old” ESUNA leaders (who he said were more advanced in the social sciences than their ESUE counterparts) and the Algerian group at the expense of those leaders in Europe. At this point the MEISON visitor from Addis spoke for the first and only time: “Haile that is stupid, simply stupid.” It became clear to me from this meeting that Haile Fida was preoccupied with the issue of political power above all else. MEISON (Europe) leaders and ROLE [Revolutionary Organization for the Liberation of Ethiopia] / EPRP (Algeria) leaders had forged a marriage of convenience against “old” ESUNA in order to sideline the latter.¹⁴⁷

It was at the next Congress of ESUE, also held in West Berlin, in April 1973, that a spirit of division in the movement seemed to pass the point of no return. Underlying the issues actually up for debate, largely organizational ones about how the world-wide Ethiopian student movement should be organized and who would control their various publishing arms, was actually the subterranean competition between the two secret organizations, EPLO and *Meison*. The end result was that a new world-wide student organization, the World-wide Federation of Ethiopian Students, or WWFES, was created to supersede the existing global confederation of unions. WWFES, along with ESUNA and some smaller national groups, came to be controlled by partisans of EPLO. ESUE came to be controlled by supporters of Haile Fida's

¹⁴⁷ Alem Habtu, “*The Ethiopian Student Movement*,” *op. Cit.*

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Meison.

Congress participant Yeraswork Admassie recalled the tense atmosphere: “One evening, Berhane Meskel and Haile [Fida] were having an argument. Both men’s veins stood out and people kept their distance, apprehensive that an explosion was in the offing. While we were both in prison¹⁴⁸, I had the opportunity to ask Haile what it was all about. He replied, ‘We were telling each other that he would be answerable for it later.’ We all know the fateful consequences of those differences.”¹⁴⁹

The congress participants also argued over events back home. Fentahun Tiruneh remembers how the Haile Fida supporters criticized the path of the USAA:

With regard to the union at home, ESUE members characterized it by elitism, ultra-leftism and left adventurism. They remarked at the union at home was dominated by infantile leftists. They argued that the shift in the locus of violent struggle from university students to secondary school students was due to grave errors in leadership.... They cited concrete incidents to amplify their allegations. They cited revolutionary songs such as “*Fano Tesemara...*” (‘Rebels spread...’) sung by students, to be expressions of ultra-left illusions. They also pointed to ultra-left errors by USUAA leadership when they commemorated the Paris Commune in 1971, despite the low level of consciousness present among the students at home.¹⁵⁰

The enmity between factions became highly charged. This is how a pro-EPLO chapter of the ESM in the Netherlands wrote about the pro-*Meison* leadership of ESUE the following year: “One of the main leaders of this reactionary group is none other than Yohannes Mesfin, a reactionary bourgeois offspring, who wrote a violent attack against the right of nationalities to self-determination in collaboration with Fikre

¹⁴⁸ In 1977–78.

¹⁴⁹ Yeraswork Admassie in Bahru Zewde, *Documenting the Ethiopian Student Movement*, pp. 61–62.

¹⁵⁰ Fentahun Tiruneh, *op. Cit.*, p. 92.

Merid, another member of the ESUE leadership *mafia*.¹⁵¹

Countdown to Dawn

As the months went by, it became increasingly evident that qualitative shifts were taking place in the movement, and this was true both in the diaspora and at home. Demonstrations, violence, arrests, imprisonments, expulsions, these had become routine facts of existence for Ethiopian leftists. Those abroad became almost hyperactive, throwing themselves into cementing ties, building organization, and bidding for international solidarity. They must have felt time rushing forward, racing to prepare themselves for what was becoming an obvious horizon of revolutionary opportunity.

While the student milieu continued to be a kind of crucible of revolution through the months and years to follow, at this moment it's clear that these young people were no longer interested in being part-time activists. They wanted to become professional revolutionaries. Hiwot Teffera explains,

The reason the students quit school was to pursue the struggle professionally. That was how the underground organization that I joined (which was later named *Abyot*) was born.... Organized, albeit rudimentarily, and armed with Marxist theory, the students wanted to take their struggle to an even higher plane. It had been quite a while since they were shouting, "Freedom is won through struggle and violence." Che Guevara had cast his spell on them and jungle became bewitching and transcendental. Mao's 12,000 kilometer Long March gave hope and inspiration and Dien Bien Phu symbolized victory in all its glamour.¹⁵²

Hiwot Teffera felt the preparations keenly. About the summer of 1973, she observed: "What was interesting was that, without communi-

¹⁵¹ From "The Fight Against the Reactionary Leaders of ESUE," *The Proletariat*, labelled Vol. 1 No. 1, 1974 but probably 1975, published by the Ethiopian Students' Union in Holland.

¹⁵² Hiwot Teffera, *op. Cit.*, p. 95.

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cation of any kind, at exactly the same time *Abyot* members were training in Taekwondo in Langano, some members of the Algeria Group... were taking military training with Nayef Hawatmeh's Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine—and the rest with Yasser Arafat's Al Fatah in Syria!"¹⁵³

The question became for the Ethiopian left—how much more time did they have to prepare for the coming deluge? They knew Haile Selassie was not invincible. Having studied world revolutions intently, they knew that the small and weak of today can unite to cast aside the big and powerful when the big and powerful outlives its moment in time. As Chairman Mao—whose writings and speeches were the subject of exhaustive study by the ESM—once said, “Everything is subject to change. The big decadent forces will give way to the small new-born forces. The small forces will change into big forces because the majority of the people demand this change.”¹⁵⁴

EPLO CC member Kiflu Tadesse reports this remarkable exchange: “As late as December 1973, a few weeks before the 1974 movement broke out, Berhane Meskel met Haile Fida in Berlin and asked him how soon he envisioned the revolution to begin. Haile declared that he could not envision it coming within the coming twenty five years.”¹⁵⁵ This difference in perspective was an ongoing underlying theme in intra-movement conflicts.

And so by the end of 1973, the Ethiopian leftist movement was polarized into roughly three camps. The oldest members of the revolutionary generation were largely in exile, settling into their academic titles, arguing for their points of view, and preparing for a long march ahead. The younger members of that generation were organizing intensely and urgently; for some, international conferences were giving way to guerrilla training missions. And those back home were watching the contradictions in the society around them become more and more

¹⁵³ Hiwot Teffera, *ibid.*, p. 98–99.

¹⁵⁴ Mao Zedong, “U.S. Imperialism Is a Paper Tiger,” Speech of July 14, 1956. Accessed from Marxist Internet Archive. (www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-5/mswv5_52.htm).

¹⁵⁵ Kiflu Tadesse, *op. Cit.*, p. 85.

obvious, and doing their part to exacerbate them.

Kiflu continues,

The split that took place amongst the Ethiopian radicals of the period was based on a clear difference of opinion concerning what they perceived was the correct strategy for the Ethiopian revolution and the assessment of the situation.... The youthful veterans of the political battles that took place in the late 1960s in Ethiopia were firmly convinced that immediate and forceful action was the catalyst required to release the pent-up revolutionary potential in Ethiopia. Action-oriented and aggressive, they were inclined to doubt the judgement of the older activists who had lived abroad for over a decade. Most certainly, there was an unwillingness to defer to them. Among those latter, those, like Haile Fida, who had devoted a good part of their life to the student movement and enjoyed considerable support within it, saw themselves as rightful leaders of any political movement created by the intelligentsia. This was unacceptable to strong individuals in the radical movement who rejected authority of any kind.¹⁵⁶

But the horizon was breaking. Haile Fida was wrong and Berhane Meskel was right; and Ethiopia was about to change forever. And for the political exiles, both Bale and Bole would be stops on the road home. Was the movement ready to see the Black Vietnam become a reality?

Polemicizing against the comrades in Algeria, “Tumto Lencho” had argued in mid-1971,

The December massacre is in many ways a turning point; more than this, it is a mirror which suddenly revealed to all that the movement was profoundly weak and flawed through and through. The infantile illusion that revolution was around the corner, an illusion entertained by a signif-

¹⁵⁶ Kiflu Tadesse, *ibid.*, p. 85.

icant portion of the student activists, was now shattered. So too was the unexpected belief that the regime was constrained from dealing violently with the sons and daughters of its own bureaucrats and henchmen.¹⁵⁷

Hello, 1971? Meet 1974.

¹⁵⁷ Tumtu Lencho, "The Question of Nationalities and Class Struggle in Ethiopia," in ESUNA, *Challenge*, Vol. 11, No. 2, July 1971, reprinted in Ayalew Yimam, *The Ethiopian Student Movement and the National Question*, p. 199.

Chapter 4

Armed Struggle and the Revolutionary Vision

*“A revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. It can be added that a revolution is neither shouting revolutionary slogans, or parading on the streets with Mao Tse-tung or Che Guevara badges. Nor is it exhibiting long hairs or carrying Marxist books in one’s hands or pockets. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another. It is a battle of strategy and tactics.”—ESUNA, *Hand Book on Elementary Notes on Revolution and Organization*¹⁵⁸*

“The seizure of power by armed force, the settlement of the issue by war, is the central task and the highest form of revolution.”—Mao Zedong, “Problems of War and Strategy”¹⁵⁹

“Why did Walleligne die? Why did Marta die? Freedom and liberty would only be obtained by force and through struggle!”—A song of the revolutionary student movement, early 1970s¹⁶⁰

Ideological Legacies, Ethiopian Realities

The more one studies the Ethiopian revolutionary period, the stronger the urge to compare it to that of Russia. There are many political and social parallels between the two empires at the time of their rev-

¹⁵⁸ ESUNA, *Hand Book on Elementary Notes on Revolution and Organization*, p. 18; in large part paraphrasing Mao Zedong.

¹⁵⁹ November 6, 1938, featured in *Quotations from Chairman Mao*.

¹⁶⁰ Quoted in Gedion Wolde Amanuel, editor, *Game Changers of Identity Politics in Ethiopia*, p. 4; the references are to Wallelign Mekonnen and Martha Mebrahtu.

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olutionary crises and repeating patterns can even be seen in the unfolding sequence of revolutionary events. But it must be acknowledged that the biggest difference between the two is that the revolutionary crisis in Ethiopia unfolded in a world that had already seen great revolutionary events that profoundly transformed society in two of the largest countries on the planet. It's logical that Ethiopian revolutionaries would study these events and orient their own efforts in those larger contexts. It's complicated in this post-Soviet century marked by the globalization not only of economies, but of ideas, to understand the worlds in which these events occurred; and it's imperative to reach back to those earlier times to see how important *radical ideology* was to what happened.

The revolutionaries of Lenin's generation grew up in a European culture where some form of mass politics had been replacing imperial whim for already a century. The revolutionary left of Lenin's time got its inspiration from philosophical studies in academia, from experience in street-fighting, industrial organizing struggles, spells of imprisonment or banishment to varying communities of exiles, and even parliamentary debate. Republicanism, labor organizing, social welfare, philosophical altruism: these things were already established if not universally welcomed phenomena in European political culture, and as exotic and backwards as Russia might have been considered, it was still Europe. On one level, revolutionaries like Lenin and his co-thinkers existed in a kind of cultural reaction to secular European political and philosophical culture; on another, they understood that social change would be made by consciously resisting the political equilibrium of the day. They had internalized Marx's famous dictum that "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it."¹⁶¹ The world would not just happen, it would be consciously shaped and molded. They saw themselves as heirs to living and obvious radical traditions acting out of historical necessity and personal commitment.

It is not surprising that when the modern era arrived in Ethiopia, certain expectations of "modernism" were strictly controlled. Much of

¹⁶¹ Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," 1845; accessible at the Marxist Internet Archive. It's worth noting that this quote appeared on the cover of certain issues of the EPRP's *Abyot*.

the modernization encouraged by the emperor had a “for show” quality: parliament without political parties, trade unions built not by workers organizing themselves but by international organizations attempting to forestall militancy. But in encouraging education and relying on world resources to supply it, the empire opened a kind of Pandora’s box: all the traditions and philosophies which were alien to the emperor’s vision of his country came right in the front door. Students reaching for an education in the physical sciences, for example, wound up with an education in the science of socialism and making revolution.

During the Cold War, the western narrative of a world in which professed “democracy” was pitted against supposed “communism” seemed far removed from the African reality in which Ethiopian students found themselves. The advent of anti-colonial struggles running the spectrum from the valiant tradition of Ethiopian resistance to Italian fascism, to Dien Bien Phu, to the Battle of Algiers, to the Mau Mau rebellion; the overthrow of a gangster state in Cuba; the intense Western drive to subvert African leaders who preached economic independence from Europe and America; all these excited and then informed the Ethiopian movement. Marxism was becoming a kind of common tongue in both Western universities and among people newly determined to overcome the depravities of colonialism and imperialism, and that tongue, that ideology, offered not only an explanation for why things were the way they were, but it offered roadmaps to a better, more liberated future.

If there were limits on what could be officially translated and published into Amharic in a country without freedom of the press, there does not seem to have been a careful ban on the importation of revolutionary literature from abroad in English. The mass importation of inexpensive Marxist-Leninist texts from Beijing and Moscow—and at first those were all in English as well—doesn’t seem to have really gotten underway until 1974, but before then one could freely visit the library at the Soviet Permanent Exhibition¹⁶² in Addis Ababa. And if there were radical texts circulating on campuses in North America and Europe, those made it freely to radical circles back home where they were trea-

¹⁶² Now called the Russian Centre for Science and Culture, RCSC.

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sured and shared.

The dramatic divergences in the 1960s between the two socialist giants, the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, meant that by the time Ethiopian radicals started to embrace Marxism-Leninism, there was not actually one Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy for them to simply adopt. If the revolutionary *moment* in Ethiopia closely matched the Russian revolutionary one, Ethiopia was not nearly as industrialized a country, and so in crucial ways, the Chinese, Cuban and Vietnamese examples offered lessons of relevance the Russian one did not. As the radical movement snowballed during the lives of one young generation, it was forced in some ways to *invent* political praxis for itself out of different strands of revolutionary ideology. In a country with very little *political* tradition to refer to, this made for a vibrant, albeit combustible political community.

It is clear, though, that the Ethiopian student radicals had come to embrace the doctrine of revolutionary armed struggle, passing over social-democratic notions of gradualism and reform. They were inspired by the forms of revolutionary organizing and, frankly, revolutionary violence, espoused in other peasant-based economies where the industrial proletariat was underdeveloped, and thus was an inadequate fulcrum for the overthrow of the existing order. As African revolutionaries, they were quick to identify imperialism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism as primal enemies, holding the United States in particular responsible for being the predatory power behind Ethiopia's native compradors. It was only natural that the ideological contributions of figures like Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh and Che Guevara would be as relevant to the movement as those of Marx and Lenin. Where many socialist leaders preached global peace, Che urged the creation of "two, three, many Vietnams,"¹⁶³ in other words, many fronts on a global struggle. And if the African-American freedom struggle was a profound influence on Ethiopian revolutionaries, it was not the apostles of non-violence who

¹⁶³ See Che's "Message to the Tricontinental," published in Cuba in 1967, for his stirring call for a multi-front struggle of African, Asian, Latin American, and even European peoples against imperialism. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/guevara/1967/04/16.htm>.

made an impact but the fiery younger generation of militants like the Panthers.

Let us take a deeper look at some of the political concepts embraced by the growing Ethiopian revolutionary movement.

The Imperative of Violence

Aside from the national question that we've already examined, there were two prime political considerations for the Ethiopian movement. First, the limitations of peaceful and legal struggle, and second, the implied differences in goals, strategies and tactics between a primarily industrial society and a primarily peasant one.

In retrospect it's fascinating that the first of these questions which arguably continues to dominate Western social movement discourse into the 21st-century was not something the movement spent a lot of time debating. Without even the illusion of democratic niceties in Ethiopia, the need for the complete overthrow of the system was self-evident. Nobody in the radical ESM was advocating non-violent resistance as a principle.

Chairman Mao (1893–1976) famously advised that “political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.”¹⁶⁴ Misunderstood by some as a glorification of violence, what Mao is really offering is a simple understanding of how states ultimately rely on brute force to preserve class rule. With the ruthlessness of the Haile Selassie regime, this was self-evident to radical Ethiopians.

If Mao is saying that political power and political struggle can't be understood without understanding the social role of violence, he doesn't leave it there. “Weapons are an important factor in war, but not the decisive factor; it is people, not things, that are decisive. The contest of strength is not only a contest of military and economic power, but also a contest of human power and morale. Military and economic power is necessarily wielded by people.”¹⁶⁵ This suggests that while a

¹⁶⁴ Mao Zedong, *Quotations of Chairman Mao*; original source “Problems of War and Strategy” (1938).

¹⁶⁵ Mao Zedong, *On Protracted War*, 1938

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violent confrontation might be inevitable, what appear to be poor odds can be rebalanced by the will of great numbers of determined people.

In 1963 Che Guevara cautioned, paraphrasing Karl Marx, “[W]e must not fear violence, the midwife of new societies. But that violence must break out at the precise moment when the leaders of the people have found circumstances favorable.”¹⁶⁶ It really appears that the Ethiopian revolutionary movement internalized this understanding and was preparing appropriately.

They would have seen the advice Lenin gave on the necessary physical confrontation with the capitalist state in his *State and Revolution*. They read the advice Mao gave on guerrilla strategy and building among the people. And they would have read the advice on resolute devotion to the struggle from Latin American revolutionaries being popularized by Havana’s Organization for the Solidarity of the Peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America (OSPAAAL); not only from Che Guevara and Fidel Castro but texts like this one from Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui published in the widely circulated magazine *Tricontinental*: “Revolution is, unfortunately, not made with fastings. Revolutionaries from all parts of the world must choose between being the victims of violence or using it. If one does not wish to see one’s spirit and one’s intelligence serving brute force, one must forcibly resolve to put brute force under the subservience of intelligence and the spirit.”¹⁶⁷

The second question is more complicated. It confronts the theoretical challenge of how a socialist movement organizes in a country where capitalism itself isn’t fully developed, and indeed, what its very goals are. There are many implications of this problem which could fill volumes, but we will concentrate here on the implications for certain strategic choices confronting the Ethiopian revolutionary movement. In later chapters we will go deeper into the questions of how the Ethiopian revolutionary movement understood what they were fighting for.

¹⁶⁶ Che Guevara, “Guerrilla War: A Method,” in *Venceremos!* (1963) p. 271.

¹⁶⁷ José Carlos Mariátegui, quoted in the *Tricontinental* introduction to “Ethics and Socialism” 1930/1967. (See the Marxist Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/mariategui/works/1930-ethics.htm>)

It's worth looking at how theoreticians like Mao distinguished the tasks of revolutionaries in China from the tasks of revolutionaries in Europe. In his classic text "Problems of War and Strategy," Mao first examined the forms of struggle in advanced capitalist countries:

But while the principle [for power] remains the same, its application by the party of the proletariat finds expression in varying ways according to the varying conditions. Internally, capitalist countries practice bourgeois democracy (not feudalism) when they are not fascist or not at war; in their external relations, they are not oppressed by, but themselves oppress, other nations. Because of these characteristics, it is the task of the party of the proletariat in the capitalist countries to educate the workers and build up strength through a long period of legal struggle, and thus prepare for the final overthrow of capitalism. In these countries, the question is one of a long legal struggle, of utilizing parliament as a platform, of economic and political strikes, of organizing trade unions and educating the workers. There the form of organization is legal and the form of struggle bloodless (non-military). On the issue of war, the Communist Parties in the capitalist countries oppose the imperialist wars waged by their own countries; if such wars occur, the policy of these Parties is to bring about the defeat of the reactionary governments of their own countries. The one war they want to fight is the civil war for which they are preparing. But this insurrection and war should not be launched until the bourgeoisie becomes really helpless, until the majority of the proletariat are determined to rise in arms and fight, and until the rural masses are giving willing help to the proletariat. And when the time comes to launch such an insurrection and war, the first step will be to seize the cities, and then advance into the countryside and not the other way about. All this has been done by Communist Parties in capitalist countries, and it has been proved correct by the

October Revolution in Russia.”¹⁶⁸

Mao then contrasts the strategy he was pursuing—ultimately successfully, and in exactly this way—in China. “China is different however. The characteristics of China are that she is not independent and democratic but semi-colonial and semi-feudal, that internally she has no democracy but is under feudal oppression and that in her external relations she has no national independence but is oppressed by imperialism. It follows that we have no parliament to make use of and no legal right to organize the workers to strike. Basically, the task of the Communist Party here is not to go through a long period of legal struggle before launching insurrection and war, and not to seize the big cities first and then occupy the countryside, but the reverse.”¹⁶⁹ Mao’s views were not universally accepted by twentieth-century revolutionaries, but they found wide support in the so-called third world where social conditions looked less like industrialized Europe and more like pre-revolutionary China.¹⁷⁰ Needless to say, radical Ethiopian students scoured his written works.

They also certainly studied the writings of the Vietnamese general Vo Nguyen Giap, who while he was in the process of defeating a third imperialist invader stressed the necessity for a balanced strategy. This quote was actually reproduced in an Ethiopian radical publication: “Our revolutionary war depends on the entire people’s strength and on the regular forces comprised of workers and peasants fighting the enemy... and using all means to coordinate attacks in rural and urban areas.”¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ Mao Zedong, “Problems of War and Strategy,” Nov, 1938 (Marxist Internet Archive www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_12.htm).

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Mao developed the theory of “new democracy” to map out how societies that have not fully developed capitalism can jump to socialism. It’s not altogether different in practice than Leon Trotsky’s theory of “permanent revolution,” though few adherents of either theoretician would find that a flattering comparison. A rich subject for a study unto itself, see chapters 6 and 8 of this volume for further examination of related questions.

¹⁷¹ Vo Nguyen Giap, quoted in *Abyot*, Special issue, 1978, “On Some Points of the Armed Struggle Waged by the People under the Leadership of the EPRP,” p.

Mohamed Yimam, who would join a cell of the revolutionary underground sometime in 1974, explains how the Chinese experience resonated with young Ethiopians:

We mostly read and discussed books that were shipped from Russia and China. Ideologically, we preferred the books from China. We thought the Chinese revolution was purer and more profound, and held relevant lessons for our situations. All of us... were fascinated by how a small group of guerrilla fighters who started from a small base of operations in a remote area could finally defeat a powerful government and establish the People's Republic of China.... We read *Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village* by William Hinton and *Red Star Over China* by Edgar Snow.... These books painted a poignant picture of revolution that captured our imagination and hence we read them more than once.¹⁷²

There was in fact a long tradition of guerrilla resistance in Ethiopia, not only from regional rebels against central authority but from the years of Italian occupation. The ESM proudly reflected on this legacy of resistance. For example, Melesse Ayalew wrote in an editorial in ESUNA's journal in 1971: "Even more significant is the history of the resistance struggle against Italian fascism between 1935 and 1941. Faced with the overwhelming power of fascism and betrayal by the feudal ruling oligarchy whose top representatives, led by Haile Selassie, fled to Europe early in the war, the Ethiopian people had nowhere to turn but rely entirely on their own resources. Under this circumstance, they evolved one of the earliest and successful cases of popular warfare."¹⁷³

Mao Zedong himself had something to say back in 1938 about the war against Italian fascism in Ethiopia, then often referred to as Abyssinia. He saw guerrilla struggle as key to a long-term perspective of

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¹⁷² Mohamed Yimam, *Wore Negari*, p. 53.

¹⁷³ "Editorial: Imperialism and National Liberation," Melesse Ayalew, *ESUNA Challenge*, Vol. XI, No. 1, Jan 1971.

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winning the war, then raging:

Why was Abyssinia vanquished? First, she was not only weak but also small. Second, she was not as progressive as China; she was an old country passing from the slave to the serf system, a country without any capitalism or bourgeois political parties, let alone a Communist Party, and with no army such as the Chinese army, let alone one like the Eighth Route Army¹⁷⁴. Third, she was unable to hold out and wait for international assistance and had to fight her war in isolation. Fourth, and most important of all, there were mistakes in the direction of her war against Italy. Therefore Abyssinia was subjugated. But there is still quite extensive guerrilla warfare in Abyssinia, which, if persisted in, will enable the Abyssinians to recover their country when the world situation changes.¹⁷⁵

Ethiopians probably would not have seen this *during* the Italian occupation—though some brave Italian communist internationalists did travel to Africa to join the Ethiopian resistance—but they certainly would have seen it by the 1960s when Mao’s works were being studied by the new generation of student revolutionaries worldwide.

What Kind of Armed Struggle?

The revolutionary student movement may have lined up behind the idea of armed struggle, but they were not so naive to believe that the immediate tasks of the movement were as simple as acquiring guns and heading off to the mountains *en masse*. Even when Senay Likke, clearly anxious for the conflict to begin, issued his “Bale or Bole” challenge, the movement seems to have understood the need for gravitas and deliberation... and more importantly, a mass base of support. It would not be simple or easy.

¹⁷⁴ The Eighth Route Army was one of the most important Communist guerrilla forces in China before liberation.

¹⁷⁵ Mao Zedong, *On Protracted War*, 1938.

4. Armed Struggle and the Revolutionary Vision

Abstract discussions like that around the national question had obvious serious ramifications. As one student movement publication wrote, “Without smashing the military, police, prisons, courts and etc. of the semi-feudal and semi-colonial state, the question of removing the nationality question will be difficult, if not impossible.”¹⁷⁶

Confronting the movement was a historic contradiction in the doctrine of armed struggle. While Mao’s theories of protracted people’s war and arguably the path of armed struggle pursued in Vietnam had proven successful strategies for revolutionaries, the post-Cuba praxis of Che had not. While Che would always be the inspirational *guerrillero heroico*, or heroic guerrilla, he died in the jungles of Bolivia with a small band of followers, isolated from mass struggle.

As much as Che was a revolutionary icon, his vision of how armed struggle advanced the social revolution seems to have been very different than Mao’s. Throughout his own writings on the subject, Che focused more on the effects of military action while Mao focused more on the building of a relationship between guerrilla fighters and the peasant communities around them. American Maoist theoretician Mike Ely contrasts the two visions of armed struggle: “Guevarism sought guerrilla zones that acted as catalysts for national crisis. Maoism sought political base areas that would function as a parallel state contending for countrywide power.”¹⁷⁷

To the extent that such a thing actually existed, the ideology of “Guevarism” was really the work of French adventurer Régis Debray, whose 1967 work *Revolution in the Revolution* circulated widely in the New Left. Based on Che’s own story, his writings, and positing unique social aspects for Latin America, Debray’s vision of armed struggle involved small bands of guerrillas creating many small inspirational flashpoints, or *focos*, deliberately isolated from local communities and their struggles, that would create a state of disorder that might be

¹⁷⁶ WWFES, “Editorial Note,” *Struggle*, May 1978, in Ayalew Yimam, *The Ethiopian Student Movement and the National Question*, p. 432.

¹⁷⁷ Mike Ely, “Focoism vs. Peoples War: Problems of Exaggerated Universality,” Kasama Project (2009) <https://kasamaarchive.org/2009/10/14/focoism-vs-peoples-war-problems-of-exaggerated-universality/>.

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exploited in order to collapse the existing order. Unfortunately for what came to be known as “*foquismo*,” or focoism, such small flashpoints were easily extinguished militarily, and the theory’s explicit disengagement from mass struggles was at worst a recipe for defeat and at best a prescription for ideological elitism.

As we will see, the Ethiopian left tended to avoid neat ideological silos. While Che’s symbolic heroism was widely admired as a kind of call to action, at least on paper the Ethiopian revolutionary movement understood the limitations of focoism, and endorsed practice based much more in line with the teachings of Mao. Certainly Régis Debray was widely read in the Ethiopian student diaspora, but it was becoming increasingly clear in the 1970s, especially given the catastrophic failure of the movement’s second hijacking attempt, that actually launching an armed struggle required more than heroic bromides.

Despite the inevitable critiques from their opponents, it seems pretty clear that the heavy study practiced by revolutionaries in the ESM resulted in a fairly sober approach to armed struggle. The 1971 ESUNA *Hand Book* confronts some of the implications for Ethiopian praxis:

There are some conscious Ethiopians who claim that there is no need of politicizing the masses. The solution presented by such people is the starting of “guerrilla warfare” immediately by way of installing a small band of conscious guerrillas in the countryside. The peasant are expected to rally to these liberators. This theory is wrong.... It forgets that the Ethiopian masses have time and again taken up arms and fought heroically, and that what they lack are not sharpshooters but capable organizers and political instructors.¹⁷⁸

Armed struggle was not seen just as a strategic choice, but actually an organizing method. The *Hand Book* goes on,

¹⁷⁸ ESUNA, *Hand Book on Elementary Notes on Revolution and Organization*, p. 23.

We choose armed struggle knowing it to be the most difficult, the one that calls for the greatest sacrifices, the one that most infuriates the feudalists and imperialists, but at the same time the one that constitutes the highest form of the popular struggle, the one that shatters the skepticism, fatalism, defeatism, obscurantism, fear and deception that have afflicted the masses, the one that brings all the positive qualities of the masses at present submerged under corruption, exploitation and injustice, the one that restores the feelings of national pride and confidence, a bright future, the one that is the only reply to the reactionary violence of the ruling class. We choose armed struggle because it is the only way that leads the broad masses of the people (led by the working class) to power.¹⁷⁹

During the factional struggle within the ESM leading up to 1974, armed struggle remained a subject of debate. The opponents of the Algiers center challenged them to be sure their enthusiasm for violence (and their support for regional separatists already engaged in armed struggle) was connected to clear revolutionary *political* struggle. “Unless ‘people’s war’ just means a conflict in which lots of people are engaged, how can their be a people’s war without an anti-feudalist and anti-imperialist program? Unless ‘armed struggle’ is narrowly interpreted to mean brandishing guns, as anarchists, terrorists, and adventurists seem to think, how can there be armed struggle without ‘a clear and progressive political program’ of struggle against the class enemies of feudalism and imperialism?”¹⁸⁰ Haile Fida’s supporters in the movement would go on to say during this debate, “starting an armed struggle with a handful of activists is not our task.”¹⁸¹

EPLO co-founder Kiflu Tadesse says that the comrades in Alge-

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁸⁰ Tumtu Lencho, “The Question of Nationalities and Class Struggle in Ethiopia, from *Challenge*, WWUES/ESUNA July 1971; reprinted in *Game Changers of Identity Politics in Ethiopia*, p. 63.

¹⁸¹ *Tiglatchen*, Number 4, 1973, quoted in Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation, Part I*, p. 80.

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ria and their supporters were aware of the necessities of building organization. “The EPLO group, convinced that the struggle was already underway, seriously objected to Haile Fida group’s position on the issue of armed struggle. The EPLO denied that it was pursuing a ‘focoist’ strategy and warned against those who decried the need to first politicise the masses and proposed the organization of small guerrilla bands. Those who regrouped around the EPLO agreed that political work was essential, but argued that it could be done most effectively in conjunction with a revolutionary war.”¹⁸²

Time would certainly tell.

In the next chapters, we will see how the unfolding situation in Ethiopia challenged the vision of the pre-1974 movement. The EPLO wing of the movement (the future EPRP/EPRA) would come to attempt to initiate rural armed struggle, and at least theoretically, accepted a critique of methods of armed struggle that diverged too far from *mass* struggle. In 1978 the EPRP wrote a document that called for understanding how armed struggle was only part of the revolution’s toolbox:

This confusion of form with content and strategy with tactics, a confusion that was prominent in the 60s, led to a fetishist approach to the question of violence and the automatic equation of taking up the gun with having a revolutionary line resulted in very many tragic [sic] focoist adventures in very many places. Quite a lot of parties and groups, having forgotten that a really revolutionary party must develop the capability of “walking on both legs” (legal/illegal, peaceful/violent, overt/covert or clandestine) and hopping from one to the other depending on the concrete situation, labelled all legal and peaceful forms of struggle as “opportunist”. These people, whom Lenin aptly called “inexperienced revolutionaries”, overlooked the basic points concerning revolutionary violence and missed the essential strategic point by failing to analyse the essence of the given political action

¹⁸² Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation, Part 1*, p. 81.

in relation to its class nature and its relevance to the revolutionary struggle in the country.¹⁸³

Furthermore,

Equating violence with revolutionary line in a simplistic and mechanical manner leads to taking armed struggle as the *only* form of struggle for *all* times. This reduces the question of revolutionary violence and peoples' war to mere focoist adventures and leads to a position of taking the vanguard organisation as a force independent from the class whose interests it purports to defend. This erroneous approach to the question misses the crucial fact that a party which has opted for armed struggle strategically can (and in many cases must) use peaceful methods of struggle under suitable conditions.¹⁸⁴

Ironically, the wing of the movement led by Haile Fida's *Meison* in opposition to the EPLO/EPRP would come to use a similar critique against the EPRP itself, conflating the early revolutionary enthusiasm of the movement with its actual practice during the revolutionary period. A pro-*Meison* student diaspora publication wrote a scathing attack on its factional opponents in 1977, which suggested some kind of virtual original sin.

In their sentimental and romantic proclivities, the Ethiopian infants drew the wrong lessons from the focoist adventures of Guevara in Bolivia. The obsession of the rebellious youth in the west with the Guevara "cult" at about the same period afforded the Ethiopian infants a show of wisdom to imbibe and imitate. The years 1968 and 1969, therefore, became the heydays of such "revolutionary" songs as: "*Fano Tesemara, Fano Tesemara; Bedur Bege delu Tiglun Litemarra;*

¹⁸³ EPRP, "On Some Points of the Armed Struggle Waged by the People under the Leadership of the EPRP," *Abyot*, Special issue, 1978, pp. 2–3

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

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Ende Ho Chi Minh, Ende Che Guevara.” The authors and populizers of this focoist hymn are to be found today in the very heart of the EPRP leadership. In propagating focoism, the infantiles not only denied the necessity of, and the urgency for, the creation of the proletariat party but also totally neglected the crucial task of mass political work and mobilization as a prior condition for the prosecution of the armed struggle.¹⁸⁵

Time would tell whether the Ethiopian revolutionaries would be able to avoid Che’s mistakes while upholding him as a heroic icon. The Eritrean fronts were already engaged in armed confrontations with the imperial government; and the former Ethiopian student activists had begun, at least in small numbers, to get preparatory training from various liberation movements in the Arab world. They had resolved to take their dream of armed struggle backed by political organizing seriously. They understood it would require a real mass-based organization.

To facilitate the march to the country-side, it is essential that a revolutionary organization be established. The foundation of a national liberation front will lend strength to the trends already underway. It shall be the work of such an organization to mediate between revolutionary theory and practice, between student and peasant and worker movements, between the city and the countryside, between the past and the future of our struggle. It is of the very nature of revolutionary practice to usher in new historic possibilities, new tasks and new men. We must now embark on this endeavor assigned to us by history.¹⁸⁶

It was words like these which deeply informed the revolutionary

¹⁸⁵ Yabiyot Mestawot, “Petty Bourgeois Radicalism and Left Infantilism in Ethiopia: A Genesis from Student Politics to Party Politics: The Case of EPRP,” in UPESUNA, *Unity & Struggle*, Vol. 1, No. 2, July 1977, p. 14.

¹⁸⁶ From the Forward to WWUES/ESANA, *The Liberation of the Imperial Ethiopian Government Embassy*, 1969, p. 3.

movement.

The question remains, for all the movement's debate over focoism and people's war, how would these play out in Ethiopia? Could talk be transformed into a social revolution? The ESM had been preparing for a protracted armed struggle against an Ethiopian government backed by U.S. imperialism. Yet it seemed doubtful that the United States was on the verge of provoking the Black Vietnam by sending troops to reinforce the emperor's rule or his various counterinsurgency efforts. How would an armed struggle unfold?

The movement had suffered martyrdom. But its ranks were full of people who understood what they were being asked to do. As ESUNA's *Hand Book* stated, "[I]t is one of the iron laws of the struggle that it be advanced forward at the price of genuine comrades. Some die, some get jailed and others are banished from their home. Whenever the enemy unleashes these attacks, we are never surprised—instead we unleash our own secret weapon... which is to sustain superior morale and a spirit of organization—unique only to revolutionaries. Only then can the revolution be assured a safe landing zone in our homeland."¹⁸⁷

It is said that no battle plan survives first contact with the enemy. In 1974, nothing could have been truer. "In a revolutionary period the situation changes rapidly and the knowledge of revolutionaries must change rapidly in accordance with the change in the situation. Repeating antiquated slogans and entertaining obsolete analyses will not do."¹⁸⁸

There would be a growing contradiction between the radical movement's aim of engaging an armed struggle for liberation and the success of their urban mass work. This tension is at the heart of the tragedy that unfolded. Armed struggle would only be a successful strategic component of revolutionary strategy if it gained mass support, and violence held the risk of being a two-edged sword.

The differences between the intellectuals who looked at the revolution in Ethiopia as a long march, and the younger activists whose ear

¹⁸⁷ ESUNA, *Hand Book on Elementary Notes on Revolution and Organization*, opening pages.

¹⁸⁸ EPRP, "On Some Points of the Armed Struggle Waged by the People under the Leadership of the EPRP," *Abyot*, Special issue, 1978, p. 13.

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to the ground spoke of urgency and rapid change were about to change from paper concerns to life and death decision-making.

Chapter 5

1974, The People Rise

“It was a small dog, a Japanese breed. His name was Lulu. He was allowed to sleep in the Emperor’s great bed. During various ceremonies, he would run away from the Emperor’s lap and pee on dignitaries’ shoes. The august gentlemen were not allowed to flinch or make the slightest gesture when they felt their feet getting wet. I had to walk among the dignitaries and wipe the urine from their shoes with a satin cloth. This was my job for ten years.”—A palace attendant interviewed by Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski¹⁸⁹

“The question of ‘whose revolution?’ can be firmly answered: the revolution belonged to the people, it was their achievement. The February Revolution was no military movement (except for those who see mutinies and ignore strikes), nor was it a creeping coup d’etat unless the way the coup de grace was given is taken as the substitute for the whole year long struggle of the people as a whole.”—EPRP insider Babile Tola¹⁹⁰

“The solution to these problems is first to overthrow the government and then dismantle the system.”—Democracia, No. 1¹⁹¹

Yekatit 66, the February Revolution

In the modern world, mass movements come and go. Upsurges disrupt and yet dissipate. Civil unrest returns to civil complacency. Tyrants quake, yet stare down their opponents and survive. But sometimes, the perfect storm of conjuncture arrives, and everything changes.

¹⁸⁹ Ryszard Kapuscinski, *The Emperor: Downfall of an Autocrat*, p. 5.

¹⁹⁰ Babile Tola, *To Kill a Generation*, p. 24.

¹⁹¹ Quoted in Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation, Part 1*, p. 121.

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The impossible becomes probable, the unexpected becomes real life, and foundations once thought to be made of stone collapse like wet cardboard; timeworn institutions implode, and people arise, as though shaking off slumber. A few well-aimed hammer blows, and a centuries-old colossus is no more. That was Ethiopia in February 1974; the month of *Yekatit* 1966 by the Ethiopic calendar. But not everybody was surprised.

The emperor was old, the empire was corrupt. The people were starving... in some rural areas, quite literally and on a massive scale, while the government did nothing to help them. In the words of Worku Lakew, recently out of university at the time, “You could smell the anger and misery of the people and the revolution that was about to come.”¹⁹²

University student Hiwot Teffera remembers how it started.

February 18 started as a day like any other when I left home in the morning.... I was standing in front of Mona Lisa Bar in Abware, a few steps from home, wondering where all the taxis had gone until a passerby told me that I was wasting my time waiting. He informed me the taxi drivers had gone on strike. They went on strike protesting high gas prices precipitated by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) embargo.¹⁹³

The nearly 18,000 members of the Ethiopian Teachers Association¹⁹⁴ walked off their jobs the same day. By the end of the month, according to Hiwot, “Demonstrations and strikes paralyzed the country.... The university campus seethed with turmoil. Once again the students’ demands included the reinstatement of the [student] union and its organ and the release of political prisoners such as Getachew [Maru] and others, as well as the unconditional return of the fifteen students suspended in December of the previous year.”¹⁹⁵

¹⁹² Worku Lakew, *Revolution, Love and Growing Up*, p. 93.

¹⁹³ Hiwot Teffera, *Tower in the Sky*, p. 67–69.

¹⁹⁴ See John Markakis/Nega Ayele, *Class and Revolution in Ethiopia*, p. 82.

¹⁹⁵ Hiwot Teffera, *Op. Cit.*, p. 67–69).

Military units across the country began to mutiny. And despite the lack of a free press, no political parties, and the stifling political traditions of Ethiopia's repressive monarchy, the various rebellious actors quickly created a political culture of appealing to the people directly through home-made media. Blair Thomson was the BBC correspondent in Addis Ababa. He recalled the events of late February:

Thursday was also the beginning of the “leaflet” revolution—what was to become a veritable “little rain” of paper. From early morning, army helicopters had been flying low over the city. At lunchtime, they began dropping leaflets. The first of these was directed primarily at the service units and the police, who had so far not committed themselves to the growing rebellion.... It was a most unusual document, carefully worded to make it clear from the outset that the Emperor was not the target of their discontent. It also revealed that the authors—the Air Force, Airborne Division, 29th Brigade and Engineering and Signals sections—had refused to accept orders to go to Asmara to quell the revolt in the Second Division. About an hour later another leaflet was dropped. This one was decidedly more political in content, using for the first time the phrase “revolutionary movement”... “From now on, anyone given authority should be given it with the support of the popular voice and not by a limited class of people.”¹⁹⁶

Another such leaflet read, “Ministers and generals enrich themselves at the expense of the soldier. Ethiopia rise. Crush the government that benefits only the few.”¹⁹⁷ These appeals were snapped up by a population hungry for change. Such leafletting was not confined to the capital. American teacher Barbara Olson recalls, “A pamphlet is being distributed right here in Gondar that accuses local *balabats*, or big shots,

¹⁹⁶ Blair Thomson, *Ethiopia, The Country That Cut Off Its Head: A Diary of the Revolution* (1975), pp. 34–35.

¹⁹⁷ Quoted in Markakis/Ayele, *Op. Cit.*, p. 86.

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of stealing from the people and urges jailing them.”¹⁹⁸

The imperial government attempted to make concessions. It lowered gas prices and made vague promises to the teachers. The taxi drivers resumed work but the teachers did not, and the unrest continued to spread. The people were in motion. Years of pent-up rage and frustration surfaced, and suddenly the arrival of a democratic political culture thanks to hijacked school mimeograph machines found Ethiopia’s urban population politically asserting themselves even in the face of violent threats from the government.

As one leftist observer recounted, “The autocrat, conscious that power was slipping from under, announced a change of Prime Ministers, from Aklilu to Endelkatchew. 3,000 students immediately took to the streets chanting the slogan, ‘A Popular Democratic Government—Yes! Ministerial Leap-Frogging—No!’”¹⁹⁹ Others put the number at 5,000 and noted the students were “singing the Ho Chi Minh march.”²⁰⁰ Remembering the suppressed military coup of 1960, the emperor acted quickly and removed his figurehead prime minister, an aristocrat named Aklilu Habtewold, replacing with him with a liberal aristocrat named Endalkatchew Makonnen. The rubber stamp cabinet was dismissed, and a pay raise was offered to the military, whose mutineers temporarily returned to their barracks. But the people stayed in the streets.

The imperial government had not previously hesitated to drown even minor rebellions against its authority in blood, but not this time: They blinked. What once looked like an impenetrable edifice of power was revealed to be riddled with weakness; and the military was no longer its reliable instrument. Significant concessions were made and the government was handed to a sequence of reform-minded bureaucrats, but the people were not silenced. In the moment of that blinking, imperial power began to dissipate.

Blair Thomson observed,

¹⁹⁸ Barbara W. Olson, *op. Cit.*, pp. 354–355.

¹⁹⁹ “A special correspondent,” “Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ethiopia,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Mar 4, 1978, p. 466.

²⁰⁰ René Lefort, *Ethiopia: An Heretical Revolution*, p. 55

The combined effect of the Yekati Riots and the army pay mutinies gave the country's radicals an opportunity to take the initiative. It also opened the way, for the first time since the 1960 coup attempt, for those deliberately created divisions in the aristocracy and military to come to the surface. And it forced the Emperor to appear at least to be giving up his almost god-like hold over the nation.²⁰¹

The Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions, or CELU, had been founded in 1962. It was created with the sponsorship of pro-imperialist forces in world labor, that is to say, the American Federation of Labor–Congress of Industrial Organizations or AFL–CIO, who hoped to create a captive, docile labor organization with whom the “business community” could cooperate, forestalling more militant working class organizing while claiming to promote the free organization of workers. Of course it wasn't CELU's original intention to become a breeding-ground for Ethiopian Bolsheviks: It's not for nothing that the AFL–CIO has been somewhat less than jokingly referred to worldwide as the “AFL–CIA.”

The revolutionary movement had an understanding of CELU. The *Hand Book* produced by ESUNA described it as an organization built to put the brakes on popular struggle: “[B]ureaucratic leaders and traitors to the working class (leaders of CELU) restrict the working class's struggle and slow down the process whereby it becomes the class conscious vanguard of the revolution.”²⁰² And yet, by March 8, CELU—with all its compromised history—initiated a general strike.

Given the embryonic and deeply bureaucratic nature of Ethiopian capitalism, this meant a general strike against the government. CELU represented not only the relatively small Ethiopian industrial and manufacturing proletariat, but civil service workers, airline workers, office workers, and others. When the CELU action ended after making broad political demands on the government, smaller strikes sprung up every-

²⁰¹ Blair Thomson, *Op. Cit.*, p. 46.

²⁰² ESUNA, *Hand Book On Elementary Notes on Revolution and Organization* (1972), p. 17.

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where. A strike against the main bus company owned by the emperor himself lasted a month. Priests from the government-sanctioned Orthodox Church went on strike. And these actions were not simply concerned with economic interests of workers; they addressed such issues as access to education, civil rights, even land ownership.

Across Ethiopia's urban centers, the protests took on a distinctly radical political tone. According to one leftist observer, the residents of the town of Jimma went even further, challenging the local government for power itself.

The popular uprising by the townsmen of Jimma took place towards the end of March. A mammoth demonstration that embraced almost the entire population of the town confronted the police force and expelled the governor and his officials. A 34-people committee was elected by popular will to administer the town in place of the deposed provincial administration. Composed mainly of teachers, students and merchants, and accountable to the people, this committee remained in power for weeks. The only place where popular insurrection developed into a popularly elected government, Jimma recalled shades of the Commune. It remained a step ahead of the countrywide mass movement. The class struggle in Jimma was particularly sharp and the movement of the masses that much more advanced.²⁰³

As the economic demands of protesters were soon surpassed by political demands, segments of society for whom political activity had been previously unimaginable sprang into action. There were mass demonstrations by priests, and by prostitutes.²⁰⁴ Prisoners rebelled in Addis Ababa, resulting in a crackdown that took over a hundred lives, "mostly the taxi drivers and students who had been jailed from earlier

²⁰³ "A special correspondent," "Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ethiopia," *Op. Cit.*, p. 467.

²⁰⁴ See Ghelawdewos Araia, *Ethiopia: The Political Economy of Transition*, (1995) p. 76.

transportation strikes.”²⁰⁵ Women began demanding their rights; and in one significant example, in April 150,000 members of Ethiopia’s Muslim minority held an unprecedented march for equal rights in Addis Ababa. Peasants in some regions began to seize the land. As the weeks went on it was clear that something more fundamental was happening than a simple explosion of discontent: and that fundamental thing was the kind of conjuncture that becomes a revolutionary situation.

Writing in 1980, an Ethiopian leftist leader explained the dynamic:

The 1974 February Revolution caught in its whirlpool all the classes associated with decaying feudalism (landlords, the aristocracy and nobility the peasants) and with “emergent” capitalism (workers in the factories and industries, in the public administration, the petty bourgeoisie, lumpen proletariat). The February Revolution was not merely a revolution directed against feudalism and the comprador-bureaucratic bourgeoisie, it also, at the same time, manifested an internal crisis for the trade unions, the armed forces, the state administration, and for the workers, peasants, women, students, etc.... The assault on the conditions of oppression led to or was intrinsically linked to the attack on the organizational forms of this oppression. Therefore, the February Revolution negated the political and economic forms of domination, in the place of feudal Ethiopia, which recognised an individual’s political existence only via the possession of land and the subjugation of the peasant, the revolution forwarded a radically different conception of the organization of the society.²⁰⁶

This radical opening provided the material basis for the fulfillment of the proletariat’s historic duty, according to the classic tenets of Marxism-Leninism, despite the Ethiopian proletariat’s underdeveloped

²⁰⁵ Barbara W. Olson, *Gondar, Ethiopia, 1971–1975* (2011), p. 292.

²⁰⁶ The EPRP’s Mulugeta Osman, “Review of Books on Post-1974 Ethiopia,” in EPRP, *Ethiopian Marxist Review*, No. 1, August 1980, p. 114.

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nature.

The issue is not as to whether a particular class homogenized and led the whole movement. It was rather of a question of which class best embodied the liberation of other classes in its fundamental drive for liberation; in other words the question was not which class *imposed* its particular class liberation as the “liberation” of the others but rather which class *had to* liberate the others in order for itself to be really free. The proletarian character of the February Revolution is not to be automatically derived, be it from the number of the proletariat in the country or the absence or presence of a proletarian party, nor is it dependent on the nature of the trade union in place. The Revolution posed the question of political power not in the form of replacing the rulers with new ones but in the revolutionary sense i.e. the social content of this power and the reorganization of the society in new forms which express the utilization of power by the masses, their social participation.²⁰⁷

The radical students who had been organizing themselves abroad for this very moment of conjuncture watched what was happening with excitement. The moment had arrived to come home.

The Return of Exiles

In an earlier era of revolutionary upheaval, the Russian socialist leader Lenin wrote a work that deeply influenced and inspired the Ethiopian revolutionary movement, which would again and again refer to its formulations. This work captures the spirit of the moment, and those Ethiopian revolutionaries were deeply aware of the urgency of that moment. Lenin argued that at certain times, objective events demanded bolder actions than simple pleas for reform and incremental progress. He wrote,

²⁰⁷ Mulugeta Osman, *ibid.*, pp. 114–115.

Revolutions are the festivals of the oppressed and the exploited. At no other time are the masses of the people in a position to come forward so actively as creators of a new social order as at a time of revolution. At such times the people are capable of performing miracles, if judged by the narrow, philistine scale of gradual progress. But the leaders of the revolutionary parties must also make their aims more comprehensive and bold at such a time, so that their slogans shall always be in advance of the revolutionary initiative of the masses, serve as a beacon, reveal to them our democratic and socialist ideal in all its magnitude and splendour and show them the shortest and most direct route to complete, absolute and decisive victory.... The workers are not looking forward to striking bargains, are not asking for sops; they are striving to crush the reactionary forces without mercy, i.e., to set up the *revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry*.²⁰⁸

And so the left confronted its immediate tasks. Everything they had been preparing for as a future abstraction was suddenly and sharply on the table.

It's clear that the sudden explosion of popular unrest in 1974 was at least partially the fruit of the radicalization that had been taking place in the student world. The continued militancy of students and teachers is clear reflection of this; as is the militancy of civil service workers who would have been students just a few years earlier. The students at home were exhilarated at the political awakening around them.

The suspensions of student activists in Addis Ababa like Hiwot Teffera, Meles Tekle and others, and the ban on the University student union was lifted in March. Hiwot recalls a celebratory rally where the speakers were former student activist Eshetu Chole and former law student Girmachew Lemma: "It was Eshetu Chole who captured our

²⁰⁸ V.I. Lenin, *Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution*, 1905. (Via Marxist Internet Archive, www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/tactics/ch13.htm).

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imagination. We roared in total rapture when he revealed to us that all we needed to do was three things, ‘Organize, organize, organize!’ It was a delirious moment.”²⁰⁹

Fellow student activist Mohamed Yimam also remembers the rapturous mood of the University students.

One of the most memorable events to me at this time was the inauguration of the USUAA office holders. At the inauguration, Girmachew Lemma, a former president of USUAA delivered the keynote address. Members of the faculty, including Eshetu Chole and Fikre Merid, also spoke, but Girmachew was in a class by himself. He was an electrifying speaker who mesmerized the audience. Charismatic and towering, he had a commanding presence that eclipsed anyone who stood near him. The audience interrupted his speech with a tumultuous applause so frequently that it was difficult to hear him finish but a few complete sentences. . . . In Girmachew I saw a leader I was instantly attracted to and seemed capable of leading people to do anything that he wanted them to do. Girmachew worked as a legal counsel in the Ethiopian Trade Union [CELU].²¹⁰

The student movement in the diaspora was also electrified by the events back home. In one of the most dramatic examples, Ethiopian students studying in Moscow occupied the Ethiopian embassy in March in solidarity with the protests at home. According to a *New York Times* report at the time:

About 80 Ethiopian students occupied the Ethiopian Embassy for three hours today and demanded the abdication of Emperor Haile Selassie and the trial of both the Emperor and other high officials of his newly appointed

²⁰⁹ Hiwot Teffera, *op. Cit.*, pp. 69–70.

²¹⁰ Mohamed Yimam, *Wore Negari*, p. 47. Girmachew Lemma would be associated with EPLO; Fikre Merid with *Meison*; Eshetu Chole stayed an independent.

government. The students, chanting in Amharic “Down with the Lion of Judah,” kept Ambassador Yohannes Tseghe and two aides at the embassy until the Ambassador notified Addis Ababa. They marched in a group past the two permanent Soviet guards at the embassy and seized a portrait of the Emperor from a foyer and put it upside down in the courtyard facing the street. At one time they threatened to burn it.... Among other things, the students demand that “the feudal monarchy that has been the cause of the age-long poverty and illiteracy” of the Ethiopian people be removed and replaced by a democratic republic with a new constitution, land reform and free political parties. The students, who appeared to be from 20 to 28 years of age, were said by the Ambassador to be mostly students from Patrice Lumumba University here, along with some from Moscow State University and other institutions. In all, 350 to 400 Ethiopian students study in the Soviet Union, about 130 of them in Moscow. Today’s group included five young women, some of whom hung posters in front of the yellow-and-white embassy building. “Ethiopian Women Struggle Against Feudalism, Imperialism and Male Chauvinism,” the posters said.²¹¹

As inspired as the radical student leaders both at home and abroad were, they were not yet the face of a revolutionary organization able to channel the popular unrest in a way that would put the popular assumption of political power on the agenda. The organizations of the Ethiopian left were not yet ready to lead. Aside from the student activists, some young leftist leaders were behind bars at home in Ethiopia, and many of the more experienced and ideologically minded of the others were still in exile. The organizations themselves were still embryonic and untested; in Ethiopia’s climate of political repression they were also

²¹¹ “Ethiopian Students in Moscow Protest Selassie’s Rule,” *New York Times*, March 10, 1974 (www.nytimes.com/1974/03/10/archives/ethiopian-students-in-moscow-protest-selassies-rule-importance.html).

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entirely clandestine.

The Central Committee of EPLO called a congress for the end of March in Geneva, Switzerland.²¹² While the congress was marred by the sudden defection of one leading member, Desta Tadesse (along with his wife, Nigist Adane), to the competing *Meison* movement, the meeting confronted the unexpected development of large-scale urban class struggle, something they had always assumed would follow only after the armed struggle in the countryside had been initiated. They made plans for their return home. Tesfaye Debessay and Kiflu Tadesse devised a new party structure for clandestine organizing, and the meeting discussed both the creation of a mass organization to recruit youth and the need to establish a rural base for armed struggle. The meeting agreed that the EPLO leadership center should be moved from exile in Algiers back to Addis Ababa. High on the agenda of the returning exiles would be regrouping various small clandestine leftist circles and organizations together under the EPLO banner. They hoped to build on the growing excitement and confidence of those radicals who were at home in the thick of the unfolding uprising. By June most of the EPLO leaders had returned home to Ethiopia²¹³.

As some, like Tesfaye Debessay, returned to Addis Ababa to coalesce the still-secret EPLO's supporters, others travelled to the liberated areas of Eritrea to infiltrate into the northern rural regions of Ethiopia. Berhane Meskel Redda led the team of fighters through Eritrea to the province of Tigray to scout for base areas for the coming armed struggle²¹⁴. Tragically two of the team died along the way, including fellow veteran of the 1969 hijacking Benyam Adane.

The EPLO members who returned to the country quickly grasped that the key terrain of struggle was the questioning and burgeoning self-expression of the awakening population. In early July, EPLO cadres began publishing an underground mimeographed bulletin called *Democracia*, or "Democracy." Starting with a circulation of just a few

²¹² See Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation, Part 1*, p. 131.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

hundred hand-duplicated copies, it soon spread across the country, becoming a widely sought authority on revolutionary strategy and analysis. It was published every week; copies were passed hand-to-hand and often the paper was recopied regionally. Distribution points included tea rooms popular with radicals, but sometimes “Papers were often simply thrown through a window in the knowledge that they would be eagerly picked up inside.... Papers were also left on busy street corners to be picked up by pedestrians or distributed swiftly to groups of people standing in bus stops, queues, and otherwise congregating in the street.”²¹⁵

Kiflu Tadesse recalls the first issue of *Democracia*, published on July 3, 1974. It “was devoted to a lengthy analysis of what it called ‘the February Popular Movement’. It stressed that the struggle started out ‘along clear class lines. The workers rose against the owners of capital and government that protects the interests of the owners of capital. The soldiers arrested generals and other high ranking officers, and came forward with the demands of their class compatriots, the broad masses. The peasants evicted oppressive landlords and struggled to regain their land.’”²¹⁶ Interestingly, in its first year of publication, *Democracia* never identified itself as the voice of a specific organization, though it was indeed the organ of the clandestine EPLO, with none other than Tesfaye Debessay of the EPLO CC sitting on its first editorial board.

It was not only EPLO members who had returned home. Haile Fida and a number of his co-thinkers in the also still-secret *Meison* came home as well. Understanding the thirst for knowledge accompanying the awakening of the Ethiopian population, Haile Fida opened a radical bookshop, and stocked it with the cheap Marxist pamphlets that both People’s China and the Soviet Union were then busily exporting to eager young readers around the world by the million. Gedeon Wolde Amanuel, a secondary school student at the time, remembers:

In 1974 a bookshop called “Progressive Bookshop” came into being. Delegated by youth councils, we met Ato Haile

²¹⁵ Ibid., p. 153.

²¹⁶ Ibid., p. 120.

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Fida, Negede Gobeze and Dr. Kebede Mengesha... Haile and the others... made us a donation of a vast number of books by Marx, Lenin and Mao. We were pleased by these men's return from abroad and were determined to forge further links with them.... Another source of amazement for me was a publication that came from abroad, dedicated to the memory of Mesfin Habtu and entitled *Handbook of Elementary Notes on Revolution and Organization*. It taught us a lot about clandestine operations and how to set up a revolutionary code of ethics. At the time, secret members of the Ethiopian Student Union numbered 5,000–10,000. At one meeting held on the premises of a church, there were delegates from every section of a secondary school.²¹⁷

Haile Fida's group also launched their own underground bulletin, called *Ye Sefiw Hizb Dimts*, or "The Voice of the Masses." Thus the landscape of the Ethiopian left significantly broadened; adding to the groups and publications being formed by an even younger generation of radicals.²¹⁸

Mohamed Yimam was recruited to the circles around *Democracia*:

At this time there at least four underground papers that were being disseminated: *Democracia*, *Ye Sefiw Hizb Dimts* (The

²¹⁷ Gedeon Wolde Amanuel in Bahru Zewde, *Documenting the Ethiopian Student Movement*, p. 131.

²¹⁸ According to Meison's hostile critics in the EPRP, which evolved from EPLO, the origin of *Ye Sefiw Hizb Dimts* is more complicated: "In the early days of the February Revolution there was a small group in Addis Abeba which used to put out leaflets, later to be called 'Voice of the People', supporting the demand of the EPRP and the broad masses for the formation of a popular provisional government. However, when Haile Fida returned to Ethiopia after a prolonged sejour in Europe, along with his retinue, this group underwent a transformation. The local elements who supported the popular demand and stood against the junta were purged. The reformist and reactionary group of Haile Fida took over and later emerged as Meison (or the AESM). Starting with full support to the regime while being outside of the regime and moving fast to giving full support (in practical sense) to the regime by being the actual functionaries of the regime, the Haile Fida group emerged as the most ferocious enemy of the struggle of the oppressed Ethiopian peoples." from EPRP, "Meison's 'New' Tunes from Beyond the Grave," *Abyot*, February/March 1978.

Voice of the Masses), *Abeyot* (Revolution), and *Key Bandira* (Red Flag). The two underground organizations that published *Democracia* and *Abeyot* later merged to form EPRP after a protracted discussion.... I remember our cell was consulted about the title of *Democracia* before it became the main organ of EPRP.... We all liked it and I commented it was a neat idea. It also made ideological if not political sense. In Marxist theory, as interpreted by Mao Tse Tung, the first phase of a socialist revolution for a country just coming out of the feudal economic order is what Mao called “the New Democratic Revolution.”... This thinking was widely accepted around revolutionary circles and hence the name *Democracia* to signify the revolutionary democratic phase of this struggle.... Our cell was considered one of the most dedicated and hardworking. We printed *Democracia* in our crude printing presses.... The [masthead] stamp was made from discarded rubber of a sandalshoe from which each letter of *Democracia* was carved out. We also distributed the papers to as many people as we knew.²¹⁹

These groups looked for opportunities to join forces. Young radical leader Getachew Maru was released from prison in June. Shortly afterwards Hiwot Teffera, who he had recruited to the left, reconnected with him:

Right after Getachew was released, *Abyot*, the organ of the organization I had joined, started coming out. It was only later that I learned Getachew was its editor.... “A discussion is going on in our organization about a possible merger with other groups with similar goals,” he said. “There are progressive groups that we can potentially work with such as the *Democracia* group, *Meison* and Red Flag.”... There is no group capable of giving leadership to the revolution at this point. We were caught off guard by it. We have to work

²¹⁹ Mohamed Yimam, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 61–62.

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together for a common goal.²²⁰

Ultimately, *Democracia*, led primarily by returned exiles, successfully merged with key emerging leftist forces. It united with the *Abyot* group, with some members of the Red Flag group, and picked up a number of influential independent figures like Girmachew Lemma and his followers. One of the most important things *Democracia* supporters did was look to strengthen their ties to popular mass organizations like CELU. In fact both Girmachew Lemma and Kiflu Tadesse wound up joining the staff of the growing labor union. For the moment, *Democracia* and *Ye Sefiw Hizb Dimts* became the visible face of the left, both arguing for pushing the ongoing revolutionary upsurge toward its logical conclusion of the overthrow of the emperor, and the institution of popular power.

The Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces

Especially given the history of the quashed 1960 military coup, unrest inside the military was clearly a major threat to the political status quo. On a day-to-day basis, the emperor needed a loyal military to continue the fight against separatists in Eritrea and elsewhere, to suppress peasant and now growing urban unrest, and also to help wall off portions of the country suffering from an increasingly dire famine. The modern trappings of Haile Selassie's consultative government were looking increasingly false and fragile, which meant the military was increasingly recognized as the source of actual state power.

While dissent inside the military was an important part of the urban unrest in the first half of 1974, it was not the driving force of the upheaval. *Meison* cadre Abera Yemane-Ab wrote some years later,

Contrary to what the military government claims today and contrary to the attempt by some to re-write the history of the Ethiopian Revolution, it was the civilian left which continued to agitate for a system change while members of the armed forces were restive following the satisfaction of their

²²⁰ Hiwot Teffera, *op. Cit.*, p. 111–112.

petty demands and stayed in their barracks. The civilian left among workers, civil servants, students, teachers, and intellectuals continued to agitate for fundamental change. It issued a barrage of leaflets condemning the return of the armed forces to their barracks as a betrayal of the Ethiopian peoples and pleaded the cause of the broad masses.²²¹

In April, the military had successfully demanded the arrest of the emperor's cabinet, while at the same time swearing fealty to the emperor himself, and then stepped back from the uprising. But toward the end of June, a secretive committee of military officers announced itself as the "Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces," or, after the Amharic word for "Committee," *Derg* for short. In what would eventually be called a slow-motion coup, the *Derg* presented Prime Minister Endalkatchew with a list of political demands including steps to end corruption, free political prisoners, and a revision and modernization of the constitution. The *Derg* proceeded to arrest dozens of members of the aristocracy and bureaucracy, and loudly proclaimed its new slogan, "*Ityopya Tikdem!*," or "Ethiopia First!"

"Ethiopia First!" was an appeal to political unity addressed to the various restive segments of Ethiopian society, but it was also a chauvinist call to *national* unity in the face of various separatist movements hoping to pull advantages from the loosening bonds of the Ethiopian government.

While the military remained subordinate to the government on paper, at least for the moment, it wasn't hard to predict the trajectory of the military's involvement in politics. As Hiwot Teffera observed, "Because of this power vacuum, you could say that the military junta has assumed power even though it is not yet official."²²²

The *Derg* insisted that the Prime Minister admit one of its own into the government, and so General Aman Andom (ironically an Ethiopian of Eritrean descent) became chief of staff. The announcement

²²¹ Abera Yemane-Ab, "The Defeat of the Ethiopian Revolution," p. 5.

²²² Hiwot Teffera, *Op. Cit.*, p. 111–112.

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was made by the emperor himself²²³. General Aman was a war hero, and an overall popular figure, perfect for the *Derg*'s public face for a force that actually operated in the shadows. Conducting its business behind closed doors, the exact makeup of the *Derg* was never widely known. It started out with 126 formal members; though by 1978 it was down to 80.²²⁴ Among its members were a roster of officers who would become important figures in the following period: Major Sissay Habte, Major Atnafu Abate, Captain Moges Wolde-Michael, Captain Alemayehu Haile, and the officer who became the chairman of the military committee, an American-trained officer named Major Mengistu Haile Mariam.²²⁵

The *Derg* was the fruit of a power struggle inside the military, and each of its moves toward power was marked not only by the arrest of allegedly corrupt political figures, but of high-ranking officers judged to be tainted and excessively tied to the *ancien régime*. The *Derg* must be credited with a canny strategy; in its gradual leaning on the levers of power it also removed both civilian establishment and military figures who might have rallied some kind of liberal opposition to its moves, thus pre-empting opposition to their encroachment upon the government.

By July, the *Derg* felt secure enough to demand the resignation, and shortly afterwards the arrest, of Prime Minister Endalketchew. He was replaced by *Lij* Mikael Imru, a liberal aristocrat rumored to have vaguely social-democratic leanings. Throughout the summer, the military and the new prime minister continued to maneuver in the halls of power. A new draft constitution was proposed which included constitutional restraints on the emperor and democratically elected houses of a National Assembly. The arrests of the emperor's supporters in and around the government continued.

²²³ See Blair Thomson, *op. Cit.*, p. 76.

²²⁴ Pliny the Middle Aged, "The PMAC: Origins and Structure: Part Two," *Northeast African Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1979), p. 3.

²²⁵ Pliny the Middle Aged, "The PMAC: Origins and Structure: Part One," *Ethiopianist Notes*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (1978–79), p. 11. Mengistu Haile Mariam emerged as chairman of the actual *Derg* though not—yet—of the soon-to-be-ruling PMAC.

The Ethiopian media began to run exposés on the emperor's corruption; and soon the mood on the streets turned even angrier. According to BBC newsman Blair Thomson still stationed in Addis Ababa, student demonstrations started chanting "'Kill the Emperor', 'Hang the Emperor' and 'Down with the Emperor.'"²²⁶ And the news began to break of the devastating famine in Wollo and Tigray provinces along with the emperor's seeming complete indifference to it.

The drought, however, was the emotional factor on which much of the anti-imperial propaganda was based, and in the last few days posters had appeared on the streets—based on an idea first used by the ELF—which showed pictures of Wollo drought victims alongside pictures of the Emperor in his fine clothes, feeding large chunks of meat to his dogs. One dog in particular was a feature of the campaign: Haile Selassie's pet chihuahua, Lulu, which had died after a long and comfortable life on the royal lap.²²⁷

On TV, the military "accused the Emperor of 'building statues to dead dogs and feeding his live ones while hundreds of thousands were starving. Yet all the while he was calling the poor and hungry 'my beloved people!'"²²⁸ On September 11, Ethiopian New Year's Day, Ethiopian television broadcast a documentary which exposed the horrors of the Wollo famine and contrasted them with the high life of the Ethiopian aristocracy.

The very next day, tanks and troops filled the streets of the capital and the announcement broke, emperor Haile Selassie had been deposed. The 82-year-old emperor himself was escorted to a Volkswagen Beetle and driven off. His disappearance was sudden, complete and virtually final. Military spokesmen announced the establishment of the Provisional Military Government of Ethiopia. It named the emperor's son, the crown prince Asfa Wossen, who was actually out of the country

²²⁶ Blair Thomson, *op. Cit.*, p. 101.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 101–102.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

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undergoing medical treatment, as the new, powerless figurehead regent and head of state, and suspended what was left of the existing government structures.

Blair Thomson listened to the broadcast statement from the *Derg*.

The new Draft Constitution would be put into effect as soon as “necessary improvements are made to include provisions reflecting the social, economic and political philosophy of the New Ethiopia and to safeguard the civil rights of the people”. Meanwhile the Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces would hold power and run the country until legal representatives could be elected. Until then, courts would continue to function and all existing laws be valid, all strikes and demonstrations were “contrary to the motto “Ethiopia First”, and were banned, and special military courts were to be set up to deal with anyone disobeying these and any future orders.”²²⁹

Without shedding any blood, the *Derg* had seized the reins of power, and promptly demanded an end to the popular mobilizations that had made that seizure of power possible. It would not be easy to rule in what had been unleashed. American teacher Barbara Olson remembers what happened in October in Gondar as local leadership attempted to orient to the new reality. At a political rally, “the students who have been the most eager and vocal for a people’s government harass Mayor Seyoum as he stands at the podium trying to speak. They won’t let him finish, instead they interrupt him, shouting to the crowd, ‘Who is this man standing up there trying to tell us what to do?’ and then stomp away.” Shortly afterwards, “someone came to the elementary school warning that high school students were going from building to building in town destroying pictures of the former Emperor.”²³⁰

The establishment of the Provisional Military Administrative Council in September 1974 was later marked each year by the new

²²⁹ Ibid., p. 105.

²³⁰ Barbara W. Olson, *op. Cit.*, p. 362.

government as the moment of victory of the Ethiopian revolution. The new government would be led by General Aman Andom—not actually a member of the *Derg* committee of mutinous officers itself—as the PMAC’s chairman flanked by Majors Mengistu and Atnafu as its vice chairs in a triumvirate junta. The military had successfully ridden a popular wave to power, and in doing so, dramatically changed the nature of the ongoing revolutionary upsurge.

A Revolution Hijacked

The relationship of the military to state power had been obvious all along: the emperor ultimately relied on the military to impose his will via repression if need be, and so the soldiers’ protests and mutinies revealed the weakness at the heart of the *ancien régime*. But what was not universal was what attitude the civilian left should take to the *political* involvement of the armed forces.

Meison cadre Abera Yemane-Ab claims that during the period after the initial unrest in the military had died down, when the focus of the year’s revolutionary upsurge moved to popular demonstrations and infighting in the halls of power, the civilian left was eager for the soldiers to lend their power to the popular movement.

These radical groups used every, means of communication including personal social, school acquaintances as vehicles to persuade the armed forces to come out of their barracks once again. It is this and only this kind of relentless campaign by the Ethiopian left together with the spreading unrest among the peasantry of Showa, Arsi and Sidamo which propelled another round of action by the armed forces. No single group or organization including the military was responsible for systematically planning, coordinating and leading the Revolution until the armed forces re-emerged from their barracks in June, 1974.²³¹

And it’s true that in July, the labor federation CELU issued a state-

²³¹ Abera Yemane-Ab, *op. Cit.*, p. 5.

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ment of support for the *Derg's* platform of reform demands, which included nods to the concerns of Ethiopian workers.

Previous revolutionary movements like the Russian Bolsheviks recognized that organizing rank-and-file soldiers was important, and the Ethiopian left continued this tradition. The attitude toward the military as an institution was more complicated. During the summer,

EPLO... made efforts to guide the new regime, which did not have any political or organizational experience and was acting like a ship caught up in the midst of a storm. Special effort was made to win over the non-commissioned officers to its side and to show them the direction and their role in the struggle.... The Prime Minister, Mikael Imru, who was also contemplating forming a party, called on Tesfaye Debessai, a colleague he knew back in Switzerland, to discuss the issue.²³²

What the ultimate goal of military involvement in the upsurge might be was not yet clear. Were there motivating forces or ideologies behind the military officers? One contemporary analyst of the *Derg* quotes a government minister characterizing the composition of the *Derg* in July this way: “[S]ome are half-baked radicals and Maoists, and the fiery radicals are very unrealistic. Some of the majors are very reactionary. The only thing the whole committee has in common is a general feeling of dissatisfaction. The armed forces have no crystallized opinions and no ideas.”²³³

The EPLO was actually deeply worried about the potential for the military to hijack, interrupt, or repress the ongoing political upsurge.

The Ethiopian radicals were quite aware of the dangers of military regimes. Their readings on the history of popular struggles in the Third World had taught them that the military was likely to intervene and to seize power in situations

²³² Kiflu Tadesse, *op. Cit.*, p. 120.

²³³ Pliny the Middle Aged, *Part 1, op. Cit.*, p. 10.

of revolutionary upheaval when the foundations of existing regimes were crumbling.... The EPLO leadership and the majority of the Left, were convinced that military intervention would spell disaster for the revolutionary cause in Ethiopia.²³⁴

EPLO CC member Kiflu Tadesse further recalls that *Democracia* openly questioned what the military had in mind. It warned that the “Ethiopia First” nationalist rhetoric spouted by the *Derg* before their seizure of power suggested the military’s intentions might not fulfill the hopes of Ethiopia’s restive population. “Which Ethiopia is first? asked *Democracia* in its second issue. The priests, nobles and comprador bourgeoisie, or the oppressed who have borne them on their shoulders? In a class divided society, such a slogan can only confuse and, if not defined, cannot provide political guidance. ‘We say, the broad masses of Ethiopia are first,’ added the paper.”²³⁵

Democracia soon warned that the *Derg* was not a suitable vehicle for social revolution. “By conspiring in and around the *Derge*, no kind of meaningful change will come about.”²³⁶

But not everyone on the left looked at the military as a potential threat to the revolution. Despite widespread concerns, some approached it as a vehicle which might be ridden to the seat of power. One such leftist was Dr. Senay Likke, last seen being politically routed inside the ESM. His bid for ideological dominance rejected in the diaspora student movement, Senay had returned to Ethiopia sometime in 1972 or 1973. As we have seen, Senay had become a bitter foe of the forces loyal to the Algiers EPLO base. Apparently uninterested in joining forces with Haile Fida’s opposing *Meison*, he branched out on his own, ultimately forming his own clandestine organization in Ethiopia, the *WazLig*, or Proletarian League. Senay had always been especially interested in the military angle of the struggle, affecting the air of a guerrilla while he was still traversing the walkways of Western universities, so it’s

²³⁴ Kiflu Tadesse, *op. Cit.*, p. 122.

²³⁵ Kiflu Tadesse, *ibid.*, p. 123.

²³⁶ *Democracia*, Vol. 1 No, 6 quoted in Kiflu, *op. Cit.*, p. 121.

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not at all surprising that it he was among the first returning radicals to orient to the military.

Senay Likke worked in Addis Ababa, but began teaching air force cadets martial arts outside the city part time. Eventually his contact with members of the military grew into gaining the ear of key players in the secretive military committee:

It is often acknowledged by people close to the government that Senaye was quite close to the Derg in its early days and that later he was involved in teaching Marxism and Leninism to Major (later Colonel) Mengistu Haile-Mariam and his group in the Derg.²³⁷

Kiflu Tadesse confirms,

Sennay himself and members of his group... were presenting a series of lectures on the basic tenets of Marxist philosophy to the officer corps of the Derge. Sennay was able to forge this relationship through officers who knew him while he was a karate teacher at the Air Force.²³⁸

A written statement by the “Ethiopian Revolutionary Committee,” likely Senay Likke and his comrades, to an American radical gathering in August 1974 suggests a determined and clear mind about priorities for Ethiopian revolutionaries.

The success of a revolution depends also on a subjective factor, namely, on the ability of the revolutionary class or classes to solve the existing contradictions. This ability depends on the level of organization and consciousness of the advanced class... on its revolutionary spirit and capacity to guide the broad masses.... So the main struggle facing us today is that of party building.

The statement somewhat ominously continues,

²³⁷ Andargetchew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, p. 199.

²³⁸ Kiflu Tadesse, *op. Cit.*, p. 120.

In Africa, revisionism, utopian socialism and social democracy exist all embedded in the theories and practices of “African socialism” and “Arab socialism”. These -isms of bourgeois liberalism and social fascism have to be wiped out, destroyed and victory scored over them before genuine M-L parties can be created. This struggle is one of our main struggles today and we are deep in it already.²³⁹

While all left factions had some interest in winning influence among *Derg* members, It can't be overstated how important was Senay Likke's role as transmission agent of radical ideology to *Derg* figures like Major Mengistu. He seems to have provided the ideological backing for officers who had thus far shown little inclination as a body to embrace a specific radical ideology; Senay's tough-guy image and his focus on building power would have absolutely appealed to Mengistu. A career military officer, Mengistu had been isolated from the radical student movement. If some Ethiopians learned the theory of revolution at American universities, sites like Fort Benning in Georgia would have been comparative ideological wastelands for Mengistu and his fellow trainees. Undoubtedly American racism was plain to see, but communist tracts probably not so much. PMAC vice chair Atnafu had received some training in China²⁴⁰, but since the Chinese government excelled at playing double games, in this case offering training and munitions to ELF rebels while entertaining distinctly cordial relations with the emperor, it's not obvious that Atnafu was any kind of Maoist conduit to the *Derg*. While eventually Mengistu would become a ready consumer of advice from open agents of avowedly socialist countries running the gamut from the Soviet Union to Cuba and North Korea, there are no traces of state-sponsored subversion in 1974 on his level, short of the trade in tracts.

Senay's extraordinary closeness to members of the *Derg* was to prove fateful. If the tale that has Senay Likke at the steering wheel of

²³⁹ Ethiopian Revolutionary Committee, “Greetings to the Congress,” Communist League, *People's Tribune*, Vol. 6, No. 8, August 1974.

²⁴⁰ Blair Thomson, *op. Cit.*, p. 132.

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the Volkswagen carting Haile Selassie off to obscurity²⁴¹ seems entirely fanciful, that Mengistu came to rely on Senay is definitely fact.

Left unresolved by the military seizure of state power were all the major issues that had come to define the year's struggles. Was a republic on the horizon? Would there be democracy? What of the demands of the peasants, of the workers, of regional separatists? What of the rights of women, or of the hopes for students for a country that could harness their skills and knowledge? In November the PMAC issued a proclamation for Ethiopia First that included all sorts of progressive, aspirational platitudes for the reorganization of society, including "A popular government acting for the good of the people is required."²⁴² But no moves were made in that direction. Would the new military government fulfill the dreams of Ethiopia's revolutionaries—or would it slam the brakes on the popular struggle?

The old government was gone; the military was at the helm of state power: Was the power of the people now dissipated? Was the revolution over? Which class would rule? Resolution was not soon to be delivered, but the choices ahead were soon to be made clear.

Lines of Battle Appear

The first moves by the PMAC government to keep a tight grip on popular expression were quickly met with defiance, to which the *Derg* responded by digging in its heels. According to *Derg* analyst "Pliny":

Within a week of the PMAC takeover, the Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions (CELU), whose radicalism over the previous six months had been a major surprise, held its annual conference. Its deliberations resulted in a statement categorically opposing military rule and calling for the immediate formation of a peoples government and an end to the ban on strikes and demonstrations....

²⁴¹ Seen discussed, for instance, in Ethiopia chats on Facebook.

²⁴² Quoted in Zoltán Gyenge, *Ethiopia on the Road of Non-Capitalist Development*, Institute for World Economics of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (1976), p. 30.

The PMAC were not in fact too worried by the left-wing opposition or by radical groups in September and October 1974. Self-assurance derived from the ease with which they crushed overt support for popular government in the armed forces and a growing consensus among their own ranks and in the military at large that military government was necessary for the time being at least.²⁴³

The government announced a planned national development campaign, the *Zemetcha*, where students would be sent to the countryside to provide national service. Students like Hiwot Teffera reacted immediately. “My friends and I were against the *Zemetcha*, but each position had its own merit. One morning, Meles Tekle, a vocal opponent of the *Zemetcha*, gave the speech of his life. There was a thundering applause when he said in English, ‘Try to teach the Eritrean peasant how to wash his hands; he will instruct you how to pull the trigger!’ We became ecstatic and kept clapping feverishly and non-stop.”²⁴⁴

The clandestine popular movements did not disperse. Still a student activist at the time, Gedeon Wolde Amanuel remembers how the movement resolved to continue under whatever circumstances might arise. Note his mention of the ESUNA *Hand Book*:

Following the Derg’s seizure of power and the enactment of repressive laws, it became virtually impossible to hold meetings where 40–50 people could attend. Another lesson we learned from the handbook was how to conduct the struggle under a variety of guises, i.e. as mass organizations, teachers’ association, or workers’ union, in order to appear politically neutral. We soon adopted this method; accordingly, such publications as “Voice of the Broad Masses”, *Democracia* and “Red Banner” (which were issued well into 1969 EC), were being distributed by members of our discussion groups. In 1967 EC, the clandestine Ethiopian

²⁴³ Pliny the Middle Aged, *Part 1, op. Cit.*, p. 12–13.

²⁴⁴ Hiwot Teffera, *op. Cit.*, p. 118.

Students Union, wishing to join the bandwagon, decided to publish its *Dil Betegel* (“Victory Through Struggle”) (Prepared with the help of a duplicating machine pilfered from an elementary school).²⁴⁵

The factions of the left (excluding Senay Likke and his followers) seized on a key slogan: the demand for a popular provisional government. An editorial from pro-EPLO student activists in Europe issued in October sums it up:

It is now more than ever clear that the legitimate political demand of the popular forces in Ethiopia for the urgent constitution of a provisional democratic government to execute and implement the immediate revolutionary demands of the masses has become one of the burning questions of our movement. At this crucial stage of the struggle the triumph of revolutionary democracy or conservative reactions depends on the incontrovertible fact whether this popular will finds concrete expression in the creation of this democratic organ of power or in its trampling under the iron boots of forceful military domination of our political life.... The provisional democratic government draws its revolutionary authority and power only in as much as it is the expression of popular will and grows out of the popular *institutions*, mass organizations, committees, militant groups and circles created by the revolutionary process and no less in as much as, is democratically constituted by their elected representatives.²⁴⁶

The stakes of the revolution were raised dramatically by the military in late November, in an event which also suggested the governing body was far from unified. On the morning of Saturday, November 23, gunfire and explosions were heard in various parts of Addis Ababa. They

²⁴⁵ Gedeon Wolde Amanuel, in Bahru Zewde, *op. Cit.*, pp. 131–132.

²⁴⁶ WWFES, Editorial, *Bulletin of the WWFES*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Oct. 1974, (Geneva, Switzerland); spelling corrected.

lasted until the following morning. Major Mengistu had long-simmering internal policy conflicts with General Aman, including a crucial one over the course of the war in Eritrea, which General Aman had been proposing to end peacefully; Mengistu resolved these differences by shootout. General Aman Andom was dead.

Mengistu's *Derg* faction promptly descended on the centers where prisoners collected during the past months of upsurge had been detained. Sixty high-profile prisoners were seized and executed, including two of the year's previous prime ministers, Endalkatchew Makonnen and Aklilu Habtewold. Joining these politicians in gruesome mass shootings were a host of *ancien régime* ministers, aristocrats and nobles including the governor of Eritrea, a grandson of the emperor, a scattering of high-ranking military officers and factional opponents of Mengistu from within the *Derg*, and a half dozen leftist soldiers and officers who belonged to an EPLO study cell²⁴⁷. The bloodless revolution was no longer bloodless: The nation was shocked; both *Democracia* and *Voice of the Broad Masses* accused the *Derg* of fascism.²⁴⁸

BBC Correspondent Blair Thomson witnessed "groups of women, shrouded in the jet-black dresses and shawls of mourners, shuffl[ing] round parts of the Ethiopian capital wailing and singing.... Only a few teenagers—not students—seemed pleased. 'This is what we have been waiting for,' said one. 'They had it coming—now the revolution can really begin.'"²⁴⁹

A former student activist loyal to *Meison* remembers that the executions made the stakes of the struggle clear.

[R]emember [the] atrocious event which marked the beginning of the future trajectory of the revolution. The execution of the 60 high officials of the last regime by the Dergue headed by Mengistu Haile Mariam.... Among these high officials was the father of a friend of all of us. I remember we were holding a sort of a meeting (ESUE) in Berlin. The

²⁴⁷ Kiflu Tadesse, *op. Cit.*, p. 170.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

²⁴⁹ Blair Thomson, *op. Cit.*, p. 121.

moment we heard about the event, all what occurred to me was the famous aphorism of our idol, Mao Tsetung: “*Abiot ye rat gibshia aydelem*” “revolution is not an evening dinner.” Like all the rest of my friends... it never occurred to me to utter a ton of condolence to the friend who lost his father. For us it was a matter of self-evidence that he has to accept this as the consequence of the “class struggle.” The only exception was Haile [Fida].... Haile took our friend by the hand in a corner and conveyed his condolence formally to him for losing his beloved father.²⁵⁰

General Aman was replaced as the head of the PMAC with another general who was also outside the ranks of the actual *Derg*, and who had served as the military attaché to the United States, Brigadier General Teferi Benti. Another non-ideological figure, Teferi attempted to be reassuring during his first press conference. “Even during this critical period, all of you have noticed that there was peace in the country and life was going on normally.”²⁵¹ Mengistu and Atnafu remained *Derg* vice chairs, though it was now very evident that Major Mengistu was the figure to watch.

The very next Monday, a series of bombings rocked the capital, followed by a wave of arrests. Among those arrested were activists Meles Tekle and Eshetu Chole.²⁵² The Eritrean Liberation Front was blamed for the bombings, but opposition activists soon realized that new rules applied. The threat of bloodshed was now as real as blood itself.

In December, the *Derg* issued a proclamation, its first ideological one since the “Ethiopia First” proclamation in the summer. The political system of Ethiopia was to be something called “Ethiopian Socialism”: “Ethiopia Tikdem means socialism, i.e. Ethiopian socialism, and Ethiopian socialism is equality, self-reliance, hard work; giving priority to the interests of the community and Ethiopian unity is an absolute truth.”²⁵³

²⁵⁰ HB, “Shading Light on Haile Fida’s Life,” 2010.

²⁵¹ Quoted in Blair Thomson, *op. Cit.*, p. 131.

²⁵² Kiflu Tadesse, *op. Cit.*, p. 199.

²⁵³ Quoted in Kiflu Tadesse, *op. Cit.*, p. 182.

The word chosen for “socialism” at this stage, previously non-existent in Amharic, was “*hibrette sebawinet*,” meaning something like “community of the people,”²⁵⁴ and very unlike the cognates adapted for the finer points of Marxist ideology soon necessitated by the deepening of ideological debates in Ethiopian political society.

Blair Thomson, the BBC reporter, saw the declaration as evidence of infiltration or at least influence by Chinese agents, but the truth seems more likely that the declaration, still far from a formal pledge to Marxist-Leninist principles, was cobbled together by various forces around the *Derg* at least in part to undercut the growing leftist opposition and draw popular support. Kiflu Tadesse reminds us that “Among those who advised the *Derg* during this period were: the Senay Likke group; Lij Mikael Imru; many pro-west individuals; and a host of other intellectuals.”²⁵⁵

Democracia responded by asking, “What kind of socialism?” did the *Derg* mean. “It went on to describe what genuine socialism entailed in socio-economic and political terms. The most basic of these, it stated, is for the workers and the poor peasants to gain political power. As long as the country was run by one committee, no social change could be brought about, let alone socialism.”²⁵⁶

But despite the eclectic nature of the proclamation, it was followed by two very radical moves. On the first day of 1975, Ethiopia’s banks and financial institutions were nationalized, followed a month later by the nationalization of industry. And all secondary school and university classes were suspended for a year so that the youth of Ethiopia could be mobilized and sent to the countryside: the *Zemetcha* had arrived.

According to Senay Likke himself,

Once the Monarchy was brought down, major revolutionary steps were taken in succession that put Ethiopia on the road of the National Democratic Revolution. First, the

²⁵⁴ Blair Thomson, *op. Cit.*, p. 133.

²⁵⁵ Kiflu Tadesse, *op. Cit.*, p. 185.

²⁵⁶ *Democracia*, Vol. 1, No. 20, summarized in Kiflu Tadesse, *op. Cit.*, p. 183.

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Derg proclaimed Socialism as the guiding principle of the revolution and with this, hitherto unknown propagation of socialist science began flooding the country. Translation of classical Marxist-Leninist literature in various Ethiopian Languages was encouraged and a cultural revolution in literature, art and education had begun.²⁵⁷

Was it really this simple, this straightforward?

The game had certainly completely changed. It felt like a real revolution. The question remained, “what kind?”

²⁵⁷ Comrade Senay Likke, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, pp. 7–8.

Chapter 6

Socialism and Democracy

“Socialism is impossible without democracy.”—V.I. Lenin (1916)²⁵⁸

“The Derg cannot fulfill the democratic demands of the people because what the people demanded is not to have a babysitter (guardian of power) but to elect their own representatives, to have freedom of speech, of the press and to organize political parties. A body (the Derg) which has undemocratic policies and working methods cannot guarantee democracy.... If demanding democracy is considered as turning back the wheels of history, then what the Derg is saying is that the solution is to move from the autocratic dictatorship to a military fascist one. In this case it (the Derg) has no other solution but to rely on its brute force.”—Democracia, August 23, 1974²⁵⁹

“Plans and studies are also underway to make democratic rights available for the broad masses.”—Senay Likke²⁶⁰

The Democratic Soul of Socialism

It’s fair to say that an anti-communist narrative of Marxian socialism as an ideology of authoritarian—indeed totalitarian—rule is the lens through which most people now view capitalism’s defeated twentieth-century competitor. It’s a narrative of hammer-fisted rule by unelected strongmen backed by repressive, bureaucratic elites who coat brute force in layers of glossy deception with the moral support of deluded dupes and apologists. Such a narrative is wielded as a condem-

²⁵⁸ V.I. Lenin, “A Caricature of Marxism and Imperialist Economism,” 1916, via Marxist Internet Archive.

²⁵⁹ *Democracia*, August 23, 1974, as quoted in Babile Tola, *To Kill a Generation*, p. 26.

²⁶⁰ Comrade Senay Likke, *op. Cit.*, p. 22.

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nation of idealism and a cautionary tale to those who might challenge the conventional Western wisdom of capitalism as the great engine of progress through profit. Unfortunately, it's even fair to say that there's plenty of circumstantial evidence from the history of now mostly erased twentieth-century socialism to validate some of these caricatures. Given the narrowing attention span of a super-wired twenty-first century, the arguments in defense of socialism's ideological integrity and contextualized history require nuance, evidence and detail that are now rarely given adequate air-time. Nobody writes historical myths for mass consumption quite like its victors, especially when the fact-checkers have all been silenced.

Anti-socialist narratives rely on a view of history as the progression of actions of great (or terrible) men, rooting socialism in an authoritarian or totalitarian figure's personal ideology rather than in a material analysis of class struggle. To look at the Ethiopian Revolution as merely the story of Mengistu Haile Mariam is thus a serious misjudgment of how history happens, of how, in this case, the Ethiopian revolution unfolded. He was a key figure, for sure, and certainly for a moment triumphant, and more than a little villainous. But what Marxism teaches about *the people* being the motor force of history, this is actually on vivid display in an examination of the Ethiopian revolution. What the focus on Mengistu reveals is not only the bias of anti-communism, but also all the ideological weaknesses of the post-war Soviet top-down vision of socialism by directive and ultimately military force. The true story of any revolution is the story of a people in motion and the struggle of various players to interact with that great human wave.

We will address the *revisionism* of the *Derg's* vision of socialism in Chapter Eight, but for now let us look at Senay Likke's cautious pronouncement in the epigraph above and contrast it to the full throated embrace of participatory democracy by the EPLO wing of the Ethiopian left that would go on to found the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party in 1975, and root it in the autonomous quest for ideological solutions exercised by the Ethiopian left during its infancy in the student movement. The revolutionary call for democracy in Ethiopia

comes from the methods and ideological principles that Ethiopian revolutionaries learned not from the strict guidance of foreign state sponsors (like the direction *Derg*-favored cadre would ultimately receive in Moscow and East Berlin), but from their deep study of traditional revolutionary icons like Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Mao; Che, Giap, and Ho; but also the icons of the new left like Frantz Fanon, Rosa Luxemburg, Regis Debray, Huey Newton and the Black Panthers, Kwame Touré, Isaac Deutscher and the theoreticians popularized by the new left favorite, *Monthly Review*.

These studies led them in two directions: first, to implement the so-called “mass line” taught by Maoism, which meant listening to what the people themselves wanted with the aim of synthesizing demands that would be both popular and revolutionary; and second, to embrace a radically democratic vision of socialism as expressed by both theoretical founders like Lenin and innovators like the activist thinkers of the 1960s. In a world where the word “democracy” was abused both in the West and the socialist bloc, it becomes clear that it had real, aspirational and even strategic meaning for Ethiopian revolutionaries. This meaning demands a confrontation with the narrow, electoral vision of democracy that has come to be presumed in the so-called liberal republics. When Ethiopian radicals discuss democracy, they’re not talking about mere emulation of Europe or America. As the 1971 ESUNA *Hand Book* puts it:

At the same time the existence of several bourgeois parties supposedly in opposition to one another basically, makes it possible for the bourgeoisie to boast of the freedom and democracy that prevail under its capitalist rule. While all that it has done by transferring power from one bourgeois party to another is to assure the continuation of the rule of the bourgeoisie as a *class*.²⁶¹

Lenin was clear that while the class struggle is a technical, social dynamic that enables the more just and egalitarian socialist economic

²⁶¹ ESUNA, *Hand Book*, op. Cit., p. 6.

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model to replace the exploitative capitalist one, it also creates the arena for the profound humanization of social relations. The end of exploitation and oppression and the blossoming of human potential are promised in the creation of a cooperative society. It's this linking of the economic, political and social that makes democracy key. In this excerpt from a 1916 polemic Lenin specifically connects one social issue, here, national liberation, to the struggle for socialism; but elsewhere in his work he also spells out that the revolution is the opportunity for revolutionaries to take a clear moral stand against all oppression:

For socialism is impossible without democracy because: (1) the proletariat cannot perform the socialist revolution unless it prepares for it by the struggle for democracy; (2) victorious socialism cannot consolidate its victory and bring humanity to the withering away of the state without implementing full democracy. To claim that self-determination is superfluous under socialism is therefore just as nonsensical and just as hopelessly confusing as to claim that democracy is superfluous under socialism. Self-determination is *no more* impossible under capitalism, and *just* as superfluous under socialism, as democracy generally. The economic revolution will create the necessary prerequisites for eliminating *all* types of political oppression. Precisely for that reason it is illogical and incorrect to reduce everything to the economic revolution, for the question is: *how* to eliminate national oppression? It cannot be eliminated without an economic revolution. That is incontestable. But to *limit* ourselves to this is to lapse into absurd and wretched imperialist Economism.²⁶² We must carry out national *equality*; proclaim, formulate and implement equal "rights" for all

²⁶² "Economism" in the Leninist sense is defined as a political deviation that addresses only narrow, immediate economic demands like higher wages to the exclusion of connected political and social demands which broaden the focus of a struggle. See also modern left debates over class reductionism vs. intersectionality.

nations.”²⁶³

It’s important to understand and remember that Lenin saw *bourgeois* democracy as a false expression of democracy, where the ruling classes offered tokenistic and symbolic forms of mass participation as a cover for what was actually the ruthless rule of a tiny capitalist class ultimately reinforced by their control of the state and its armed forces. Per Marx, no matter how liberal the trappings, capitalism is marked by the “dictatorship of the bourgeoisie” as a class, to be remedied by the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Lenin was aware, even before the conjunctural events of 1917 that allowed the Bolsheviks to lead the workers’ *soviets* to power, that revolutionaries needed to be prepared for changing terrain during the course of struggle.

The social revolution is not a single battle, but a period covering a series of battles over all sorts of problems of economic and democratic reform, which are consummated only by the expropriation of the bourgeoisie. It is for the sake of this final aim that we must formulate every one of our democratic demands in a consistently revolutionary way. It is quite conceivable that the workers of some particular country will overthrow the bourgeoisie before even a single fundamental democratic reform has been fully achieved. It is, however, quite inconceivable that the proletariat, as a historical class, will be able to defeat the bourgeoisie, unless it is prepared for that by being educated in the spirit of the most consistent and resolutely revolutionary democracy.²⁶⁴

Walleign Makonnen himself, in that crucial document on the

²⁶³ V.I. Lenin, “A Caricature of Marxism and Imperialist Economism,” (1916) (Accessed from the Marxist Internet Archive (www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/carimarx/6.htm)).

²⁶⁴ V.I. Lenin, “The Revolutionary Proletariat and the Right of Nations to Self Determination” (1915). (Accessed from the Marxist Internet Archive, www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1915/oct/16.htm).

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national question he published back in 1969, saw the egalitarian, democratic goal intrinsically linked to the methods of struggle. He even presciently warned against a reliance on the military to solve the problems of Ethiopian society:

And how do we achieve this genuine democratic and egalitarian state? Can we do it through military? No!! A military coup is nothing more but a change of personalities. It may be a bit more liberal than the existing regime but it can never resolve the contradiction between either classes or nationalities.... To come back to our central question: How can we form a genuine egalitarian national-state? It is clear that we can achieve this goal only through violence, through revolutionary armed struggle. But we must always guard ourselves against the pseudo-nationalist propaganda of the regime.²⁶⁵

The 1971 ESUNA *Hand Book*, produced in exile but smuggled back into the country as a manual for revolution, emphasizes that solidarity amongst the oppressed, a key building block of democracy, was central to revolutionary organizing.

In Ethiopia the peasantry is a revolutionary force and it will be the main fighter—under the leadership of the working class party—against serfdom and the autocracy as well as the imperialists. However, the impetus, the direction has to come from what Engels calls the alert population concentrated in the towns.... Who leads the peasantry is *the* crucial issue of the revolution.... In contrast to all exploited classes of previous socio-economic formations (slave and feudal) the proletariat is a class which cannot free itself from exploitation without abolishing all exploitation of man by man and all forms of oppression, and consequently, without freeing all the working people from pre-capitalist and

²⁶⁵ Walleign Makonen, “On the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia” (1969).

capitalist yoke of dependence.²⁶⁶

The *Hand Book* goes on to spell out how revolutionaries should help the people connect the dots, even under the Ethiopian circumstances of low political consciousness.

The aim is to create sympathy and active solidarity (and consequently alliance) amidst workers and peasants as well as revolutionary students. The intention, moreover, is to show that the problem is not local but central (country-wide) and that the solution can only come if the system at the center is destroyed... in doing this we should bear in mind the low level of political consciousness of the masses and we should make widespread and persistent efforts to explain what the basic democratic concepts (equality, election, right, freedom, government by the people, land to the tiller, etc.) mean.²⁶⁷

When *Democracia* began publishing in 1974 it became popular precisely because it fed a hunger for the discussion of these ideas that had been suppressed by the elitism and censorship of Haile Selassie's autocracy.

Those Ethiopian leftists who threw their lot in with the military would have done well to read up on the German-Polish revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919). She warned about the limitations of ruling by decree, something for which *Democracia* frequently and harshly chastised the *Derg*.

Certainly, the thoughtless had a different picture of the course of events. They imagined it would be only necessary to overthrow the old government, to set up a socialist government at the head of affairs, and then to inaugurate socialism by decree. Once again, that was an illusion. Socialism will not and cannot be created by decrees; nor

²⁶⁶ ESUNA, *Hand Book, Op. Cit.*, p. 3.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

can it be established by any government, however socialistic. Socialism must be created by the masses, by every proletarian. Where the chains of capitalism are forged, there they must be broken. Only that is socialism, and only thus can socialism be created.²⁶⁸

Luxemburg was clear that it wasn't good intentions or flashy socialist rhetoric that would mark the transition to a new society, but an actual revolution in social relations led from the oppressed and exploited classes. It's impossible to know if EPLO members read this text—though Luxemburg was certainly in vogue in Europe during the time when the ESM studied there—but it's clear they had come to the same conclusion.

An insightful and prescient polemic written by pro-EPLO students in Europe in late 1974 in defense of calling for a people's provisional government is obviously aimed against those on the left like Senay Likke who were relying on the military to steer the proper course.

The demand for the creation of a provisional government is not an idyllic dream as the *right opportunist* trend in our movement miserably try to blabber but is dictated politically by the urgent need of a popular organ of power to execute and implement these immediate tasks of the revolutionary movement.... What miserable pedantry and lack of political vision that this impotent clique in our movement cannot provide a concrete political alternative to this transition of power and the proper organ necessary that could be instrumental in its execution, except that frantically shrieking the strategic slogan "Down with imperialism and feudalism". It should be observed that the position of *right opportunism* in our movement contains a dangerous liquidationist character. By evading the concrete issue of transition of power, it disarms the masses politically and

²⁶⁸ Rosa Luxemburg, "Speech to the Spartacus League" (1918). (Accessed from the Marxist Internet Archive, www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/12/31.htm).

exposes the revolutionary movement to the swindling and usurpation of its legitimate right by a self-styled military junta.... In our eyes, the decisive battle between revolution and counter-revolution both within the Armed Forces and in the political life of the country at large will be decided by the urgent political question whether the popular will triumphs in the constitution of a provisional democratic government or in its defeat to be replaced by a rabid cry of "law and order!"²⁶⁹

Viciously undemocratic regimes throughout the twentieth century made standard practice of claiming to be paragons of democracy, but at least in its first period, Ethiopia's military rulers and their apologists were remarkably forthright about their need to maintain a tight grip on political power. They did indeed actually argue *against* democracy. An account of the revolution by the *Pravda* man in Addis Ababa, Valentin Korovikov, was published for mass distribution by a Soviet state publisher in 1979; its point of view can safely be presumed to be in line with that of the *Derg*. Compare this series of rationalizations with the quote above, which turns out to have been remarkably prescient.

For instance, the EPRP insisted that, since the army was the product of the Ethiopian monarchy, it could not lead the revolution and, consequently, power should be handed over to some sort of people's government. This demand was put forward practically on the very next day after the overthrow of Haile Selassie. Ultra-revolutionary popular slogans were also used as a smokescreen for attacks on the *Dergue* and the army, which in the Ethiopian conditions was the sole force capable of completely wiping out feudalism, breaking the old state machinery, defending the country's territorial integrity and crushing the armed resistance of the reaction-

²⁶⁹ Editorial, *Bulletin of the WWFES*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Oct. 1974 (Geneva, Switzerland) (spelling corrected).

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aries.²⁷⁰

Democracia made a firm assertion about the potential of military rule. “The military regime cannot fulfill the demands of democracy... a group that does not practice an internal democracy of its own, cannot fulfill the wishes of the people... the only solution it has is violence.”²⁷¹
Words to remember.

Power to the People

Democracia and the rest of the Ethiopian left began calling for a popular provisional government, that is, for organs of democracy, while the *ancien régime* was still clinging to power. The demand took on increased urgency with the military seizure of government. They made this call understanding that it was not a simple demand but a strategic lever that might crack open the potential of the revolution. They also understood it was a kind of litmus test revealing the true intentions of competing forces within the revolution. And this demand for people’s power came from the people themselves.

Pro-*Democracia* Ethiopian students in Europe at the beginning of 1975 explain the demand:

The demand for a popular provisional government is neither reformist nor utopian. It is a concrete demand to further the development of the revolutionary process in Ethiopia.... With characteristic contempt for the masses... the military rulers state that the masses are not conscious enough to take their destiny into their own hands. So what is the solution? The military rulers say: “We will stay in power and make sure that the masses become conscious!” Therefore, anybody who asks for the right to organise, who demands the formation of a provisional government made up of the true representatives of the popular masses is labelled as an “extremist”

²⁷⁰ Valentin Korovikov, *Ethiopia: Years of Revolution* by Novosti Press Agency, Moscow, 1979; p. 91.

²⁷¹ *Democracia*, Vol. 1, No. 6, August 1974, quoted in Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, p. 113.

by the military and repressed as such. To all this, our masses have answered clearly by saying: “We are conscious and we don’t want an American-backed military rule.” The masses say: “We want a popular provisional government that will be a step ahead in the bitter class struggle we are engaged in to end all exploitation.”²⁷²

The revolution that EPLO, the future Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP, see the next chapter), had been preparing for was not exactly the revolution that happened. The empire collapsed sooner, and more easily, than most would have guessed. And suddenly there was this military regime, now calling itself socialist no less, sitting atop the corpse of the Ethiopian state but, exactly as had been predicted, displaying little interest in granting basic democratic rights, much less surrendering political control to the people; and unanswerable to any body politic except itself. The commitment of the Ethiopian left to a perspective of long-termed armed struggle was just not enough of a strategy in response.²⁷³ The revolution did not stop with the *Derg*’s seizure of power. So how to relate to the new government?

There are many reasons for popular attraction to the future EPRP, but it was the demand for a people’s government that gave the EPRP special power. It was their insistence that the people were correct in wanting to determine their own future that made them a threat to the *Derg*, which was soon to label them “anarchist” and “counter-revolutionary” for this profoundly democratic commitment.

The staunchly pro-*Derg* Hungarian ambassador observed the reaction of Ethiopian workers and students to the vague promises of the

²⁷² Editorial, “The Fight Against the Reactionary Leaders of ESUE,” *The Proletariat*, labelled Vol. 1, No. 1 1974 but actually Vol. 2, 1975, published by the Ethiopian Students’ Union in Holland, p. 6.

²⁷³ Paradoxically, long-term armed struggle was pursued with ultimate success by both the EPLF and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front. Both fronts in power pursued resolution of the “national question,” but neither instituted socialism or actual popular democracy. I would argue that, at least on paper, the EPRP’s program was to the classical left of the national liberation fronts. See later chapters for an introductory discussion of the TPLF, whose trajectory with its victory in 1991 puts it adjacent to, but outside of, this investigation.

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PMAC made upon their assumption of power.

After the dethronement of the Emperor, the military government was faced with the problem that the trade union leaders and part of the intelligentsia construed the expression “popular government” as meaning that the administration of the country should be taken over by a civilian government. This attitude expressed at the same time the striving of the reaction to discredit the most progressive force capable of guaranteeing the best-organized change, the army and its representative body, the Military Council.... Similar problems cropped up in connection with the student movement. Some of the university youth held confused anarchistic “ultra-leftist” view: their leaders hewed to petty bourgeois principles that led them to an unrealistic assessment of the situation. A certain influence of the Maoist ideology could also be felt. These elements demanded a “popular government” instead of a military one.²⁷⁴

It's an almost hilarious statement of paternalism that makes a dividing line very clear: the *Derg* needed to demonize the demands of the people as somehow a threat to the very revolution they claimed to be steering. Giving voice to those demands was the obvious response of the revolutionary left.

That left did indeed look to theory that stressed the self-actualization of the masses, as in Mao's “mass line” as summarized in the 1971 *Hand Book*:

Another characteristic of a working class party is that it adheres to the mass line. A working class party is not an elite party. It is the instrument of power of the working class and all the working peoples—it is their conscious and leading party. As such it can only be strong if it practices the mass line, it can only be “effective” if it serves, joins, links

²⁷⁴ Zoltán Gyenge, *op. Cit.*, p. 31.

itself and leads the masses. Starting from the basis of “the people along are the motive force in the making of world history,” and “the revolution is the work of the masses,” that “the masses have boundless creative potentials and enthusiasm for socialism,” the working class party must strengthen its links with the masses, learn from them, teach them in return and lead their struggle.²⁷⁵

The key part here is “learn from them, teach them in return.” The left listened to what the people were clamoring for, synthesized it into the demand for a popular provisional government, and then began to organize the people into mass and cadre organizations that could challenge the course of the unfolding revolution. Ultimately the EPRP understood that the revolution’s social transformation could only be the work of the awakened masses of people themselves and not directed by proclamation or force of arms.

The EPRP made democracy the key demand on a road to socialism, though the clarity of this formulation took some precious months to evolve. In the unstable moments of conjuncture, the EPRP was not ready to lead any kind of insurrection, and it’s probably true that an important moment was passed on to the military, who by virtue of its arms was able to leverage events in their favor. The military government in turn presumed its reforms would materially benefit the population enough to win support without making democratic concessions.

The revolutionary line was developed and deepened in the course of struggle. To be frank, despite the revolutionary politics of its editors, *Democracia* didn’t openly advance the idea of socialism *per se*, until socialism was put on the table by the *Derg*.²⁷⁶ In this regard, they might be accused of falling short of the vanguard role they hoped to fill. Furthermore, the explosive factionalism that eventually cursed the future EPRP at its historically most difficult moments suggests that internal group functioning failed to completely mirror the aspirational democratic urge.

²⁷⁵ ESUNA, *Hand Book, op. Cit.*, p. 10.

²⁷⁶ See Kiflu Tadesse. *The Generation Part 1*, p. 183.

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But the EPRP's *stated* vision eventually came to be complete and coherent.

Democracy, according to our party, EPRP, is not simply a means to mobilize the masses against the fascist regime. On the contrary, EPRP believes that democracy [is] a crucial feature of its internal make-up and of the kind of society that it was to establish in Ethiopia. EPRP does not and has never conceived socialism without democracy as proletarian democracy is undoubtedly of a high and true nature than any form of bourgeois democracy. EPRP does not aim to curtail democracy within it on the grounds that it is engaged in a bitter struggle. Democracy is not a luxury but a pre-requisite for the effective functioning of the organization and the realization of its aims. EPRP never tries to stifle/curtail the democratic rights of the masses in this or that pretext. We do not aim to be another Soviet Union or East Germany where socialism means dictatorship of a clan of exploiting bureaucrats over the working people. Hence, EPRP's conception of socialism is intrinsically linked with the broadest democracy for the proletariat and the working masses.²⁷⁷

The bottom line is that class power in Ethiopia was still not held by the masses after the removal of the emperor.

After September 1974, the Ethiopian revolution remained a vivid class struggle. The Kenyan sociologist Dr. Michael Chege observed that:

In his pamphlet, *What is to be Done?*, Lenin delineated the respective roles in a socialist revolution of, on the one hand, professional revolutionaries drawn from "the young generation of educated classes", and the working classes on the other. In Ethiopia, the *Dirgue* had on the contrary eliminated the revolutionary intelligentsia and suppressed the

²⁷⁷ "EPRA Successfully Conducted a Vast Rectification Campaign," *Abyot*, Vol. 2, No. 7, Nov. 1977, p. 6-7.

working class in the name of Marxism-Leninism. In the face of this gigantic blasphemy it should surprise no one that the military Government proceeded to build its power on social classes (and in a manner) that neither Marx nor Lenin would have approved.²⁷⁸

Despite the increasingly radical face of the military, the revolution had not yet delivered on its promises.

In 1976 *Democracia* wrote,

There are many social truths which history proves, beyond doubt, once and for all. Of these many truths, the one and the fundamental one at that, is that in every country, where exploited classes and oppressed people are found, genuine liberation can be grasped only in a social revolution under proletarian leadership, in alliance with the peasantry and with the co-operation of other oppressed classes. In our era such a social revolution in the economic, political and social fields can, with revolutionary power, destroy age-old reactionary remnants, anti-development and exploitative relations in order to herald the birth of a new order only by a Marxist-Leninist Party, armed and built with the scientific and most correct proletarian ideology.... EPRP clearly knows that a social revolution is not a daily dinner preparation. It very well understands that struggle demands ups and downs and numerous preparations and is far from the sweet dreams and philosophical hypotheses of the palace revolutionaries. This it has learned from the universal principles of Marxism-Leninism, the experience of the international proletarian movement and from the revolutionary truths of the Ethiopian society.... It correctly defines the revolutionary line after soberly estimating the class alignments and the power balances and after *patiently* investigat-

²⁷⁸ Dr. Michael Chege, "The Revolution Betrayed: Ethiopia, 1974-9," *JMAS*, Sept. 1979, p. 373.

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ing the anti-people and anti-revolutionary force's essence and form. Along with this, it will struggle at all times and to the finish by alternating political and armed, peaceful and illegal methods of struggle for the realization of a genuine peoples democracy, for peace and progress and for a society fully free from exploitation and oppression. Nothing will prevent it from this stand. The crimes and threats, prisons and blind massacre of the anti-people and anti-revolutionary forces; the bloodletting by feudalists, imperialist and fascists; none of these will prevent the party from its rock firm stands.²⁷⁹

And so the revolutionary Ethiopian left faced the future with optimism and determination.

²⁷⁹ "EPRP and the Proletariat," from *Democracia*, Vol. 3 No. 12, Dec. 1976, reprinted in *Abyot*, Vol. 2, No. 3, April 1977.

Chapter 7

1975, The Limits of Power

“You heroically stood up last year in February to break the rusted chains of oppression and exploitation. For this just struggle, you have suffered and shed your blood which marked the clear advancement of the revolution. You smashed the autocratic king and his ruling cliques. But the brutal oppression and exploitation are continuing under new forms and in a way more sophisticated. All these are hardly possible to conceal. Because, the revolution for which you bled, and made a life and death struggle is snatched out of your hold by the self-appointed caretakers. In this respect the revolution is being misdirected to serve the interest of the ruling class, not yours. On the contrary, the very revolution you have set in motion is twisted to destroy you. Therefore, before it becomes too late, you should reclaim the revolution and assert your rights. And throughout this historical struggle you wage, EPRP will stand and fight at your side until final victory.”—EPRP, Message to the Broad Masses, 1975²⁸⁰

“In order to advance the struggle, a revolutionary movement must carry out a concrete and all-sided analysis of the concrete conditions of a given period and on the basis of this analysis formulate the appropriate strategy and tactics of struggle. To this end, it is first necessary to clearly differentiate between the friends and enemies of the revolution; to devise methods of winning over the wavering forces that stand in between to the side of the revolution, to which cause they could contribute when they can. Secondly, it is imperative to correctly assess, at any given time or place, one’s own forces and those of the enemy. Finally, it is necessary to set up the corresponding organizations

²⁸⁰ “Message to the Broad Masses,” in the *Program of the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Party*, August 1975 (As reproduced by ESUNA, p. 36).

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for the given forms of struggle, and be able to raise the correct slogans of the struggle.”—Preamble to the program of the All-Ethiopian Socialist Movement (*Meison*), 1975²⁸¹

Momentum & Contradiction

The year 1975 was a year of profound social and political change in Ethiopia. The military was firmly in power, coasting on popular support for the revolution, and it actually began to enact a radical social agenda, albeit one with some profound limitations.

The contradictions were massive: still engaged in wars against the restive populations of Eritrea and other regions, the *Derg* claimed to support peace and respect for national diversity. As its leaders moved into the palaces vacated by the nobility, it began to promise the redistribution of national wealth. As it claimed to support the rights of urban workers and beyond that the “broad masses” of the Ethiopian people, it showed little inclination toward democratic process or popular self-expression. And while claiming to address the social justice aspirations of the younger generation as expressed by the increasingly radical college and high-school age population, the *Derg*’s first major act after the proclamation of “Ethiopian socialism” was to close the nation’s schools, clad the nation’s young people in military-style uniforms, and send them packing *en masse* to the countryside. Though the National Development Campaign’s participants were entrusted with carrying the revolution to the countryside, what seems quite clear is that the first goal of the *Zemetcha* was removing a volatile and uncontrollable force from the crucible of Ethiopia’s urban areas. Both *Democracia* and *Voice of the Masses* reacted to the *Zemetcha* with suspicion.²⁸²

Upon the kickoff of the campaign, the *Derg* chairman, Teferi Benti, exclaimed at a rally, “Youth of Ethiopia! Today’s or tomorrow’s Ethiopia is yours. So that the country can belong to you, you have to belong to the country today. Stand against the sufferings of the people. Prepare

²⁸¹ Preamble to the program of the All-Ethiopian Socialist Movement (*Meison*), 1975, p. 2–3.

²⁸² See Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part 1*, pp. 179–181.

the people for a new life!”²⁸³ In January, 60,000 students in the first wave of the *Zemetcha* were sent to the countryside. That meant 60,000 students who could no longer fill demonstrations in the streets of Addis Ababa and other cities.

Gizachew Tiruneh was one of the youth inducted into the *Zemetcha*.

We were encouraged to teach the villagers about the socialist philosophy of the new government. We did not receive any formal training to do so. However, we were expected to have some understanding of the subject matter, as the government disseminated such information on the radio, television, and in the newspapers on a daily basis. Nearly all of us were convinced that socialism was a democratic political system in which everyone would have equal rights. Moreover, we believed that socialism was an egalitarian economic system in which income disparity and economic exploitation would be eradicated.... We repeatedly told the peasants that the goal of socialism was to equalize the economic conditions of all of the people in the country. We also told them that social equality among men and women had to be achieved. We added that male chauvinism would have no place in socialism.... Although the peasants were too polite and respectful to show their discontent openly, they [were] very uneasy about the new social and economic policies we were preaching to them.²⁸⁴

Another young participant in the campaign writes home to a former teacher:

In our country as you know it is a national struggle time. Not individual, it is up to organize the people means the peasant, and after on there shall be a class struggle between

²⁸³ Provisional Military Administrative Council, *The Ethiopian Revolution Second Anniversary*, September (1976), p. 25.

²⁸⁴ Gizachew Tiruneh, *On the Run in the Blue Nile* (2014), pp. 56–57.

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the peasants and the bourgeois. The question [who] will win out peasants [or] bourgeois. I am sure the peasants will win. After we organized the peasants we Zeamach students are an axe or saw to cut out the bourgeois to dismiss them out of Ethiopia.... Until we complete our aim we don't know whether a true socialism or not.²⁸⁵

And here was the flaw in the *Derg's* plan: it turned out that, even away from home, concentrations of students teaching literacy to peasants was as combustible a combination as students congregating on campus. The students, asked to treat socialism as something tangible, took their work seriously, and deepened their studies. By the time the *Zemetcha* materialized, the left groups realized that infiltrating it was a better strategy than opposing it, and EPLO/*Democracia*—soon to begin organizing as the EPRP—began producing specific literature addressed to the young campaigners. They became a captive audience for leftist agitators, who found many sympathetic ears among the students: The youth league being organized by the EPLO grew by leaps and bounds. And so for example, when his *Zemetcha* term was over in 1976, Gizachew Tiruneh promptly joined the EPRP.

Nega Mezlekia was also a high school student at the time of the 1974 revolution. He was assigned to the *Zemetcha* from his hometown of Jijiga. He explains how the *Zemetcha* backfired:

The campaign produced results that were directly contrary to the regime's policy. The students, in many parts of the country, rallied the peasants against state officials, the police and administrator—most of whom were landowners. As a result, a number of students were put to death. With its resounding motto of "Ethiopia First!" the military junta's initial policy was a shade apart from other forms of African socialism, being more nationalistic than universal. The students, however, had already been exposed to the teachings

²⁸⁵ Reproduced in Barbara W. Olson, *Gondar, Ethiopia 1971–1975*, p. 406.

of Marx, Lenin and Mao, and were attempting to use these imported ideas as principles of organization and education. The students' efforts to jump the junta's gun and urge the peasants to form collectives was in direct opposition to the will of the regime. Their attempt to oust former landowners from their midst create chaos, catching the junta unawares. By the end of 1975, the regime decided to recall the students to the cities.²⁸⁶

EPRP insider Kiflu Tadesse explains how important it was that the civilian left organized inside the *Zemetcha*:

The EPRP won the sympathy of the youth after it articulated its demands and innermost feelings during the student *Zemetcha*. The EPRP shared the hardships, anguish, frustrations and misery of the *zematch* students. It also shared their exuberance in their day to day struggles, acclaimed their modest achievements, and above all, made efforts to give guidance to their struggle. Reciprocally, winning the soul of the Ethiopian youth meant life and vibrancy to the EPRP, which was still toddling.²⁸⁷

Following the January 1 nationalization of the banks and insurance companies and the start of the *Zemetcha*, the year brought a dizzying series of radical proclamations of reform. In February, the PMAC took control of about a hundred of the country's major companies; followed almost immediately by a "Declaration on Economic Policy of Socialist Ethiopia." Industry was divided into three categories, one to be immediately nationalized, one reserved for joint development with foreign capital, and one reserved for private ownership.²⁸⁸ The state bureaucracy was expanded exponentially as new ministries were created to manage government business. Ministries were created to address new development needs: education and medical infrastructure, public

²⁸⁶ Nega Mezlekia, *Notes from the Hyena's Belly* (2000), p. 141.

²⁸⁷ Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, p. 83.

²⁸⁸ See PMAC, *The Ethiopian Revolution Second Anniversary*, p. 40.

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services, water and sewage. A committee was even empowered to study eradicating prostitution, which with mass migration to the cities from impoverished rural areas was becoming rampant. Drought and ecological problems like deforestation were also addressed. And the major problem of urban unemployment was targeted.

On March 4, land reform was announced; all rural lands were to be seized by the state and hereditary land ownership and feudal land tenancy systems were to be abolished. Mass rallies of support for the land reform followed the next day, and peasant associations started to be set up, often with the assistance of *Zemetcha* campaigners. The left broadly supported the reforms and participated in the rallies of support, though there was creeping suspicion that things were not as they seemed. Mohammed Yimam, a student member of the *Democracia* network, remembers:

We participated in a huge demonstration that started in Arat Kilo and went downtown through the back of Emperor Menelik's palace to what became known as Revolution Square.... Interspersed with the placards that supported the Land Proclamation Act, which ended feudalism as we knew it, were others that were asking for a provisional civilian government.... A group of young people surrounding Girmachew [Lemma] carried these placards.²⁸⁹

On March 21, the regency of crown prince Asfa Wossen was revoked, and the royalty virtually abolished. (Haile Selassie was by now completely tucked away in the ignominy of official detention; his death would follow later in the year, the natural causes of the official announcement widely interpreted as code for someone pressing a pillow over the deposed emperor's face.)

On July 26, a proclamation made urban land and extra houses government property, effective in August. Neighborhood urban dwellers associations called *kebeles* were set up in Ethiopian cities with which all residents were required to register in return for new, official identity

²⁸⁹ Mohammed Yimam, *op. Cit.*, pp. 63–64.

cards. In August the *Zemetcha* was reauthorized.

In December, a new labour law was promulgated which promised to “guarantee the dignity of workers.”²⁹⁰ The law established an official trade union federation, and called for the establishment of more trade unions across the country, though the rationalizations of these unions were to be improved efficiency and production rather than worker militancy and independence. Indeed, no right to strike was enshrined in the new code. “Hereafter in Socialist Ethiopia the dignity and worth of labour will be duly respected and all forms of exploitation abolished with fair and just remuneration for work. The welfare of workers will be motivated by the precedence of the common good over individual gains and workers will be made to have full participation and due share in the production process.”²⁹¹

The revolution seemed to be roaring forward. Mass demonstrations were becoming commonplace, and for the first time May Day, the international labor holiday, was celebrated in the streets with an officially sanctioned event. Mass organizations were being established all over: peasants, workers, women. Politically, however, the military was in full control.

Meison member Abera Yemane-Ab writes,

Yet, by the summer of 1975 thousands of peasant association have been formed throughout the country with the help of *Zemachs*. Although no re-distribution was carried out millions of tenants had acquired the land they held as tenants and, for the first time in their history, cultivated the land anticipating to reap the full benefits of their labour, come harvest time. Millions of peasants had finally come together to talk freely about their problems and to seek their own solutions without looking back over their shoulders. In the most free and democratic election ever conducted in Ethiopia, millions of Ethiopian peasants chose their own leaders from amongst themselves. It seemed that they were

²⁹⁰ *The Ethiopian Herald*, December 6, 1975.

²⁹¹ Quoted in *The Ethiopian Herald*, December 6, 1975.

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about to take their destiny into their own hands.²⁹²

Had land really been given to the tiller, fulfilling the original demand of Ethiopian radicals? With the government's claims to wanting a peaceful solution to the war in Eritrea, was a resolution of the crises haunting the country on the way? Was the military really successfully bringing socialism to the ancient nation of Ethiopia? According to the *Derg's* backers and apologists, some of its later chroniclers, and certainly to concerned observers in the American State Department (still officially backing and arming the Ethiopian military), the answer was *yes*. But let us look a little deeper beneath the surface of this narrative.

A Split on the Left

Through the end of 1974 and beginning of 1975, *Meison's The Voice of the Masses* reflected a line similar to that of EPLO's *Democracia*. Both underground journals and their growing clandestine networks called for the military to turn over power to a popular provisional government and advocated for more democracy in the revolutionary process. Both groups talked to anyone who would listen, including radical members of the *Derg*, and when the reforms started to unfold, both groups sent members into the bureaucracies of new government ministries, and both groups entered the various new mass organizations to advocate for their positions.

In the face of the changing challenges of the revolution, unity negotiations did take place between the formally covert EPLO and *Meison*. EPRP veteran Solomon Ejigu Gebreselassie summarizes what happened:

Both organizations named delegates to the talks, initially Dr. Tesfaye Debessay and Kiflu Tadesse for EPRP, and Haile Fida and Andargatchew Assegid for *Meison*.... The discussions were held from February to April 1975. Allegedly, EPRP insisted that unless there is unanimity on the need for a PPG (people's provisional government—a

²⁹² Abera Yemane-Ab, "The Defeat of the Ethiopian Revolution," p. 7.

slogan and a notion both organizations shared for over a year until Meison changed course and opposed it around the first quarter of 1975), that it was impossible for the two organizations to work together. As a result, the two agreed in minor issues such as on popularizing revolutionary ideas, and the distribution of their organs among each others members, and to hold further talks.... In weeks, Dr. Tesfaye went underground and the talks were permanently discontinued.²⁹³

Meison's line did indeed change course, and the ramifications were a crossing of a Rubicon. Its founder, Haile Fida, is alleged to have said, "We have an alternative... at this crucial time, either we have the courage to change the whole political climate and our political capacity, by actively participating in the social transformation of the Ethiopian society; by giving critical support for all the progressive steps the military takes or we step aside condemning simply the reactionary measures it takes and remain meaningless in the history of the Ethiopian revolution."²⁹⁴ And so *Voice of the Broad Masses* announced a policy of critical support to the *Derg* and the PMAC. Haile Fida joined Senay Likke as a prime leftist advisor to the military regime.

Makonen Getu was an Ethiopian university student still studying abroad at the University of Stockholm when the revolution touched off. In Sweden, he became General Secretary of the Ethiopian Students' Union in Europe (ESUE). He explains the *Meison* strategy of giving critical support to the *Derg*: "The 'critical support' strategy enabled MEISON to establish a 'temporary alliance' with the PMG. This opened the door for MEISON to advance its struggle legally and gain access to many critical government institutions, political training establishments, and mass organizations."²⁹⁵

It's clear from *Meison's* own words on the people's provisional gov-

²⁹³ Solomon Ejigu Gebreselassie, *EPRP: Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, p. 44; Solomon supports a dissident faction of the EPRP.

²⁹⁴ HB, "Shading Light on Haile Fida's Life" (2010).

²⁹⁵ Makonen Getu, *The Undreamt*, p. 72.

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ernment that they couldn't conceive of democracy as something other than bourgeois elections, and that meanwhile, someone must stand above the masses monitoring their readiness. "It was necessary to tell the masses that they could win political power only if they raised the level of consciousness, if they got more organized and armed, and not through the ballot box. Even if one assumed that it were possible to establish [the] PPG, such a government would never stand for the interests of the masses but for those of the bourgeoisie in general."²⁹⁶

None of the Ethiopian left groups at the time was monolithic: internal divisions within *Meison* certainly existed as returning exiled activists and new adherents struggled to formulate a path going forward that would diverge from that of *Democracia*; of course each party struggled to make the most of its position around the table of the revolutionary moment.

EPLO's Kiflu Tadesse, himself then organizing on the ground in Ethiopia, notes the fundamental differences that had kept *Meison* and EPLO separate started to become clearer with the shift in *Meison*'s line.

The political differences between the two groups were reflected in the organizational activities and their attitudes towards the process of the struggle itself. Despite the relatively favorable conditions for conducting peaceful political struggle, the EPLO strongly believed that, in the final analysis, it would resort to armed struggle. The EPLO was a clandestine organization and tried to remain so.... Many of the *Meison* members were exposed to the public. For EPLO members, this kind of organizational concept was considered bizarre.²⁹⁷

EPLO would come to sharply criticize *Meison*; they would come to accuse *Meison* of being *complicit* with the military regime and worse. EPRP's *Abyot*:

²⁹⁶ "Me'isone in the Ethiopian Revolution," *The Voice of the People*, (English edition, via UPESUNA), No. 1, May 1977, p. 7.

²⁹⁷ Kiflu Tadesse, *Part 1 op. Cit.*, p. 226–227.

Meisone argued that “the Derg is progressive” and should be given support by revolutionary forces. Hiding behind the slogan of “critical support” the Haile Fida group allied itself with an anti-democratic regime that would have been critically and firmly exposed and combatted. Leaving aside the reformist claptrap about “critical support” let us look briefly if the Meisone grouping did employ this. Primarily, a party or group that allies itself with a regime under the watchword of “critical support” must have its own independent existence, must have a strong base and must be critical of the regime’s anti-democratic actions while extolling and supporting its progressive ones. We do not subscribe to this opportunist fantasy but that’s what its exponents say. Meisone talked a lot about critical support but in practice it not only supported each and every anti-people actions of the Derg but it initiated these repressive acts itself.²⁹⁸

By all accounts the *Derg* itself was heavily divided and ridden by factions and competing interests. Adding to Senay Likke’s already prodigious influence over the Mengistu wing of the *Derg*, *Meison* and particularly Haile Fida could now be found as an ideological force behind the military regime. The *Derg*’s developing radical posture and proclamations can be seen as increasingly the product of the significant influence of a wing of the civilian left. But the power behind this contradictory alliance were always the guns of the military.

Dawit Shifaw was a military functionary and low-level member of the *Derg*. He spells it out: “It was Maeson who advised the Derg to nationalize rural lands and extra urban houses and lands. It was also Maeson who persuaded the Derg to arm the peasants against the landlords. While doing this, Maeson became hand in glove with the Derg, especially with Mengistu Hailemariam.”²⁹⁹

The increasing left face of the *Derg* was a real challenge for those,

²⁹⁸ EPRP, “Meisone’s ‘New’ Tunes from Beyond the Grave,” *Abyot*, February/March 1978.

²⁹⁹ Dawit Shifaw, *Diary of Terror*, p. 64.

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like EPLO and *Democracia*, whose analysis was laced with not only a healthy suspicion of the military's motives, but an understanding that the Ethiopian state was not yet in the hands of the people. Kiflu Tadesse explains,

The EPLO was faced with a regime whose political stock had risen considerably and not only among the direct beneficiaries of the reforms. Many radicals were won over as well, seeing no reason to struggle against a regime that had fulfilled the major material demands of the movement. It was imperative, therefore, for the EPLO to reorient the struggle by focusing on the fundamental issues the regime had not, and was not likely to resolve.... By focusing on the role of the state, regarded as safeguarding the interest of the ruling classes, the EPLO brought the political challenge to the center of the debate.... Henceforth, democracy became the cardinal issue, and the peoples' right to organize and arm themselves was the major demand. The absence of democracy and popular organization were depicted as a dire threat to the very survival of the left and the economic reforms of the revolution.³⁰⁰

Looking back on this critical juncture and the events that were soon to unfold, the EPRP's judgment of *Meison* would be very harsh.

Meisone was the organiser, the ideologue, the propagandist and the executioner for the Derg. Meisone filled the bureaucracy, run the so-called Provisional Office for Mass Organizational Affairs (POMOA), etc. At a critical time when the junta was besieged by the mass revolutionary movement and cornered, Meisone mercenaries came to its rescue and beautifying the fascist regime through "Marxist" phrases carried out a wide and extensive campaign of confusion and repression. Together with the full and unconditional

³⁰⁰ Kiflu Tadesse, *ibid.*, p. 210.

backing to the DERG (so much so that there was absolutely no difference practically between Meison positions and that of the Derg) they undertook the physical liquidation of militants and progressives from all sectors.³⁰¹

Over the course of 1975, *Meison's* leadership and other *Derg* allies on the left were invited to consolidate in an advisory body to the *Derg* that came to be known as the Politbureau. They had an inside track as both observers and ideological advocates for the regime. The two camps on the left, pro- and anti-government, joined battle, a battle that was waged with words... for now.

The Women's Coordinating Committee was established in early 1975³⁰², as the first step in consolidating a women's movement. A conference the WCC held in April that was attended by 300 women delegates from government offices and factory floors, was the site of debate between the two factions of the left. WCC was supervised by a male member of the *Derg*, Lt. Alemayehu Haile; its female leaders included EPLO labor activist Daro Negash and *Meison* activist Dr. Nigist Adane.

Meison partisans explained what happened:

This conference saw a bitter confrontation between the ultra "left" women, regrouped around the EPRP, and progressives among whom some were members or sympathisers of MEISONE. The confrontation was but a reflection of the divisions that prevailed among the vanguard forces and revolved around some important issues of the revolution. Most important among these was the question of the nature of the Derg and the tactual [sic] attitudes that progressives should have towards it. The EPRP group refused to see any difference between the Derg on the one hand and the feudalists and imperialists on the other. Arguing that the Derg was fascistic and more dangerous to the Ethiopian people

³⁰¹ EPRP, "Meison's 'New' Tunes from Beyond the Grave," *Abyot*, February/March 1978.

³⁰² ISEANE, *Women in the Ethiopian Revolution* (1980), p. 25.

than feudalism and imperialism it constantly called for its overthrow.... It rejected the idea of any tactical alliance with the military and shunned any meaningful legal work to educate and organize the people. MEISONNE argued that there were very sharp contradictions between progressives and reactionaries with the Derg itself.... Therefore, MEISONNE argued, revolutionaries must come out in support of all the progressive measures taken by the government and should temporarily ally with its progressive elements in order to defend the revolution.³⁰³

Meison complained that the EPRP was counterposing revolutionary demands—like the demand for a people’s government—to demands dealing with specific reforms that might improve the lot of Ethiopian women. Over the course of the year it lost the factional struggle and eventually abandoned the WCC to the EPRP in favor of its own women’s mass organization.³⁰⁴

While official freedom of the press had not come to Ethiopia with the revolution—*Democracia* and *Voice of the Masses* remained underground productions even with the entry of radicals into various government agencies—the rarified political atmosphere meant that censorship standards were loosened, and indeed discussions of revolutionary politics were now given room in state-sanctioned media.

One of the most important arenas for debate on the left become an independent monthly magazine called *Goh*, or “Dawn.” One of its former staff writers tells its story:

Goh came into being right after the February revolution. It was founded by two enterprising women, Sara and Mulu.... *Goh* became the magazine of choice for Zematcha students, teachers, and the most educated section of the population.... *Goh* had to pass government censorship to be published. While the situation was relatively liberal at this time,

³⁰³ ISEANE, *op. Cit.*, p. 29.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29–33.

no one would write anything that was openly critical of the government. *Goh*... was pushing the envelope and testing the limits of the available freedom by writing more and more radical pieces that would have been unthinkable in previous periods.... [Eventually] the party had very much control of the magazine through the four of us. Neither Sara nor Mulu was ever bothered by what was now becoming an obvious association of the paper with EPRP, or if they did, they did not raise any objection.³⁰⁵

Goh prominently featured historical and political/theoretical articles in Amharic on Lenin, Mao, Ho Chi Minh, and Stalin; it also ran features on figures like Antonio Gramsci, Chu Teh, and Angela Davis. It ran articles about the Chinese revolution and about national liberation struggles elsewhere in Africa. The color covers featured original artwork like revolutionary drawings, photo montages and political cartoons. Its pages were filled with solid discussion, reader contributions, poetry, and articles about issues confronting the revolution such as the emancipation of women. It was sustained by advertisements for everything from local soda and beer to office machines. Browsing through the pages of *Goh* is a distinctly different experience than looking at the state-sponsored media, so full of government pronouncements and rationalizations.

Goh, widely associated with EPRP, private sector magazines understood to be sympathetic to *Meison*, and the state dailies all ran pseudonymously partisan debates between *Meison* and the future EPRP throughout 1975 and 1976. According to Hiwot Teffera, “EPRP and *Meison* engaged in a sizzling debate (without claiming authorship) in the government owned Amharic daily *Addis Zemen*—New Era—and *Goh*—Dawn—magazine over the kind of democracy needed at that particular point in time.”³⁰⁶

The split in the left also dominated the remaining student diaspora, which was still a hotbed of radicalism. The Ethiopian Students

³⁰⁵ Mohammed Yimam, *Wore Negari*, pp. 75–80.

³⁰⁶ Hiwot Teffera, *Tower in the Sky*, p. 149.

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Union in Europe, now dominated by supporters of *Meison* (though this was not true of all the smaller regional unions in Europe), and the Ethiopian Student Union in North America, squarely on the side of the soon-to-be-EPRP, acted as auxiliaries and foreign publicity agents for their preferred factions. ESUNA did generate a pro-*Meison* pro-*Derg* splinter named Union of Progressive Ethiopian Students in North America (UPESUNA), that published its own materials including translations of *Meison* publications back home.

A dissenting member of ESUE in West Germany issued a flyer in 1975 that gives some of the flavor of the disunity in the diaspora ESM. The polemics ran hot, foreshadowing the physical conflicts that would grow out of the war of words.

The junta which came to power by force has tried all in its powers to get the support of the students so as to use them to dupe the people; but with no success. The youth, just like the masses, rejected the fascistic junta and called for its replacement with a popular provisional government. The junta, then, showed its true nature and along with attempts to disperse the movement, it unleashed a systematic repression against student leaders—kidnapping some like Melese Tekle, hunting others like USUAA's president Getachew Begashaw. Once again the things have come full circle and the oppressed masses are being repressed.... The isolated junta has found no ally but sheer brute force and demagoguery. In both it is being actively helped by U.S. imperialism. At another level it is being actively assisted by traitorous intellectuals who have sold themselves to the junta and imperialism in order to protect their interests by filling bureaucratic and advisory posts. The reactionary leaders of ESUE are at present the vanguards of the junta's offensive to *divide* the student movement and to create *confusion* among the people. Covering their reactionary and counter-revolutionary nature with pseudo-revolutionary phrases these despicable elements spread reactionary ideas, chauvinism and the

like.³⁰⁷

Confrontations with Power

There was plenty of reason for those on the left who did not adopt a policy of critical support to the regime to be concerned. In March, popular student leader Meles Tekle was executed. He had been arrested for suspicion of involvement with the wave of bombings blamed on Eritrean Liberation Front commandos in the fall; he was a former editor of the USUAA journal, *Struggle*. Accused of terrorism, Meles was sentenced to life in prison by a special tribunal; the *Derg* intervened and changed the sentence to death and promptly carried it out. Pseudonymous veteran of the revolution “Babile Tola” believes he was framed but made a public example:

He was arrested mainly because he had boldly argued with the Derg representatives who had come to address university students in mid-September.... Ironically, the intellectuals who had been targeted for castigating the regime’s crude nationalism and lack of clarity and popular base were thus executed as anti-socialist by the same Derg which had railed against them for adhering “to a cheap foreign ideology.”³⁰⁸

By the summer it was clear that despite all the radical proclamations, the government was more and more concerned that the momentum of the revolution was getting out of control. Even *Meison* cadre Abera Yemane-ab took notice: “[T]he summer of 1975 was imbued with a strong counter-revolutionary undercurrent. This was particularly so among the Dergue members who were alarmed at the pace of events in the South and who were waiting for an opportune moment to strike

³⁰⁷ “The Heroic Struggle of the Ethiopian Peoples and Youth Against Feudalism and Imperialism,” signed Waje Wayo, ESUE member West Germany, undated but clearly early 1975.

³⁰⁸ Babile Tola. *To Kill a Generation*, p. 33. For a discussion of Babile Tola’s identity, see the note on Ethiopian names at the beginning of this text.

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at the revolutionary forces who they deemed were moving too fast.”³⁰⁹

The *Derg* wasn't really interested in independent, self-realizing organizations of the oppressed, rather it was trying to build structures for social control to reinforce its own authority. This is illustrated by the increasingly combative relationship between the military government and the labor movement as represented by the Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions, which had played such an important role in 1974. CELU joined the huge 1975 May Day celebrations in Addis Ababa, but the CELU contingents apparently appeared more in political sync with the opposition calling for popular power rather than reflecting support back on to the PMAC.

As noted in Chapter Five, CELU had been established under the emperor's reign in cooperation with the American labor bureaucracy, which routinely helped the American State Department create civil society organizations in the third world which they hoped would serve as a bulwark against the bolshevization of different segments of society, in this case labor. Through its African American Labor Center (AALC), the AFL-CIO helped establish CELU to promote labor peace. According to Beth Sims,

The African-American Labor Center (AALC), founded in 1964, is active in some 31 countries ranging from Angola to Zimbabwe. Its founder and first director was longtime labor activist and CIA operative Irving Brown. He molded the institute into an anticommunist organization that spread the doctrine of labor-business harmony and bread-and-butter unionism to its African beneficiaries. Under Brown, the AALC became a vehicle for funneling U.S. aid to procapitalist, economistic African trade unions, a role which it continues to play today.³¹⁰

Because of CELU's importance to the U.S. State Department, the

³⁰⁹ Abera, *op. Cit.*, p. 15.

³¹⁰ Beth Sims, "Inside the AFL-CIO's International Program," (1992) (accessed at www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Labor/AFL_CIO_WOTWU.html).

Addis Ababa listening post at the U.S. embassy paid extremely close attention to unfolding events surrounding the Confederation, and apparently through informants learned and shared quite a lot of detailed information with superiors back in the U.S. The U.S. embassy watched CELU's radicalization and confrontational relationship to the military regime with some alarm. A younger leadership generation was struggling to supplant the older generation of more docile union leaders and so the State Department was concerned that the American investment in CELU would come to naught. When the *Derg* moved to close the CELU headquarters in May, temporarily arresting some of its leaders, the U.S. embassy sent off a lengthy analysis which read in part:

If cause of ruckus is—as asserted—simple exasperation within *Derg* with CELU in-fighting and move triggers reasonably straightforward elections, labor movement could conceivably emerge strengthened from this episode. However, if radicals have their way, the strength to override opposition in at least some unions, and the momentum to press ahead with attempts to foist more pliant leadership on CELU in preparation for its transformation, difficult days could lie ahead.³¹¹

Derg representatives went to workplaces where the workers were represented by CELU to justify trying to shut down the confederation. Another U.S. Embassy cable reports a confrontation between Ethiopian Airlines (EAL) workers represented by CELU and a *Derg* official. The official attempts to use CELU's history to rationalize their confrontational attitude toward CELU. The workers wanted none of it:

Derg captain then took floor and went through explanation on reasons for CELU headquarters closure.... Captain placed emphasis on “capitalist origins” of and support for CELU. He noted that such a CELU had no place in socialist Ethiopia. This elicited immediate rejoinder from several

³¹¹ May 22, 1975 cable; Wikileaks link wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1975ADDIS06056_b.html.

EAL employees who noted that CELU had been important to them; asked by what authority Dirg had closed it; and demanded to know what Dirg proposed to put in its place. “We have supported CELU with our votes and our money, what are you doing for us?” Other employees then reportedly spoke up to say that Dirg had dissolved student organizations which had supported its rise to power and to note that Dirg now seemed bent on doing same to unions. Dirg spokesman rejoined that “CIA” had financed CELU and it obvious this could not continue. Several employees thereupon immediately responded that Dirg was fine one to talk about American support. It was being supported by American funds and American support for Ethiopia was surely nothing new. Dirg members thereupon withdrew. New EAL General Manager tried to conclude session on patriotic note emphasizing need for discipline. Employees told him that EAL was disciplined organization, but that did not mean employees unprepared to speak their mind to him or to Dirg.... Word of tenor of this meeting already all over town, which not surprising given size of audience which participated.³¹²

And so the *Derg's* attempt to use a left-wing posture to justify its repression of CELU was rebuffed, and the *Derg* at least temporarily relented in its efforts to shut the confederation down. The younger generation won its factional struggle and gained leadership of the organization over the old guard at a meeting at the end of May/beginning of June. Among the younger generation of CELU staffers were revolutionaries from the major factions on the left, including EPLO's Kiflu Tadesse and Girmachew Lemma.

Predictably, the U.S. embassy went into a panic over the sudden communist subversion of CELU. The embassy sent a memo back to the State Department:

³¹² May 22 cable; Wikileaks link wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1975AD-DIS06057_b.html.

In sessions June 2 and 3 new CELU Provisional Executive Committee began consideration of numerous proposed changes. First action to be taken was vote to suspend old CELU constitution.... Five point resolution next considered.... Debate included extensive critique of American labor relations with “socialist countries” going back as far as Bolshevik revolution. AFL-CIO especially condemned for alleged anti-socialist actions in Chile in recent years. Presentation was in such great detail that it went far beyond knowledge of labor group participating in debate. Conclusion probably that material was fed in either by CELU staffers Girmachew Lemma... and/or Kiflu, who spent several years studying journalism in Russia. In any case, this was first specific appearance of communist line and content was distinctly Russian.³¹³

The embassy’s attempt to imply Soviet subversion via Kiflu Tadesse shows the U.S. embassy certainly did not understand everything that was happening. This was not the only insinuation of a dark communist conspiracy: The embassy went on to discuss their suspicions about CELU’s new chairman, Markos Hagos. Ironically, of course, an attempt to put Ethiopia in the orbit of the USSR was not to come from these young radicals but their opponents in the regime. But back to the memo:

Markos Hagos, new Chairman, was notified late June 2 that he appointedorer [sic] delegate to ILO Geneva conference. Fact that he could complete health, passport, tax and all other formalities to enable him to depart next day suggests he must have been prepared well in advance.... It is becoming more apparent that strategy of May 31–June 1 meeting was carefully pre-planned. Several informants, reliable in the past, believe that prime movers were Girmachew

³¹³ June 4, 1975 cable; Wikileaks link: www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1975AD-DIS06634_b.html.

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Lemma of CELU staff and Getachew Amare who supposedly obtained support of Lt. Col. Atnafu Abate, 2nd Vice Chairman of PMAC, and left-wing group in Dirg. Former opposition leaders, mainly from small unions, are said to have joined in enthusiastically and were rewarded with seats on Provisional Executive Committee.³¹⁴

Markos Hagos, the new leader of CELU, was in fact an EPLO member. He was not a former student leader, but came out of the rank and file of insurance company workers. CELU staffer Getachew Amare seems to have also been EPLO, at least he was accused of being so when he was put on a *Derg* deathlist in 1977³¹⁵. Atnafu Abate was one of the three leaders of the *Derg* in 1975, but the reference here is curious: while Atnafu seems to have often disagreed with his co-Vice Chair Major Mengistu he doesn't seem to have belonged to a grouping inside the *Derg* sympathetic to the opposition.

Lest we forget who the audience for this cable was, it goes on to urge its distribution to U.S. agents attending the upcoming ILO conference so that they might be on the lookout for CELU radicals: "For Geneva: Please pass foregoing information to Pat O'Farrell and Jerry Funk of AALC attending ILO Conference."³¹⁶ And so the relationship between the U.S. government and the CIA-sponsored advocates of labor peace is exposed.

If the Embassy was confused about who was behind the subversion of CELU, they were right that American influence over CELU was in dire jeopardy. The CELU meeting passed a significant resolution, announcing the severing of ties with its original American sponsors:

What is AFL-CIO? 1. This organization showed its true reactionary nature by severing its relations from the world wide labor union which was led by progressives and from the socialist Russian labor unions established in the early

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Kiflu Tadesse, *Part 1 op. Cit.*, p. 144.

³¹⁶ June 4 cable, *op. Cit.*

20th century. 2. This organization was anti-Bolshevik and worked against the anti-reactionary campaign which was carried out in the west when the great Bolshevik revolution crushed the reactionary elements. 3. This imperialist organization refused to recognize the Russian progressive government even after President Roosevelt tried to establish relations with the new revolutionary government of Russia. 4. From earliest times, when America declared war against Spain and made the Philippines its colony, this organization supported the invasion in the name of the working class and is therefore anti-working class. 5. This organization supported the American invasion of Vietnam, which has caused the death of over two million people. 6. This organization has sought to rule over the third world and has been a saboteur especially in Africa, through such organizations as the AALC. 7. This organization supported the previous leadership of CELU and channeled all its money to reactionary elements. Therefore, CELU has severed its ties with the AFL-CIO and is ready to face any hardships which it may encounter as a consequence.³¹⁷

It's a remarkable statement, clearly contextualizing AFL–CIO activity within the aggressive historical agenda of imperialism. Of course this is not an accident: it was written by the cadre of EPLO/*Democracia*, the soon to be EPRP.

In yet another cable, the embassy reports more details from its informants about the internal workings of CELU and the passing of the resolution against the AFL–CIO, again worriedly insinuating the authors are agents of the Soviet bloc. It's clear the embassy is unaware of dynamics out on the street, highly confused about the nature of the opposition to the *Derg* and presenting a less than clear picture of the divisions inside the regime. Their red-baiting of Kiflu Tadesse and Girmatchew Lemma and their insinuations about a Soviet bloc conspiracy

³¹⁷ Quoted in US Embassy cable June 6, 1975; Wikileaks link www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1975ADDIS06760_b.html.

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is predictable:

Mesfin Gebre Mikael, one of original four founders of CELU, now with ILO, told EMBOFF June 7 that the four “technical advisors” led by Kiflu and Girmatchew were responsible for drafting resolutions passed by CELU.... He also believes that Kiflu, “the brains” of the group, who has four years journalism experience in Russia, secured financing from Moscow channelled through Hungary and Bulgaria as well as from “Christian trade union group” in Brussels to pay organizing expenses.... Published document is actually second draft. First draft was very radical and anti-Dirg.... Gebre Selassie Gebre-Mariam, another of CELU’s four original founders and now adviser to MinInt, agreed that first draft was written in strong language and attacked Dirg.... He is fairly confident, however, that election was controlled through above-cited technical adviser who, he asserted, are in turn connected to Dirg faction led by Lt. Col. Atnafu.³¹⁸

But the most important revelation in this embassy cable is the news that, even under repressive threats from the military government, the EPRP successfully drove the CIA out of the Ethiopian labor movement: “In view continued imprisonment of former CELU leaders, indication CELU elections may have been rigged, new CELU resolution and public media pronouncements severing relations with ‘imperialist’ AFL/CIO-AALC, EPMG refusal to honor AALC/CELU/GOE agreements to operate in Ethiopia and other clear indications that US aid to Ethiopian labor not wanted by EPMG, mission recommends aid funding to AALC be terminated.”³¹⁹ It’s instructive to note that this happened because revolutionaries worked *inside* the labor movement rather than dictating terms to it as the *Derg* had tried to do.

³¹⁸ June 11, 1975 cable; Wikileaks link www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1975AD-DIS06929_b.html.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

Ethiopia's First Political Party

Over the summer, convinced that the *Derg's* reforms were indeed the embodiment of the revolution, a small grouping of EPLO/*Democracia* supporters defected to the side of the regime³²⁰. Unfortunately for the organization, they were key members of one nucleus attempting to establish a base for armed struggle in the north; they went on to establish a small splinter group, *Malerid*, or the Revolutionary Marxist-Leninist Organization.

Even though the split was small in numbers—fewer than a dozen cadres—the leadership realized that it was time to confront the evolving challenges of the time in order not only to consolidate the work that had been done but push the revolution forward. An extended, delegated conference was called, and thirty members of the group's leadership gathered clandestinely in the Addis Ababa residence of Yosef Adane.³²¹ Zeru Kehishen chaired the conference, and it was well represented by both veterans of the diaspora student movement and revolutionary activists who had stayed at home. Berhane Meskel (recently returned from the nascent guerrilla base areas), Kiflu Tadesse, Samuel Alemayehu (brother of 1969 hijacker Iyasou Alemayehu who was now stationed as EPLO's liaison in Europe), Getachew Maru, and Aklilu Hiruy (brother of Tito Hiruy), were a few of the attendees; the conference locale was surrounded by armed guards.

People outside the leadership knew something big was up. Activist Mohammed Yimam remembers,

Birhanu and Mezy told us of the national congress of EPRP, which declared the party. They told us tidbits from the congress. For some reason, I really believed it was a big conference involving a large number of people, which of course would have been difficult to organize. We were told the meeting was guarded by EPRA fighters. We heard that Berhane Meskel attended the congress protected by body-

³²⁰ See Kiflu Tadesse, *Part 1 op. Cit.*, p. 235–236.

³²¹ For details, see Kiflu Tadesse, *Part 1 op. Cit.*, p. 239–246.

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guards. These stories assumed epic proportions in our imagination. *Democracia* later bragged that the congress was held under the Deg's nose to declare the party.³²²

A number of contentious issues were discussed, including the correct attitude to take to the *Derg*, but the central issues of the conference were organizational. The delegates realized that the stakes were growing higher and higher, and that it was time for the organization to take a significant step forward and emerge from the shadows. Delegates knew that the *Derg* was being pushed by its leftist advisor Senay Likke to establish a political party, possibly on the upcoming first anniversary of the PMAC's seizure of power, and felt a sense of urgency.

According to Kiflu Tadesse, who was there, "The last agenda decided by the Conference was the public declaration of the party's existence and the publication of its program after three and a half years of anonymity. It was believed the time had come to declare the party's identity and to seek support for its program. The declaration of the organization was considered a natural course in the development of the struggle."³²³

After some discussion, a new name was chosen for the party. While Getachew Maru had proposed to go forward openly with the name "Communist Party of Ethiopia," the delegates settled on the "Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Party." And so was christened the first political party in Ethiopia.

The conference produced the definitive program of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Party, 37 pages in its English version plus a lengthy preamble, all of which was soon distributed in Amharic, Tigrinya, and *Afaan Oromo* editions, as well as in English, French and Arabic versions. The program defined the Party as a Marxist-Leninist party of the Ethiopian working class, with the ultimate goal of a classless, communist society³²⁴, and the immediate task of completing the new democratic revolution through to its end. And although August

³²² Mohamed Yimam, *op. Cit.*, pp. 71–72.

³²³ Kiflu Tadesse, *Part I op. Cit.*, p. 244.

³²⁴ Preamble to the *Program of the EPRP*, ESUNA edition, 1975, p. V.

1975 was certainly the organization's formal "coming out party," the program acknowledged that as an organization it had been founded some years before.

The Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Party (EPRP), since its founding three and half years ago, undertook the task of organizing the peoples under the leadership of the proletariat, to struggle against and liberate themselves from all forms of oppression and thereby set themselves forcibly for a genuine political, sound and economic development.... Nevertheless, the immediate goal of the EPRP is to consummate the New Democratic Revolution, under the leadership of the working class. The Party does not call for the immediate realization of its final aim defying or wishing away the objective situation prevailing in Ethiopia now. On the contrary it shall use the dialectical method to analyze each concrete condition and revolutionary steps to be taken. The present concrete conditions demand the abolition of feudalism and imperialism so that the broad masses of the people win their political and democratic rights; that is to say to complete the New Democratic Revolution.³²⁵

We will examine some of the thinking behind the concept of "new democratic revolution" in the next chapter.

The Party positioned itself as the true defender of the *Yekatit* revolution in opposition to the *Derg*.

The February revolutionary struggle of the Ethiopian masses is threatened with defeat. None of the basic contradictions which led the February revolution are correctly or fully resolved. Thus, the only guarantee for the victory of the peoples' struggle is to forcibly advance and consummate the New Democratic Revolution.... Henceforth the working peoples of Ethiopia will not tolerate oppression

³²⁵ Ibid., pp. IV–VI.

and exploitation no matter the source. The working people do not accept the domination of any group or individuals no matter what power it may possess.... It will not bow to whoever has a gun in its hands.³²⁶

The specific goal of the program: “To destroy the rule of feudalism and imperialism, especially imperialism by the U.S. and its representatives—bureaucrat bourgeoisie, and comprador bourgeoisie—and to establish peoples’ democratic republic of the broad masses.”³²⁷ It called for the establishment of a “broad, democratic and progressive political system”³²⁸ via a “national peoples’ congress” that would guarantee “freedom of speech, press and correspondence, worship, assembly, associations, procession and demonstration.”³²⁹ It included calls to punish fascists and reactionaries, to abolish secret police, separate church and state, establish a just legal system, release political prisoners, and “to prepare the necessary political basis for the impending socialist society.”³³⁰ It pointedly demanded that rural lands come under the control of peasants “in *practice*,” a jab at the handling of land reform by the military regime. It contained fairly detailed prescriptions for the development of the economy, again in a way that would lay the basis for the “forthcoming socialist society.”³³¹

While the program condemns the “militaristic slaughter” of the Eritrean people³³², it does not call for the rights of Ethiopia’s national minorities to secede. Instead it calls for negotiations, peaceful solutions, full rights for minorities, and internal autonomy. This omission was to negatively affect the Party’s relationships with the various national liberation fronts, and while it was to be modified over time, is a somewhat surprising lack given the stance the party’s founders took in the ESM.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. IX–XI.

³²⁷ *Program of the EPRP*, ESUNA edition, 1975, p. 1.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³³² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

Frankly this program plank is not particularly distinguished from the *Derg's professed* position.

There is a lengthy section in the program on safeguarding the rights of working people and on social welfare in general, critically including guarantees of the right to strike. Among its more progressive planks is a call for full workplace-based childcare, of real material importance to the liberation of women. It contains specific calls for full equality between men and women, including opposition to “the confinement of women to the kitchen.”³³³ Rights to divorce and birth control are also to be guaranteed.

The program calls for the establishment of a “people’s army” and to “abolish U.S. led imperialist military organizations in the country and do away with dependence on arms from the imperialists; to shut down all foreign military bases and to expel all imperialist military personnel and ‘advisers’ from the country.”³³⁴ In a direct challenge to the military it calls for “recognition to the commendable deeds of those soldiers and officers of the now existing army who resisted or are resisting to fight and against and refuse to participate in the mass extermination of oppressed peoples.”³³⁵

The program promises a foreign policy based on “peace and non alignment,” not particularly remarkable for the 1970s, but includes calls to “strengthen friendly relations with the Palestinian, Oman, and Arabian Peninsula’s Revolutionary National Liberation Movements and Organizations.”³³⁶ And bolstering its anti-imperialist solidarity, the program calls “To support the struggle of Afro-Americans (black Americans), American Indians, Puertoricans, Mexicans and other non-white oppressed minorities in their struggles against discrimination and for their fundamental human rights.”³³⁷

Stirring direct appeals to Ethiopian workers, peasants and broad masses conclude the program. They’re not direct polemics with the Par-

³³³ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 23–24.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 30–31.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

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ty's competitors on the left, but there should be little doubt about their subtext.

The Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Party is standing shoulder to shoulder with you to agitate and struggle for your cause; it is a lawyer at your side to support you but never to replace you.... The Party is your right hand for your revolutionary struggle, it is not a dictatorial force which usurps your leadership, pays lip service to your name and your just cause, engages in endless self aggrandizement.³³⁸

It continues with sharp advice to the peasant masses:

Neither be deceived, nor get disarmed by the way the land is said to be owned these days. Unless you safeguard your land through political power, which grows out of the barrel of the gun, it can be taken back by any contender claiming ownership by force. To make sure that land falls and remains under your control, you have to be your own liberator by becoming master of your own destiny.³³⁹

The program concludes,

Arise all and march forward following the heroic paths of the patriots and comrades who have given their life for liberation and revolution. Let's march forward via New Democracy to the impending historical milestone of socialism... the transitional stage towards the classless society. Forward With Revolution!!³⁴⁰

As we will see in Chapter Nine, the program and reputation of the EPRP were soon met with increasing resonance among Ethiopians: 1976 would be a watershed year marked by rapid growth of support for

³³⁸ Ibid., pp. 32–33.

³³⁹ Ibid., p. 34.

³⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 37.

the Party. Certainly reaction from the hyper-politicized student movement in the diaspora which had spawned the Party was ecstatic. The Ethiopian Students' Union in North America—issued a strong statement of support: “What a historic development of earthshaking significance in the history of class struggles in Ethiopia. Ethiopia has at last its Marxist-Leninist Party! It has the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Party! This is indeed the gloriest moment—the real moment of the festival of the oppressed!”³⁴¹ ESUNA went on to reproduce the new Party program and distribute it to the ESM abroad.

While its many publications remained illegal and were distributed only clandestinely, the red flags of the Party were soon ubiquitous at political events. The emergence of the Party created an active pole for opposition to the *Derg* that was largely urban, and, unlike the aristocratic Ethiopian Democratic Union that was rallying former landlords and drumming up a guerrilla army in sanctuaries in the neighboring Sudanese republic, the Party expressed clear support for carrying the revolution forward, not attempting to undo it.

Over the next period the Party won thousands to its banners and built extra-legal mass organizations among many segments of society to bring the message of a people's government to every political and social arena. One EPRP supporter describes some of them:

The oppressed women of Ethiopia, their struggle initially spontaneous, soon forged an organisational weapon. the Ethiopian Women's Organisation, and its standard-bearer, a paper called the “Double Fighter”. As the democratic women got stronger, bourgeois and bureaucratic women grouped around the “Committee 1975”, a vain attempt to divert the women's movement from class struggle to bourgeois feminist trash. The democratic struggle also ripped through the armed forces who represent no mechanical unity. Clandestine papers—“The Voice of the Air Force” and “Oppressed Soldier”—made their appearance in the

³⁴¹ ESUNA, “Statement on the Formation of the EPRP,” undated [1975].

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belly of the beast.³⁴²

An example of how the Party's mass organizations popularized its demands can be found in a 1976 issue of *Voice of the Air Force*:

We demand the immediate dissolution of the Derg and the formation of a revolutionary popular provisional government made up of existing political parties, labour unions, peasant associations, teachers' unions, students unions and oppressed soldiers.³⁴³

By 1976 the EPRP had over 5,000 cadre level members, with tens of thousands of other members in the youth league and the mass organizations.³⁴⁴ The numerous Party-sponsored mass organizations and allied groups served different strategic functions, and proved effective at building support among different segments of Ethiopian society: from EPRA, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Army guerrilla force establishing base areas in the countryside, to the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Youth League, which recruited heavily among the *Zematchoch*, and among high school and college students. In addition to its women's organizations, it ran circles to introduce children to revolutionary politics. It organized a revolutionary trade union, the Ethiopian Workers Revolutionary Union or ELAMA, and an association of revolutionary teachers. It organized in the rank-and-file of the military and even had secret members in the broader membership of the *Derg* outside the PMAC. The Party's urban defense squad members numbered 450 in Addis alone. The Party vied for control of *kebeles* in neighborhoods where its supporters dominated.

Dozens of clandestine publications were published and distributed by the Party across the country. In addition to *Democracia* and the journal of the foreign section *Abyot*, these included *Labader*, *Red Star*, *Double Fighter*, and *Oppressed Soldier*. An elaborate cell structure with zones

³⁴² "A special correspondent," "Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ethiopia," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Mar 4, 1978, p. 472.

³⁴³ *Voice of the Air Force*, reprinted in *Abyot*, Vol. 1, No. 2, January 30, 1976.

³⁴⁴ See Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, p. 184.

and inter-zone committees was established in urban areas.³⁴⁵ The Party used networks like sports clubs to organize people and get the word out. Study circles were a favored method of recruitment.

The Party spread all over the country and recruited among all its nationalities. Babile Tola summarizes: “The EPRP was strong in Addis Abeba and the main towns (it had a party structure even in Asmara city, Eritrea, manned by civil servants, teachers, workers, etc.); in the rural areas its strong organizational work was in Shoa, Kaffa, Sidamo, Gondar, some parts of Gojjam, Wollo and Hararghe. The EPRP leadership was (and is) multinational.”³⁴⁶

The August conference reorganized the leadership of the Party as well. To address growing concerns over internal democracy and functioning, the post of Secretary General was abolished, and Berhane Meskel was removed from his role in the EPRP politburo, apparently under some protest. A new post of secretary of the Central Committee (CC) was created, and Tesfaye Debessay was elected to fill the role.³⁴⁷

While some have accused Berhane Meskel of having a Stalin-sized ego, the Ethiopian revolutionaries largely eschewed egotism, beginning with the prolific use of *noms d’guerre*, pseudonyms, or through the collective or anonymous attribution of political writing. This lack of identifiable personas had interesting ramifications later, when the Party’s enemies found locating open and obvious leadership targets a challenge. The leadership—indeed the membership—were dedicated to the cause, making great personal sacrifices to build the Party under conditions of increasing physical danger. Former Party member Worku Lakew recalls, “I had been impressed by the fact that as one of the revolutionary parties of the world, this one was unique as it is probably the only example of such a party that had no personality cult of any kind and whose leaders were not known to the world.”³⁴⁸ That said,

³⁴⁵ Kiflu Tadesse’s *Generation* books contain extraordinary amounts of detailed information on the internal organization of the EPRP. Recommended reading.

³⁴⁶ Babile Tola, *op. Cit.*, pp. 113–114.

³⁴⁷ Kiflu Tadesse, *Part II op. Cit.*, pp. 326–327.

³⁴⁸ Worku Lakew, *Revolution, Love and Growing Up*, p. 204.

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this moment raised a warning flag about the internal functioning of the Party and its willingness to constructively and democratically address internal line differences. Unresolved internal issues, stemming in part from the legacies of the Party's roots in differing groups like the former *Abyot* and EPLO base, were only exacerbated by the extreme challenges of unfolding events. Berhane Meskel apparently felt the rural armed struggle was being neglected.

Hiwot Teffera recalls her deepening involvement with the Party's youth organization:

The cell I joined later became the Addis Ababa Youth League Inter-Zonal Committee, with Tito [Hiruy] as secretary. The Inter-Zonal Committee was below the League Central Committee in the hierarchy of the organization. It played a major role, providing leadership to the League in planning, organizing, directing, coordinating, and facilitating communication among members.... One had to be between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five to become a Youth League member. An individual was recruited to study circles and required to study the basic tenets of Marxism-Leninism.... Strict discipline was required of us.... We used code names to minimize danger. Unless we happened to know one another before, we did not reveal our identities. Neither were we supposed to know more than what was necessary. Only the chair of the committee knew the people who worked in the committee immediately above.³⁴⁹

Despite the Party's announcement to the world of its existence, the conditions of clandestinity continued to determine the EPRP's activities. Nega Mezlekia remembers 1975:

My colleagues and I, like most young people at the time, spent many evenings making duplicates of *Democracia* by hand. We scattered them in back alleys and market stalls,

³⁴⁹ Hiwot Teffera, *op. Cit.*, pp. 143–145.

dodging the men in uniform who patrolled the streets—just like we had in the old days, as we painted slogans on the walls. Unlike the old days, this infraction carried a death penalty. But the law was something to be observed only when you had nothing better to do. We were acting out of personal conviction. I was not a member of the EPRP, nor were any of my close friends, an invitation to join the party seemed imminent, though no one knew how or when it would come. The EPRP remained invisible, with no head office, and no delegates to contact. Only the overwhelming work done in its name testified to its existence.³⁵⁰

Mohamed Yimam recounts how central the production and distribution of the Party's press was to their clandestine work:

By this time, every one of the members in our cell was very much engaged in underground work. The group now lived in a big house south of the Ethiopian Electric Company. The house was rented by Mesfin, who worked for *Goh* magazine. This house had become one of the main production centers of *Democracia* and *Red Star*, the theoretical journal of the party, which appeared intermittently. This became a busy center with unknown and hooded party members coming in and going out with stacks of *Democracia* that was laboriously printed by the people in this house. Birhanu would bring the manuscripts for us to print and then bring a car to take it back once it was produced.³⁵¹

In the fall and into the next year, members of the Party's leadership core travelled north to work both on bolstering the future base areas for the armed struggle that was still seen as inevitable, and to attempt to work out relations with the national liberation fronts. Zeru Kehishen travelled to Tigray, and Tesfaye Debessay to Eritrea.

³⁵⁰ Nega Mezlekia, *Notes from the Hyena's Belly*, p. 143.

³⁵¹ Mohamed Yimam, *op. Cit.*, p. 71–72.

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Tesfaye was to meet at great length with the more recently established and ostensibly more radical EPLF, now in apparent ascent over the original ELF. The Eritreans' reaction to the EPRP's declaration and program had been underwhelming. While broadly supportive of the EPRP against their common enemy in the military regime, Eritreans for Liberation in North America, the diaspora association for pro-EPLF Eritreans in the U.S. and Canada, reacted to the program by asking, "will the EPRP succeed in fighting the cancer of chauvinism within its ranks as well as among the masses?"³⁵²

During the meetings the EPLF asked the EPRP leadership to accept its analysis of the Eritrean struggle as not a *national* question, but a *colonial* one, therefore implying different interpretations of Eritrean history as well as a dramatic difference in political line.

A veteran of the EPRA at that time who went by the nom d'guerre "Ammanuel," remembers how Tesfaye explained this problem to an assembly of EPRA fighters in the base area. "He explained that, until the party studies the Eritrean problem and comes up with a response in a short period of time, it has assumed the position that the Eritrean question was one of liberation and not of nationality or colonialism."³⁵³

If Tesfaye was unwilling to commit to the colonial analysis without discussing it inside the Party, he did agree to issue a joint statement with the EPLF that significantly altered the new program's position on the Eritrean struggle. The statement, released in early 1976, read in part,

The EPRP unconditionally supports the Eritrean people's struggle for their independence. It as well supports the political and armed struggle waged by the EPLF for the independence and liberation of the Eritrean people.... The two parties agreed to cooperate militarily and materially.³⁵⁴

For its part, the EPLF agreed that:

³⁵² AESNA, *In Defence of the Eritrean Revolution*, p. 221.

³⁵³ Kahsay Abraha Bisrat, *Love of Assimba*, p. 110.

³⁵⁴ "Joint Statement of the EPLF and EPRP," reprinted in AESNA, *In Defence of the Eritrean Revolution*, p. 223

Since the objective and subjective conditions for a NDR [New Democratic Revolution] that clears the way for socialist revolution are fulfilled, EPLF supports the struggle waged by EPRP for the realization of the NDR in Ethiopia.

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In reality, by all accounts relations between the EPRP and its guerrilla force EPRA and both the EPLF and the old ELF remained fraught with tension and suspicion.³⁵⁶ 1975 was also the year that the Tigray People's Liberation Front was established on the borderlands with Eritrea by radicals who the EPRP critiqued as "narrow nationalists." For now, while the central government was overwhelmed with challenges to its authority, there was room in Tigray for small peasant-based armies from EPRA, TPLF, EPLF and the counterrevolutionary EDU, but perspective suggested trouble down the road.

Foreshadowing of Violence

The EPRP's "coming out" moment was on the eve of the first anniversary of the PMAC's deposition of the emperor. In the event, Senay Likke's wish for the *Derg* to declare a political party did not come to pass, at least not in 1975. But *Meison*, fast becoming virtual junior partners in government, did follow the EPRP in stepping more fully into the light. It also published a full "Programme of the All Ethiopian Socialist Movement" in the fall of 1975, certainly at least partially in response to the move by the EPRP.

Meison's program is written in a much less agitational style—and it must be said, a less inspiring one—than the EPRP's program. Its rhetoric is almost didactic, and despite a number of shared programmatic points with the EPRP, its tone reflects the underlying differing perspectives that came to delineate the two movements before 1974.

The program's introduction explains that *Meison* was founded

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

³⁵⁶ Despite tensions between EPRP and EPLF, upon Tesfaye Debessay's death, the EPLF's journal *Vanguard* was to characterize him as a "mature, humble, courageous and resolute fighter...a revolutionary internationalist comrade." (*Vanguard*, Vol. II, No. 2, April 1977, p. 63)

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under different conditions some years before, but that it would remain a *movement* not a *party* until it was properly integrated with the working class and until struggle with other Marxist-Leninist groups produced unity with a correct line.

Since Me'isone has already taken roots throughout the country and the people's struggle is being intensified, it has become necessary to formulate a clear and general programme that would embrace all aspects of the people's struggle. Hence, Me'isone makes without revealing its secret apparatus, its existence today publicly known and presents its detailed programme for the national democratic revolution.... Me'isone stands for socialism and the complete liberation of the oppressed masses of Ethiopia.³⁵⁷

The program targets feudalism and imperialism as the enemies of the revolution and discusses a future "people's democratic republic" where "The ultimate state power is to be vested in a national assembly whose members shall be elected by the people in secret and direct elections."³⁵⁸ But almost bizarrely, the program contains absolutely no mention of the military regime, *Meison's* critical support of that regime, or any suggestion about how to move beyond the current reality other than vague platitudes about struggle among progressive forces.

The program does contain a plank notably absent from the EPRP's: "The right of all nationalities to self-determination up to and including secession is to be recognized."³⁵⁹ *Meison's* ethnic makeup was said to be skewed to Ethiopia's southerners compared to the EPRP, skewed to northerners, and so an openness to Oromo nationalism, for instance, is not surprising. *Meison* compounded popular support among southerners over its association with the government's land reform. But its evident support of the *Derg* fighting in Eritrea seems to sharply conflict with the notion of an enshrined right to secession.

³⁵⁷ "Introduction" to the Programme of the All Ethiopian Socialist Movement, English version, no publishing details, pp. 8–9.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

Tellingly, the section of the program on workers and social issues omits any mention of a right to strike. Instead it promises a “right to work” and government guarantees for employment.³⁶⁰ Indeed some of its suggestions for the culture and economy of the country seem written to appeal more to technocrats than proletarians.

By the end of 1975 it was more than evident that the EPRP and *Meison* represented two distinct poles on the left; one opposing the government and the other not only supporting it but beginning to integrate into its apparatus. As Kiflu Tadesse writes, “The differences that grew into enmity between the two political organizations stemmed from their analyses of the Ethiopian situation and their different approaches to the military regime. All other differences were corollaries.”³⁶¹ While during this period the differences were still expressed politically, *Meison* began to sharply criticize EPRP, accusing them in its *Voice of the Masses* of being in *de facto* alliance with the EDU and with the ELF’s alleged reactionary sponsors in the Arab world. The descent into name-calling—which was certainly not one-sided—boded ill for resolution of the left’s differences.

If left sectarianism had not yet broken out into violence, the same could not be said for the general situation around the country. The reforms and nationalizations had turned the landlord class and the nobility squarely against the revolution; and the land reform and agitation from the student *Zematchoch* had raised the expectations of poor peasants. By the *Derg*’s own accounting³⁶² dozens of executions and killings of “outlaws” and “counter-revolutionaries” took place that summer.

In late August the military suppressed a peasant revolt in Bichena: As many as 1,000 dead included decorated veterans of the resistance against the Italians in the 1940s. High school student and *Zemetcha* campaigner Gizachew Tiruneh was traveling in the region in the aftermath of the suppression. “The army’s brutality had been unprecedented. For instance, the army went in a hotel and shot to death a teacher who

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³⁶¹ Kiflu Tadesse, *Part II op. Cit.*, p. 72.

³⁶² See, for example, the “Diary of the Revolution” in PMAC, *The Ethiopian Revolution Second Anniversary*.

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was traveling from another town to somewhere towards Addis Ababa. When his wife, who was holding their toddler child, saw her dying husband and screamed and cried, the army turned back and killed her too.”³⁶³ He recalls the words of a *Derg* member visiting the town he was staying in saying, “We will civilize Gojjam until five people are left.”³⁶⁴

The military was losing its patience with revolutionary forces outside its control. A U.S. embassy cable offers a fascinating report about the *Derg’s* concerns about subversion in the *Zemetcha*:

PMAC has in recent weeks been giving warnings to radical elements in student “Development Through Cooperation” campaign in rural areas, saying that Ethiopian Socialism is not carbon copy of any foreign model, and does not follow any foreign ideology. Because some radical and disruptive student campaigners have openly called themselves “Mao-ists” these statements by PMAC have been interpreted as pointed at pro-PRC [People’s Republic of China] radicals. Comment: On balance we doubt that PRC would want to involve itself in ideological struggles between radicals and moderates; on other hand, PRC apparently found itself unable to refrain from distributing Little Red Books and other materials to radical and other elements who requested them. And of course, top priority in PRC policy is to counter Soviet influences. Thus whether PRC wishes it or not, PRC is being assigned some responsibility for student excesses.³⁶⁵

The PMAC made a big deal of its first anniversary at the helm of the state with a large parade and rally. They hoped to mark their triumph with a solid show of mass support. But the “Revolution Day” celebrations didn’t work out exactly as intended. The US Embassy’s observers caught the absence of complete unanimity in a report sent

³⁶³ Gizachew Tiruneh, *op. Cit.*, p. 44.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

³⁶⁵ September 16, 1975, cable; Wikileaks link search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1975ADDIS11065_b.html.

back to Washington that September:

Although most of the signs carried by parading groups supported the revolution and decried imperialism, some—likely unauthorized—had an anti-Dirg flavor. These called for a return to civilian rule, union elections, and the release of detained students. Some anti-American slogans reportedly appeared (such as Yankee Go Home). These were few in number and not believed to be sanctioned by PMAC. A few apparently unauthorized groups tried to join the parade but were turned back by the ubiquitous police. One such group appeared to be students with anti-Dirg posters.³⁶⁶

The EPRP-dominated CELU, hanging onto legality by shreds, was one of the major forces behind the counterpoint at the celebration. An EPRP supporter reported it this way:

Meanwhile, the Dergue prepared to celebrate in September 1975 the anniversary of its putsch.... When it called on the masses to turn out for a public parade, CELU set its pre-condition: that it would carry its own placards! Close to half a million people paraded that September 13. Among them, as expected, were government functionaries and sluggish and lumpen elements transported from the countryside to show “mass support”. But there were also workers, students and revolutionary youths who sang the Internationale and other revolutionary songs. Women marchers raised their clenched fists point blank at the Dergue members and chanted “Fascists! Fascists! Down with you!” Workers placards read: “Down with Petty Bourgeois Socialism!” “Socialism is Scientific” “Provisional Popular Government Now!” The fabulous parade organised to show the junta’s “mass support” turned out to be an anti-Dergue and proletarian demonstration. Police terror descended on the marchers.

³⁶⁶ September 16, 1975 cable; Wikileaks link search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1975ADDIS11070_b.html.

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Many were arrested, many disappeared.³⁶⁷

CELU followed up its intervention in Revolution Day with a call for a massive strike at the end of September. Unfortunately, CELU misjudged the amount of support it could gather, and the strike was not a success, lasting only a few days and failing to mushroom into a true general strike. It was met with an immediate and severe response from the military regime.

The strike would simply not be tolerated, and the government did what it could to break it. In one incident, a group of Ethiopian Airlines workers preparing literature for CELU were raided and killed by the Derg.³⁶⁸ By the PMAC's own accounting, "Seven people were killed and nineteen others injured when embers of the security forces were compelled to open fire at the Bole International Airport. The fire was opened when employees of the Ethiopian Airlines were endeavouring to obstruct by force the arrest of a person who was distributing counter-revolutionary literature at the establishment."³⁶⁹

A state of emergency was declared in Addis Ababa, and the *Derg* arrested every labor leader it could find. Among the arrested were CELU head and EPRP member Markos Hagos. EPRP CC member Samuel Alemayehu was also caught in the dragnet, though the Derg apparently did not realize his true affiliation.³⁷⁰ Markos was tortured by Colonel Daniel Asfaw, the chief of the security services and a key ally of the *Derg's* Major Mengistu. "During one interrogation session, Marcos was bleeding so profusely that the colonel ordered him to sit on the floor so as not to 'dirty' the chair.... [T]he interrogation consisted of the repeated question, 'are you a member of the EPRP?'. Later on, the bloodied Marcos was paraded in front of the other arrested workers while Colonel Daniel taunted all by stating, 'Look at your chairman!

³⁶⁷ "A special correspondent," "Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ethiopia," *Economic and Political weekly*, Mar 4, 1978, p. 471.

³⁶⁸ Kiflu Tadesse, *Part II op. Cit.*, p. 16.

³⁶⁹ PMAC, *The Ethiopian Revolution Second Anniversary*, p. 46.

³⁷⁰ Kiflu Tadesse, *Part II op. Cit.*, pp. 17–18.

Is he the one who would be king!”³⁷¹ While Markos and many of the others were eventually released, it was a bad moment for both the independent labor movement and for the EPRP. CELU was banned.

As we have already noted, in December the *Derg* promulgated a new labor law and created a sham official trade union called the All Ethiopia Trade Union (AETU), the mandate of which, ironically, was not dissimilar to the original labor-peace mandate of CELU as originally intended by its American sponsors.

Addis Ababa was not the only city to see unrest and confrontations between the opposition and the *Derg*. It must be repeated that despite how the *Derg* and state media portrayed it, the unrest breaking out was not *counter* revolutionary, but from people demanding to see themselves included in the revolution.

An EPRP supporter describes the mobilization of revolutionary women in the town of Jimma in late 1975:

The women of Jimma were not much behind. The democratic upsurge of the broad masses woke them from a slumber of generations. When they met in September 1975, the regional military commander asked them “to organise to raise funds.” The women retorted that instead, they wanted “to get organised to be able to participate politically, socially and economically but not to raise funds.” Attempts to forge an association of the oppressed women were sabotaged by bourgeois women. At a meeting organised to discuss “the causes and solutions of the double oppression of women,” bourgeois women paid unemployed women to threaten and intimidate the democratic women. Proletarian justice was meted out to the reactionary women. Hitherto the pariah of society, the broad masses of women were entering the political battlefield as both an autonomous force and as part of the people’s democratic movement.³⁷²

³⁷¹ Babile Tola, *op. Cit.*, p. 38.

³⁷² “A special correspondent,” “Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ethiopia,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Mar 4, 1978, p. 467.

But the repression reached Jimma as well.

A massive demonstration took place, conspicuous for the presence of a large number of women. The placards read: “Down with the Dergue!” “Forward with the EPRP!”. As the march, led by a woman worker, reached the town hall, the forces of repression opened fire. Machine gun and rifle fire continued for an hour. The people, unarmed, ran for safety. House to house searches began. Nearly 2,000 workers, students, teachers and women were arrested and beaten. In this manner, the strike that had been decided on was broken after two days.³⁷³

While the violence was not the worst Ethiopia would see, the *Derg’s* actions at the end of 1975 were a kind of watershed moment. It had held onto power for a year, and had certainly gained support, critically including a large segment of the left which had promptly invested itself deeply in the *Derg’s* success. But in a clearly forming pattern, again and again it revealed its need to rely on state-directed violence. Meanwhile the opposition movements were now well-positioning themselves to exploit the internal contradictions of revolutionary Ethiopia. And those contradictions were rich: a land reform that left peasants propertyless; political reforms that left citizens powerless; economic reforms that replaced one set of bosses with another.

It’s worth quoting a lengthy analysis of what happened in these first months of the revolution, from EPRP supporter Mulugeta Osman, writing in 1980. Mulugeta seizes on the class nature of the intensifying conflict and the *Derg’s* intrinsic need to enact radical reforms in a way that would ultimately preserve its own power.

[T]he section of the petty-bourgeoisie which appropriated the state power via a coup had to move in two interlinked directions. One was to destroy to the last all the means and instruments which could enable the proletariat to appropri-

³⁷³ Ibid., p. 471).

ate power and social emancipation. And thus the abolition of the various committees set-up by the people, the dissolution of CELU and others and the relentless terror against the EPRP and against any attempt at autonomous organizational action. Secondly, the military regime had to present its own liberation, i.e. the liberation of the petty-bourgeoisie from its conditions of oppression by the Haile Selassie state apparatus and the bourgeoisie as the liberation of the people as a whole, the general interests of the people are thus said to be incarnated in the interests of the regime and, its logical development, in Mengistu. Hence, once again the political existence of the individual or group exists only within the framework of the subjugation of the individual by the state.

Within this framework, the resort to “socialism” as an ideological facade highlights the repression and beyond it the subjugation of the individual to the state. The military regime did not express the interest of one particular class in this respect as it was striving to mould all classes in its interest. True enough, like a bonapartist state it had the appearance of conflict with all classes but unlike such a state it did not enjoy the support of a vast section of the peasantry. The realization of the liberation of the petty-bourgeoisie, actualized on the political level by the taking over power and the setting-up of new organizational forms (*kebele* and the like), required on the economical sphere the appropriation of surplus both from the peasant and the proletariat.

The nationalization measures are intended to facilitate the extraction of increased surplus, the accumulation of capital, etc, i.e. the transformation of the petty-bourgeoisie into a state or bureaucratic bourgeoisie. This transformation necessarily implied a contradiction with the landlords and also with the comprador and bureaucratic bourgeoisie which

were compromised (by their role within the Haile Selassie state apparatus and their link with land) and attacked as strategic enemies by the February Revolution. The transformations also called for regimentation of the mass of peasants and workers within the options of the military regime.

From this drive by the regime to impose its interests as the interest and needs of the society at large follows its conflict with almost all the other classes (including the fraction of the petty-bourgeoisie which has gone to the side of the proletariat) and its drive to shape and reorganize the whole socio-economic formation. The overall weakness of the bourgeoisie as a whole, the weakness of the petty-bourgeoisie as a consequence, the continuing revolutionary struggle of the masses and the international crisis of capitalism lie at the root of the weakness of the regime in realizing its aim.³⁷⁴

The year ended in a kind of stalemate between the major players of the revolution. Both danger and possibility were on the horizon, with the decisive players strengthening their positions in their respective corners. So, what, exactly, was the Ethiopian revolution going to mean for the people of Ethiopia? And who would decide?

³⁷⁴ Mulugeta Osman, "Review of Books on Post-1974 Ethiopia," *Ethiopian Marxist Review*, No. 1, August 1980.

Chapter 8

Symbolic Confusion

“The EPRP is the party of the working class. It is guided by the working class ideology of Marxism-Leninism. Its aim is to strengthen the unity and alliance of the workers and peasants so as to ultimately establish Proletarian Dictatorship in the era of Socialism and eventually establish a classless Communist society free from oppression and exploitation of man by man.”—Preamble to the Program of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party³⁷⁵

“Me’isona is guided by the revolutionary theory of scientific socialism. Its final aim is to establish a socialist society in Ethiopia, and to struggle in unity with the workers of the world to bring about a classless society.”—Preamble to the Program of Meison³⁷⁶

“Victory is always the fruit of struggle. This is what Marxist-Leninist practice has taught us. This is what the great October Socialist Revolution has taught us. This is what the long struggle of the heroic peoples of Vietnam has taught us.... Struggle and victory, victory and struggle are dialectically interwoven. Our struggle will continue till we attain total victory.”—Lt. Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam³⁷⁷

The Red Mantle

The logo of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party was a hammer and sickle, chunkily designed, surrounded by a wreath and red star. A red star emblazoned the masthead of every issue of *Democracia*. In

³⁷⁵ EPRP Program, *op. Cit.*, p. V.

³⁷⁶ Preamble to the Program of Meison, *op. Cit.*, p. 7.

³⁷⁷ Lt. Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam, *Fourth Anniversary of the Revolution*, Ministry of Information and National Guidance (1978), p. 11.

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one surviving photo, in addition to its hammer-and-sickle banners and flags, EPRP marchers carry huge posters of Che Guevara.

The symbol of *Meison*, appearing on the masthead of *Voice of the Masses*, was a hammer and sickle, more finely rendered than the EPRP's and surrounded by sheaves of grain, a ribbon, and a yellow star. At government rallies it fielded contingents carrying posters of Marx, Lenin and Mao; one photo of such a contingent even shows *Meison* supporters from a shoe factory wearing matching red shoes.

The symbol of the various party-building efforts of the *Derg* from *Emaledh* to the eventual Workers Party of Ethiopia founded on the revolution's tenth anniversary in 1984 revolution was also a hammer and sickle. After the treaty of friendship between Ethiopia and the Soviet Union in 1977, huge portraits of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and VI Lenin became commonplace in public spaces, including the newly christened Revolution Square in Addis Ababa. By 1977 one could mail a letter with government-issued postage stamps bearing hammers and sickles or portraits of Lenin.

How was this even possible? Did it mean the differences between these forces whose competition eventually came to violence were something less even than cosmetic? Were the differences among Ethiopian leftists mere sectarianism carried over from bad feelings in the student movement? There is, ultimately, a certain degree of subjectivity in the answers to these questions, but they reveal a problem common with any ideology-based movement: does the ideology change and morph with time in response to new circumstances and realities? If Marxist-Leninist ideology is considered by its adherents a scientific method of analysis and a measured prescription for the world's problems, what degree of fidelity to those "scientific" concepts of its most successful thinkers and practitioners is required to earn a continued claim to the red mantle?

Lenin himself wrote about the ways that Marxist theory could be usurped by those not actually interested in fulfilling its revolutionary intentions. He addresses this in his classic work *State and Revolution*, which was in turn cited by the EPRP to explain their point of view that the *Derg* were actually the hijackers of a popular revolution:

What is now happening to Marx's theory has, in the course of history, happened repeatedly to the theories of revolutionary thinkers and leaders of oppressed classes fighting for emancipation. During the lifetime of great revolutionaries, the oppressing classes constantly hounded them, received their theories with the most savage malice, the most furious hatred and the most unscrupulous campaigns of lies and slander. After their death, attempts are made to convert them into harmless icons, to canonise them, so to say, and to hallow their *names* to a certain extent for the "consolation" of the oppressed classes and with the object of duping the latter, while at the same time robbing the revolutionary theory of its *substance*, *blunting its revolutionary edge and vulgarising it*.³⁷⁸

So while many international observers accepted the *Derg's* socialist pretensions at face value, to the EPRP these claims rang hollow and false.

It wasn't just the blunting of Marx's revolutionary and emancipatory message, but outright betrayals of it, that tied the EPRP's ideological conflict with the *Derg* to Lenin's original struggle, especially his sharp conflict with many avowed socialists during the period of the First World War. Lenin called the distortion of Marxist ideas "revisionism." He argued against many socialists of his day who clung to the Marxist mantle while *revising* both the methods of struggle and the ultimate transformative goal prescribed by Marx and Engels to solve the oppression and exploitation of humanity under capitalism with nothing short of its violent, revolutionary overthrow at the hands of a self-aware and organized proletariat. Later, long after the victory of the Russian Revolution and the post-WW2 extensions of the socialist world, "revisionism" came to be a central charge made by the Chinese communists led

³⁷⁸ V.I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, quoted in "Down with all Revisionist Distortions Against the Ethiopian Revolution," in the pro-EPRP journal *Forward*, published by the World-Wide Federation of Ethiopian Students, February 1977.

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by Mao Zedong against the Soviet Union both for its policy of peaceful coexistence with Western capitalism and its repressive and inegalitarian representations of socialism in practice.

In countries where Soviet leadership held sway into the Brezhnev era, all the traditional Marxist-Leninist words and visuals remained in place, but they were gutted of their original intent and meaning when it came to practice. In the words of Marxist historian Doug Enaa Greene, “Marxism-Leninism eventually became the new reigning orthodoxy both inside the USSR and its allied communist parties. However, it was no longer a vibrant theory of revolution, but a state religion, a dogma and infallible science used to justify the requirements of whatever the policy the leadership needed it to. Soviet Marxism-Leninism was deterministic, mechanical and economic.”³⁷⁹

In Ethiopia, this was obvious to young EPRP activists like Mohamed Yimam. Everything was not as it claimed to be. “It was very easy to see that what the Derg was doing did not square with what Lenin, Mao or Marx have written. EPRP skillfully exposed this contradiction for us that we were easily convinced that EPRP was the true Marxist and the Derg was at best a pseudosocialist, or at worst a fascist organization. Its mission in history was to foil a genuine proletarian revolution that only the EPRP leading the ‘proletariat’ was capable of bringing.”³⁸⁰

The EPRP asked whether conscious revolutionaries should work to influence those at the top to make expedient choices from above, or should they rely on the masses of people themselves to deepen the revolution. A resolution from the pro-EPRP Ethiopian student movement in the United States distancing itself from the pro-*Meison* student organization in Europe spells this out clearly.

ESUNA believes that the two mutually exclusive and irreducible lines would have to ultimately come to a historic decision... between those who uphold democratism, and those who uphold feudal despotism, between those who

³⁷⁹ Doug Enaa Greene, “The Final Aim Is Nothing” in *Links, International Journal of Socialist Renewal*.

³⁸⁰ Mohamed Yimam, *Wore Negari*, p. 62.

uphold the mass line and those who uphold objectively the comprador-bureaucrat-imperialist-feudal line, between those who uphold politics in command and those who uphold petty economic handouts... between those who have confidence in the masses and their strength for making Revolution and those who speculate on one or two officers within the Dergue to bring the “revolution” from above to the masses.³⁸¹

CELU, now under the influence of EPRP activists, passed a resolution in September 1975, accusing the military regime and its backers of seeking to institutionalize the revolution as a way of enshrining its power *over* the people.

[T]he present historical task in Ethiopia is to carry the popular democratic revolution through to the end. This requires the independent, conscious, militant and organised participation of the oppressed classes. As such, the historical task of the proletariat is to mobilise the broad masses and coordinate their struggle. For such historical task, there can be no substitute or alternative to the party of the proletariat. Trying to find such a substitute or an alternative will undoubtedly end in total failure. Such being the reality, and when the regime has suppressed and trampled upon democratic rights and condemned and persecuted the organisations—a party, which is formed by the government for its own interests with a handpicked individuals, who are neither elected by nor represent in any way the broad masses, is unacceptable. Such a party cannot fulfill the interests, needs and objectives of the oppressed masses, and as such cannot be supported by the oppressed masses in general and the proletariat in particular. Such a party is a device of the few to stage a mock delivery of power to their pet (party)

³⁸¹ “Resolution on the Current Situation in ESUE” passed at the 23rd Congress of ESUNA, as reprinted in *Combat*, Vol. III, No. 2, August 1975, p. 91.

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and to institutionalise themselves. Such a party could not safeguard and promote the rights and interests of the masses. On the contrary, as its very creation is meant to dupe the masses to submission, the proletariat vehemently opposes such devious aims and devices.³⁸²

As we saw in the last chapter, days after passing this resolution, CELU was banned.

The EPRP believed that wielding the power of the existing state was fundamentally in contradiction with overthrowing that state and replacing it with true revolutionary democracy. Since the existing standing army was actually the foundation of that state, all the military's proclamations could never actually truly revolutionize social relations:

[T]he attitude of Marxists toward reform and fundamental change is very clear and unequivocal. Marxists are not against reforms as long as the "reforms" do not create obstacles to the strategic aims of the proletariat; peoples' democracy and socialism. Similarly; we are not against the Dergue's decree on land. What we are saying is the hard fact that Lenin taught us on the one hand and what the practical reality in Ethiopia has shown on the other; namely the decree alone won't be the solution so long as it is devoid of the political power of the popular masses. The Dergue's decree is simply equalised land tenure, which Lenin castigated as petty-bourgeois utopia and moreover, "useless." Land reform cannot be carried out *without* the political power of the proletariat and peasantry and *against* their political participation. History has many cruel examples where attempts to use the feudo-bourgeois state, which is an instrument of enslavement, as an instrument of liberation brought untold sufferings.... It is for the building of the proletarian-peasant dictatorship through a revolution from below to resolve the

³⁸² Resolution of CELU, Sept. 18–21, 1975 Congress quoted in "Much Ado About the United Front of Ethiopian Fascists," *Abyot*, Vol. 1 No. 2, January 30, 1976.

agrarian question in a revolutionary manner that the EPRP stands.³⁸³

It was certainly remarkable that in a few short years, the principal language for political discourse in Ethiopia was the language of Marxism-Leninism, but this fact didn't actually mean that everybody meant the same thing by the words (and iconic images) they were using. In fact the differences were quite profound. And just because the major players claimed to be embodying the same values didn't mean that the actions of all players matched their rhetorical expressions. Actions spoke louder than words.

Ideological Silos

During the 1960s and 1970s, the world left outside the socialist countries siloed into competing “brands” of leftist ideology. In most countries with an opposition socialist movement, competing parties and movements represented the differing ideological trends. Most countries sported an “official” communist party recognized in some way by—and parroting the line of—the official Soviet Communist Party. There was usually a social-democratic party with lineage or allegiance to the Socialist International, often integrated into the parliaments of liberal democracies. Both these wings of the left were considered out of touch by the youthful, confrontational, and theoretically innovative energy of the New Leftists. There were Trotskyist sects and parties affiliated to a spectrum of competing internationals, and there were the so-called Maoist parties of what came to be called the anti-revisionist movement, or as it was known in the United States, the New Communist Movement. Only a few of these Maoist parties ever successfully established working relations with the Chinese Communist Party itself. After the death of Mao in 1976, the Maoist movement itself fragmented into wings that opposed the post-Mao regime, those that supported it, those that sought a *rapprochement* with traditional pro-Soviet communists,

³⁸³ “When Ethiopian Opportunists Are in Trouble Their European Counterparts Also Make the Loudest Noise,” by Kelisen Belew, *Abyot* V2N4, March 1977.

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and those who followed the quixotic leadership of Albanian communist leader Enver Hoxha after his break from being China's sole European state ally. There were also a host of maverick parties embracing aspects of Marxism-Leninism but eschewing the rigid allegiances and ideological dictates of pro-Soviet or pro-Chinese lines. Mutual hostility was generally the rule for interaction across silos.

It's worth examining how the Ethiopian left fitted into this universe. It can be confusing since each silo has its own way of interpreting ideas that sound like they're being expressed similarly when reality often suggests something else completely.

Adoption of the ideological concepts in currency in the late 1960s wasn't exactly the same thing as falling in line with one of the rigid left silos. All the major factions of the Ethiopian left considered themselves "Marxist-Leninist." This is significant and important; while this label was coined by Soviet leader Stalin after Lenin's death, by the 1960s it was effectively bookshelved by the Soviets, eager to portray themselves as reasonable partners for peaceful coexistence, and had instead become a marker for those claiming adherence to the much more muscular revolutionary internationalism promoted at the time by Beijing. As an umbrella term, it's probably about as far as one can go trying to pigeon-hole the Ethiopian left.

In truth the most common use of ideological labels on the Ethiopian left was in crafting political insults. The EPLO/EPRP wing was derided as Anarchist, Maoist, Fanonist, Focoist, and Trotskyite. One polemic accused the late Mesfin Habtu of being a Trotskyist based on the reading material in a study group: "One instant in that respect was the distribution of a reading guideline prepared under the leadership of the notorious Trotskyite—the late Mesfin Habtu—where the writings of Isaac Deutscher were openly encouraged as reading materials."³⁸⁴ By the time the Soviet Union began to take a close interest in post-revolutionary Ethiopian politics, it used the term "Maoist" as a kind of red-baiting bugaboo smear for Chinese influence in the same way the word "communist" was used by the McCarthyites during the American

³⁸⁴ Yabiyot Mestawot, *op. Cit.*, p. 38.

red scare.

Guevarism was sometimes used as a marker for the iconoclastic, eclectic ideology of groups during this period who rejected the idea that revolutionary parties should fall in line behind one of the competing giants of the socialist world. But labelling the EPRP “Guevarist” as some have done, doesn’t really reflect the totality of EPRP’s politics, despite their founders’ clear idolization of the fallen fighter.

Labelling the EPRP “Maoist” is problematic in its own way in that many who were influenced by Mao rejected the label itself. Some of the world’s Maoists were certainly looking for assistance or state recognition from the People’s Republic of China. This proved particularly elusive for Ethiopian revolutionaries due to the fickleness of Chinese foreign policy goals. In general by the mid-1970s those foreign policy goals became a divisive problem for those who had embraced China’s Mao-inspired 1960s revolutionary internationalism, creating situations like that in Angola where the recognized “Maoist” rebel faction³⁸⁵ found itself in an alliance with racist South Africa and the CIA.

Outside the student diaspora, the Ethiopian left’s embrace of certain Maoist ideas did not seem to come with the heavy embrace of the Mao personality-cult iconography for which the Maoist movement was renowned. The notion of “anti-revisionism” though, gained currency as Soviet practice proved to be increasingly problematic in Ethiopia.

Quoting Mao’s ideas was commonplace in the Ethiopian revolutionary student diaspora; its obvious his writings were studied seriously. For example in a discussion of the goals of the revolution written by Ethiopian Students in Amsterdam in 1971: “The tasks of the peoples’ struggle must be two. The principal task should be to strike at these two enemies, imperialism and feudalism. The second task should be the unity of the democratic forces that, in the words of Mao Tse-Tung, ‘... the struggle must be carried out through an interrelated national and democratic revolution because the enemies, feudalism and imperialism, are interrelated to each other.’”³⁸⁶ But it’s not clear that most Ethiopian

³⁸⁵ UNITA, or the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, led by Jonas Savimbi.

³⁸⁶ From “The Socio-Political Reality and the Ethiopian Peoples’ Struggle in Per-

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revolutionaries saw Mao's influence as something that marked a qualitative enhancement or synthesis of Marxism-Leninism into something deserving of its own name.³⁸⁷

Hiwot Teffera is pretty clear that Getachew Maru and his *Abyot* group, which included such important figures as Tito Hiruy, *did* self-identify as Maoist before it merged with other forces in EPLO. She relates a moment back in 1969 where the young Getachew Maru confronted Tilahun Gizaw about the direction of the student movement.

Getachew Maru sprang to his feet and thundered at Tilahun. "Nearly a billion Chinese are with us! The whole world is with us!" he said and reeled off Mao Tse Tung's thought!... It was Getachew Maru who introduced Maoism in Ethiopia.... Just as Berhanemeskel Redda had changed a generation of students; Getachew Maru had transformed a generation of youth with Maoism.³⁸⁸

But most veterans of the movement agree that what came to be the EPRP was not so easily pegged. Babile Tola remembers that the 1972 founding EPLO congress was cautious not to fully embrace the growing anti-Soviet critique of the world Maoist movement for pragmatic reasons:

On the question of the Soviet Union, though some delegates forwarded the theses of "social imperialism" to characterize the Soviet Union, this did not get the backing of the majority and was discarded. Still, the congress stated that "revisionist USSR is no friend of the Ethiopian Revolution" and must be handled as such; open attacks against Moscow

spective," *Ethiopia Uncovered*, December 1971, Ethiopian Student in Benelux, p. 58.

³⁸⁷ Maoism in the post-Soviet world, way outside the scope of this investigation, has as a movement actually come to exactly that conclusion. Maoism is now embraced as the distinct "MLM," a praxis of Mao-inspired revolutionaries in Peru, Nepal, India, Philippines, Turkey and elsewhere. Ironically, in today's left "Marxist-Leninist" has largely returned to a meaning suggesting something approaching late-Soviet orthodoxy.

³⁸⁸ Hiwot Teffera, *Tower in the Sky*, p. 91, p. 283.

were also prohibited on the grounds that this would render the work of the EPLO (and especially of the plan to train and plant a guerrilla unit) very difficult given the regional situation at the time.³⁸⁹

Another veteran of the student movement recalls it this way:

[W]ithin EPRP at first there were not what one would term hardliners. For example, there were no Maoists among the nine members of the [original 1972] Central Committee. Amazingly, within the Algerian [exile] group, Gezahegn Endale was a Trotskyite. The others... had a critical outlook and did not espouse either the Moscow, or the Albanian or Peking line. It is possible that this was to be a problem when they later merged with the “Abyot” group.... [In] ESUNA, as time went on... it degenerated into a Maoist sect. As things worsened, “Beijing Review” became the sole approved reading material. On the battlefield, fighting would break out among guerrillas belonging to one or other school of thought. This proved to be a thorn in the side of the Foreign Relations Committee.³⁹⁰

As much as certain ideas and methods assimilated by the EPRP came from Mao’s writings and practice, and as much as certain individuals identified as Maoist, the party itself did not adopt the Maoist label.

Mao died in 1976, and the pro-EPRP World Wide Federation of Ethiopian Students, then holding a congress in Germany, issued a two-page statement of condolences upon learning of his passing.

The greatness of this Marxist-Leninist lies not only on his life-long dedication to the genuine liberation of the once abused, degraded and downtrodden Chinese people as well as the emancipation of all oppressed nations and peo-

³⁸⁹ Babile Tola, *To Kill a Generation*, pp. 106–107.

³⁹⁰ Melaku Tegegn in Bahru Zewde, *Documenting the Ethiopian Student Movement*, pp. 148–151.

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ples the world over, but also on his persistent and resolute upholding, defending, creative application and enriching of the revolutionary teachings of Marxism-Leninism.³⁹¹

The EPRP's foreign journal *Abyot* expressed a sharper version of this sentiment in its own editorial on the Chairman's death.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Mao that we would like to mention is his insistence on an independent analysis of the objective situation. In practice and theory he opposed dogmatism and revisionism. The many movements that dogmatically assert to follow his teachings need to ponder this crucial feature of the great leader who shocked established tradition with his analysis of the peasantry's potential and with his fierce determination to safeguard the independence of the proletarian party and to persecute a bitter war against insurmountable odds. It is right to rebel said Mao. He not only rebelled but led a revolution to victory and left a giant imprint on world history.³⁹²

The other groupings of the Ethiopian left evolved in the same student milieu as the EPLO/EPRP, and shared a lot of the same ideological framing. Babile Tola remembers that "[F]or a long period the Haile Fida group was overtly pro-Chinese."³⁹³ Pictorial evidence from after 1974 shows *Meison* contingents at demonstrations waving placards with Chinese-printed posters, including those of Mao. But a quick review of available *Meison* propaganda shows that ultimately it was Ethiopian issues that were important, not Chinese ones. The American communist group with which Senay Likke associated occupied space adjacent to Maoism, but actually had a strong affinity for some kind

³⁹¹ WWFES, "Revolutionary Tribute to the Befallen Comrade and Great Proletarian Leader and Teacher Chairman Mao Tse-tung," Sept. 25, 1976.

³⁹² EPRP, "In Memory of Comrade Mao Tse-Tung," *Abyot*, #7, Sept-Oct. 1976, p. 19.

³⁹³ Babile Tola, *op. Cit.*, p. 101.

of pre-WW2 hardline Stalinism.³⁹⁴ All told, however, the relative peace and luxury of European and American universities accentuated the flash of competing left silos in a way that the life-and-death confrontations in Ethiopia did not allow. The ideological conflicts on the Ethiopian left were very real, but ultimately these were rooted in the practical considerations of how to apply and interpret ideological considerations more than on upholding a particular tradition.

Generally the Ethiopian left did broadly subscribe to the theory of “new democracy” espoused by Mao Zedong,³⁹⁵ and this theory conflicted with Soviet ideas like the “theory of productive forces” and the “noncapitalist path of development” that fail to maintain the central role of the conscious proletariat. Mao’s theory attempts to address a path to socialism in places where capitalism, and therefore with it the revolutionary proletariat, are not developed enough to replicate the formula for socialist revolution espoused by Marx and Lenin. Examining the concrete conditions of pre-revolutionary China, Mao analyzed the differing class forces and their interests: the relatively small urban proletariat, the huge peasantry, the pre-capitalist forms of land ownership in wide swaths of the countryside, and the transitory loyalties of different layers of the urban intelligentsia, petty bourgeoisie and property-owning bourgeoisie who variously supported either a progressive, anti-imperialist nationalism or surrendered to profiteering and puppetry under foreign occupiers from the Japanese to the British. He suggested that in uniting the people in a revolution for democracy, led by the proletariat and a *communist* party, a transformation to socialism was possible even though capitalism itself was much less developed than in Europe and North America. It’s not hard to see how this model would fit into Ethiopian reality; though it’s also not hard to see how the process might be hijacked by class forces focusing merely on the mechanics of seizing power than on the visionary goal of egalitarian communism.

³⁹⁴ This is reflected in an encomium to Stalin in the previously cited 1974 statement from the “Ethiopian Revolutionary Committee” printed in the CL’s *People’s Tribune*.

³⁹⁵ See Mao Zedong, *On New Democracy* (1940) (Via MIA www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_26.htm).

Chaperones of Revolution?

Every social movement, every *revolutionary* movement, is confronted by the issue of leadership. The existence of competing ideologies—and competing material and social interests—is a simple fact of politics; so it's not particularly surprising that the success of a movement is due to factors that include not only the balance of forces amidst seemingly random conjunctures of history, but also the organizational and ideological integrity of those who would attempt to shape the unfolding of destiny.

A key component of the Marxist-Leninist vision for revolutionary change was a revolutionary party capable of offering leadership to a revolutionary struggle, and with it almost military-style discipline. This had been obvious to the young Ethiopians discussing Marxism in the 1960s student movement despite the absence of traditional party politics in Ethiopia. While we have shown that it is not true that revolution dropped suddenly upon Ethiopia as if by *deus ex machina*, it is true that Ethiopia's political culture was in many ways behind that of both countries in the developed world and countries in the developing world which had awakened to political consciousness through the bloody osmosis of colonialism.

Former student activist Fentahun Tiruneh reminds us how the student movement compensated for the political immaturity of other sectors of Ethiopian society:

The ESM, in effect filled the gap in the political opposition left unoccupied by any of the groups that opposed the old regime. The spontaneous peasant uprisings were peripheral political concerns that did not have direct political bearing on the government. Worker strikes were not able to rise beyond labor union consciousness. Their fate was limited by economic concerns. Peasant and worker actions were severely frustrated by the old regime. These two social classes needed conscious, planned and consistent leadership to coordinate their efforts for radical change. This type of

leadership had to be provided from outside their perimeter.... In its fifteen years of intense political engagement, the ESM was a surrogate political party organization, which accomplished major political tasks and scored brilliant victories.³⁹⁶

Having suppressed the development of an independent political class, the emperor had created the perfect vacuum for the radical left to intervene with its commitment to popular power. To a real degree, the student classes served as a conduit of revolutionary ideas to other social groups. Radical young people became radical teachers and so the torch could be passed in a short period of time to an upcoming generation. This was accelerated during the tumultuous year of 1974, and even afterwards through vehicles like the *Zemetcha*, and through the transformation of student radicals into hardened revolutionary cadre often embedded into mass organizations, government agencies, trade unions and community groups. And as we have seen, it happened through the conscious intervention of radicals into the ranks of the Ethiopian armed forces. A party allowed for the exponential magnification of the social mobilization that was occurring.

When the Russian Bolsheviks, for instance, organized among soldiers on a massive scale during the final days of World War One, their goal was to *split* the Russian army: to win the workers in uniform away from the Tsarist officer corps and away from loyalty to the bourgeois state. The original *soviets*, or popular councils, set up in the revolutionary cities of 1917 Russia included mutinous and demobilized soldiers home from the front lines along with representatives from factories and neighborhoods. Rank-and-file military discontent was a crucial part of the unrest of 1974 in Ethiopia, and indeed provided lots of leverage to the popular movements.

But the *Derg* itself was primarily a committee of the junior officer corps. It was military officers who went on to assume state power directly, actually bypassing the demands of the masses in the streets

³⁹⁶ Fentahun Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Students*, pp. 101–103.

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for democratic control over the government and the politics of the country. While there were apparently some in the *Derg* who favored a move toward popular democracy, they seem to have been quite outnumbered.³⁹⁷ Despite the intentions of those on the Ethiopian left who oriented to the military, the *Derg's* grip on state power thus actually became a barrier to the transfer of power to the popular classes, and therefore a barrier to achieving the radically democratic vision of socialism that so many Ethiopian revolutionaries had embraced. The *Derg's* rationalizations for their role as the military saviors of the revolution—supported by *Meison*—reveal a fundamental revision of those crucial elements of the communist ideology actually espoused by Lenin, to which all sides were claiming adherence.

The attitude of the EPRP to the military closely mirrored that of the Russian Bolsheviks. Its sympathizers inside the Ethiopian Air Force published an underground newsletter called *Voice of the Air Force*, and in 1975 they explained:

[T]he officers and the others stand for quite different and contradictory interests. If one satisfies his interest it will inevitably be at the expense of the others.... In a society divided into classes, the ruling and oppressed classes have their own distinct outlooks (ideologies).... This contradiction cannot be solved separately from the objective situation that exists in Ethiopia. It can only be solved, and to forget this is foolish/utopian, when a genuine socialist revolution is made in Ethiopia and only when the present army (structure/set up, etc) is destroyed and a new one built. Aside from the contradictions with the officers all the other contradictions within us are now antagonistic, they can be solved in a democratic way.³⁹⁸

³⁹⁷ See pp. 9–11 of “Pliny the Middle-Aged’s” *The PMAC: Origins and Structure: Part One* for details on the consolidation of the *Derg* including details on its composition and internal contradictions.

³⁹⁸ “One Can’t Repeatedly Cheat the Air Force,” from *Voice of the Air Force*, reprinted in *Abyot*, Vol. 1, No. 2, January 30, 1976.

The *Derg* and its defenders openly sneered at this, suggesting that its opponents were “infantiles” or utopian and naive, or “anarchist” for refusing to accept the fact that only a strong military hand could provide the order to steer the country into a revolutionary future. This is of course a pretty common self-justification from self-proclaimed military saviors in countries throughout the world, but it is not socialism, at least not according to the definitions crafted by Marx and Lenin.

The EPRP supporters in the Air Force were very direct. What the *Derg* was attempting to build could not be actual socialism.

[O]fficers who say that they have gone to the Soviet Union to learn how to form a political party should stop declaring that “democratic liberties should not be accorded to the masses during revolutionary times.” They should stop their deceitful actions because we know fully that they want to cling to power under the pretext that the “masses are not still organised.” We know (and we did not have to voyage to the Soviet Union to know this) that “a revolution without an organisation and an organisation without democratic liberties” cannot just come about. “Revolution is a festival of the oppressed,”³⁹⁹ and we know quite clearly that popular democracy is necessary (crucial) during the time of revolution. Hence we demand that democratic liberties be accorded to the oppressed masses.... We have heard that these persons taking courses in the Soviet Union have erased from Marxist books what Marx and Marxists have said on (a) the need to destroy the army set-up by the oppressing classes and build a new (people’s) army and (b) the incapability of soldiers to lead the socialist revolution. Our intelligent philosophers (!) have made this revision on the ground that “Ethiopia’s revolution is different from all other revolutions”! Bravo socialists!! But this is not socialism.⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁹ A reference to a Lenin text previously cited.

⁴⁰⁰ *Voice of the Air Force, op. Cit.*

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While the *Derg* often invoked the broad masses of Ethiopia in whose name they claimed to be administering the country, they completely rationalized their own role in the revolution. Blurring the social and class distinctions between rank-and-file soldier and officer, and waving away any questions of class rule and state power, the *Derg* promulgated the idea of the “man in uniform” as the hero and protector of Ethiopia’s extended revolution. On the second anniversary of the PMAC’s September 1974 assumption of power, the *Derg* spelled it all out.

The Ethiopian man in uniform has not only experienced oppression but is also a member of the downtrodden class. That is why the man in uniform has disappointed his ill-wishers and his prophets of doom in such an exemplary way to the oppressed masses of the Third World by avoiding the dangers of being divided and thereby becoming an instrument of anti-revolutionary forces. This he achieved in doing by shedding his blood and by sacrificing his life in defence of the Revolution. True Ethiopian revolutionaries must learn that unity is strength from the solidarity and dedication of the man in uniform. If members of the Ethiopian Armed Forces had not taken the necessary measures to safeguard the unity which is as precious as life itself to them whenever the situation so demanded, it is in incontrovertible truth that our Revolution would not have assumed its present form, shape, and direction.⁴⁰¹

Cuba’s Raúl Valdés Vivó reinforces this by arguing that anyone who opposed the *Derg*’s role at the head of the state must simply have a problem with authority and discipline. He scolds,

It should also be noted that a great many students have adopted an entrenched antimilitarist stance, one that could only be justified if the armed forces had taken the side of

⁴⁰¹ PMAC, *The Ethiopian Revolution, Second Anniversary*, Addis Ababa, September 12, 1976, p. 2.

the oppressors: in effect, because of this, many students have themselves ended up on the side of the oppressors, whether or not they want to admit it. The so-called Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), that engages in counterrevolutionary terrorism in the cities, originally drew its ranks from the students. As was only to be expected, they had a source of inspiration in Maoism. For fear of joining the military, who only yesterday were at the service of reaction, and failing to understand that the army today serves the Revolution, these former students have fallen into the hands of the ousted landowners and into the network of plots engineered against the Ethiopian Revolution by international imperialism and Arab reaction. Of course, also present is the petty bourgeoisie's loathing of discipline, organization and giving way to the masses—even though it invokes their name at all times as the principal driving force in history.⁴⁰²

Yet the Ethiopian army still continued the wars initiated by the imperial Ethiopian state against regional rebels and unruly peasants; and until the cementing of ties between Ethiopia and the USSR in 1977, was still armed and supplied by U.S. imperialism.

Valentin Korovikov was the Soviet journal *Pravda's* man in Addis Ababa. His 1979 chronicle of the Ethiopian revolution published by the official Moscow Novosti press agency continues this narrative of an unruly situation brought to necessary order by the military. In so doing he expresses what can only be called contempt for actual revolutionaries along with a deep attachment to a ruled order that came to be a hallmark of Soviet, and by extension, *Derg*, ideology and policy.

But the forces of reaction pinned their greatest hopes on the petty-bourgeois anarchist leftist group that called itself The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP). It

⁴⁰² Raúl Valdés Vivó, *Ethiopia's Revolution [Etiopia, la revolución desconocida]*, International Publishers, 1977/1978, p. 66.

had been formed before the revolution from various student groups and led by Ethiopians who had returned from abroad, also for the most part students. The Eritrean separatists who had a wide network of agents in Addis Ababa also played an important part of this subversive organisation. They believed that their plans for separation could be furthered if the central authorities were weakened and disorganised, and if there was chaos, constant conflict and strife in the country. It was no accident that the EPRP practically always supported the demand for Eritrea's separation from Ethiopia. The absence of a political revolutionary party in the country, ideological and practical inexperience of the Ethiopian youth, the dizzy successes of the first stages of the revolution, the leftist slogans of rebellion and anarchy, youthful impatience, under the impact of Maoist literature, to achieve socialism at one fell swoop and certain other factors were responsible for the EPRP acquiring some influence in the capital and other towns. This was also promoted by the fact that the EPRP used Marxist terminology which it applied very arbitrarily to Ethiopian realities.⁴⁰³

In the same underground newsletter quoted above, EPRP's Air Force sympathizers condemn the *Derg's* military narrative.

The workers, peasants, progressive students and intellectuals as well as oppressed soldiers are struggling to recuperate the rights that the Derg forcefully deprived them. The masses are struggling in an organised manner. Hence, the Derg should immediately stop its attempts to make us believe that the soldiers are the vanguard of the socialist revolution, and it should cease its attacks against the struggling masses whom it accuses of "greedily vying for power" or "of sabotaging the revolution". It is the Derg that is greedily

⁴⁰³ Valentin Korovikov, *Ethiopia: Years of Revolution*, Novosti Press Agency, Moscow, 1979, pp. 90–91.

ying for power, it is the Derg that is sabotaging/reversing the revolution. Power, belongs to the masses and it is the masses who are demanding to have power, to have what is justly theirs. It is the Derg that is ying for power and to deny this or blame the people instead of the Derg is like blaming the mother for the father's mistakes.⁴⁰⁴

For the *Derg*, leadership meant simply being the boss.

In reaction to the claim by the *Derg's* supporters that the EPRP were merely the spoiled children of the petty-bourgeoisie, the EPRP answered back with an acknowledgement of how revolutionary ideas fuse de-classed intellectuals with the proletariat, an argument straight out of the Russian revolution. From an article in *Democracia*:

Never and nowhere has the proletariat acquired the political and historical consciousness which will enable it to accomplish a social revolution by its own. The economic struggle it conducts to improve its wellbeing alone will not enable it or thoroughgoing class and social liberation. The proletariat embraces the instrument of its class struggle, the Marxist-Leninist ideology, from intellectuals who betrayed their previous class and who resolutely rally for the rights and liberties of the oppressed.... Intellectuals agitate, mobilize and organize the proletariat not like a prophet's prophecy, not like a soothsayer's preaching, not like the commands of a war commander. Agitation, mobilization and organization are not their charity which they dispense voluntarily.⁴⁰⁵

A Party Over the People

The wave of reforms and nationalizations from 1975 were certainly popular, but the passing of control to the state, when the state was not

⁴⁰⁴ *Voice of the Air Force, op. Cit.*

⁴⁰⁵ "EPRP and the Proletariat," from *Democracia*, Vol. 3, No. 12, Dec. 1976; reprinted in *Abyot*, Vol. 2, No. 3, April 1977.

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actually controlled by the people, was no kind of resolution of the class struggle out of which Marx and his heirs promised the emancipation of the oppressed and exploited classes. And in the *Derg's* self-appointed role as chaperone of the revolution, it became obvious there was a contradiction between its facility with socialist rhetoric and the reality of actions which seemed designed to cement its rule and control over Ethiopian society. Consider how the PMAC was quoted by Ethiopian state media in announcing its new labor law in 1975: "Harmonious relations between workers and management can be realized through the strict observance of socialist legality and that it is necessary to create a machinery which expedites conciliation and adjudication to realize this objective."⁴⁰⁶ Thus "socialist legality" and a decidedly un-socialist class peace are invoked in one fell swoop.

All the name-calling from the *Derg* and its allies against the EPRP harnessed a full dictionary of Marxist language, heavy on the epithets, but was lacking in substantive analysis or evidence. The attempt by the *Derg* to invoke Marxist-Leninist rhetoric didn't make the *Derg* actually a Marxist-Leninist vanguard, or more importantly, substantively a social force that would bring liberation to the broad masses of Ethiopia. The EPRP identified in the *Derg* the revisionism that Lenin, and later Mao, warned against. EPRP supporters wrote,

Combating every brand of opportunism—be it revisionism or dogmatism, "is a question of extraordinary, indeed of primary, importance" to all Marxist-Leninists engaged in the struggle for true democracy and socialism.... The EPRP did not start to fight the Moscow counter-revolutionaries only at the time they took the side of fascism and stood against the Ethiopian revolution. When the EPRP was founded it declared that revisionism constitutes a very grave danger and is the main one to the international communist movement. Consequently, the EPRP consistently fought against

⁴⁰⁶ Ethiopian News Agency quoting PMAC Labour Proclamation of Dec 6, 1975. *Ethiopian Herald*, Dec. 6, 1975.

revisionism both inside and outside the party.⁴⁰⁷

Elements of the *Derg* moved politically closer to the Soviet Union while the two countries developed closer ties over the next few years, and the EPRP didn't hesitate to call out the Soviet reality for deviating from true socialism.

In a number of its publications, especially in its official organ *Democracia*, the EPRP has been widely teaching the masses the danger posed by the Soviet bureaucrats to the Ethiopian revolution.... The supply of arms, "experts," interrogators, etc. and the diplomatic support the USSR is giving to the crumbling fascist state cannot be isolated from the nature of today's "Soviet" state. *Abyot* describes the "Soviet" Union as a "country where democracy has been stifled. It is a country where a clique of bureaucrats rule with iron hands in the name of the working class. It is a country where the working class has no say either in the running of the government or the industries. It is a country where the people are muzzled, where genuine Marxists are hounded, sent to concentration camps or destroyed in psychiatric hospitals. In the Soviet Union (and in East Europe) Socialism is a mask behind which ruthless counter-revolutionary revisionists hide."⁴⁰⁸

To the EPRP, the *Derg*'s socialism was so much double-talk, belied by its actual practice. Here *Abyot* digs beneath one *Derg* claim to expose an ugly reality:

To anyone who does not have a nodding acquaintance to Marxism-Leninism, what is confusing about the regime in Ethiopia is the contradictions in the regime's talk of socialism while it kills communists; in its declaration of "unrestricted

⁴⁰⁷ "Soviet Hegemonism Exposed," in the pro-EPRP journal *Forward*, WWFES, January 1978, Vol. 2, No. 4.

⁴⁰⁸ "Soviet Hegemonism Exposed," *ibid.*

democratic rights to the broad masses” while it massacres workers who staged peaceful demonstration using their declared “rights”, in its declaration of land reform while depriving the peasants [of the means] to defend themselves from counter-revolutionary landlords, and so on. The latest act in this historical drama of self-contradictory double talk is the March and latest proclamation to disarm the people with the bluff of “arming the people” at the same time.... One may be surprised why a regime that just declared emergency decree to disarm the population would again “arm” the people.... The riddle resolves itself by seeing *whom* is the regime arming. Would Mengistu ever arm the people, who had cried for arms? Of course not.... Mengistu had to pick up his loyal men from the kebeles and yellow trade unions and arm them. Such selective arming of fascists has been carried out in the other major towns where the class struggle is also acute.⁴⁰⁹

By transforming itself from a movement into a *party*—a disciplined leadership body with a shared understanding of ideology and strategy under an identifiable banner that could rally support—the EPRP hoped to raise the stakes. The proclamation of the Party’s existence in 1975 put both *Meison* and the most power-hungry officers in the *Derg* on the defensive. They had been outmaneuvered on the political front. The EPRP was exercising leadership to the thousands and thousands of Ethiopians who began to look to them. Unfortunately, in light of the factionalism soon to blight the movement, some of the Party’s unity was fragile and shallow; a weakness that would soon be exploited by the Party’s enemies.

The *Derg*, especially the wing led by Major Mengistu and influenced by various leftist veterans of the student movement, knew that to advance its claim of a popular mandate it needed the legitimacy that a political party would provide. If the *Derg* seemed generally disinter-

⁴⁰⁹ “‘Arming’ (?) and Disarming at the Same Time,” from *Abyot*, Vol. 2, No. 3, April 1977.

ested in turning over actual power to any sort of popular democratic institution, its claim to the revolutionary mantle required the lip service of popular participation that a party promised. Initially the *Derg* relied on the political advice of its allies like Haile Fida and Senay Likke, but as we will see, by mid-1977, the development of close ties to the Soviet Union and Fidel Castro's Cuba brought political prescriptions as attachments to massive military and economic aid from the Soviet bloc.

Senay Likke, a staunch ally of Mengistu, wrote about the intentions of the pro-military left: "The Ethiopian Revolution has an infinitely bright future. With the untiring efforts of the progressive section of the Dergue, all genuine progressive and revolutionary Marxist intellectuals. The day for the establishment of the Workers Party of Ethiopia is coming nearer and nearer. This is the most urgent task of the revolution at this stage and efforts without let-up will be made in this respect."⁴¹⁰ He wrote these words most likely in mid-1976; but for all the urgency in his platitude-flavored words, the pro-*Derg* civilian left ultimately didn't have the power to actually fulfill this task on behalf of the military; they abdicated their leadership role and the truth of who was using whom would soon unfold.

Eventually as we will see, the Russians and Cubans would replace the civilian left as advisors to the regime; when they did they were deeply concerned that Mengistu follow their direction. A July 1977 report of a conversation between the Soviet ambassador to Ethiopia and a Cuban military advisor spells out what the *Derg* needed to do; concluding with the urgent need to form a party. The advice also came with a warning to put the brakes on social change.

Elements of confusion can be observed in the Defense Council. Mengistu Haile Mariam still remains the main leader of the Ethiopian revolution. The PMAC needs to solve the following political tasks: 1. To take additional measures to strengthen its social base. In order to achieve this it is necessary to make the socio-economic policy more

⁴¹⁰ Comrade Senay Likke, *The Ethiopian Revolution op. Cit.*, pp. 21–22.

concrete, so that it could assure the peasants that the land would remain in their possession, and that the regime would not rush with collectivization. In addition, some measures in order to, as a minimum, neutralize the national bourgeoisie, are necessary to assure it that the regime would not expropriate its property. 2. To develop the nationality policy and to make it more concrete (to create autonomous national regions), even though now it would not be an easy task because cadres from non-Amhara nationalities which were discriminated against before the revolution have not been prepared yet. 3. To create a political party and a broad people's front with participation of not just workers and peasants, but also with the national bourgeoisie.⁴¹¹

As has been discussed, the student movement had long stressed the creation of a revolutionary party, and before 1974 both the long-term perspective of Haile Fida and the rapid preparations of the Algeria center had been inspired by Lenin's struggle to organize the Bolshevik party in Russia before 1917. But the kind of party being advocated by the *Derg* and stressed by the Soviets seems like a strange inversion of Lenin's vision of a fighting organization that could lead the proletariat and its allies to victory in a revolution. There is a mechanical formalism to it; as though the creation of a party after the fact might somehow disguise the dynamic already in place and erase the fact that the military had already been sitting on top of the revolution since 1974.

A publication of the PMAC attempts to explain the role of the party it hoped to materialize:

The existence of ripe objective and subjective conditions are necessary for a revolution to take place. When Ethiopia's broad masses rose up in unison in February, 1974, while the objective conditions for a revolution were present, the subjective conditions were missing. Therefore, not only the rev-

⁴¹¹ "Memorandum of conversation between Soviet Ambassador to Ethiopia A.N. Ratanov and Cuban military official Arnaldo Ochoa," July 17, 1977; Wilson Center archive link digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111849.

olution was spontaneous, but that its success was doubtful. This state of affairs flaringly manifested itself specially when the enemies of the revolution were poised fully to attack the revolution. Nevertheless, because of the determined struggle waged by genuine progressives and Ethiopia's broad masses, the problems that arose at various stages of the revolution were progressively overcome. But, still the working class party, the sure guarantee of the revolution has not yet been formed. It is axiomatic that the revolution cannot attain its ultimate objectives without the leadership of the working class party. A popular struggle that does not have a working class leadership cannot hit its goal. This condition has to be fulfilled. In this respect the evolution of the Union of Ethiopia's Marxist-Leninist Organizations towards full merger assumes great significance. For the advancement of the revolution, it is not only necessary to form the working class party, but also to see to it that the broad masses become effectively organized at different levels.⁴¹²

This is a clear reflection of late Soviet orthodoxy, where the role of the party was to administer the state with the alleged applause of the citizenry, organized into the ranks of officially approved sectoral mass organizations. In practice for the Soviet Union of the Brezhnev era, as well as for the *Derg*, this meant that the party was intended to be mainly an instrument of mass control. While it could be said that by 1975 the Ethiopian revolution was an ongoing process not yet resolved, the fact that the state had already passed from the hands of the emperor to the hands of a military junta doesn't really rationally suggest that the creation of an official state "communist" party led by that same junta would suddenly and magically bring popular democracy and control.

The *Derg* had a revisionist concept of the state and party. Working

⁴¹² Propaganda and Information Committee, Fourth Anniversary of the Ethiopian Revolution, *The Roles of POMOA and the Yekatit '66 Political School in the Ethiopian Revolution*, Addis Ababa, September 1978, Sept. 1978, pp. 14-16.

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backwards, *after* the seizure of state power by the bourgeois army, it somehow claimed the creation of an official party would proletarianize the revolution, when in fact all it would do was control it.

What the government was looking for was a rubber stamp for its policies, and the EPRP fully called out the *Derg* for its deception.

Shivering under isolation, fuming at the growing strength of the EPRP and the mass offensive, the Junta has opted, as usual, to use “a combination of force and demagogy.” It is not as yet fully clear as to whether it wants to set-up a unique political party or a “united front” that will be paraded as a “democratic body regrouping progressives”! Anyway, the junta has set-up an “organising committee” whose president is a certain Haile Fida known for his notoriously reformist and opportunist stand. Characteristically, the organizing committee consists of a myriad of well-known opportunists ready to serve the fascist junta. Be it a party or a front, there is no doubt that the body that will be set-up will be no more than a conglomeration of fascists and their boot-lickers. It will be no more than an instrument in the service of the junta which is desperately trying to legitimise its rule and control the militant mass organisations.⁴¹³

In truth there was no revolution from above. Despite all the hammers and sickles and Lenin portraits it could muster, the *Derg* was administering a state of bureaucratic capitalism while riding a crest of popular upheaval. The central task of revolution remained: the popular seizure of power and the creation of revolutionary democracy. The *Derg* was an obstacle in that task.

On the other hand, the EPRP was arrayed from below, gaining popular support. As the editors of its widely distributed underground newspaper, *Democracia* wrote,

⁴¹³ EPRP, “Much Ado About the United Front of Ethiopian Fascists,” *Abyot*, Vol. 1, No. 2, January 30, 1976.

EPRP from its inception and outset is a vanguard party of the proletariat. This is not a silly wish. It is an open secret that it is a tested and purified product of the February 1974 people's struggle. We would have liked to refute the hired-coolies (social democrats) of fascism, who claim that EPRP is not a party of the proletariat by refuting one by one their opportunist village theories and their isolated and out-of-context quotes which they use as supportive arguments, thereby exposing themselves as common charlatans. Thus, we shall be forced only to show the clear truths since the ongoing struggle process has refuted their empty clamour.⁴¹⁴

The situation in 1975 was not yet settled; the people were still in motion and the fate of the revolution was not sealed. Would the revolutionary process deepen? Or would the military consolidate its control? Who would succeed in claiming the revolution's red mantle? How would the left move forward?

The EPRP looked forward and identified its future paths. They wrote:

Faced with the new situation, a political organisation had the following options: 1. Follow a collaborationist line and join the Derg. This was what the Meisone bandas of Haile Fida did under the rather thin cover of "critical support" which in fact was all out support and no criticism. 2. Embark on immediate armed struggle, Or 3. prepare armed struggle while organising the masses and intensifying the struggle, to launch the armed struggle when the oppressed masses exhaust all possibilities/illusions of peaceful political struggle.⁴¹⁵

The stage was set for bitter conflict.

⁴¹⁴ EPRP, "EPRP and the Proletariat," from *Democracia*, Vol. 3, No. 12, Dec. 1976, reprinted in *Abyot*, Vol. 2, No. 3, April 1977.

⁴¹⁵ EPRP, "On Some Points of the Armed Struggle Waged by the People under the Leadership of the EPRP," *Abyot*, Special issue, 1978, p. 9.

Chapter 9

1976, The Point of No Return

“EPRP reached its zenith of popularity in 1976. Its fame crossed land and water. Everybody whispered its name. It appeared mighty and invincible. It soared into the sky. The clouds and the moon seemed to fall under its dominion. But, like Icarus, who flew too close to the sun and got the wings of his chariot burned, it came too close to the ‘sun’ for its own good, too.”—former EPRYL activist Hiwot Teffera⁴¹⁶

“Because of POMOA/MEISON’s involvement [with the Derg], the main differences that separated radicals themselves became the concern of the state power and apparatus.”—former EPRP CC member Kiflu Tadesse⁴¹⁷

“We don’t hold any illusions. We find ourselves facing a regime whose whole plan corresponds, for example, to the bloody dictatorship of the Shah of Iran. We have always lived and worked defying clandestinity and repression. We will continue.”—EPRP CC member Bayou Ayana⁴¹⁸

The Revolution Institutionalized

February 1976 marked the second anniversary of the uprising against the emperor. The military junta of Teferi Bente, Mengistu Haile Mariam and Atnafu Abate was in tight control of the government, but despite a dizzying number of economic reforms, their relationship to the revolutionary process and indeed the direction and potential of the revolution itself seemed in doubt.

An early April 1976 cable from the US Embassy in Addis Ababa

⁴¹⁶ Hiwot Teffera, *Tower in the Sky*, p. 171.

⁴¹⁷ Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, p. 69.

⁴¹⁸ EPRP CC member “Bayou Ayana” interviewed by *Afrique Asie*, translated in *MERIP* #45, March 1976.

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suggests a difficult moment for the *Derg*. Reporting on an interview with a visiting academic, Donald Levine:

After numerous conversations at all levels in Addis Ababa (Levine speaks Amharic), Levine concluded that virtually no one in Addis Ababa, from street boys up, support the Dirg.... The Dirg, according to Levine, has “dug itself into a hole” and will become even more repressive in order to remain in power. He sees no alternative to military rule for a long time, even though there may be changes in the Dirg. Levine’s information on the “Politburo” (Dr. Senay Likke, Dr. Haile Fida, et al.) indicated that they have little influence on decisions but a strong influence on ideology.⁴¹⁹

Another cable outlines what the Embassy saw as *Derg* vice-chair Mengistu’s almost dire attempt to win support from various quarters:

His new moves seem grouped under two categories: A. To share power with leftist intellectuals, in a bid for the support of students and trade unionists, and also through a sharp media tilt towards Sovs, East Europeans, and Chinese to try for their support, especially Sov restraint on Somalis. B. To foster unified, popular sentiments and to placate military discontents over Eritrean war by fanning historical fears of Arab/Moslem pressures, and attempting to raise largely Amhara and some co-opted G****s⁴²⁰ in a “peoples army” to go to Eritrea to displace and/or exterminate Eritreans, this achieving “final solution” of problem.⁴²¹

The EPRP did its best to exploit the contradictions of the regime,

⁴¹⁹ April 7, 1976 cable; Wikileaks link: search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1976ADDIS04141_b.html.

⁴²⁰ Historical but derogatory word for the Oromo people deleted here by me. –ISH.

⁴²¹ April 27, 1976 cable; Wikileaks link www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1976AD-DIS04993_b.html.

raising a constant cry against the worsening repression, and challenging the realities behind the *Derg's* rhetoric. A special issue of *Democracia* circulated in early Spring calls out the actions of the *Derg* that were anything but revolutionary:

A revolution is not a straight line—it is zigzag. Although it will be late, the victory will belong to the people. The aim of the fascists and reactionaries to confuse the people by creating temporary problems will not save them from the destiny of history. When the government of the “elite” is pressured by peoples struggle, it concedes and makes certain proclamations. But, when the peoples struggle cools, the government tries to sabotage the struggle anew. It has massacred those people who have promoted the revolution. Many people have been massacred in Eritrea, Gojjam, Afar, Gujji, Wollo and Kaffa. In Awash the Government has killed many workers. Whenever the Government finds any threat to its power, it begins killing people. It is not enough for them to take weapons, which should have been used against anti-revolutionaries, and use them against revolutionaries. It is not enough for them to massacre the people. They are now trying to make the people cut their fingers by the fingers, in other words; in other words, they are trying to turn the people against the people.⁴²²

Public events sponsored by the *Derg* were a captive audience for the civilian left, which took full advantage. A rally at the beginning of April to mark Victory Day, the anniversary celebration of the defeat of the Italian invasion at Adwa in 1896, was the scene of several acts of resistance. U.S. Embassy observers reported home on two incidents:

According to one reliable eyewitness, during the silence immediately following the national anthem, an Ethiopian teacher climbed to a vantage point and began loudly

⁴²² EPRP, “The Fascist Declaration—To Massacre the People,” *Democracia Special Issue* from Feb. or Mar. 1976.

berating the three Dirg principals by name. He reportedly termed them fascists and accused them *inter alia* of killing Ethiopian people, while startled audience listened in silence. According to our source, his accusations continued for some three or four minutes until he was taken away by police.⁴²³

Later,

Students attempted to disrupt activities by chanting anti-Dirg slogans and some stones were arched into the crowd. Some anti-Dirg leaflets were also distributed. One student participant subsequently related with surprise that police had turned their backs on student agitators and walked away when their activities began. Following ceremony, some students marched through streets of Addis chanting “Down with fascist Dirg—Up with (Marxist) EPRP”.⁴²⁴

To grab back initiative, the *Derg* needed to take action; and so came an act of revolutionary institutionalization that would have severe consequences over the coming period. Unfortunately, the initiative would also institutionalize the factionalism and sectarianism on the left.

In February, the *Derg* replaced a key number of cabinet ministers with appointees largely drawn from the ranks of the pro-PMAC civilian left. Daniel Tadesse, a member of *Meison’s* Central Committee, was made Minister of Works and Housing. Dr. Makonnen Jote, a former student activist and former supporter of the EPRP turned *Meison* member, was made chief administrator of the Shoa region. Dr. Tefera Wonde, an associate of Senay Likke in the *WazLig*⁴²⁵, was made Minister of Health. *Meison* member and former student activist Hennock

⁴²³ April 8, 1976 cable; Wikileaks link search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1976AD-DIS04203_b.html.

⁴²⁴ April 8 cable *op. Cit.*

⁴²⁵ See “The Fiction of Various Organizations” in EPRP’s *Abyot*, Vol. 2 No. 4, March 1977: “‘Woz’—written by Ermias Dagne, a chauvinist follower of Senay Likke, Dr. Teferra Wonde (minister of health) and Gililat G. Mariam.”

Kifle was made Minister of Agriculture and Forestry Development.⁴²⁶ But even more significant developments were to come in April.

The Provisional Office for Mass Organizational Affairs (POMOA) was announced on April 21, 1976. According to the *Derg*, POMOA was established “to help... implement revolutionary proclamations, and... help bring about a revolutionary political leadership.”⁴²⁷ The announcement actually marked the formalization of a body that had already been meeting and advising the *Derg* for some months. Informally called “the Politburo,” its formalization was rooted in a call made by the *Derg* on the first anniversary of the September 1974 coup to begin a process of political organization that might lead to the creation of a state-sponsored political party.⁴²⁸ It’s not completely clear if POMOA was created at the direction of the military as a holding pen for its leftist allies or by those leftist allies as a point of entry into the state apparatus, or, most likely, a convenient synthesis of the two competing motivations.

What is clear is that POMOA elevated a whole layer of veterans of the revolutionary student movement to formal membership in the state apparatus, and as a result, *elevated the differences of opinion on the revolutionary left to a confrontation between the state and its military guardians on the one hand and those leftists advocating for popular democracy and appealing to the common people to mobilize against the government on the other*. Just as part of the Ethiopian left had thrown its lot in with the military government, now that government threw in its hopes to legitimize its rule through the creation of a state political party with those leftist allies. It was a marriage of convenience, and it wouldn’t last forever.

A *Derg* publication from POMOA’s waning days claims POMOA was the fruit of a process of organizing revolutionary intellectuals: “Of fifty or more candidates, fifteen who were willing and were thought qualified were constituted as members of POMOA. The Trotskyite

⁴²⁶ Details reported in cable of February 24, 1976; Wikileaks link wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1976ADDIS02277_b.html.

⁴²⁷ *The Roles of POMOA and the Yekatit '66 Political School in the Ethiopian Revolution, 1978*, p. 8.

⁴²⁸ Note Andargetchew Tiruneh, *op. Cit.*, pp. 229–230.

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EPRP was opposed to the establishment of POMOA. These 15 members started their work on January, 1976.”⁴²⁹ *Meison*’s Haile Fida became POMOA’s chairman, and its vice chair was student movement veteran Senay Likke. Other members included *Meison* notables Negede Gobeze, Fikre Merid, Alemu Abebe, Nigist Adane, and Andargachew Assegid. A handful of independent leftists like Eshetu Chole and even at least one rumored undercover EPRP member rounded out the office.⁴³⁰

POMOA was to set up branches around the country and publish a regular and legal journal in Amharic called “*Abyotawit Ityopya*” or “*Revolutionary Ethiopia*.” According to information received by the U.S. Embassy, “Approximately 900 students, said to be the cadre for this office, are currently undergoing indoctrination at Addis University by Dr. Negede Gobeze of the ‘Politburo.’”⁴³¹ POMOA became responsible as well for the *Yekatit* 66 Cadre School, significantly giving *Meison* cadre direct influence over the ideological direction of the next generation of bureaucrats and technocrats. The cadre school was also empowered to oversee sending candidates abroad for political training in the socialist countries, primarily the Soviet Union.

The announcement of POMOA’s formation (initially called the Provisional Office for People’s Organizational affairs) was printed in the public media. Clearly drafted by the now elevated POMOA cadre, it reflects the formal, controlled gradualism that *Meison* was optimistically trying to apply to the revolutionary process from their seats close to the site of power:

The office shall have the following powers and duties: to prepare directives in accordance with which democratic rights can be enforced; to enforce the democratic rights proclamation and interpret its scope; to ensure proper implementation of the National Democratic Revolutionary Program and to prepare and distribute in the various lan-

⁴²⁹ *The Roles of POMOA....op. Cit.*, p. 9.

⁴³⁰ Andargetchew Tiruneh, pp. 229–230.

⁴³¹ April 21, 1976 cable; Wikileaks link search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1976ADDIS04822_b.html.

guages the directives which will aid in the development of the philosophy of Ethiopian Socialism; to aid in creating the necessary conditions for the establishment of the People's Democratic Republic which guarantees the dictatorship of the broad masses; to indicate tactics to change the present bureaucracy to assure efficient work and that revolutionary actions not be obstructed; to operate the political school as the head thereof; to prepare directives, plans, and programs for training cadres to aid in organizing the masses; to study ways to solve transitory economic and social problems; and to hire employees necessary for the performance of its functions.⁴³²

The announcement came with the release of a document that was touted by POMOA and its military sponsors as the defining document of the unfolding revolution. It was the "Programme of the National Democratic Revolution of Ethiopia." Said to have been drafted by Meison leader Haile Fida himself⁴³³, the Programme boldly declares its aim as nothing less than "To completely abolish feudalism, imperialism and bureaucratic capitalism from Ethiopia and with the united effort of all anti-feudal and anti-imperialist forces build a new Ethiopia and lay a strong foundation for the transition to socialism."⁴³⁴ Its lofty goal is the establishment of a people's democratic republic "in which the freedom, equality, unity and prosperity of the Ethiopian peoples is ensured, in which self-government at different levels is exercised and which allows for the unconditional exercise of human and democratic rights."⁴³⁵

Offering much less detail than either the 1975 programs of *Meison* or the EPRP, the Programme is long on vaguely Marxist-Leninist platitudes, includes some goals for national development, economic planning and foreign policy, promises the equality of women, opposes

⁴³² As quoted in US Embassy cable of April 21, 1976; Wikileaks link search. wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1976ADDIS04822_b.html.

⁴³³ See Andargetchew Tiruneh, p. 233.

⁴³⁴ *PROGRAMME of the National Democratic Revolution of Ethiopia*, p. 9.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

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religious sectarianism, and delivers imperatives for the organization of Ethiopia's people into mass organizations and a revolutionary vanguard party, but it is totally absent any specific language about democratic rights. There is no talk of press freedoms, no rights to assemble, no right to strike, no speech guarantees, and certainly no establishment of a legal system. The promises of eventual socialist transformation are left quite vague. There is a guarantee of the right of self determination and self government to national minorities that rings particularly hollow given the actual military situation between the *Derg* and various rebellious nationalities at the time. One official statement on the Programme said, quite tellingly, "It is only the Ethiopian people who can find a solution to the problem in Eritrea."⁴³⁶, further implying that the liberation fronts were just "reactionaries and foreign meddlers."

The calls for anti-imperialism are also somewhat detached from reality because the military government remained dependent on the United States for arms to wage its conflicts, fundamentally continuing imperial practice despite the revolutionary rhetoric.

A lengthy preamble attempts to discuss the class nature of Ethiopian society, identifying in a vaguely ominous way the class forces that might unite (or be excluded) to carry out the national democratic revolution. A clear sign that distinguishes this document as a product of civilian left authorship is the absence of the rationales for military rule that mark later ideological proclamations of the *Derg*: there's nothing here about the "men-in-uniform" or the special mission of the military. All that was to come later, for now POMOA served as ideological cover for the regime. Later when POMOA outlived its usefulness, new ideological claims were to be made by avowed leftists less independent from the military at the center of power, to more directly cement the actual reality of military rule.

Somewhat surprisingly, an official publication of the *Derg* put the programme explicitly in the context of the political and cultural advances prescribed by Mao's "New Democracy." "But now it has become imper-

⁴³⁶ "Explanation Given on New Program," *The Ethiopian Herald*, April 22, 1976.

ative to liquidate the culture of reactionaries and to supplant it with a new proletarian culture which reflects the value of the new democracy. In the words of Chairman Mao, ‘Generally speaking, the culture of the new democracy is the value of the working class which is essentially anti-imperialist and anti-feudal.’ This being so, as in the political field there is also a united front in the cultural arena.”⁴³⁷ One may reasonably infer the pen of a comrade of Haile Fida or Senay Likke behind this citation; later, a Mao-friendly reference from the *Derg* would have been unthinkable.

In discussing the immediate tasks of the Ethiopian people, there is uncharacteristically no specific mention of the opponents of the military regime from either left nor right. In fact, while the preamble condemns a nonspecific front of counter-revolution and imperialism, it calls for a “broad front of revolutionary forces... based on the worker-peasant alliance”⁴³⁸ to carry out the tasks of the programme. The question must be asked was whether this was any kind of opening to advocates of immediate popular democracy like the EPRP.

In fact this very question was asked inside the EPRP.

Subsequent to the POMOA announcements, a meeting of the EPRP’s Central Committee was held at the Addis Ababa residence of Dr. Williams Hastings Morton, a professor at the university and a British member of the party. Here, lines of division inside the Party appeared. According to CC member Kiflu Tadesse⁴³⁹, none other than Berhane Meskel argued that “the EPRP should make a historic compromise and form a front with the Derge.” In opposition to this, Zeru Kehishen argued “that it was wrong and a betrayal of the cause to form a front with a government that had drenched its hands in the people’s blood. Zeru argued that to cooperate with an undemocratic regime was a defeat to democracy itself.”⁴⁴⁰

Kiflu recounts that most CC members were uncomfortable with

⁴³⁷ Provisional Military Administrative Council, *The Ethiopian Revolution Second Anniversary*, 1976, p. 18.

⁴³⁸ *Programme*, op. Cit., p. 5.

⁴³⁹ Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, p. 63.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

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either position. The body adopted a position to call for a united front of anti-feudal and anti-imperialist forces, including the potential to cooperate with the *Derg* should it allow democratic rights, free political prisoners, and cease repression and pull back some of its war effort in Eritrea. However, any overtures from EPRP to POMOA, using provisional agreement with aspects of the PNDRE as good faith, were apparently brushed off by the *Derg* or by POMOA's *Meison* cadre.

In pursuing its inside track to power, *Meison* was making great strides; it's little wonder that they would rebuff overtures from their competition. The network of urban neighborhood associations, or *kebeles*, that had been created by the urban property reforms of 1975, became central to *Meison's* strategy. With the appointment of Daniel Tadesse to the housing ministry, the *kebeles* became part not just of Daniel's portfolio, but of *Meison's* bailiwick. Suddenly *Meison* had an organizational leg up on the opposition, had been delivered a captive audience, and had the beginnings of real power.

Painting the Towns Red

If the EPRP was missing out on the benefits of state recognition by being excluded from POMOA, its open existence as an identifiable party—not just as an underground mimeographed publication—raised its profile and continued to win broad support among urban people, especially among enthusiastic, anti-authoritarian youth. Red banners bearing the hammer-and-sickle logo of EPRP were proudly displayed at mass gatherings, despite the legal precariousness of the situation and the still clandestine nature of party organization.

Keeping Party secrets became part of the excitement for radical youth. Gizachew Tiruneh joined a cell of the EPRP in 1976 when he was 18, in the town of Bichena.

The first thing that a new member of a cell had to do was to read what was known as “the discipline.” By reading and accepting “the discipline,” one was taking an oath of loyalty to the new party. Specifically, a member would give his or her word to never tell anyone, including the police and

other security forces, about the existence of the cell. If the authorities caught a member of the cell, he or she must not admit that he or she worked for the new party. The oath must be kept even if a member was imprisoned and tortured.⁴⁴¹

Party and Youth League activist Hiwot Teffera recalls how young people were mobilized to raise the profile of the EPRP.

The beginning of 1976 saw spurts of [Youth] League activity.... It was time to go on the offensive. “There will be a graffiti and banner hoisting day. Banners with slogans should be hoisted at night on electric poles and walls should be painted with slogans. It is going to take place city wide simultaneously....” Tito [Hiruy] told us at one of the IZ [inter-zonal] meetings in early 1976. He gave us the slogans to be painted.... The next morning, the entire city was submerged in a sea of red with banners hoisted everywhere and walls ornamented with slogans. Addis looked like a carnival city. The graffiti and banners were as much the delight of members as they were the Derg’s nightmare.⁴⁴²

Gizachew participated in the same propaganda effort in his town.

During one of my monthly trips to Debre Markos to meet with the subzonal committee, our secretary passed along a decision made by the party leadership. The leadership thought we needed to show the presence of our party to the people in our districts.... The proposed activities included throwing propaganda pamphlets over the fences of homes, posting slogans and posters on telephone polls and house walls, writing antigovernment slogans on cemented streets, fences and bridges with red ink or paint, and hanging red party banners on telephone wires.... Once I returned to

⁴⁴¹ Gizachew Tiruneh, *On the Run in the Blue Nile*, p. 90.

⁴⁴² Hiwot Teffera, *Tower in the Sky*, pp. 146–147.

Bichena, Misiker and I wrote scores of party slogans on the white sheets. The slogans included, “Down with Fascism!” “EPRP will win!” “Down with Reactionary Scholars!”... The action was to be conducted around 1 a.m. when the people would be asleep. Misiker and I had the task of distributing the red paint, the brushes and party slogans to the other members of the district committee and to the several people who worked in our respective cells.⁴⁴³

Even *The New York Times* noted the EPRP’s campaigns. “When it wants, the People’s Revolutionary Party can cover the city with hammer-and-sickle flags, effigies of Colonel Mengistu and leaflets saying ‘Provisional People’s Government Now’ or ‘The E.D.U. and the fascists are obverse and reverse sides of the same coin.’”⁴⁴⁴

By May Day, the traditional revolutionary celebration of labor and working people, EPRP was ready to intervene in state-sponsored celebrations. Kiflu Tadesse suggests the Derg unwittingly gave the Party a platform for its demands: “When it allowed the celebration of the 1976 May Day, the Derge had envisaged that the people would still support the various measures that it had enacted. However, the support that that military regime had enjoyed a year earlier was fast waning and the May Day celebration reflected the conflict between labor and the regime. Hundreds of thousands of workers took part in the demonstration and major demands of the society were addressed.”⁴⁴⁵ Thousands marched behind EPRP banners.

The Party continued to focus on building up its mass organizations. The Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Youth League (EPRYL) went public in 1976 as a vehicle for youth and student activism and recruitment, always a major successful focus of the Party, rooted as it was in a generation of student radicals. All the young people brought

⁴⁴³ Gizachew Tiruneh, *op. Cit.*, pp. 121–122.

⁴⁴⁴ John Darnton, “War in Addis Ababa’s Streets devouring the Revolution’s Progeny,” *The New York Times*, March 9, 1977 (via www.nytimes.com/1977/03/09/archives/war-in-addis-ababas-streets-devouring-the-revolutions-progeny.html).

⁴⁴⁵ Kiflu Tadesse, *op. Cit.*, p. 24.

to the party through infiltration of the *Zemetcha*, and through its established networks of university and high school students now had their own red banner.

Following the *Derg's* suppression of CELU and attempts to co-opt industry trade unions, late in 1975 EPRP had organized ELAMA, the underground Ethiopian Workers Revolutionary Union to focus its outreach and organizing in the urban working class. In early 1976, ELAMA held its first delegated congress under conditions of clandestinity. According to Kiflu Tadesse, who had been heavily involved in the Party's CELU efforts, "The Congress was held at the residence of Daro Negash, former president of the Berhanena Selam Printing Press Labor Union. Daro Negash, a dedicated woman fighter and a member of the underground organization, was a mother of eight children.... It was attended by about 27 representatives, most of whom were from the Addis Abeba and vicinity factories."⁴⁴⁶

This was a major challenge to the *Derg*, which held as a chief priority the suppression of independent labor organizing as a threat to order and social control. The EPRP upheld the right of workers to strike even against state enterprises: no such guarantees were offered by the *Derg* and its new Programme. While ELAMA actively agitated among workers and issued regular publications, its calls for mass labor action met workers anxious to preserve an independent labor movement but cautious about confronting the repressive state apparatus. A general strike called for the fall proved to be short-lived and ineffective, though the EPRP was certainly increasing its support among the proletarian classes it claimed to represent. POMOA staffed the captive state-controlled labor federation, the All-Ethiopia Trade Union (AETU), with regime supporters including significant numbers of *Meison* cadre.

The growing support for the EPRP was not welcomed by the government. According to EPRP supporters in the modern diaspora,

The EPRP was called "anarchist" and the intellectual allies of the *Derg* called for its decimation. On March 3, 1976,

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 23.

the EPRP issued a public communique exposing the Derg's plan to unleash terror and to massacre EPRP militants and sympathizers. The Derg heightened the repression by sending its most psychopathic and feared Majors, Ali Mussa and Getachew Shibeshi (both perished in 1991), on a killing spree to east, south and the west. From Asbe Teferi to Jimma, the majors went on a rampage killing all and sundry arbitrarily so much so that many of their victims have become immortalized in revolutionary songs and poems. Dozens of EPRP members and sympathizers, innocent people, traders whose wealth was coveted by the Majors were killed brutally. The EPRP did not fire a single shot during all this time.⁴⁴⁷

In a few months the *Derg* adjusted its penal code in an effort to formally criminalize opposition.

[T]he draconian laws were made even more harsh months later by yet another Penal Code amendment (July 1976). The new articles increased the punishment for anyone who distributes “subversive literature” and the death penalty was imposed on anyone “who establishes contact, sympathizes with or assists anti people and anti revolution organizations within or outside the country.”⁴⁴⁸

Based on developments like these, the EPRP undertook one of its most fateful organizational decisions that summer. Sensing the likelihood of major escalations in confrontations with the *Derg*, in July the Party consolidated its Urban Armed Wing (UAW). The EPRP's *Democracia* announced “In order to defend ourselves and resist the counter-revolutionary repression, and to give a lesson to those who still think that they can live in peace after arresting and executing people, to arouse and show the people that it is possible and probable to struggle til vic-

⁴⁴⁷ ESPIC, “The Truth About the EPRP,” 2006, Washington, D.C. (PDF).

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

tory, we have formed the urban defense squads.”⁴⁴⁹ UAW was charged with preparing Party members for urban armed conflict through training and political education. It also was charged with acquiring arms, and with raising money for the Party through violent expropriations such as bank robberies.

While the Party had already established the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Army (EPRA) in rural areas of northern Tigray province close to the areas of Eritrea where the liberation fronts were active, the EPRP’s rural guerrilla efforts remained largely embryonic. There is a suggestion that at this beginning stage, EPRP told its rural EPRA units to avoid confrontation with the government until the moment was ripe. But the urban areas were about to become a battlefield, and by December, violence was such an integral part of the EPRP’s existence that UAW was dissolved and responsibilities for local military operations were incorporated into the priorities of local Party leadership.⁴⁵⁰

One veteran activist who joined the Party in 1976 remembered, “The revolutionary party had mobilised the bulk of the urban population in opposition to the fascist Junta at unheard of speeds in previous history.... [But] the Party was already under attack and lacked the political and organisational space to explain its strategy and tactics to the public of its members and supporters.”⁴⁵¹ While the EPRP’s politics had always embraced the concept of armed struggle, the ways violence would actually manifest in its political work would prove to be far more complicated than political abstraction had anticipated.

The *Derg’s* continuing war against the liberation movements in Eritrea was at best, from the *Derg’s* point of view, stagnating. At worst, the liberation fronts were gradually holding more and more territory, surrounding Eritrea’s major towns. The *Derg* issued a comprehensive statement on the Eritrean conflict in May 1976, certainly in part to combat the widespread support for the Eritrean rebels in progressive international circles. It begins,

⁴⁴⁹ Quoted in Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, p. 149.

⁴⁵⁰ Kiflu Tadesse, *op. Cit.*, p. 152.

⁴⁵¹ Worku Lakew, *Revolution, Love and Growing Up*, pp. 159–160.

For over thirteen years a foreign inspired secessionist attempt has challenged the historic unity of the people of Ethiopia and the integrity of their land. Despite the sectarian beginning of this movement, for the greater part of this period, this disparate movement has succeeded to give the appearance that it is seeking secession to liberate Eritreans from the clutches of feudalism.... But those, who, with the instigation of outside forces, are bent on pursuing the illusory objective of secessionism will find no comfort in [our] policies. By restoring and institutionalizing the basic rights of the Ethiopian people, their Eritrean countrymen included, this policy statement will unmask the secessionist elements for what they are: a group of dissidents who want to sell the interests of the Eritrean people to the highest bidder while making much noise about their rights.⁴⁵²

The statement feigns sympathy for those who joined the rebels. "While one could understand and even admire the idealism of some of the young people who chose the revolutionary path of action, it was clear from the outset that their idealism was misplaced and that for that reason it would be misused." Now that the imperial regime is gone, "There is no need for such a base [for revolutionary action] when revolutionary forces are effecting changes in the whole of Ethiopia."⁴⁵³

After citing as evidence for its commitment to resolving the situation in Eritrea peaceful its demand that the Eritreans lay down their arms, the statement concludes with a threat: "The Provisional Military Government has the responsibility and duty to defend the revolutionary gains of the Ethiopian people from reactionary forces and to crush those who are inimical to the unity of the working masses and the Ethiopian Revolution."⁴⁵⁴ That threat of continued military action was the true face of *Derg* policy toward Eritrea.

The *Derg* attempted to enlist mass support for its war by mobi-

⁴⁵² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Eritrea Then and Now*, May 1976, pp. 1–2.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

lizing a mass peasant militia to march on the Eritrean liberated zones. Taking dubious inspiration from the recent Moroccan “Green March” which mobilized poor settlers to offset an indigenous independence movement by seizing territory in the Western Sahara being evacuated by Spanish colonialists, the “peasant march,” or Operation *Raza*, as it was dubbed, turned into a rout as poorly armed, trained and organized peasants with little skin in the Eritrean game were quickly turned back by the Eritrean liberation fighters. The defeat stung the *Derg* and its allies.

The EPRP, for its part, stepped up its condemnations of *Derg* policy. A 1976 Party statement reads,

The futility of the junta’s war is not lost on anyone. But this does not decrease the need for us all to oppose it firmly and to express active solidarity with the Eritrean masses. The EPRP has been declaring consistently that the Eritrean question can be settled only in a peaceful and democratic manner, by fully recognising the rights of the Eritrean masses to decide their destiny, by stopping the war and negotiating with the liberation fronts.⁴⁵⁵

The Party’s *Democracia* addressed residents of the borderlands with Eritrea:

PEOPLE OF NORTHERN ETHIOPIA! To hinder the revolution, they have tried to weaken your associations. They have forced the Zemacha to desert you. They have opposed your attempts to disarm by sending troops to kill you. They are training an army called “Nebelbal” by Israelis. All these steps are still not enough. They are even instigating you to fight your own Eritrean brothers. Take care and do not be deceived by the fascists. As they had you fight the Eritrean people, they will send others to fight you when you proceed with your revolution. They will make Christians

⁴⁵⁵ EPRP, “Eritrea: Junta’s Futile War,” *Abyot*, Vol. 1, No. 2, January 30, 1976.

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fight Moslems, Northerners fight Southerners, etc. You must realize that “Tomorrow it will be me”. Proletariats, Students, Zemechas, Teachers, and Progressives—wherever you are. Expose the attempts of the fascists to revise the revolution. The differences between the Eritrean and the Ethiopian people is not *primary*. The solution to the Eritrean problem is Democracy.⁴⁵⁶

It is notable that that this statement omits any specific expression of support for the Eritrean fronts or the idea of secession.

Danger Signs

Throughout 1976 the *Derg* continued to respond to the opposition's actions with violence. In April, the military opened fire on leftist demonstrations. Ever watchful, the U.S. embassy noted,

Embassy has reason to believe these demonstrations were primarily stimulated by EPRP/Democracia (Marxist) opposition faction to leftists (Voice of the People/”Politbu-ro”) faction supporting Mengistu and Dirg element closest to him.... The bulk of the demonstrators were youths they carried signs reading “Hang Mengistu.” But all of them were not that extreme.... Military opened fire on demonstrators at Arat Kilo. Eyewitness claims troops used machine gun and carbines.... Radio Ethiopia broadcast sharp warning to Addis populace: Unauthorized demonstrations would not be tolerated and would be suppressed by whatever means necessary.⁴⁵⁷

The *New York Times* took note of the deepening conflict between the *Derg* and the EPRP in the context of broader social unrest. It interviewed refugees in Nairobi:

⁴⁵⁶ “The Fascist Declaration—To Massacre the People,” *Democracia* “Special Issue” from Feb. or Mar. 1976.

⁴⁵⁷ April 22, 1976 cable; Wikileaks link www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1976AD-DIS04882_b.html.

The refugees, mostly university students who fled what they described as harassment and repression by the military, rulers, say that the execution of some persons charged with the hoarding of red pepper underscores the council's inability to arrange effective food distribution to the urban centers despite one of the most bountiful crops in Ethiopian history. Peasants in such fiercely independent regions as Gojam are reportedly refusing to harvest fields except for their own needs as a way of protest against what they view as Government interference with traditional cultural and religious practices. The refugees say that in the last three months an underground group, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party has managed through unions and commercial organizations to get control over the sale and distribution of red pepper, a key ingredient in the preparation of the Ethiopian national dish, *wat* and *njeri*, a spicy, curry-like stew. The refugees say that the clandestine party had organized the distribution of pepper to villages but had withheld it from the army. They believe that the announced executions of the hoarders was a council attempt to quash the protest.⁴⁵⁸

The most ominous news of the summer was the government's announcement of a wave of executions, including one of its own high-ranking members, Major Sisaye Habte. The EPRP's *Abyot* reported the details: "On July 13, the military regime announced that it has executed '19' persons. Among the executed figured Major Sisaye, Derg member and chief of the Political and Foreign Affairs commission, General Getachew Nadew, military governor of Eritrea, seven individuals accused of 'economic sabotage', seven others accused of 'leading the country into a bloodbath' (actually a junta monopoly!), two of taking 'bribes' and one for 'selling state secrets.'"⁴⁵⁹ Those executed ran the

⁴⁵⁸ Michael T. Kaufman, "Ethiopian Regime Puts 18 to Death, Charges Plotting," *New York Times*, July 14, 1976.

⁴⁵⁹ EPRP, "The Reasons for the Executions of '19' Persons" from *Abyot*, Vol. 1,

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spectrum from members and supporters of the government, to bourgeois speculators, to members of the EPRP. The EPRP members executed along with the others that July were not the first EPRP members to be killed by the *Derg*, and they certainly wouldn't be the last. As usual, the *Derg* did its best to lump all its opponents together, obscuring differences from left to right.

The U.S. embassy puzzled over the executions.

Circumstances surrounding executions are still unclear and may remain so) including reasons why Derg chose execution route rather than less drastic measures. Move occurred against backdrop of frustration over internal policy failures including disastrous outcome of "Operation Raza" (Peasant March), problems within Air Force and airborne, reported demands by Second and Third Divisions for a return to civilian rule and peaceful settlement of Eritrea problem, lack of progress on Eritrean negotiations, severe inflation and shortage of some important food commodities in urban markets, and increased domestic opposition from the clandestine Marxist group, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP).⁴⁶⁰

The embassy went on to speculate that that inter-ethnic tensions were one of the underlying causes, citing Mengistu's *Derg* faction as being predominately Oromo, while Major Sisaye and many of the others were northerners.

Interestingly the memo hints at deeper political intrigue involving the *Derg's* leftist allies: "Both Sisay and Kiros (among others) were fingered by the underground pamphlet 'Shimut' six months ago. Since this flyer is almost certainly a 'black propaganda' effort by the 'Politburo' ideologues, Sisay and Kiros may have been viewed as ideologically unacceptable for some time."⁴⁶¹

No. 6, August 1976, p. 2.

⁴⁶⁰ July 23, 1976 cable; Wikileaks link www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1976AD-DIS08773_b.html.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid.

Ironically, the EPRP suggested that Sisaye was eliminated in part because he represented a pro-American element inside the ruling *Derg*. “There is no doubt that Major Sisaye was a trusted man of the Americans. When Kissinger visited Kenya, Sisaye talked to him for three hours in the Nairobi Continental Hotel. No doubt they must have discussed the chronic instability of the Derg. America, which plays a double game of fully supporting the Derg and also trying to stabilise it via a coup from within it was no doubt sympathetic to the Major.”⁴⁶²

But looking deeper at the situation, the EPRP suggested that the execution of Major Sisaye was a marker for the ascendancy of the alliance between Mengistu, still nominally a junior member of the PMAC, and the leftists now organized in POMOA.

The execution of Sisaye manifests the instability that grips the Derg at such a high level of its power-holders. Though Sisaye, a well-known rightist, was rumored many times to be in the process of preparing a coup d’etat, it seems unlikely that he actually attempted one as the Derg wants to make us believe. Sisaye’s fate was sealed when he came out in open (in a latest Derg meeting) and uncompromising opposition to the alliance between Major Mengistu (chief of the Derg) and the Haile Fida led intellectuals grouped around the “All-Ethiopian Socialist Movement,” a reformist outfit. Thanks to the backing of Major Mengistu, the Haile Fida clique not only started a purge within the military and the bureaucracy but was filling these vacant posts with its own loyal people. As ministers, political commissars, directors, executives of the powerful “Peoples’ Organizing Office”, the Haile Fidas were becoming a threat to Sisaye and his group. Their Peoples’ Organizing Office was making his political commission powerless. They were sending his elements within the Derg to foreign countries on the flimsy pretext of “political education courses” (Sisaye’s assistant, lieutenant

⁴⁶² EPRP, “The Reasons for the Executions of ‘19’ Persons” from *Abyot*, Vol. 1, No. 6, August 1976.

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Bewketu Kassa, refused to go to Moscow for such an education and is now in hiding). Major Kiros, member of the Derg and reactionary head of the “zemetcha” (campaign of students to teach in the rural areas), was also opposed to the Haile Fida group.... All in all then, Sisaye’s elimination is a victory for the Haile Fida group who have utilised the occasion to continue the purge of all the elements opposed to them. Within the Derg itself, the contradictions sharpen and become concretised.⁴⁶³

This view is corroborated by then-government-insider Dawit Shifaw, who saw the executions as part of a significant polarization within the *Derg*.

With the elimination of Sisay Habte, two diametrically opposing forces were established in the Provisional Military Administrative Council. One group was led by Mengistu and supported by civilian communist party bosses including Haile Fida, Negede Gobeze and Fikre Merid of Maeson, and Senay Likke of the Worker’s League. The second group was led by Alemayahu Haile of Addis Ababa police, backed by students, teachers, and workers controlled by the EPRP. Although the difference between EPRP and Maeson was obvious to the public, the difference between Mengistu and Alemayahu was not much known except by the top leadership.⁴⁶⁴

The EPRP saw the factional struggle inside the *Derg* as a potentially fatal weakness, and the Party resolved to continue to focus on its goals, regardless of how the factional struggle resolved itself. Again from *Abyot*,

The mounting repression against the masses show that the Derg’s so-called programme has failed, it means that its alli-

⁴⁶³ “The Reasons for the Executions of ‘19’ Persons” *op. Cit.*

⁴⁶⁴ Dawit Shifaw, *Diary of Terror*, p. 41.

ance with the traitorous intellectuals led by Haile Fida has not brought it any solace. It means that we shall witness more executions in the near future as a result of the internal power struggle of the Derg. Unlike the reformists, we do not have worries or nightmares speculating as to whether it will be the body of Major Mengistu or that of Colonel Atanfu that will be riddled with bullets. We shall continue the struggle against the whole fascist batch and imperialism. If we have anything to add to this it is to caution the progressive world about the practice of the junta of killing known reactionaries together with revolutionaries and labelling the whole of them as “counter revolutionaries.”⁴⁶⁵

In the two short years of their unrequested stewardship over Ethiopia's revolution, the military officers in the *Derg* had shown a remarkable predilection for using terminal violence as a means of addressing knotty social problems, confronting unruly dissidence, and solving its own organizational problems, all the while continuing the military agenda of their royal predecessors against a growing chorus of national liberation movements on the borders of the former empire. By the September anniversary of the PMAC seizure of power, it was clear that the beginnings of a personality cult around the three members of the junta was being cultivated.⁴⁶⁶ In this revolutionary world, the political and sectarian squabbles of the Ethiopian Student Movement had shed all abstraction; these arguments were now lived out in the streets of Ethiopia's cities and towns. It was becoming a new—and incredibly dangerous—reality.

In August, the EPRP raised a warning that its former *political* opponents like Haile Fida, now elevated to the state apparatus via POMOA and various ministries, were well-positioned to do serious material damage in their now state-sanctioned roles. From *Abyot*: “Thanks to the

⁴⁶⁵ “The Reasons for the Executions of ‘19’ Persons,” *op. Cit.*

⁴⁶⁶ Compare how the PMAC portrays itself in the PMAC pamphlets entitled *The Ethiopian Revolution First Anniversary of the Ethiopian Revolution* (1975) and *The Ethiopian Revolution Second Anniversary* (1976); the PMAC's pamphlet for the fourth anniversary in 1978 was simply a speech by Mengistu.

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despicable police work being done by the traitors led by Haile Fida, the Derg is moving in a brutally energetic manner against the revolutionary elements. It has concluded, just like the reformists, that without the destruction of the EPRP it cannot have peace and stability. Hence, the intensified drive to 'break the EPRP.'"⁴⁶⁷

Threat of violence or no, the opposition continued to grow, including among rank-and-file soldiers, and advice to the *Derg* on how to deal with this growth flowed from those who had been opponents of the EPRP long before either the Party or the *Derg* existed. For instance, despite press controls, open discussion forums in state-controlled media continued to challenge POMOA hegemony over the country's political discussion, so, according to EPRP insider Babile Tola, "Senay Likke of WazLig was able to convince Mengistu that the forum should be curtailed as the EPRP was benefitting from it."⁴⁶⁸

EPRP and *Meison* members had been together in the ESM for years. But now *Meison* was ensconced in an increasingly repressive government. The abstractions in their respective programs and forms of approach suddenly confronted reality, and the judgment of EPRP on *Meison* was harsh. From *Abyot*:

Meisone spearheaded the ferocious vilification campaign against the EPRP and labelled the EPRP as an "enemy organisation that must be destroyed by force immediately." Kebede Mengesha, Chairman of the Addis Ababa POMOA and Central Committee chairman of Meisone was the first to propose the carrying out of house to house searches in Addis Ababa. His proposal presented to the Derg in a written form were later applied causing the loss of so many lives amidst the people. Long before the Derg declared total war against the EPRP (September 1976), the Central Committee of Meisone gathered to vote death sentence on a list of EPRP members and sympathisers. The list was forwarded

⁴⁶⁷ EPRP, "Repression Against the Popular Masses Intensified by the Junta," in *Abyot*, Vol. 1, No. 6, August 1976, p. 14.

⁴⁶⁸ Babile Tola, *To Kill a Generation*, p. 73.

to the Derg and served as the first base for the massive man-hunt carried in Addis Ababa and other places.... Meisone was not a group within the camp of the revolution. It had slipped from reformism into outright crime against the people. Meisone members were killers, informers, anti-people vermins.⁴⁶⁹

For its part, *Meison* disdained the EPRP and blamed it for initiating violence. A 1977 statement reads, “When it became clear that this ‘party’, which pretended to be a working-class party, was nothing more than a grouping of philistine petty-bourgeois, EPRP started a campaign of beatings and stabbings against workers and youth who opposed its bankrupt line. Our organization foresaw in July 1976 that the EPRP would certainly go over to terrorism, to assassinations.”⁴⁷⁰

But late in 1976, when the open discussion forums were silenced, the barely civil discourse between different left factions ceased. The conversation was about to change from ink and paper to steel and lead.

Into the Breach

On September 11, 1976, New Year’s Day by the Ethiopian calendar and the second anniversary of the military’s seizure of power, the *Derg* declared war on the EPRP.⁴⁷¹

As summarized by historian Andargetchew Tiruneh:

A lengthy article written in the official daily (*Addis Zemen*) in early September referred to EPRP by name for the first time, and argued that it was not the workers’ vanguard par-

⁴⁶⁹ EPRP, “Meisone’s ‘New’ Tunes from Beyond the Grave,” *Abyot*, February/March 1978.

⁴⁷⁰ Me’isone, “Meisone in the Ethiopian Revolution,” *The Voice of the People*, No. 1, May 1977, p. 8; lest one confuse this statement for prescience, note that it dates from a period months later, after events on the ground had qualitatively and quantitatively evolved.

⁴⁷¹ This “declaration of war” is the locus of historical controversy, along the lines of relevant inquiry into which side bears responsibility for the escalation of conflict. This author finds the arguments of Kiflu Tadesse in *The Generation, Volume II*, quite convincing. See chapter 4, pages 129 and following.

ty but that in reality it was an anarchist organisation since it had destroyed property and since it had instigated workers to go on strike.⁴⁷²

Babile Tola remembers,

[T]he military government officially broadcast a statement designating the EPRP by name as public enemy number one. The statement piled on the EPRP accusations from the outrageous to the ridiculous. The fall in agricultural production, the rotting of crops, peasant rebellions, increase in commodity prices, lack of spare parts, machinery breakdowns in factories, the worsening of the living standard of workers, strikes by workers, students and teachers, demonstrations, alleged refusal by European dock workers to load relief supplies destined for Ethiopia, the spread of prostitution and a host of other problems were presented as the works of the EPRP.⁴⁷³

The bottom line of the government's declaration was simple and deadly for the EPRP. "The decree of the war of annihilation allowed that any EPRP member would be executed on sight."⁴⁷⁴

In a perfect illustration of the strange political moment, at a rally to mark the second anniversary of "*Ityopia Tikdem*," Derg chairman General Teferi Bente took a moment to note the recent passing of Mao Zedong. "Although the death of Chairman Mao has deprived the revolutionary peoples of the world of his physical presence, they remain fortified by the knowledge that the legacy of the revolutionary achievements and thoughts that he left behind will be with them forever. The Ethiopian people will draw instructive lessons from the lifelong struggle of Chairman Mao."⁴⁷⁵ Participants at the rally apparently "held aloft

⁴⁷² Andargetchew Tiruneh, *op. Cit.*, p. 258.

⁴⁷³ Babile Tola, *op. Cit.*, pp. 67–68.

⁴⁷⁴ Kiflu Tadesse, *Part II. op. Cit.*, p. 130.

⁴⁷⁵ Quoted in *Peking Review*, "Memorial Meetings Held in Many Countries to Mourn Chinese People's Great Leader Chairman Mao," Vol. 19, No. 42; October

portraits of Chairman Mao Tsetung bordered with black crepe.”⁴⁷⁶ A year later, this kind of sentiment from the *Derg* would be unthinkable.

POMOA, through its *Meison* and *WazLig* cadre, created lists of known EPRP supporters and shared them with Mengistu’s allies in various repressive state agencies. Activists arrested over the summer, including hundreds of youth, now faced execution in prison. In the next few months, hundreds were in fact executed, many of these announced publicly but many many more carried out in secret at *Derg* prisons where application of formal laws was entirely arbitrary. EPRP leader Kiflu Tadesse watched this happen:

The most vulnerable were those who had been imprisoned earlier.... Following the declaration of the war of annihilation, thousands more of EPRP members and supporters were thrown into prisons.... Protest demonstrations made in opposition to the declaration of the war of annihilation were the pretexts for massive arrests. The alleged crimes of some of the youth were the paintings of slogans found on walls.⁴⁷⁷

On at least one occasion, the Party acquired copies of those secret government lists of EPRP supporters marked for capture and execution. One list contained the names of dozens of labor activists including former CELU leaders like Markos Hagos. The Party urged everyone found to be on such lists to immediately go underground.⁴⁷⁸

It was a real turning point, as the scale of the repression that had been a regular and defining feature of military rule since 1974 intensified. According to Babile Tola,

What changed in September 1976 was thus not the nature of the *Derg*. Only the degree of terror, the content of the repression assumed new features... from the *Derg* takeover

15, 1976; p. 41.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁷ Kiflu Tadesse, *op. Cit.*, p. 135.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 144.

day up to September 1976, there was repression and terror in Ethiopia. Small in comparison to what was to come afterwards, but terror nonetheless. This is the brutal fact which the Derg and all its apologists try to gloss over in their attempt to accuse the opposition for resorting to self-defense after September 1976.⁴⁷⁹

The EPRP had long envisioned the struggle for people's power in Ethiopia as ultimately an armed struggle. Although a fight against a military regime claiming its own mantle of "Ethiopian socialism" was not the armed struggle first envisioned by the ESM when it chanted "Today Vietnam, Tomorrow Ethiopia" back in the 1960s, the Party leadership assessed the moment and decided the time had come to fight back. For the EPRP, *the declaration of the war of annihilation became the specific form through which the transition from the peaceful to the violent form of struggle took shape.*⁴⁸⁰

Double Fighter/Dereb Tagaywa, the publication of the EPRP mass organization the Ethiopian Women's Organization marked the turn to active armed struggle:

The struggle of the oppressed Ethiopian masses has reached this higher stage. The struggle of oppressed Ethiopian women, being part and parcel of the struggle of the oppressed Ethiopia masses has also reached a new stage. The oppressed have a means of struggle tested through history, one which is just, unflinching and sure to break not only the spirit of the enemy, but also its very backbone—armed struggle!⁴⁸¹

On September 23, a squad from the EPRP's Urban Defense Wing attempted an assassination of Major Mengistu Haile Mariam, the vice chairman of the PMAC, widely believed to be the *Derg* member most responsible for the move to annihilate the EPRP. But the attack failed.

⁴⁷⁹ Babile Tola, *op. Cit.*, pp. 48–49.

⁴⁸⁰ Kiflu Tadesse, *op. Cit.*, p. 132.

⁴⁸¹ Quoted in WWFES, *Forward*, No. 5, March 1977.

Kiflu Tadesse was a member of the EPRP CC that authorized the attack:

By the time those who were following Mengistu reached him and opened fire, his vehicle was close to the gate of the Fourth Division. His driver maneuvered and speeded up and Mengistu ducked under his seat. He was able to survive with only a minor wound. According to Captain Moges Wolde Mikael, when Mengistu came out of his vehicle, he was in terrible shape and in shock, hiding under the seat and his pistol lying on the floor.⁴⁸²

POMOA responded by hastily organizing rallies to attempt to tie the EPRP to foreign agents and to the reactionary aristocratic opposition EDU. Picket signs in English lambasted the Party, with such word-play slogans as “Down with Ethiopian Princes Restoration Party” and “Death to DemocraCIA.” The wave of arrests and executions escalated.

Dawit Shifaw, a supporter of the Derg at the time, witnessed some of the violence of the week after the attack on Mengistu.

The day that followed the assassination attempt, the city of Addis Ababa was paralyzed by a student demonstration, which demanded the downfall of the Derg and its “fascist leaders.” This was directed against Mengistu and his supporters in the council. In the rally, they destroyed public property wherever they went by throwing rocks. I was riding a bus that day, which was attacked by a demonstrating mob and was totally destroyed. Many people were injured, but there was no fatality on that bus. This was a troubling moment for Mengistu. He realized that some of the council members were not helping him to suppress the disturbance.⁴⁸³

EPRP escalated its armed resistance on October 1 with another targeted assassination, this one successful, against Dr. Fikre Merid, a

⁴⁸² Kiflu Tadesse, *op. Cit.*, p. 155.

⁴⁸³ Dawit Shifaw, *op. Cit.*, pp. 43–44.

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veteran of the ESM and an apparently popular university lecturer, but also a member of POMOA and the Central Committee of *Meison*. Several members of the EPRP UAW squad who hit Fikre were captured and executed, including one who was a returned ESM activist from ESUNA in Washington, DC.⁴⁸⁴ For the EPRP, it was a desperate act of self-defense. For *Meison*, it was demonstrable proof of EPRP's terrorism.

The US Embassy took notice of the events at the end of September with some concern. In a cable home to Washington dated October 8, 1976 the embassy attempted to compile statistics on the resultant casualties:

Public media campaign which PMAC began Sept 13 and 14 against EPRP, EDU and other "anarchist" elements who oppose government... has resulted in arrests of many suspected members and sympathizers of these groups. During week of Sept 20–25, dissidents responded by encouraging strikes and demonstrations... and attempting to assassinate Major Mengistu... Although it difficult to assess accurately exact number of arrests and deaths during week, embassy believes 100–200 students, 100–150 workers/strikers and perhaps another 300 suspected EPRP members were arrested. Reliable source stated figure had reached nearly 600 by Oct 3. He added Dirg running out of space for more prisoners and speculated there would be a prisoner release in early November after overall trade unions had been formed. Additionally, at least 20 and perhaps as many as 50 persons were killed Sept 22–23 as a result of strikes, demonstra-

⁴⁸⁴ *Meison* supporters in the USA somewhat gleefully suggested EPRP members were getting what they deserved for their original sins revealed during student factionalism days. See for instance in UPESUNA's *Unity and Struggle*: "another clear case was the so-called 'self-criticism session' in the Washington Chapter of ESUNA/Federation back in 1974 when in inter-clique struggles of the leadership such notorious focoists as Yitbarek Hizki (a juvenile delinquent who was recently executed in Ethiopia for engaging in the terrorist killing of the late comrade Fikre Merid) were 'derided' for their 'outspoken' focoist proclivities." (Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 13)

tions, and stoning of buses. Following assassination attempt on Maj Mengistu, evening of 23rd, it is believed number of those arrested were executed. One source estimates 600 persons were executed, although embassy feels lower figure of 100–150 confirmed by source who has access to Dirg members more accurate. Evening of Sept 24 two separate sources confirm that seven people were killed and another 10 or 11 wounded in the Enderasse Hotel. Hotel guests were asked to come to lobby with their papers, after which Eritrean and Tigre guests were shot.⁴⁸⁵

The cable went on to discuss the significance of the Fikre assassination:

Apparent calm and business-as-usual during week of Sept 26–Oct 1 was broken by assassination of Dr. Fikre Merid... an influential member of the Dirg's Politbureau, and the closing of the commercial school. The murder appeared to be well-planned and one source reported it was at least the third attempt on his life. Second source states Fikre moderating influence within Dirg and provided much of its intellectual direction, much more than Haile Fida. This was against the background of more arrests of students and suspected EPRP members, and one eyewitness report from Ethiopian who located his student son after digging through piles of as many as 100 bodies, most of them student age, at Menelik Hospital.⁴⁸⁶

A common narrative of post-revolutionary Ethiopian history is that the EPRP initiated the violence that ultimately consumed its urban strength and leadership and therefore bears the brunt of responsibility for the bloodletting that was to follow. While the Party might be accused of temporarily escalating the violence, or of unwisely pursu-

⁴⁸⁵ Oct. 8, 1976 cable; Wikileaks link: www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1976ADDIS08773_b.html.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid.

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ing an un-winnable urban guerrilla strategy, or of inadequate political preparation and agitation for its turn, the actual factual chronology shows that the EPRP's actions were absolutely *in response* to the *Derg's* consistent use of brute force to inflict its will, and to being systematically targeted for elimination. The already extant pattern of lethal force is clearly laid at the foot of the *Derg*, not the EPRP. The political assassinations had actually commenced back in November 1974 when the *Derg* executed dozens of officials from the previous governments and the ranks of the nobility, adding in a few of its own members for good measure. Even setting aside the ongoing military campaigns in Eritrea and against various localized peasant and national minority uprisings that continued to background the first few years of the revolution, the military regime showed a commitment to the utility of violence.

This reliance by the *Derg* on repression to remove obstacles in its path really suggests that a serious confrontation with the opposition was inevitable, and in the event, even those leftists who thought the way to further the revolution was to cooperate with the military regime would mostly come to be rewarded with the same brutality shown to the EPRP. Had the Party not engaged in acts which certainly looked a lot like a highly targeted kind of terrorism, it might have had more time to politically prepare its ranks for what was coming, but it doesn't seem very likely that it would have avoided an eventual crackdown.

The EPRP claimed its Urban Armed Wing was acting in self-defense. Babile Tola states it about as clearly as can be. "It is apparent that the *Derg* cannot involve self-defense arguments to justify its killings, while the EPRP can in all fairness. In fact, the political bureau of the EPRP issued its policy statement (entitled 'The *Derg* Has Declared War On Us') on the need to resort to 'urban armed self-defense' in October."⁴⁸⁷

Kiflu Tadesse, an EPRP CC member at the time, affirms that the EPRP chose only targets who had betrayed oppositionists to the military. He denies that EPRP's intention was to "exterminate" *Meison* in the same way that *Meison* was wielding the state apparatus to extermi-

⁴⁸⁷ Babile Tola, *op. Cit.*, p. 71.

nate the EPRP.⁴⁸⁸ An article in the underground publication *Democracia* spelled out the EPRP's rationale for choosing targets.

We are not interested in taking measures against anyone who has differing or even opposed view from us.... We will take measures against those individuals whose duty is to compile and forward the list of names or progressives for execution. Those individuals who sniff around and expose progressives, those who, for their own personal ends go beyond the call of duty and present names of suspected EPRP members for the inhuman measures of the fascists.⁴⁸⁹

EPRP's hit squads, operating out of clandestinity, did indeed target numerous cadres and bureaucrats of *Meison*, POMOA and the *Derg*. The EPRP's turn to violent direct action and retaliation must be viewed in the context of a time when the government itself acted in a way remarkably free of any pretense of legal due process. Long-term political prisoners who were not executed eventually reported being held for years without trial or even clear charges: investigations were repetitive and vindictive, clear verdicts other than a sudden order to an execution wall were rare.⁴⁹⁰ During the neighborhood sweeps that were to become a trademark of the following year's "red terror," the simple proximity to an opposition publication or banner meant summary execution for many. Punishment under the *Derg* was brutal but also often arbitrary.

The EPRP's urban assassination campaign was brutal too, there can be little doubt. A later *Abyot* article expressed no remorse for retribution against members of *Meison*. "As such, they have been subjected to the wrath of the people and have paid for some of their crimes."⁴⁹¹

⁴⁸⁸ See accumulated evidence in Chapter 4 of Kiflu's *The Generation Part II*.

⁴⁸⁹ *Democracia*, Vol. III, No. 11, as quoted in Kiflu Tadesse, *op. Cit.*, p. 140.

⁴⁹⁰ See Taffara Deguefé's two memoirs and that of Hiwot Teffera. Memoirist Taffara was a government banker and holdover from the *ancien régime* held for a decade behind bars but never accused of anything specific; Youth League cadre Hiwot eventually spent years in prison but a best friend was executed merely for possessing a copy of *Democracia*; see p. 185 of *Tower in the Sky*.

⁴⁹¹ EPRP, "Meisone's 'New' Tunes from Beyond the Grave," *Abyot*, February/March 1978.

Dawit Shifaw remembers one such dramatic hit:

In the month of October 1976, a Maeson activist was sitting in a bar near Tayitu Hotel. Suddenly an EPRP assassin approached and pumped his handgun into his chest. The victim also drew his gun and blasted at his assailant. They both collapsed. Assassination such as this in public places increased fear even if one didn't participate in political activities. And for those who had been involved in politics, the fear was even higher. The EPRP snuck into every corner where the Maeson cadres were active and caused damage.⁴⁹²

While EPRP seemed far from organizing any full-scale urban uprising against the *Derg*, urban areas were approaching something like a state of civil war. *Meison* responded by taking advantage of its presence in government to significantly militarize its own power, and it did this through its influence over the system of urban *kebeles*, influence legally achieved through that appointment of *Meison* CC member Daniel Tadesse to the housing ministry in the spring.

The power in the *kebeles* was not just in their strategic proximity between government and people. By the end of the year they became sites of civil and military authority. *Meison* member Abera Yemane-Ab describes their evolution: "A second proclamation issued in October 1976, however, dramatically changed the situation. This second proclamation gave Kebeles extensive powers: administrative, judicial and economic as well as the assumption of municipal functions. More and more, the Kebeles functioned as autonomous, self-administering units with very loose control from the central government."⁴⁹³

The *kebeles* were becoming instruments of transfer of state power to *Meison*, and through the months of 1976 that power began to consolidate. Babile Tole explains,

⁴⁹² Dawit Shifaw, *op. Cit.*, p. 45.

⁴⁹³ Abera Yemane-Ab, "The Defeat of the Ethiopian Revolution," p. 17.

The kebelles, or urban dweller's associations, were formed to stem the demand for local self-administration, a popular slogan of the radical opposition. However, it was not long before these associations turned into repressive organs. Elections of kebele leaders were caricatures of free elections; regular purges were undertaken to cleanse the kebelles of "EPRP elements". By the time the anti-EPRP war got declared, the 294 kebelles in Addis Abeba were in their majority controlled by Mengistu and Meisone. The 294 kebelles were organized in 25 Higher Urban Associations called keftegnas. The highest body, which is the Association's Central Committee, "elects" the Mayor from within itself and it is thus that Dr. Alemu Abebe, the man who played a central role in the planning and execution of the "Red Terror" and was at the time a central committee member of Meisone, became the mayor of Addis Abeba.⁴⁹⁴

The October proclamation armed the *kebeles*, creating localized militias called *Abyot Tebeka*, or revolutionary guards. Kiflu Tadesse details the significance of this development: "The creation of the *Abyot Tebeka* signified the transformation of POMOA, and in particular the MEISON, into organizations that could lead and control urban paramilitary contingents. Initially, POMOA was responsible only for the political and organizational activities of the state."⁴⁹⁵ The *Abyot Tebeka* thus became the vehicle for organizing the vast lumpen proletariat of urban areas, newcomers to the cities, poor people without constructive class self interest who soon developed a symbiotic relationship with the military regime, serving as a bottomless pool for recruits to its repressive agendas. As the government official responsible for the *kebeles*, this meant that Meison's Daniel Tadesse was now also responsible for arming them; the *Abyot Tebeka* reported ultimately to him⁴⁹⁶, in close concert with Mengistu's henchmen in state security, the brothers Legesse and

⁴⁹⁴ Babile Tola, *op. Cit.*, p. 77.

⁴⁹⁵ Kiflu Tadesse, *op. Cit.*, p. 111.

⁴⁹⁶ Kiflu Tadesse, *op. Cit.*, p. 240.

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Daniel Asfaw.

Kiflu continues,

The *Abyot Tebeka* not only became one of the deadliest institutions against the opposition, but also an omnipotent force controlling the lives of the residents of the kebeles. On the pretext of “safeguarding the revolution,” a member of the *Abyot Tebeka* group could go into anyone’s residence, day or night, arrest and torture anyone who was suspect, anyone who did not comply with the sexual and other whims of the group, or anyone who was not ready for bribery. The whole kebele was at the mercy of this group and innumerable atrocities were committed that only the Ethiopian people themselves could account for.”⁴⁹⁷

Teenager Nega Mezlekia, who by 1976 had been recruited to a cell of the EPRP in the town of Jijiga, recalls the escalation of violence, and tells how the *kebeles* functioned as instruments of repression.

The fodder for the EPRP’s guns consisted mostly of members of the other civilian party, the Meison, who were now in league with the junta.... For a while it seemed that these terrorist actions were working. Power seemed a mere breath away. Then, the tables turned. The EPRP had underestimated their opponents’ capacity to organize a counterattack. The Meison members, *kebele* officials and other possible targets were issued handguns, and given unlimited discretionary powers. *Kebeles* set up local jails where they could detain suspects without charge or trial. The streets of Jijiga became ominous.... For their part, the Meison roamed the streets of Jijiga picking up pretty girls under the pretext of obtaining the background analysis of a suspect. These young women found themselves locked in a Meison member’s home until the “case was solved”. Women who

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 113.

did not co-operate were variously raped and tortured, and sometimes transferred to prison to serve an open-ended sentence. Some were killed.⁴⁹⁸

Nega was arrested during a round-up in retaliation for an EPRP action. Somehow he avoided final selection at a *kebele* prison: “When all was done, some twenty teenagers were led from the prison, screaming and pleading for their lives. Some were political prisoners, some were pickpockets, some were thieves, all were going to die. Any one of them could have been me.”⁴⁹⁹

For its part, *Meison* claimed that its stewardship of the *kebeles* and other mass organizations actually marked nascent popular democratic power. Of course to do so, they had to equate the right and left oppositions to the military government. Referring to itself, *Meison* wrote that,

The revolutionary camp had a dense network of democratic mass organizations which were not only precious tools for the revolutionary struggle but also organizations of democratic local administration. The POMOA, MEISONE and other progressive organizations gave a coordinated leadership to these mass organizations.... To the camp of the counter revolution the development of these democratic organizations represented a mortal danger. This camp was led by the old state bureaucracy, the EDU and the ultra left EPRP who showed by their concerted counter revolutionary endeavors that they were ready to go to any length to use any means in their fight for survival.⁵⁰⁰

Those left forces loyal to the military government pulled out all stops in the propaganda war against the EPRP “anarchists” and “Trotskyites.” POMOA and WazLig founder Senay Likke’s words in a pamphlet issued about this time are typical: “The main difference

⁴⁹⁸ Nega Mezlekia, *Notes from the Hyena’s Belly*, p. 148.

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

⁵⁰⁰ Foreign Section of ISEANE, *Women in the Ethiopian Revolution*, 1980, pp. 48–49.

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between the EPRP and the other forces of counter-revolution is that the EPRP has tried to wear a Marxist garb. It is notoriously known for its revolutionary phrase flaunting—a basic characteristic of Trotskyites. The EPRP engages in individual assassinations and lumpen-type gangster terrorism—a characteristic of Anarchists.”⁵⁰¹ According to the U.S. embassy, who kept a close watch on the so-called Politburo members, Senay Likke was more than just talk. “Dr. Sennaye was alleged to be most radical POMOA member, vehemently anti-American although educated in U.S., and personally involved in torture of some prisoners.”⁵⁰²

A gruesome article in the “Abiot Forum” section of the state-run English-language *Ethiopian Herald* discusses how to respond to the EPRP “anarchists.”

We the members of the oppressed masses, in schools, factories and kebeles know every one of the anarchists and their stooges in our respective kebeles very well. If we raise our hands together, determined to destroy them, once and for all, it won't take us even a month. And we have to make this decision fast.... The masses have to learn to be as brutal as the anarchists.... The bastardly force must be crushed by whatever available weapon.... The masses [must] unite, and to organize itself to use its hammer, knife etc. and exercise brutality on anarchists on a scale more than they are prepared to out-stay.... Anarchists who misunderstand the craving for peace of the masses and of their tender heart as a sign of fear and naiveté should no longer be permitted to live among us.⁵⁰³

In September, EPRP CC member Kiflu Teferra narrowly escaped capture. A raid by *Derg* security forces netted several key Party leaders in Addis and substantial reserves of the EPRP's cash. Fellow CC

⁵⁰¹ Comrade Senay Likke, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, pp. 13–14.

⁵⁰² Feb. 4, 1977 Cable; Wikileaks link www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1977AD-DIS00680_c.html.

⁵⁰³ “Abiot Forum,” *The Ethiopian Herald*, Nov. 24, 1976.

member Kiflu Tadesse recounts how Kiflu Teferra, a veteran of the student movement in the United States, escaped: “One of the officers was overwhelmed when he found some cash in one of the rooms and kept himself busy stashing away the fortune that had fallen into his hands. Kiflu Teffera, whose hands were tied to his back, grasped the gun that was hidden just above his behind and, turning his face around, opened fire and hit the guard by the gate.”⁵⁰⁴

A vice was tightening on the EPRP.

Back from the Brink?

But just as the intensifying cyclone of violence suggested the approach of an apocalyptic confrontation for power in Ethiopia, toward the end of 1976 all sides seemed to pause, either to organize last-ditch attempts to avert disaster, or make final attempts to maneuver for the best position on the heights of the battlefield.

The *Derg* was anything but monolithic. While Major Mengistu and his advisors and allies in POMOA and the so-called Politburo represented a hardline faction with a fairly clear political agenda, Mengistu was still only a co-vice chairman of the ruling junta. Despite the purge of Major Sisay, the other members of the *Derg*—including both the other members of the triumvirate junta and the larger behind-the-scenes secret committee of junior officers—were not prepared to give Mengistu a blank check for his war on the revolutionary opposition, or, for his apparent eagerness for closer Soviet sponsorship. Several *Derg* officers attempted a reorganization of power, leveraging the ambivalence of the PMAC head, Brigadier General Teferi Bente, to maneuver Mengistu away from the helm of state. Mengistu himself, aware of his own precarious situation, realized that he needed more than mere allies, and began to strengthen his own organizational hand outside of the bounds of *Meison*-dominated POMOA. Topping off the moment, key members of the EPRP were questioning the road of confrontation that threatened to consume the Party.

Mengistu’s co-vice chair in the PMAC, Major Atnafu Abate,

⁵⁰⁴ Kiflu Tadesse, *op. Cit.*, p. 142.

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seems to have been chastened into the background by the execution of Sisaye Habte. Atnafu was reputed to be positioned somewhat similarly to Sisaye, favoring moderation. While U.S. embassy cables don't provide any evidence for him being any kind of American asset, he clearly didn't have the same ideological investment as Mengistu, and was generally regarded as softly pro-Western. But during this period he seemed most interested in keeping a low profile to ensure his survival. But two other *Derg* members, Lieutenant Alemayehu Haile and Captain Moges Wolde Mikael, seized the initiative and launched a reorganization of government.

Derg analyst "Pliny the Middle Aged" describes the reorganization.

Captain Moges's committee reported to the *dergue* in December and offered a complete plan for the formalization and reorganization of the *dergue*, which was accepted and put into operation in December 1976.... The two main leaders of the group opposed to Lt. Colonel Mengistu, Captain Moges and Captain Alemayehu Haile, increased their own status and importance. Captain Alemayehu became the first secretary-general of the PMAC, and Captain Moges took over the very important political and foreign affairs committee.... Nevertheless, the December reorganization marked the victory, albeit temporary, of a more moderate faction with the *dergue* which was prepared to be more conciliatory on a number of levels; towards the EPRP and the various national movements, particularly those in Eritrea. It was the work of a group which was also prepared to keep a more open mind about US/Ethiopian relations, and which sought to limit the pro-Russian policy of Mengistu and his *Me'ei Some* allies.⁵⁰⁵

As usual, the U.S. Embassy was closely monitoring what was happening inside the *Derg*. According to their analysis, the big losers of the

⁵⁰⁵ Pliny The Middle-Aged, "The PMAC: Origins and Structure: Part Two," pp. 5-7.

reorganization would include POMOA, closely tied to Mengistu inside the government.

First Vice-Chairman Ltcol Mengistu Haile-Mariam will allegedly become chairman of Council of Ministers, size of Supreme Military Council (SMC) likely to be 17, or 18 if Gen Teferi Bante included, with PMAC member Lt Alemayehu Haile secretary general of SMC.... Future of Political Office for Mass Organizational Affairs (POMOA) uncertain, but expected to change during next 2–3 months.... Because of uncertainty of Mengistu's strength within consolidated PMAC, future of POMOA concomitantly uncertain. As Mengistu's advisory body, POMOA likely to rise and fall with his fortunes. Most recurrent rumor is POMOA will be transformed during next 2–3 months and possibly replaced by new civilian advisory group. Unpopularity of POMOA, alleged to be widespread among current PMAC members, would support speculation of POMOA transformation.⁵⁰⁶

Although he had conducted diplomatic missions on behalf of the Ethiopian government, Moges was either a secret member of the EPRP, or broadly sympathetic to the idea of uniting all of Ethiopia's avowedly left forces into a united front. Moges's brother in law was EPRP member Worku Lakew; and according to Worku, Captain Moges told him at the end of January 1977 that the *Derg* "decided to have a united front with the main revolution party that it had been fighting so far, the EPRP."⁵⁰⁷ He also said the PMAC junta was to be replaced by an 18-member committee led by Moges, and "almost all its members except two were from the camp that wanted a united front...." But "the decision was not yet made public and four days later something dramatic happened to change all of this."⁵⁰⁸

⁵⁰⁶ Dec. 22, 1976 cable; Wikileaks link www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1976AD-DIS12490_b.html.

⁵⁰⁷ Worku Lakew, *Revolution, Love and Growing Up*, p. 163.

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

Mengistu was certainly aware of the maneuvering against him. While Haile Fida and Senay Likke had served him well, by now Mengistu realized that allowing *Meison* to become the vehicle for implementing his own agenda held long-term risks. For all his original lack of leftist bonafides, Mengistu had clearly become infatuated with modern Soviet models of political organization, and having a political party with primary loyalty to himself became an ever more urgent goal.

Mengistu's base had always been the military, and the continued politicization of the military offered him the best path to building a more personal base of support. "Pliny the Middle Aged" describes how Mengistu was expanding his base:

When in 1975 the policy of sending PMAC members to eastern Europe for political training was instituted, it was also extended to many of the former members of the unit committees. As a result, by the end of 1977, thousands of military had received six- or nine-months training in Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Bulgaria, the USSR or even Yugoslavia. In retrospect it has been ironic that the policy was first pushed by Major Sissay Habte in order to weaken Major Mengistu's support in the *dergue*; it was originally those who were particularly identified as followers of Mengistu who were encouraged to go. Once returned, these military "cadres" became the central core of the political organization set up by the *dergue's abiyot seded* (Revolutionary Flame).⁵⁰⁹

This group, generally referred to simply as *Seded*, was to become Mengistu's loyal political creature. As with virtually all political organizations in revolutionary Ethiopia, *Seded* organized itself in a semi-clandestine shadow world where membership was a thing of public rumor (even the membership of the larger *Derg* group was never widely revealed). The U.S. embassy tried to figure out where it fit in, though its sources seem to have misunderstood its loyalty.

⁵⁰⁹ Pliny the Middle Aged, *op. Cit.*, p. 10.

Formation of Revolutionary Flame (Abiotawi Sidet) group with past 6 weeks may provide source of new civilian advisors to SMC/PMAC. Group allegedly composed of self-proclaimed radical advisor of Lt Alemayehu, Revolutionary Flame believed to include some Politburo cadres and members of military and police discontented with Mengistu's seemingly arbitrary decisions which lacked PMAC approval. Its views do not seem to differ greatly from current AESO [Meison] or EPRP ideology, though group opposes both. (Revolutionary Flame has allegedly published 3 pamphlets which Embassy unable to obtain so far. Will pouch to dept if we do.)⁵¹⁰

But EPRP insider Babile Tola is clear that Mengistu and his henchmen actually ran the show. Mengistu lured his factional opponents in the *Derg* into believing that the new group also had room for them:

The genesis of Abyotawi Seded is also illustrative. This secret group was first formed by Mengistu, Legesse Asfaw, Daniel Asfaw [and others].... Subsequently Mengistu approached Majors Moges and Demissie. Moges accepted and insisted that Captain Alemayehu and General Teferi be brought in. This was done and the whole Seded thing was described as being a counter-group to the Colonel Atnafu group. In reality, the preoccupation of Mengistu was to form his own political and loyal group so as not to leave the field of political organization and group formation to Meisone and the others.⁵¹¹

Although all the Ethiopian factions secretly organized among the military rank and file—the EPRP had its Oppressed Soldiers Organization—only *Seded* was to be officially sanctioned to do so. Eventually this brewed a conflict with Senay Likke's *WazLig* since Senay had been

⁵¹⁰ December 22, 1976 cable; Wikileaks link www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1976ADDIS12490_b.html.

⁵¹¹ Babile Tola, *op. Cit.*, p. 100.

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among the first of the returned student activists to orient to military officers, but for now Mengistu had *Seded* as a loyal base for his own political maneuvers inside the government.

Like Moges and Alemayehu, they also had big plans. According to Babile Tola:

Mengistu and his close friends within Seded... believed that the time had come to deal with the “waverers” within the Derg whom they now started to identify as “EPRP members and supporters,” Mengistu’s secret group held secret meetings to chart out its plan of action; a decisive move was advocated by Meisone and Senaye Likke of Woz League too. Officers within the underground “Oppressed Soldiers Organization” got wind of their secret meetings and exposed the plan publicly in their paper. However the Teferi Bentis took no preventive action. In fact it is said that both Teferi Benti and Major Moges confronted Mengistu individually and he swore to them that “it is all an anarchist lie to divide us.”⁵¹²

Within the EPRP, there was not total support for the initiation of urban armed conflict or for the assassination attempt on Mengistu. Prior to the Party’s shift in tactics, an August CC meeting revealed rifts in the leadership, with both Berhane Meskel and Getachew Maru opposing the proposed targeting of Mengistu. Interestingly, according to Kiflu Tadesse, the initial suggestion to eliminate Mengistu seems to have come from Captain Moges who secretly contacted Party leaders.⁵¹³ In the event, the assassination attempt was fully authorized by the CC. But at a Party leadership meeting in September, Berhane Meskel and Getachew Maru continued their internal dissent.

Accused of breaching internal discipline by taking their dispute outside the EPRP’s leadership bodies, Berhane and Getachew were expelled from the Party’s Central Committee in November 1976,

⁵¹² Babile Tola, *op. Cit.*, p. 84.

⁵¹³ See Kiflu Tadesse, *op. Cit.*, pp. 136–139.

though both retained Party membership⁵¹⁴. It was a significant blow to the Party as both Berhane and Getachew were key figures in the Party's genesis, and both commanded the personal loyalty of hundreds if not thousands of activists. It had the effect of silencing certain crucial internal debates, and the splintering discontent this created in the ranks of the membership would become a serious problem for the Party in the coming period.

Led by Tesfaye Debessay, the Party leadership issued a document attempting to motivate the turn to urban armed resistance. "Using our armed groups in the urban areas and confiscating arms from the regime, we should be able to provide arms both to our urban and rural armies.... It is possible to wage an armed struggle in the urban areas as well, and if adequate preparation is made, in the final analysis, it is possible to conduct an urban uprising."⁵¹⁵

An editorial in *Democracia* contextualized the necessary shift in the Party's strategy.

We are in a historical period when the counter-revolution is under no circumstances in a position to defeat the revolution, on the contrary, when the revolution is in a position not capable, powerful and strong enough to totally smash and destroy the counter-revolution once and for all. In order to fill the gap of this fluid situation, to create sufficient condition and to make the revolution victorious, the one and only way open at present or in the future is to make the proletariat politically conscious in order to enable it to fulfill its historical mission, to agitate and organize it and by disarming the anti-people forces only to arm the proletariat itself. Along with this it is imperative to strengthen in an organized manner the proletarian-peasant revolutionary alliance and to win the support and the participation of the oppressed social groups.⁵¹⁶

⁵¹⁴ Ibid., p. 173.

⁵¹⁵ See *ibid.*, p. 175.

⁵¹⁶ EPRP, "EPRP and the Proletariat," from *Democracia*, Vol. 3, No. 12, Dec.

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For over two years the Party had called for a “popular people’s government,” winning mass support on this basis by intersecting with an obvious demand of masses of people hungering for revolutionary change in Ethiopia. With a return to the open calls for armed struggle that had been common before 1974, the Party needed to find some political equilibrium. As it confronted dissent in its own ranks, the Party struggled to formulate its line. A document from 1978 acknowledges the strategic challenges:

The EPRP believed and still believes that the path to victory over the reactionary ruling class is through the persecution of a revolutionary war of the people, and to this end it has formed and continuously developed the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Army. However, the EPRP firmly believes that the revolution is the work of the masses and that revolutionary violence is the violence of the masses. Thus, the party in no way aims at replacing the masses as it upholds firmly the principle that the exploited need to become involved fully in all aspects of the struggle. Breaking the proper relationship that should exist between the party (vanguard) and the proletariat and oppressed masses leads to the creation of a deep chasm between the masses and the party. The mass movement and the armed struggle will be bifurcated and may even end up in different camps. This, the EPRP, taking into account all the forces, classes and mass of people active in the country and correctly gauging the situation adopted its tactical line.⁵¹⁷

The Party could formulate its theoretical reasoning about how to organize and balance the armed struggle in compelling terms. The same 1978 statement continues, quoting one of the movement’s Vietnamese heroes, General Vo Nguyen Giap,

1976; reprinted in *Abyot*, Vol. 2, No. 3, April 1977.

⁵¹⁷ “On Some Points of the Armed Struggle Waged by the People under the Leadership of the EPRP,” *Abyot*, Special issue, 1978, p. 11.

For the victory of the revolutionary war, the struggle in the cities is indispensable. As Giap wrote, “To advance the revolutionary war toward victory, we must build revolutionary bases in the urban areas and create conditions for attacking the enemy directly in the cities in every suitable way.... We must also insure close coordination between the urban revolutionary forces and the rural revolutionary forces in order to attack the enemy in his lair....” The EPRP launched the armed struggle in the cities as part of the overall strategy to carry out the revolutionary war of the people to final victory.⁵¹⁸

But it was not clear whether under actual conditions of direct violent confrontation with the state, that the Party would be able to effectively apply its line. It was all easier said than done.

The conditions of clandestinity and the cell structure the Party had adopted made conveying new leadership thinking about political line down through the ranks quite a challenge, even with the co-optation of able and experienced organizers like Germatchew Lemma into positions of active leadership.⁵¹⁹ And while EPRA units did function in rural areas, they did so with irregular channels of communication to the urban Party leadership; in any case during this period the liberated base areas were hardly on the scale of the ones that sustained the Eritrean movements or even the nascent national liberation movement in Tigray province.

Ousted from his leadership spot, Getachew Maru warned his lover and comrade Hiwot Teffera that the Party was making a massive mistake. He told her,

It was utter insanity. There is no explanation for it. An assassination attempt on a leader amounts to a coup d’etat. Killing individuals amounts to terrorism. A Party such as ours should not be engaged in things like that. The idea

⁵¹⁸ Ibid., p. 22.

⁵¹⁹ See Kiflu Tadesse, *op. Cit.*, p. 143.

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of urban armed struggle is a departure from the path of the struggle outlined at the beginning. The Party is treading a really dangerous avenue.... What we should be doing instead is strengthening our army in Assimba,⁵²⁰ building armies at various strategic area and intensifying the rural armed struggle. Rural armed struggle is protracted. You weaken your enemy through attrition.⁵²¹

He went on to suggest the Party was romanticizing past revolutionary insurrections without adequate preparation.

The Paris Commune⁵²² was a failure. How can we model our revolution after something that failed? The Commune is useful only as far as it teaches us a lesson. Thousands of people have died in the insurrection. The idea of insurrection is adventurous.... We have neither the military capability nor the political and organizational readiness to stage an insurrection.... All this talk of insurrection is a rush to seize power at any cost.⁵²³

Hiwot remained a Party activist, though when leadership spread out in November to meet with local cells to motivate the change in line, she was filled with disappointment.

Girmachew Lemma... did most of the talking. The talk centered on the Party's new policy: the need for staging urban armed struggle. The justification was that the "objective conditions" of the country had changed and that the Party had to defend itself from the repression and executions perpetrated on it.... When I realized [these leaders] were the very people who had expelled Getachew and Berhanemeskel from the Central Committee, my excitement

⁵²⁰ A mountainous region in Tigray where EPRA was building a base area; see Chapter 11 for a discussion of Assimba and its significance.

⁵²¹ Quoted in Hiwot Teffera, *op. Cit.*, p. 184.

⁵²² In 1871 France.

⁵²³ Hiwot Teffera, *op. Cit.*, p. 185.

vanished.⁵²⁴

Despite all the dangers, the EPRP also continued to demonstrate openly, especially inspiring students and young people to rally around the Party. The U.S. embassy noted a January attack on the U.S. Information Service building, an agency that managed immigration but was also reputed to be a nest of American surveillance.

USIS building was stoned for about 20 minutes by a group of about 60–90 youthful demonstrators. All first-floor windows and two on second floor were broken with substantial damage to USIS library from broken glass. Two of three petrol bombs thrown entered building spraying gasoline and fumes throughout interior but fortunately they did not ignite.... Additional police were requested urgently, but by time they arrived, demonstrators had moved on, after leaving EPRP propaganda leaflets, condemning EPMG, EDU and bureaucratic capitalism. Demonstration is only one of several which have been taking place all morning, as result of student boycott which has closed Addis Ababa University campus and some secondary schools throughout city.⁵²⁵

Another U.S. embassy cable spoke of the actions as part of a campaign of renewed EPRP activity: “Week-long activities have appearance of being well-orchestrated and lend some credence to contentions of strong EPRP support among students. Coincidence of reappearance of EPRP literature throughout city during past week and well-planned boycott of classes substantiates Dec. rumors demonstrations would occur at University during Jan.”⁵²⁶ Such open organizing held risks. Babile Tola accuses *Meison* cadre of leading an armed attack on a stu-

⁵²⁴ Ibid., p. 206.

⁵²⁵ January 28, 1977 embassy cable; Wikileaks link www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1977ADDIS00513_c.html.

⁵²⁶ Jan 28, 1977 embassy cable; Wikileaks link www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1977ADDIS00524_c.html.

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dent meeting in the new year at the university in Addis Ababa, killing several.⁵²⁷

General Teferi Bente, the chairman of the ruling junta, gave a major speech to a massive crowd in Addis Ababa on January 29, 1977. Curiously, Mengistu was not in evidence. Teferi was apparently making his move on the part of reform-minded members of government. He issued an appeal for national unity, calling for unity on the left:

Progressive anti-feudal, anti-imperialist and anti-bureaucratic capitalist and all other democratic forces bear historic responsibility of closing ranks and forming a common front by sinking their minor differences in the spirit of the Programme of National Democratic Revolution in full awareness of the menace hovering over the country. There is no greater clarion call that the motherland can make on them. We have no reason to believe that there is any progressive group or individual who will not respond to this call. Nor can there be. It is imperative that all progressive forces concerned with the welfare and interests of the masses should at this critical point when enemies are poised on numerous fronts, close ranks, co-ordinate their efforts and set an example in spearheading any undertaking demanding sacrifices.⁵²⁸

He continued, "What we beg of Ethiopian progressives and intellectuals at this hour and from this platform is that there must be unity; a party must be established; a joint front must be formed; and, until that happens, our revolution will always be in danger."⁵²⁹

The U.S. embassy reported two hundred thousand in the audience. "EPRP sympathizers interspersed in crowds dropped many anti-government leaflets, provoking retaliation. Some shots were reportedly fired, both at scene and during assembly, but for most part their purpose

⁵²⁷ See Babile Tola, *op. Cit.*, p. 85.

⁵²⁸ Quoted in Teferra Haile-Selassie, *The Ethiopian Revolution, 1974-1991: From a Monarchical Autocracy to a Military Oligarchy*, p. 194.

⁵²⁹ Andargetchew Tiruneh, *op. Cit.*, p. 264.

is as yet unclear (whether crowd control or opposition members). We believe over 100 persons taken into custody.”⁵³⁰

Teferi denounced many of those fighting the Ethiopian government. He singled out the Eritrean Liberation Front and the Ethiopian Democratic Union; he condemned the governments of neighboring Sudan and Somalia.⁵³¹ But nobody missed the fact that he specifically omitted the EPRP from his list of enemies. In fact, the speech entirely avoided mention of the Party. Could his appeal to the “progressive and intellectuals” really mean the *Derg* was ready to appease the left and offer concessions to civilian rule?

The city of Addis Ababa took a deep breath.

⁵³⁰ January 30, 1977 cable; Wikileaks link www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1977ADDIS00535_c.html.

⁵³¹ See cable at Wikileaks www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1977ADDIS00605_c.html.

Chapter 10

Ethiopian Fascism?

“The military junta in Ethiopia is the personification of a right-ist victory, a miscarriage of the February revolution, pre-occupied in concretizing fascism. Our military junta has deserved the title of Fascist because of its political and economic undertakings that are akin to the meaning of the term. Fascism is not used here as an adjective of abuse; because fascism is not merely a system of reprisals, of brute force and of police terror; but also a particular governmental system based on the uprooting of all elements of proletarian democracy at a moment when proletarian or new democracy is a possibility.”—Ethiopian Students’ Union in Holland, 1975⁵³²

“It was not the EPRP or the people who ‘provoked’ the Derg to be anti-democratic, it was the junta itself which barred all avenues of peaceful political dissent.... Censorship was total, underground leaflets flourished. Parties were banned, parties went underground. Peaceful protests were forbidden, strikes spread. Arrests and executions became widespread, resort to self-defense became a necessity.”—EPRP insider “Babile Tola”⁵³³

A Tangible Legacy

Ethiopia had experienced classical fascism. The fifty-year-plus Italian occupation of Eritrea starting in 1890 and the five-year-plus occupation of Ethiopia itself by Mussolini’s armies starting in 1935 meant that the word “*fascism*” was not an abstraction for Ethiopians. The racism and slave labor, the cultural brutalism, the insidious corruption

⁵³² From editorial “Mussolini Unabridged,” *The Proletariat*, labelled Vol. 1 No. 1, 1974 but actually Vol. 2, 1975, published by the Ethiopian Students’ Union in Holland.

⁵³³ Babile Tola, *To Kill a Generation*, pp. 51–52.

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and assaultive divide-and-conquer patronism, the direct and unflinching violence, the gloating arrogance of the European conquerors, these quickly became familiar to the people of Ethiopia.

Fascism rapidly branded and objectified Ethiopia like a chattel-slave entity as it added the country to its growing East African empire: Mussolini looted the country of treasured artifacts like the stelae of Axum, and in an almost childish act of pique, had a monstrous sculpture of his head set up overlooking the Adwa battlefield where Emperor Menelik and Empress Taitu had humiliated the imperial Italian invaders in 1896. The lasting mark on Ethiopia was not the handful of Italianate architectural gems that the new masters hurried to erect, but rather the loss of thousands and thousands of lives through armed repression, the wholesale burning of villages, licensed cruelty, and war against rebellious Ethiopian patriots.

So when *Democracia* and the other organs of the future EPRP began calling the *Derg* junta “fascist” very early on in 1974—and simultaneously labelling the *Derg*’s civilian left allies “*bandas*,” the word for native collaborators during the occupation—they were not just reaching into the bag of insults. They were summoning up a known story of unjust violence and repression, and they were also summoning up a memorable tradition of popular armed resistance.

It is notable that the EPRP labelled the military junta that was hijacking the revolutionary process “fascist” long before the *Derg* reached its repressive potential. In an editorial, pro-EPRP revolutionary students still in Europe at the beginning of 1975 linked what they called the fascism of the military regime directly with the traditions of European fascism, comparing the early *Derg* slogan of “*Ityopya Tikdem* (Ethiopia First)” to Mussolini’s *faux* egalitarian nationalist sloganeering:

Our era is marked by the decomposition of imperialism, and in Ethiopia the once politically dominant aristocracy has been politically crushed in the dust bin of history. The proletariat, after a long and bloody struggle has become class conscious; in February, it successfully staged a general strike and mobilized the support of the radical petty-bourgeoi-

sie behind it.... The normal police and military resources no longer suffice to hold Ethiopia in a state of equilibrium—thus, enters Fascism.... Our junta, as their predecessors, Mussolini and Hitler, as soon as they slapped Haile Selassie into prison, claimed to have masterminded and carried out a “revolution” to “victory.” They announced to the world that the Ethiopian revolution had begun and ended on Sept. 12 that feudalism had suddenly disappeared into the air. From this day onwards, everyone was to be equal, and all classes unified—and the war-cry is to be “Ethiopia First,” the unabridged tradition of Mussolini.... The junta intentionally leaves us in the dark as to the meaning of “Ethiopia First,” what they did instead was to promulgate a law that anyone found opposed to the motto was to serve a term from three to fifteen years in prison.... If “Ethiopia First” is not the best example of demagoguery, what else could it be? ...There are now two mutually exclusive positions in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian people demand democracy the junta suppresses them, the people demand a popular provisional government the junta “consolidates” itself, the proletariat prepares itself for a strike the junta is the strike breaker, the peasants grab land the junta massacres them, oppressed nationalities fight against national oppression the junta napalms and bombs them. What “good socialists” we have! What else could our junta be but the replica of Mussolini in his unabridged form? Naturally, Duce Mussolini must be reviving under the blind boots of the notorious major Mengistu!⁵³⁴

These arguments are echoed the next year in an editorial in the EPRP’s *Abyot* in early 1976:

Ever since the junta took state power, in an objective role of

⁵³⁴ Ethiopian Students’ Union in Holland, “Mussolini Unabridged,” *The Proletariat*, labelled Vol. 1, No. 1, 1974 but actually Vol. 2, 1975.

short-circuiting the revolutionary mass struggle, it has been faced with a relentless mass offensive that has refused to subside till democracy and socialism become, not paper-tiger proclamations, but vibrating realities. With each influx of the mass action the junta has been constantly using the not-so original dual tactics of repression and demagogy. To the demand for popular provisional government it responded by shooting and arresting progressives while at the same time promising that it will relinquish power “as soon as possible”.... A year after the junta’s accession to power there is absolutely no doubt amongst the masses that the junta is their enemy, that it is a fascist force serving the interests of the bourgeoisie and imperialism. With every passing day, even the sections of the petty-bourgeoisie that had hoped to get a sizable portion of the cake had abandoned the junta. If the junta rules it is thanks to terror and blind repression, thanks to full imperialist backing. Massacred Eritreans, butchered Ethiopian trade unionists, peasants, students, progressive soldiers and oppressed nationalities have testified in blood that the junta is isolated, hated, that its “socialism” is no different than the fascist variety.”⁵³⁵

A key part of the EPRP’s argument that the *Derg* was animated by the spirit of Mussolini was the socialist veneer offered by the *Derg*’s civilian left allies. “[T]he elements that support Mengistu are the Haile Fida clique of social-fascists calling themselves ‘All Ethiopian Socialist Movement’, are the Ethiopian version [of] Duce Mussolini’s remnants in Italy, Movimento Socialista Italiano; the feudo-bourgeois bureaucrats, other ‘rehabilitated’ feudal bandits and their children who have obtained high government posts.”⁵³⁶

Matching Theory to Reality

⁵³⁵ EPRP, “Much Ado About the United Front of Ethiopian Fascists,” *Abyot*, Vol. 1, No. 2, January 30, 1976, p. 1.

⁵³⁶ EPRP, “The Mengistu-Haile Fida Clique: What It Is and What It Does,” *Abyot*, Vol. 2, No. 4, March 1977.

But, as much as the word *socialism*, the word *fascism* is loaded with meaning from differing contexts and differing epochs and certainly from differing political schools of thought, and the EPRP was challenged to explain how what they were experiencing matched up with the historical legacies they were invoking. They were hobbled, to some extent, by the legacy definitions of the Comintern-era communist movement.

Dealing with the realities of its brutality on the ground, the *Derg*'s opponents knew that what they were experiencing was something systemic and definable, not just overactive state brutality. They generally attempted to frame their experience in ideological terms from Marxism-Leninism's long history of struggle against fascism. Here an Eritrean diaspora group invokes the definitive definition of fascism issued by 1930s Comintern leader Georgi Dimitrov and widely accepted as currency by many on the international left⁵³⁷:

Marxism-Leninism teaches us that "*Fascism... is the open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic and most imperialist elements of finance capital.*" Ethiopia is definitely not an advanced, monopoly capitalist country.... The Ethiopian junta can correctly be characterized as fascist, for even though it does not represent Ethiopian finance capitalists—for there are none—it represents foreign finance capital. The imposition of fascist dictatorship on the Ethiopian masses was the response not of the local finance capitalists but of imperialism which was to protect its interests in Eritrea and Ethiopia.⁵³⁸

But did the "fascism" of the *Derg* really fit into the analysis offered up by the likes of Dimitrov?

⁵³⁷ An extended study of fascism would have to examine the works of a generation of communists who confronted its brutal reality in mid 20th-century Europe: Not just Dimitrov and his relative cothinkers Togliatti and Palme-Dutt, but also Trotsky, Guerin, Gramsci and others outside the usual Comintern roster. In the milieu in which Ethiopian radicalism blossomed, those Comintern views were hegemonic.

⁵³⁸ AESNA, *In Defence of the Eritrean Revolution*, 1978, pp. 60–61.

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The Haile Selassie regime was increasingly violent and repressive in its last five years. It was more and more willing to spill blood to protect the imperial order, an order which included a cozy, oddly mutually idolatrous relationship with the neocolonial masters in Europe and North America. The Ethiopian left cut its teeth reacting to the atrocities committed by the imperial government; exposing the emperor's ties to imperialism or his military marriage of convenience with the State of Israel. But when the emperor's power evaporated over the course of 1974, with state power migrating into the hands of military officers, it was almost as though the revolution easily wiped away a veneer of capitalism as though it had been an illusion all along. Certainly, some of the bourgeoisie rallied against the threat of generic "socialism" by throwing its lot in with the aristocratic EDU, and opposing the various waves of nationalization and land reform, but the heavily bureaucratic and underdeveloped nature of capitalism in Ethiopia meant the absence of a significant comprador bourgeoisie which might have attempted to organize a more liberal or republican form of opposition to the revolutionary regime, or acted as a hidden power behind the military junta. It would simply be incorrect to suggest that the *Derg* was acting in the thrall of hidden bourgeois puppeteers.

It may have been true through 1976 that the *Derg* was still dependent on the United States for its arms and other aid, but in retrospect it's impossible to characterize the American attitude toward the *Derg* as other than ambivalent resignation. The U.S. was certainly not in a hurry to push the Ethiopian military junta away, especially given geo-political regional considerations, and had continued to at least promise to arm the regime. It wanted an exploitative relationship with Ethiopia, albeit not necessarily one with the *Derg*, though for a while it was certainly willing to give such a thing a try.

The abrupt realignment of the superpowers in the Horn of Africa after the Somali invasion in 1977 in fact meant that the U.S. was able to disengage from supporting the *Derg*'s repression at a moment convenient for the new American president Carter, who claimed to be a proponent of a "human rights"-based foreign policy. After that switch,

the USSR—which the EPRP was eventually to label “social imperialist”—did frequently pressure and manipulate the *Derg* to its own ends, but this only after the *Derg* was already sturdily in place. And while an in-depth economic analysis is outside the scope of this investigation, it should be offered that neocolonial penetration of Ethiopia was itself underdeveloped during this period, and the kind of wide openings to international capital for Ethiopia’s agricultural resources or cheap labor power that have marked the post-*Derg* period were not yet in place.

So the suggestion that the *Derg*’s “fascism” lay in a classic relationship to imperialism and finance capital raises existential questions about the nature of the *Derg* and about the nature of fascism itself that aren’t tidily answered by the theoretical canon inside which the EPRP had developed.

The EPRP certainly attempted to confront this question, and it was one of the issues at the core of the factionalism within the party. In the aftermath of the February 1977 coup in which Mengistu was to consolidate his rule (see the next chapter), the EPRP wrote,

The nature of the blood-thirsty fascist regime is all the more important. We are not, of course, questioning whether or not the regime is fascist; but what it really is, which forces do support it and as a result, what it is doing both internally and at the international level. As a result of February 3rd coup... Mengistu is not ruling alone, but with the aid of a deceptive political guidance by the Haile Fida clique staffed in the so-called “Peoples’ Political Office.” As a result, we have a fascist dictatorship by the Mengistu-Haile clique.⁵³⁹

The EPRP argued that the *Derg* was not actually just another military regime, but uniquely positioned due to its social base, and due to those facilitating its radical rhetoric. An EPRP correspondent to the Indian *Economic and Political Weekly* wrote:

⁵³⁹ EPRP, “The Mengistu-Haile Fida Clique: What It Is and What It Does,” *Abyot*, Vol. 2, No. 4, March 1977.

Unlike classical fascism, however, Ethiopian fascism did not begin as a movement among the petty bourgeois masses to contaminate the movement of the working class. To begin with, it lacked a social base. Not only was no mass movement permitted under the autocracy, but the fact that the struggle of the working class was purely economic under the autocracy did not necessitate that finance capital generate a fascist movement. Second, while it was able to bribe sections of the unemployed, Ethiopian fascism failed to secure support from its other traditional customers, the petty bourgeois masses. This was so precisely because it had arisen in a transitional situation between autocracy and democracy, and destroyed what the whole people was thirsty for: Democracy. While the members of the Dergue came from the ranks of the right-wing stratum of the petty bourgeoisie, the petty bourgeois masses remained opposed to the Dergue.... It has not been the first time in its history that fascism has employed socialist demagoguery or has posed as the champion of land reform and nationalisation. Capturing state power in times of intensified class struggle and great social ferment, was it not fascism that announced seemingly radical measures designed to mute the aroused expectations of the masses, dilute their struggle and stifle their movement? After all, it was Mussolini who declared: *"In a few months, the whole of Italy will be in our power... and it will be entrusted to the task of accomplishing the unique revolution that is possible in Italy: the agrarian revolution which must give the land to the tiller."* It was precisely such a "revolution from above" that the Dergue proclaimed.... Fascism portrays its reactionary seizure of power as "revolution" against the old ruling classes, for the "common good". It proclaims its role as the "mitigator" of class struggle and then uses state power to crush the forces of revolution, to return the masses to a state of muted silence, to put an end

to the state of unrest gripping the masses. The Dergue is no exception.⁵⁴⁰

Many observers rejected out of hand the EPRP's characterization of the *Derg* as fascist. But most of these observers were not willing to distance themselves from the *Derg*'s claim to a form of socialism either, and that offers a depressing lesson in the willingness of some to excuse the inexcusable. For them this "revolution from above" became a kind of progressive novelty to be rationalized and embraced rather than a tell that called into question the reality underlying certain dominant narratives. Let's be clear: the same leftwing observers that were soon to condemn the EPRP for targeting for assassination the leaders of the *Derg*'s fake trade union AETU, shut their eyes to the *Derg*'s repression of the existing Ethiopian labor movement including the torture and eventually wholesale murder of CELU leaders and members. They rationalize this pointing to CELU's dubious origins in the loins of the AFL-CIA, but then fail to acknowledge that, under the influence of the EPRP, CELU cast off that heritage in no uncertain terms.

If there is theoretical bankruptcy here, it is not in the EPRP's attempt to clarify what they were up against, it is with those whitewashing the actions of the military government. The tragedy was that the ideological training Senay Likke and Haile Fida had been attempting to impart to radical military officers was to be the scaffolding on which the *entire* civilian Ethiopian left would ultimately be sacrificed.

Some revelatory clarity about fascism comes from more recent theoretical work. Here theoretician J. Sakai rejects those widely accepted truisms originating with European anti-fascists like Dimitrov:

Fascism is a revolutionary movement of the right *against* both the bourgeoisie and the left, of middle class and declassed men, that arises in zones of protracted crisis. Fascism grows out of the masses of men from classes that are abandoned on the sidelines of history. By transforming men

⁵⁴⁰ "A special correspondent," "Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ethiopia," *Economic and Political weekly*, Mar 4, 1978, pp. 468-9.

from these classes and criminal elements into a distorted type of radical force, fascism changes the balance of power. It intervenes to try and seize capitalist State power—not to save the old bourgeois order or even the generals, but to gut and violently reorganize society for itself as new parasitic State classes. *Capitalism is restabilized but the bourgeoisie pays the price of temporarily no longer ruling the capitalist State.* That is, there is a capitalist state but bourgeois rule is interrupted. As [Don] Hamerquist understands, the old left theory that fascism is only a “tool of the bourgeoisie” led to disasters because it way underestimated the radical power of fascism as a mass force. Fascism not only has a distinctive class base but it has a class agenda. That is, its revolution does not leave society or the class relations of production unchanged.⁵⁴¹

This characterization resonates deeply with what was happening in Ethiopia in the mid-1970s. The *Derg* was indeed not conjured up by wealthy landlords or business owners looking for a last-ditch life-line against proletarian insurrection: It was, just as Sakai describes, an opportunistic intervention by a force on the edges of the established class silos of Ethiopian society, the junior officer class of the military. The bureaucratic nature of Ethiopian capitalism favored state control of the economy and, therefore, control of the state by a radical force seeking to impose its will on the social and political order at a moment of societal rupture. The revolutionary phrase-mongering of the *Derg*, courtesy of political opportunists from the civilian left, served as a framing narrative for the *Derg's* radical actions. But those actions, as we have repeatedly seen, were heavily based in attempts at social control. The *Derg* certainly mustered mass mobilizations, waging a war for popular opinion with some success. The *Derg* had its own material interests and pursued them ruthlessly. The *Derg's* justifying narrative of building toward socialism was actually a lie. The popularity of the *Derg* among

⁵⁴¹ J. Sakai, “The Shock of the Recognition, 2002. (Via kersplebedeb.com/posts/the-shock-of-recognition/).

certain segments of the population is only proof of the hunger of the Ethiopian people for reforms and the successful demagoguery of populist rhetoric, not actual popular empowerment.

Critical Masses

It becomes obviously crucial to understand the class dynamics of Ethiopian politics in the revolutionary period; not only to examine the actuality of the political nature of the military government, but to understand the implications for the unfolding political struggle.

The military government and both its leftist opponents and leftist allies were all products of the relatively new Ethiopian petty-bourgeoisie. Freed from the rigidity of feudal relations and so elevated to relative privilege by Haile Selassie's attempts to engage with the modern world, this class became the transmission belt for radical ideas in Ethiopia. But alone it couldn't actually effect change. This was true for any of these class factions by themselves, though the *Derg's* control of the nation's armed forces certainly gave them a leg up.

Most factions of the left embedded themselves among the people. The left was inside the labor movement, inside the youth movement; it appealed to workers and peasants and rank-and-file soldiers directly; and in the EPRP's case it presented a message of popular empowerment, a call for the people themselves to take power. Quite aside from parallel plans for armed struggle and people's war, this was classic socialist organizing.

But the strategy of the Haile Fida and Senay Likke wings of the left was also to look for a locus of power, and in identifying the military as the agent of social change, they chose a disastrous path that ignored the problematic potentials of the junior officer corps's own class interests.

Within such a dynamic, to call the actions of the *Derg's* leftist enablers "shortsighted" is to make a tragic understatement. Economist Jan Valdellin wrote in *Race & Class* about the fatal mistakes that *Meison* (referred to here as AESM) committed by legitimizing military rule:

The most positive thing that can be said about the Mengistu–AESM politbureau group is that they have tried to carry

out a revolution from above. With the help of laws and declarations they hoped to direct peasants, workers and the petty bourgeoisie. Whenever dissension arose, brutal suppression was used. Obviously such tactics can never lead to the liberation of the masses. When it became clear that no support was forthcoming from any specific class there was only one option open to the politbureau-AESM, and this was to recruit corrupt leaders and to arm the lumpen proletariat (“arming the masses”) in order to crush the opposition.... The politbureau and the AESM demonstrated the impossibility of maintaining “critical support” of the Dergue when they resorted to using the lumpen proletariat as weapons to strike down the left. Without knowing it the AESM committed political suicide by exposing itself to the Dergue’s goodwill in order to survive.⁵⁴²

The wing of the intelligentsia behind *Meison* sneered at the young people in EPRP, often accusing them of being shabbily dressed or acting like “hippies.” The relationship they built with the masses was one of trying to control them, just like parents clucking their tongues at unruly children. Claiming the masses weren’t “ready” to rule themselves, they zeroed in on the leadership of pro-government mass organizations and *kebeles*. And then, they provided the *Derg* with the ideological tools to demonize their opponents and to mobilize popular sentiment against those opponents. This against the background of large numbers of poor and unemployed people migrating to the cities who had little connection to those radicalized in the revolutionary hothouses of Ethiopia’s educational system.

The EPRP warned that despite its claim to be addressing the needs of the broad masses, the *Derg* would use national chauvinism as a tool for division and repression.

[The *Derg*] spread a false national feeling through the mass

⁵⁴² Jan Valdelin, “Ethiopia 1974-76: from anti-feudal revolution to consolidation of the bourgeois state,” *Race & Class*, Vol. 19, 1978, pp. 395–396.

media, but this propaganda was not accepted by the people. There are no principal contradictions between people of different nations. Therefore, Ethiopian people will not go and fight the Eritrean people. The enemies of the people are feudalism, imperialism, bureaucratic capitalism; and the fascist government that is the puppet of the above three in *practice*. The prominent fascist leader, Hitler, during the Second World War, said that the enemies of the Germans are Jews. He then proceeded to have millions of Jews massacred. The American imperialists in Cambodia, Vietnam, etc. tried to make the people of one nation fight each other, but their attempts were in vain. In our country, too, Menelik⁵⁴³ did the same thing, when he was expanding his reign southward.... The present fascist government is trying to do the same thing.⁵⁴⁴

The EPRP predicted the *Derg's* agitation would doom the revolutionary process to internecine war, a prediction that ultimately came to pass.

What will be the effect of the proclamation? *It will create civil war*. The ongoing revolution will be reversed. Instead of class struggle, the people will be concentrating on a secondary question. This will weaken the peasants associations and strengthen the reactionary elements.... The previous government used national chauvinism in order to stay in power. In all gathering places, it instigated tribal disputes. But the present government has taken an even worse step which will make people of different national groups fight each other and fight those who are residing in cities.⁵⁴⁵

⁵⁴³ Menelik was the Ethiopian emperor who defeated the Italians in 1896 and generally consolidated the Ethiopian empire.

⁵⁴⁴ EPRP, "The Fascist Declaration—To Massacre the People," *Democracia* "Special Issue" from Feb. or Mar. 1976.

⁵⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

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It is illustrative that divisive policies toward different ethnic groups in Ethiopia remain a tried-and-true instrument for authoritarian rulers to preserve their power.

In exploiting national chauvinism, there is no contradiction with anti-fascist theorists like Dimitrov, who noted in 1935,

Surpassing in its cynicism and hypocrisy all other varieties of bourgeois reaction, fascism *adapts* its demagogy to the national *peculiarities* of each country, and even to the peculiarities of the various social strata in one and the same country. And the mass of the petty bourgeoisie and even a section of the workers, reduced to despair by want, unemployment and the insecurity of their existence, fall victim to the social and chauvinist demagogy of fascism.⁵⁴⁶

The left was in increasing mortal danger as the military regime co-opted its language, its symbolism, but for a darker purpose. The regime even occasionally slammed the word “fascist” back at its leftist opponents. The EPRP was well aware that one of the reasons to identify the regime as “fascist” would be to broaden the base of support against that regime. In the prescription of Dimitrov, beating back fascism requires the broadest popular opposition, the building of united fronts of not only revolutionary but “progressive” or “democratic” forces. The *Derg’s* revisionist cooptation of socialism made that building of broad support harder.

The factional crisis within the EPRP that emerged in late 1976 does suggest, however, that for all its loud bluster about the *Derg’s* fascism, the internal consensus was not always so clear.⁵⁴⁷ Maybe unity with elements of the *Derg* was possible? And after all, hadn’t the *Derg* actually attempted to institute many of the radical reforms that had

⁵⁴⁶ Georgi Dimitrov, “The Fascist Offensive and the Tasks of the Communist International in the Struggle of the Working Class against Fascism,” report to the Comintern, August 2, 1935. (Via Marxist Internet Archive: www.marxists.org/reference/archive/dimitrov/works/1935/08_02.htm).

⁵⁴⁷ It should be noted this specific issue was only one of the challenges to Party unity at the time.

been long-term goals of the left all along? It is now known that certain members of the *Derg* were at least open to cooperation with the EPRP, if not sympathetic to its cause directly. These doubts, faced at a time of mounting repression whenever more dire conditions of clandestinity made internal debate less and less possible, weakened the EPRP on the eve of its greatest challenge. If there was actually a moment when EPRP unity with forces inside government could have altered the course of events and averted what was coming, it quickly flashed out of sight.

As we will see in the next chapter, *Meison's* perch at Mengistu's side was to be short-lived, and all the ideological furnishings with which they had supplied him were to be hurled back with lethal force. Ultimately, the *Derg's* appeal to crude nationalism worked to undercut its opponents was quite effective. Its appeal to the bullying spirit of nationalism combined easily with a license to unleash unflinching violence on a previously unforeseen scale. Mengistu spent two years asking potential international sponsors for backing, and when that backing finally materialized in 1977, the material blessings to the state apparatus from Soviet and Cuban sponsorship—not to mention Stasi expertise and technology from East Germany—gave him powerful momentum and leverage that were to transform the conflict between the Ethiopian government and its opponents into a fiery inferno.

To the question “what kind of socialist regime exterminates tens of thousands of civilian leftists?” the only real answer can be a refutation. Any notion that torture and rape belong in the arsenal of a “progressive” government as weapons against leftist civilians requires a redefinition of socialism that beggars belief.

Fatefully, in the summer of 1976 the EPRP looked at the way ahead.

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party has consistently affirmed that the regime of the *Derg* is terribly isolated, fascistic and inherently anti-democratic. For all those who had the common sense and the conviction to see through the regime's demogogy and the apologist press, it was/is clear that the *Derg* is wobbling on its feet and is clinging to

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power only due to the backing of US imperialism and the use of brute force against the popular masses. Events since May Day have proven the EPRP's affirmation and pointed out that the popular demand for the establishment of a popular provisional government is the only solution to get the country out of chaos by giving power to the masses. The Derg's problem, which started the day it took over power and even first when it constituted itself and moved objectively to perpetuate the exploitative system, are insoluble and immense. Its demagogy, its radical rhetorics, its blind repression have not succeeded to arrest the mass struggle. In the cities and the rural areas, the class struggle rages on. It has put out fascistic laws curtailing all democratic liberties, it has outlawed strikes (punishable by death "in serious cases"), made contact with the EPRP a fatal "crime," arrested and executed countless militants.... The contradictions within the Derg itself are exploding violently and manifesting themselves in bloody purges.⁵⁴⁸

Would the Ethiopian left be able to meet the challenge... or be consumed by it?

⁵⁴⁸ EPRP, "The Tottering Regime of the Derg." From *Abyot*, Vol. 1, No. 6, August 1976.

Chapter 11

1977, The Terror

“The grisly scene of the bodies in the streets every morning was really troubling. Whoever observed the mountains of dead people at street corners each day feared that they might be the next for the reason they may not know.”—Military bureaucrat Dawit Shifaw⁵⁴⁹

“When we passed a burnt-out hulk of a car, [my friend Dan] said, ‘That’s from before Christmas break. Some guerrilla dudes raided an army post and got a bunch of weapons, but they got trapped here.’ ‘It was totally gross,’ Dave added from my other side. ‘You could see bodies for a week.’ ‘Check out the bullet holes,’ Dan said. Then he frowned in a cockeyed way.... Dan looked to the driver of the bus, a twenty-five-year-old Ethiopian who seemed a favorite with all the teens. ‘Hey, Yared... what do you think about the burned out car? Were those guys from the EDU?’ The driver, a slender guy with rippling forearms and a receding hairline, shook his head. ‘EPRP,’ he shouted.... I asked, ‘So what’s the EPRP?’ ‘The Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party,’ Dave explained. ‘They’re the student radicals who started the whole thing. They say they want democracy, but they’re more communist than Mengistu.’”—Teenage American missionary Tim Bascom⁵⁵⁰

“The bullet-riddled bodies of children, with notes describing their contrived crimes carelessly pinned to their tattered shirts, greeted us every morning. Their crimes were ill-defined. The tags always read the same: ‘This was a reactionary! The Red Terror Shall Flourish!’”—University student Nega Mezlekia⁵⁵¹

⁵⁴⁹ Dawit Shifaw, *Diary of Terror*, p. 61.

⁵⁵⁰ Tim Bascom, *Running to the Fire*, pp. 54–55.

⁵⁵¹ Nega Mezlekia, *Notes from the Hyena’s Belly*, p. 294.

A Decisive Move

The reaction to General Teferi Bente's speech of January 29, 1977, was swift. The simmering factional rivalries within the *Derg* had been forced to a head. Teferi's failure to name the EPRP as one of the enemies of the state was a direct challenge to now Lt. Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam and his allies. Apparently disregarding the *Derg's* own record of settling scores, General Teferi had gone ahead and, in effect, openly challenged Mengistu for leadership of the country. This was a lethal mistake.

What was about to happen on the morning of February 3 was plotted in meetings of the hard-core military members of Mengistu's *Seded* organization⁵⁵², this despite that fact that several of the people about to be on the wrong side of Mengistu's guns were also nominally secret *Seded* members. Teferi, Moges and Alemayehu must have been just numbed enough to the danger represented by Mengistu to let their guard down.

Military clerk Dawit Shifaw recalls that on that morning of February 3, "Mengistu gave orders to his security chief, Colonel Daniel [Asfaw] that no one was allowed to leave or enter the palace that day."⁵⁵³ An armed squad was sent to General Teferi Bente's office, and the detail escorted the general and his bodyguards back to the palace. Dawit continues, "In the palace, Teferi's men were surrounded and disarmed while the general was led to the execution chamber where the other men were waiting for the firing squad."⁵⁵⁴

"Pliny the Middle-Aged," the early analyst and historian of the *Derg*, offers more detail to the story.

After the arrests Mengistu called a meeting of the *dergue* and presented them with evidence that this group had been planning to join with the EPRP to oust him and the pro-*dergue Me'ei Sone*. His evidence, which included docu-

⁵⁵² See Babile Tola, *To Kill a Generation*, p. 100.

⁵⁵³ Dawit Shifaw, *op. Cit.*, pp. 53–54.

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

ments in Captain Alemayheu's own handwriting, was not exactly conclusive and was only very reluctantly accepted by the *dergue* members present. But it was accepted and the six men were immediately shot.... Some extracts were published in the *M'ei Sone* publication *Addis Fana*, no. 54, but these are selective. Those who have seen the full position paper, over 90 pages, say that the intention was to allow all parties, including the EPRP, to operate freely and openly as a prelude to trying to reconcile all factions and sectors of the country.⁵⁵⁵

Among the dead were General Teferi Bente, Captain Alemayehu Haile, Major Moges Wolde-Michael, and four others, all ranking members of the *Derg*. Concerned over the events at the Palace, the U.S. embassy was furiously gathering intelligence on the coup and trying to figure out what it all meant. Their sources turned up the detail that the executions took place in the Palace cafeteria.⁵⁵⁶

But the day's carnage was not over.

Major Yohannes Mitike was an investigator for the *Derg*.⁵⁵⁷ It's not clear whether he witnessed the morning's executions at the palace, or just heard them; nor is it clear what his relationship was to the executed *Derg* members (or to the civilian opposition). But he had apparently had enough, and Major Yohannes attempted to leave the palace grounds.

Yohannes's actions were recounted by Dawit Shifaw:

[T]he head of the palace criminal investigation major drove to the gate to leave the palace. Stopping him, the gate sentries told him that they had an order that no one would leave the palace. When he asked the person who passed

⁵⁵⁵ Pliny the Middle-Aged, "The PMAC: Origins and Structure: Part Two," pp. 7, 19.

⁵⁵⁶ February 9, 1977 Cable; Wikileaks link www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1977ADDIS00782_c.html.

⁵⁵⁷ In the strange intimacy of the Ethiopian revolution, Yohannes Mitike had been assigned to investigate the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia offices of Taffara Deguefé, an eventually imprisoned technocrat whose prison diaries are soon to give us a glimpse into the fate of several key players.

the order, they told him that it was Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Asfaw, Mengistu's security chief. Leaving his car at the gate, the major walked to Daniel's office carrying his machine gun and a pistol, as escorted by a guard. Daniel was in his office waiting for staff members for a meeting.... As he reached Daniel's office, the major... shot the guard and then Daniel. His intention was to kill everyone in the office, but he couldn't find them. He then shot and killed Dr. Senay Likke as he was going down the stairs to join Daniel for the meeting.... Soon Mengistu's men arrived and exchanged fire with the major. But they could not dislodge him from the office. Finally they brought a tank already in the palace and silenced him by smashing the whole office building.⁵⁵⁸

Kiflu Tadesse claims instead that Major Yohannes killed himself during the shootout. He suggests that Yohannes "never liked the political direction of the Derge. As an investigation officer, he had come across a number of cases that he found to be flimsy."⁵⁵⁹ Kiflu also suggests that "While the coup was in progress, leading MEISON members were awaiting the outcome at the POMOA headquarters."⁵⁶⁰

According to reports, some twenty soldiers died in the shootout, which could be heard blocks away.

Apparently Dr. Senay was only critically wounded in the event, but he succumbed to his wounds the next morning. A source close to the U.S. embassy claimed, though without much substantiation, that Major Yohannes had been waiting for an opportunity to kill both Mengistu and Atnafu Abate.⁵⁶¹

The U.S. embassy speculations on the background to Mengistu's coup are fascinating; they confirm the suggestion that Mengistu had

⁵⁵⁸ Dawit Shifaw, *op. Cit.*, pp. 53–54.

⁵⁵⁹ Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, p. 168.

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁵⁶¹ February 9, 1977 Cable; Wikileaks link www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1977ADDIS00782_c.html.

acted preemptively to spike a move against him. A February 9 cable discusses Alemayehu:

Highly reliable source reports that member of POMOA, directed by Capt Alemayehu, wrote paper detailing how EPRP could be brought into fold. PMAC denunciation of 47-page document which “aims at planting EPRP members in order to foil revolution, demolish POMOA through kidnapping its members, crushing revolutionaries, and staging fascistic *coup d’etat*, as well as establishing Provisional’s Government” appears accommodation with EPRP. Although Alemayehu may have tolerated EPRP, it does not seem he was EPRP member. Highly reliable source claims Alemayehu had own group of advisors and was lending his support to separate, though small, clandestine part[y] called Revolutionary Flame.⁵⁶²

Interestingly the embassy’s intelligence on *Seded*—Revolutionary Flame—was obviously incomplete; despite being sponsored by the most powerful military figures in the country, *Seded* cloaked itself in the same clandestine secrecy as the civilian left it was trying to undercut, leaving the embassy guessing.

Something declassified U.S. embassy cables do not, however, report is whether the U.S. embassy unknowingly green-lighted Mengistu’s coup. A secret memorandum from the Soviet embassy reports on a curiously timed meeting that took place the day before the coup between officials of the U.S. and Soviet embassies in Addis Ababa. The meeting took place on February 2 between Herbert Malin, the political counselor at the U.S. embassy, and S.Y. Sinitsin, the Counselor-Minister at the Soviet embassy.

According to the no longer secret memo,⁵⁶³ the two officials dis-

⁵⁶² February 9, 1977 Cable, Ibid.

⁵⁶³ “Memorandum of Conversation between Soviet Counselor-Minister in Ethiopia S. Sinitsin with Political Counselor of the U.S. Embassy in Ethiopia Herbert Malin,” 2 February 1977; via Wilson Center link, digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111620.

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cussed at great length the current situation in the country. They shared notes on the situation within the *Derg*, and on the seriousness of the threats to the PMAC from the right-wing opposition EDU, from neighbors Sudan and Somalia, and from the EPRP. According to the Russian counselor, Malin saw the situation likely to remain “complicated and tense” despite the intentions for moderation announced by General Teferi. Sinitsin seems to have extensively quizzed Malin over what Malin saw to be the relationship of the PMAC and the United States, and what the U.S. saw as its responsibilities to the Ethiopian government. Sinitsin reports “The USA, Malin emphasized, does not oppose the ‘socialist choice’ of new Ethiopia and, as before, firmly supports the principal of respect for its territorial integrity, and is against the partition of Ethiopia.” Furthermore, when asked, Malin said that a long-standing security agreement between the USA and Ethiopia “does not call for the direct involvement of American armed forces in the defense of Ethiopia’s security.” Sinitsin told Malin that Soviet-Ethiopian relations, already friendly, “have a tendency to develop further,” but suggested that a dramatic shift in relations would not be shortly forthcoming. Sinitsin took careful note that Malin complained of anti-Americanism coming from the EPRP and from pro-*Derg* sources short of General Teferi himself. Malin seems to have given quite a lot of information to Sinitsin about all the “advanced armaments” the U.S. had agreed to supply to the Ethiopian government.

And Malin apparently remarked that the U.S. embassy’s money was ultimately on the military regime to prevail against domestic opposition:

Malin feels that the EPRP will hardly agree to support the call of Teferi Banti, due to its disagreement with the policy of the *Derg*. At the same time, he continued, the opposition forces are not united and their joint opposition to the existing regime has a temporary and tactical character. Even if the opposition forces should succeed in overthrowing this regime, a struggle for power will erupt between them, especially between the pro-monarchy “Ethiopian Democratic

Union” and the “Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party” and other leftist groups. The PMAC, in his opinion, continues to be the only real common national power in contemporary Ethiopia, although its policy does not enjoy support among a significant portion of the population.⁵⁶⁴

It’s circumstantial speculation, but it seems entirely possible Sinitsin was pumping Malin to find out how deeply the U.S. felt invested in the Ethiopian government, what its opinion of the opposition was, and what the U.S. response might be to an existential threat to that government. Of the PMAC leadership, Mengistu was undoubtedly the most interested in building closer ties to the USSR; he had already made one visit to Moscow. It seems completely plausible that he planned his move to seize control of the government with some degree of consultation with the Soviets, knowing that among the obstacles he would be removing would be those less anxious to trade-in the United States’s fading commitments in favor of whole-hearted backing from the power at the other end of the Cold War.

Indeed the literal palace coup by Mengistu meant the end of compromises: he was now in charge of the Ethiopian government. General Teferi and the others who were eliminated did not have a mass following, notwithstanding any ties they might have had to the EPRP, and so Mengistu was in no real danger of provoking additional mass opposition to *Derg* rule. One real tie that Teferi Bente had with the EPRP turns out to have been his son, Ayneshet Teferi, an EPRP member who had been recruited to an EPLO cell in ESUNA in Washington DC⁵⁶⁵. Ayneshet was arrested promptly after his father’s execution and himself put to death around Easter.⁵⁶⁶

But the greatest losers of the coup were about to be the members and supporters of the civilian left. Mengistu had just purchased a man-

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁵ Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part I*, p. 103.

⁵⁶⁶ Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, p. 168; Kiflu also says as an EPRP leader, he had attempted in January to warn Teferi via Ayneshet that Mengistu was planning a coup; the warning was rebuffed. See p. 165.

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date in blood for his own agenda.

An official statement by the PMAC in the aftermath of the shootout claimed that the carnage was actually the result of a failed coup *against* Mengistu.

Counter-revolutionaries were trying to disrupt the popular revolution which was brought about by the broad masses after years of continuous struggle and bloodshed and suffering. They were trying in vain to undo the present revolutionary march and to dismember the country and sell it out to reactionary Arab governments through subtle machinations and plots in cooperation with internal and external reactionary forces. These machinations have now crumbled and the sinister plot has been foiled.⁵⁶⁷

The extended statement spends paragraphs laying blame on the EDU, EPRP and ELF for the “coup attempt,” and lauding praise on the dedicated “men-in-uniform.”

It was masterminded by hired recruits within the PMAC used by imperialists, EDU and EPRP and was carried out with an aim not only to raid the country from various directions and thereby demoralise the men-in-uniform but also to take advantage of the unfavourable situation so that hired members of the Council could bring about a fascistic coup d'état in the capital identical to what had taken place in Chile.... For the Ethiopian men-in-uniform to complete their revolutionary task, they must have greater revolutionary awareness and revolutionary discipline.... The hands and feet of the Provisional Military Government were hopelessly tied during the last four months on account of a few EPRP, EDU and imperialist recruits in its midst. Members of the PMAC and men-in-uniform who were aware of this fact, were not able to respond immediately to the demands

⁵⁶⁷ All statement quotes from “Government Statement on Attempted Coup,” *The Ethiopian Herald*, February 5, 1977.

of the broad masses, their children, comrades, leaders to be armed and consolidate their revolution because their voices were stifled by EPRP and EDU infiltrators.

Teferi Bente is predictably blamed for his speech of the previous week: “The former Chairman of the PMAC, an accomplice of this sinister plot, failed to mention in his address to the nation on Saturday, Jan. 29, EPRP’s attempt to subvert the Revolution, and this clearly shows the extent of the plot to bring back remnants of feudalism into the mainstream of the broad masses.” The statement goes on to detail alleged assassinations and sabotage by the “paid killers” of EPRP, EDU and ELF and recount organizing efforts against them. For instance, “In urban centres workers have now formed an-all trade union through maximum struggle carried out by genuine revolutionaries after ridding themselves of EPRP agents who have been trying to prevent them from acquiring political awareness and getting organized.” With its evidence-free talk of Arabian petro dollars and Chile-style CIA plots and an entire thesaurus’s worth of Marxist-Leninist rhetoric, it illustrates the high stakes of the propaganda war between the *Derg* and the EPRP. Courtesy, no doubt, of the *Derg*’s civilian leftist allies, it reads like a funhouse mirror version of an EPRP narrative.

Lt. Colonel Mengistu addressed a rally of thousands the Friday after the coup. His speech is reprinted in the same edition of *The Ethiopian Herald* as the PMAC statement itself, along with statements from AETU, *Pravda*, and Fidel Castro. The U.S. embassy was perceptively quick to note that no representative of POMOA shared the stage with Mengistu.⁵⁶⁸ Mengistu speaks of no longer being constrained by internal conflicts inside the government. “Henceforth, we will tackle enemies that come face to face with us and we will not be stabbed from behind by internal foes. Comrades and leaders of the broad masses will not be mowed down by anarchists in the bushes. Terror and anarchy will vanish from the camp of the broad masses and reign in that of reactionaries. We will duly reciprocate the campaign of terror being

⁵⁶⁸ See Feb. 4, 1977 Cable; Wikileaks link www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1977ADDIS00686_c.html.

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spread by reactionaries and avenge the blood of our comrades double and triple-fold.”⁵⁶⁹ Implying that reactionaries inside the PMAC had been holding them back, he makes repeated calls not only for retribution but for “democratic rights.” “Revolutionary motherland or death. May EPRP, EDU and ELF be obliterated! Democratic rights to the oppressed immediately! Arms to the broad masses!”⁵⁷⁰ While weapons were indeed shortly to be distributed to government-sponsored militias that were functionally death squads, those democratic rights somehow failed to appear.

Later in the year, Mengistu was to christen as “the Red Terror” the campaign against what he called “the white terror” of the opposition, harkening back to the period following the Russian revolution when the new socialist government faced down foreign invasion and domestic reaction. It must be noted here that many on the international left bought this obvious and shallow metaphor, simplistically matching up propaganda narratives. Mengistu may not have had leftist bonafides, but he knew how to communicate in the leftist language he had so expediently adopted. At one dramatic speech in April he picked up three bottles filled with fake blood and smashed them on the ground, exhorting the crowd to action against those whom he labelled “counter-revolutionaries.” He tried to conflate his leftist opponents, royalist guerrillas based in Sudan, two competing fronts of Eritrean rebels, and the avowedly socialist Somali government threatening the eastern borders of the country as a united front of counter-revolution. His narrative relied on the clouding of details, but the violent intent of his bloody metaphor couldn’t have been clearer.

On February 8 the U.S. embassy sent a report to Washington speculating about the significance of the coup. It’s actually surprisingly perceptive, almost prescient. It said in part,

While Dirg top ranks have been decimated in last days,
and death of POMOA vice chairman Senaye Likke also

⁵⁶⁹ “PMAC Pledges Democratic Rights to Masses,” *The Ethiopian Herald*, February 5, 1977.

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

no doubt gladdened [E]PRP hearts, EPRP in long run has most to lose from shake-up. Those in PMAC favoring accommodation with EPRP are gone, and Mengistu will surely launch strong crackdown aimed at hard EPRP core possibly sweeping up in process many non-affiliated sympathizers of EPRP goals and some innocent bystanders. On other hand, some were already counting EPRP out last fall, only to see resurgence over past ten days of EPRP-inspired assassinations, anti-government incidents, and leaflet distribution. Such activities are bound to continue, and Mengistu must realize that, after his actions of past week, he is more a marked man than ever, with Haile Fida also high on most wanted list, and not only in eyes of their enemies in EPRP. At a time when summary justice is being dealt out, however, clandestine activity likely to decline for next week or so, while both sides devise new strategies.⁵⁷¹

The meaning of Mengistu's call for his men-in-uniform to take decisive action against the opposition was about to be made abundantly clear.

The Decapitation of the EPRP

The leaders of the EPRP had already gone underground since the conflict between the EPRP and the *Derg* and its civilian left allies broke out into near urban civil war in late 1976. Although *Democracia* continued to appear throughout the horrible months that were to follow, the intricate zonal and inter-zonal committee and cell structure of the EPRP started to falter under the threat of existential violence. And the organization found itself losing the mechanisms to resolve its crisis of leadership; a critical internal disagreement was blossoming into interne-cine violence. The toll on the Party would be brutal.

It would be a year of unprecedented violence. According to EPRP insider Babile Tola, they understood what was coming:

⁵⁷¹ February 8, 1977 Cable; Wikileaks link www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1977ADDIS00764_c.html.

For the Opposition, it was clear that they were going to be executed en masse, without pity and illegally. Once again, the choice was either to die “peacefully” (quietly and without resistance) or to resist.... It was not the violence of the EPRP which pushed Mengistu and his clique to wipe out the Derg members who wanted to check the terror. It was their own ambition and determination to settle the whole issue through mass murder.⁵⁷²

On February 14 the U.S. embassy issued a chilling report about government agitation against “anarchist” youth, citing the EPRP. They were taking the incitement coming from the PMAC very seriously:

True to its promise to assume offensive in pursuing revolution, EPMG appears to be moving firmly to put an end to student disturbances. Provisional Military Admin. Council (PMAC) issued statement Feb. 10, calling on urban dwellers associations (Kebeles), school supervisory committees, teachers and progressive students to “effectively check campaign by few anarchists to boycott educational classes and disrupt ongoing popular revolution.” Turning students own rhetoric around, PMAC statement identified disruptive youths as “fascist youngsters, anti-revolutionaries, remnants of old aristocracy and riraff offspring of aristocrats and bourgeoisie.” Statement mentioned counterrevolutionary acts in schools past 2 weeks and listed Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP) as students fellow conspirators. Statement viewed campaign of terror and anarchy unleashed past six months by EPRP and other agents of remnants of old aristocracy as further evidence of intensified class struggle of oppressed masses.... Reliable sources reported student led anti-government incidents afternoon Feb. 12 which apparently have resulted in arrests of “hundreds” of student age youth and alleged deaths of

⁵⁷² Babile Tola, *op. Cit.*, p. 87.

many others. EPRP leaflets observed at most trouble sites, and chants heard of “Down with Mengistu” and “Long live Teferi Bante”. PMAC statement concluded “There is no force whatsoever that can withstand united and strong arms of broad masses from crushing reactionaries and fascist youth regardless of age or sex.”... PMAC issued Feb 10 statement urging kebeles, school supervisory committees, teachers and “progressive” students to discharge responsibilities against anarchist youth.⁵⁷³

Rank-and-file members of the EPRP remained resolute, but it was clear they were also deeply aware and worried about the turn of events and what was coming. Plans by POMOA/*Meison* were discovered for a late February house-to-house search and destroy campaign to systematically root EPRP out of Addis Ababa neighborhoods.⁵⁷⁴

Fully backing Mengistu’s actions, *Meison* was open about its intentions. In February, the underground *Meison* organ, *Voice of the Broad Masses*, echoed Mengistu’s threats: “We are ready to unleash red terror on the EPRP fascists. Their blood shall serve as the water with which [we will] put out the fire of counter-revolution.”⁵⁷⁵

Even abroad *Meison’s* supporters in the diaspora student movement were quick to choose sides. *The Ethiopian Herald* reported that the United Progressive Ethiopian Students Union in North America⁵⁷⁶ sent a message from Washington DC condemning the “counter-revolutionary attempt to subvert ongoing revolution of broad masses of Ethiopia,” and fully supporting any “revolutionary measures taken against plotters.” Referring in part to the late Senay Likke, UPESUNA would “remember revolutionary comrades who lost lives during counter-revolutionary attempt.”⁵⁷⁷

⁵⁷³ February 14, 1977 cable; Wikileaks link www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1977ADDIS00928_c.html.

⁵⁷⁴ See Kiflu Tadesse, *Part II op. Cit.*, p. 194.

⁵⁷⁵ Quoted in Babile Tola, *op. Cit.*, p. 137.

⁵⁷⁶ UPESUNA, an anti-EPRP split-off from ESUNA.

⁵⁷⁷ Quoted in a US embassy cable, Wikileaks link www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1977ADDIS00787_c.html.

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The anticipated dragnet of Addis Ababa planned for the end of February failed to materialize. But nevertheless, repression escalated, and as predicted young people were a primary target. The EPRP journal *Abyot* reported a wave of arrests and executions, including:

On February 26, 1977, 44 of the 470 political prisoners held in the Special Security Police Station were secretly executed... the prisoners were all between 17–25 with the exception of one revolutionary who was 40. The youngest of them was Fikru Yosef, who was a student in the Makonnen High School in Addis Abeba.... Their hands were tied up backwards against their feet passing the tight rope through the mouth thereby pulling the head backwards. Then, they were thrown into the prison truck like dead bodies. The prisoners started to sing revolutionary songs and chanted slogans condemning the regime and pledging support to the EPRP... they were wounded either by bayonets or knife cuts. Their bodies were all stained with blood.⁵⁷⁸

The trucks were driven out of town; a small few, including the eyewitness to *Abyot's* report, managed to escape *en route*. As for the rest, their bodies were buried by a tractor.

Underground life was getting more and more difficult. Party activist Hiwot Teffera recounts meeting Nega Ayele, the former student activist, writer, and stalwart of the *Democracia* team.

That day I went to my cousin Elsa's around six-thirty in the evening. Days before the *assessa*⁵⁷⁹, I went there to spend the night and saw a man sitting on the couch in the living room. I instinctively knew he was a Party member. I made friends with him easily and since that day, I sat and talked with him whenever I went there. I became his window to the outside world. At times, people came, took him in a car,

⁵⁷⁸ EPRP, "Repression Escalated" *Abyot*, Vol. 2, No.4, March 1977.

⁵⁷⁹ The *assessa* was the Derg search-and-destroy campaign against the EPRP.

and brought him back. He had an infirmity of his legs and I often wondered how he could survive the horrible conditions with his physical infirmity.⁵⁸⁰

Party leaders who were already underground made plans to relocate. The party as a whole turned the bustling, anarchic Mercato neighborhood of Addis Ababa into a hub for activity and a sanctuary from the prying eyes of pro-*Derg* militias and *kebeles*. Leaders of the party often spent their days there in secure anonymity. But for many it was not in time. As the tense situation worsened, Hiwot remembers, “I wondered if the man was still at my cousin’s. He was not. My cousin sadly told me that he had been killed trying to leave town before the *assessa*.”⁵⁸¹

Kiflu Tadesse, a CC member himself living underground at the time, recounts in detail what happened to Nega.

In March 1977, while getting ready to withstand the search and destroy campaign, the EPRP lost four of its invaluable leading members: Yohannes Berhane, a member of the CC and one of the leading members of the *Democracia* editorial board; Melaku Marcos, a veteran activist and leading intellectual... a CC member without portfolio; Nega Ayele, an economist and a lecturer at the University of Addis Abeba and a member of the EPRP political department; Dr. William Hastings Morton, a British lecturer at the Addis Abeba and a member of the EPRP... Arrangements were made [to escape Addis] and Dr. Morton came into the picture to provide means of transportation and to give the group a plausible disguise. On a Saturday morning, on the day that the campaign was expected to begin, the [four and another EPRP member named AY] left for the south via the Akaki Road... In order to avoid the checkpoint at Akaki, Yohannes Berhane, AY and Melaku Marcos stepped out

⁵⁸⁰ Hiwot Teffera, *op. Cit.*, p. 226.

⁵⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

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of the vehicle just before the city limits. As they walked through an alley, past a factory gate in the Kaliti area... they encountered *Abyot Tebeka* members from one of the factories. They tried to run away, but they were chased by the *Abyot Tebeka* members and a mob of workers that was just going out on a break. Yohannes and Melaku were killed on the spot.... Nega and Dr. Morton, who drove past the checkpoint peacefully were waiting for the others when they heard the gunshots, and sensing danger, cancelled the plan to drive to Langano. As they returned to Addis Abeba, members of the *Abyot Tebeka* opened fire and killed both of them. Neither the regime nor the *Abyot Tebeka* members knew that they had eliminated some of the most valuable members of the EPRP.⁵⁸²

The last urban EPRP CC meeting was held secretly in Addis in February. The committee decided to step up its agitation on Eritrea, finally advocating for the actual independence of Eritrea⁵⁸³. The party knew its situation was militarily precarious, and this has to be seen as an appeal for defensive support from the Eritrean fronts. While the EPRP remained notable in its calls for solidarity with the Eritrean liberation movements, renewed ethnic suspicions between revolutionary Ethiopian and Eritrean movements were to snowball, both in the diaspora and at home.

The Central Committee meeting also agreed to reopen the discussion of urban and rural armed struggle, a core issue related to the factionalism plaguing the party.⁵⁸⁴ Despite this agreement to renew internal discussion, the dangerous climate of violence reached inside the EPRP leadership, dramatically exacerbating the rifts that had been

⁵⁸² Kiflu Tadesse, *Part II op. Cit.*, p. 196. Since Morton was a British citizen, his death received attention in the press. An Associated Press dispatch (quoted here from *The Victoria Advocate*, March 14, 1977) says, "An official statement said the four were taking pictures of a sweater factory on the outskirts of Addis Ababa for espionage purposes."

⁵⁸³ Kiflu Tadesse, *Part II op. Cit.*, pp. 185–188.

⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 185–188.

growing since the EPRP began to engage in urban armed struggle in the fall of 1976.

Accusing them of using their positions to organize a faction inside the EPRP toward the formation of a group outside the party, the EPRP CC mandated that Getachew Maru and Berhane Meskel—both removed from the CC in the fall—be arrested and detained by Party security.⁵⁸⁵ Getachew was captured and imprisoned in a safe house; Berhane Meskel eluded detention and fled north to the countryside of Shoa province with a small band of followers.

Berhane Meskel published a *samizdat*-like pamphlet “On the Mass Line,” calling for a rectification of the EPRP’s orientation.⁵⁸⁶ While he was unhappy with the EPRP’s leadership and direction, Berhane is said to have distanced himself from other EPRP factionalists who had begun to feed information to the EPRP’s enemies. In retrospect, the EPRP leadership’s opinion of its dissidents was that they were not just debating the direction of the party, but the existence of the party and its democratic mission. “The urban/rural armed struggle division is fiction. They were opposed to the whole anti-derg position,” writes Iyasou Alemayehu.⁵⁸⁷

And the EPRP did have major enemies: The first so-called *asesa*, anticipated back in February, finally began on March 22.⁵⁸⁸ The dragnet lasted at least three days. Squads led by *Meison* members and pro-*Derg* police and militias initiated a search-and-destroy sweep through the neighborhoods of Addis Ababa. Similar sweeps took place across the country. Nighttime was marked by constant raids; in the daytime, death squads looked high and low for targets. Thousands of people were arrested or killed outright. Lest some think the *Derg* wanted its campaign to go unnoticed by the world community, here is how the day was noted in a “Diary of Revolution” published in a pamphlet by a *Derg* propaganda office later that year: “March 23, 1977—Revolution-

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 182.

⁵⁸⁶ Unfortunately this text has not been translated from Amharic.

⁵⁸⁷ In correspondence with the author. Slightly edited for clarity.

⁵⁸⁸ Kiflu Tadesse, *Part II op. Cit.*, p. 197.

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ary campaign launched to cleanse the city of Addis Ababa from counter-revolutionaries.”⁵⁸⁹

The Party claimed that still had the support of the people; and that government’s repression was a sign of its own illegitimacy, and that it would only alienate those it claimed to represent. From *Abyot*:

The Dergue that took power by sheer force “on behalf of the armed forces movement,” after a long evolution of internal struggle, does not actually exist today.... The mere fact that Mengistu has reinstated the reign of terror that the Dergue had earlier stopped gradually, increased the hatred and opposition to Mengistu and the support to EPRP. Consequently, the social base that the Dergue was vainly attempting to get was thrown overboard by Mengistu. All the neutral elements and even those who gave to the Derg their passive support were all pushed by the terror on the side of EPRP. Even at the level of propaganda; Mengistu accused the crafty wing of the Derge and the mummy General Teferi of being EPRP members, of attempting to form a provisional people’s government which helped the masses to affirm the fact that Mengistu is evermore determined to suppress the popular demands of the masses and the fact that the only way out is a popular armed resistance. This is why the punishment actions undertaken by EPRA against political criminals are fully endorsed by the popular masses.⁵⁹⁰

But the reality on the ground was that the Party was in big trouble. Then EPRP supporter Nega Mezlekia recalls the constant threat of random, lethal violence.

One day, I saw a young mathematics teacher being followed

589 Ethiopian Revolution Information Centre, “Ethiopia in Revolution,” July 1977, p. 54.

590 EPRP, “The Mengistu-Haile Fida Clique: What It Is and What It Does,” *Abyot*, Vol. 2, No. 4, March 1977.

by three Meison cadres in a Toyota land cruiser. Across the street from the campus gate, the young man got out of his taxi, paid the fare, and was about to cross the road when he noticed the off-white truck that had been tailing his taxi. The Land Cruiser was one of countless identical vehicles bought by the regime for its various cronies. The young man realized what was transpiring, and knew that he was doomed. The cadres jumped off the truck. . . . They told him to raise his hands high above his head and freeze in his tracks. The young man didn't oblige. He started fiddling with a charm that was hanging from his necklace, while walking backwards. The cadres were quick to realize with the young teacher was up to. . . . The young man's hands shook, threatening to fly from his wrists, but he managed to untie the small capsule in time. He bit into it, infuriating the cadres, who tossed him in mid-air with a torrent of machine-gun fire. I hoped the cyanide killed him first.⁵⁹¹

Another random, apparently typical hit was described in *The New York Times*, observed from the perspective of a hotel bar one hot afternoon.

Suddenly, across a grove of eucalyptus trees along Josip Broz Tito Street, comes a strange undulating cry. Five shots ring out. A car speeds by, its tires screeching. Seven Ethiopian men at the bar drop their drinks and rush for the grove, pulling revolvers from their pockets. They arrive to see a taxi disappearing around a corner and half a dozen panicked teenagers rushing by. A blue Volkswagen rolls against the curb. Its occupant is dead—the latest victim in this capital's increasingly open, increasing vicious street war.⁵⁹²

⁵⁹¹ Nega Mezlekia, *op. Cit.*, pp. 296–297.

⁵⁹² John Darnton, “War in Addis Ababa’s Streets devouring the Revolution’s Progeny,” *The New York Times*, March 9, 1977 (via www.nytimes.com/1977/03/09/archives/war-in-addis-ababas-streets-devouring-the-revolutions-progeny.html).

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The *Times* reporter doesn't say who shot whom.

Street dragnets netted some major prizes. EPRP labor leader and former CELU head Markos Hagos, already a veteran of repeated imprisonment and torture, was the next key figure to fall, on March 24. According to an obituary published by EPRP supporters in Europe, "In a fierce gun battle, the valiant revolutionary fighter had finished off well over 20 of the search squad soldiers before his death."⁵⁹³ The state media report of his death couldn't refrain from accusations against him. It said Markos was "killed in the course of the search launched to free the capital from reactionaries and paid assassins."⁵⁹⁴ The article called Markos an "anarchist" and a member of the "fascistic EPRP gang," and blamed him for instigating strikes in September 1974 during the *Derg's* seizure of power.

Then it was Tesfaye Debessay. One of the most respected members of the EPRP's CC leadership grouping, Tesfaye had long gone to ground; but as an active party leader he still made his rounds to conduct political work. A statement in *Abyot* said, Tesfaye "killed himself [rather] than falling in the hands of the fascists who tried to arrest him in central Addis Ababa. In the gun battle with the fascists, he ran out of bullets and jumped through the window from the Kidane Building.... In 1975 he had to go underground as he was to be arrested. After two years of underground work, he was spotted by social-fascists while performing his contact duties."⁵⁹⁵

His long-time comrade Kiflu Tadesse says that Tesfaye had been recognized by *Meison* members driving by a search-and-destroy dragnet. The squad followed him, shot and killed his accompanying companion, and then shot Tesfaye, who "was hit on the head and ran upstairs. By the time he reached the sixth floor, his face was covered with blood and he had already begun to become delirious. He then found a window and jumped down from the sixth floor, dying instantly. The Meison squad then called Negede Gobeze, who came to confirm the identity of

⁵⁹³ WWFES, *Forward*, quoting *Abyot*, April–May 1977, 1.6-7.

⁵⁹⁴ "Former Chairman of Defunct CELU Killed," *The Ethiopian Herald*, March 27, 1977.

⁵⁹⁵ WWFES, *Forward*, quoting *Abyot*, April–May 1977, 1.6-7.

the victim.”⁵⁹⁶

Kiflu eulogized his fallen comrade:

The death of Tesfaye Debessai was the single most serious blow that Meison inflicted not on the EPRP but on the Ethiopian radical generation.... [He] was the ideologue, organizer, politician and father of the organization.... He was simple, down to earth and modest and had a deep-seated democratic instinct. In his political thinking, he was not only complex, but he could also see far beyond anyone else.... The EPRP had lost its spirit.⁵⁹⁷

Those who survived or escaped a search party found themselves with limited options. Former EPRP supporter Makonnen Araya was targeted in a raid by a local *kebele* militia and *Meison* members that Spring. He fled his home in the nick of time. He remembers, “Thus, finding myself suddenly homeless and unemployed the morning after the raid, I started to live the life of a fugitive. Everything happened so fast. In the space of a few hours, my life had changed forever. I could not return home. My family members could not return home. I did not realize it then, but this new way of life would engulf me for an undetermined period of time. The city of Addis Ababa became a prison, engulfed in a perpetual state of search, seizure, and senseless murders. The routine in itself frightened and horrified me. I had to leave the city.”⁵⁹⁸ Like many hundreds of others began to do, Makonnen made his way to the EPRA guerrilla base areas in the north of the country.

The EPRP’s European section summarized the overwhelming onslaught of the “Red Terror” in *Abyot*, attempting, in hindsight somewhat vainly, to put a spin of resolute optimism on the ongoing horror:

At present, the EPRP is facing one of the most ruthless campaigns of terror ever seen anywhere in the world. To defeat this and carry the revolutionary war until victory,

⁵⁹⁶ Kiflu Tadesse, *Part II op. Cit.*, p. 200.

⁵⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

⁵⁹⁸ Makonnen Araya, *Negotiating a Lion’s Share of Freedom*, p. 5.

the members of the EPRP, of the EPRYL and of the various genuine mass organisations are standing side by side with the oppressed masses in a united, firm and determined manner. Daily, fascists, social imperialists and Cuban mercenaries are shedding the blood of thousands of fine revolutionaries all throughout the country. Daily, thousands of our militants and supporters are paying the necessary sacrifice and advancing the revolutionary war to its objectives. The people who have embraced the EPRP and the members of the EPRP knew from the outset that the school of civil war is a painful school. They knew that this bitter war, which necessarily will have very many instances of reactionary terror campaigns and mass slaughter, will melt the will of the faint-hearted and the pseudo-revolutionaries. More importantly, the people and the EPRP knew, know and are ever more certain that the oppressed masses led by the EPRP will triumph over the fascists, social imperialists, traitors and all other scums.⁵⁹⁹

The courage of the overwhelmingly young EPRP supporters being targeted was most certainly not spin. One female survivor remembers,

Women contributed immensely in EPRP squads and other activities. I remember an incident at the Darg Interrogation Center where an interrogator wondered aloud what sort of discipline could have been instilled in women members that enabled them to withstand such tortures as having their breasts set ablaze by torched newspapers. Those heroic young women endured it without divulging any information.⁶⁰⁰

The *asessa* was indeed deadly, and it cost the EPRP dearly, but it

⁵⁹⁹ “The Principled Unity of EPRP is Unshakable!,” *Abyot*, February Special Issue 1978, pp. 30–31.

⁶⁰⁰ Original Wolde Giorgis, in Bahru Zewde, *Documenting the Ethiopian Student Movement*, p. 125.

didn't wipe them out.

Let The "Red Terror" Intensify!

One of the more gruesome incidents of that bloody March was so bad that even the *Derg* attempted to distance itself from the horror. It caused a temporary lull in the bloodshed and marked a rift in the relationship between Mengistu and his leftist allies that proved to be a harbinger of things to come.

Derg supporter Dawit Shifaw was among those horrified by news of the event that swept Addis Ababa and remembers the raids beginning: "The search moved systematically from neighborhood to neighborhood as streets were blocked to catch anyone who might leave home to escape the search. The neighborhood search team, which was comprised of several armed soldiers, armed *kebele* revolutionary squads, and authorities as well as Maeson and [Waz] League cadres moved steadily from house to house."⁶⁰¹

Taffara Deguefé, a technocrat from the *ancien régime*, was languishing in prison at the time, without charges; he kept a diary where he recorded the stories that swept through the prison population. He pieced together the details of what happened next from some of those eventually arrested for the action:

Members of the defence squad of the Berhanena Selam Printing Press near Arat Kilo denounced a dozen or so of their co-workers as EPRP members. That was at a time when workers were being encouraged to expose the "reactionaries" in their midst. The suspects in Berhanena Salam were turned over to the police for investigation and the police released them for lack of evidence. The city was horrified the next day when the bodies of nine of them, including a woman in an advanced stage of pregnancy, were found by the bank of a nearby river. The torture and execution of the nine was apparently carried out by the defence squad of the

⁶⁰¹ Dawit Shifaw, *op. Cit.*, pp. 59–60.

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kebele where Berhanena Selam Printing Press was located. The leader of the squad was Girma Kebede.⁶⁰²

Daro Negash, eight months pregnant, the leader of the printer's union, and a founder of the EPRP's underground labor organization, ELAMA, was the woman mentioned.⁶⁰³ According to *Abyot*, "[T]he Nebelbal-Banda beasts pulled out her eyes with a knife, mutilated her body, cut her breasts off, and opened her stomach with a bayonnette."⁶⁰⁴

Daro's murder was too viscerally brutal to pass unnoticed. Popular opinion rebelled. Dawit Shifaw explains what happened next.

[S]ilence began to break when Mengistu's killing machine was out of control. It was the workers of Berhanena Selam who first said "Enough is enough," days after their eight coworkers were brutally murdered by Arat Kilo *kebele* authorities. They rallied carrying posters demanding the execution of *kebele* chairman Girma Kebede and his assistants.... To bring the people back to his side, Mengistu betrayed Girma Kebede and ordered his execution by firing squad.... As a Maeson active member,⁶⁰⁵ his party may have tried to save his life. But Mengistu chose to silence public outcry instead of pleasing his Maeson partners.⁶⁰⁶

From prison, Taffara Deguefé supplies the final details. "Girma Kebede was arrested and brought to our prison with five of his accomplices. It was discovered that he was a designated executioner, who had already murdered 24 persons, and had a list of over 200 others he was supposed to liquidate yet. Early one Saturday morning, Girma and his accomplices were taken to the scene of their crime and, in front of the assembled residents of the *kebele* they had terrorized, executed by

⁶⁰² Taffara Deguefé, *Minutes of an Ethiopian Century*, pp. 512–513.

⁶⁰³ Kiflu Tadesse, *Part II op. Cit.*, pp. 197–198

⁶⁰⁴ EPRP, "News," *Abyot*, Vol. 2, No. 3, April 1977.

⁶⁰⁵ This is disputed.

⁶⁰⁶ Dawit Shifaw, *op. Cit.*, pp. 59–60.

a firing squad as counter-revolutionaries.”⁶⁰⁷ Taffara took special note of the behind-the-scenes intrigue: “We were to learn later that the Berhanena Selam incident was a turning point in the relationship between the Political Bureau run by Haile Fida and his group, and the Dergue. It was the Fidaists who were urging the continued purge of the *kebeles* for what they turned as reactionaries and anarchists.”⁶⁰⁸

Mengistu distanced himself from Girma Kebede, but people knew better. According to former *Meison* member Abera Yemane-Ab, “Girma Kebede took his orders directly from the office of the Dergue, specifically from the office of Legesse Asfaw.”⁶⁰⁹ Legesse Asfaw, the brother of the late Daniel Asfaw—killed by Major Yohannes in February—was a key henchman of Mengistu, and would go on to be one of his biggest party loyalists.

A second search and destroy campaign took place in late April/Early May. Kiflu says that *Meison* coordinated the first one with the Derg and militia death squads, but that, on its way out of favor with the *Derg*, left the second campaign to *WazLig* and *Seded* cadre backed by the army.⁶¹⁰ During this second campaign, another EPRP founder and CC member, a veteran of ESUNA in the US, Kiflu Teffera, was apprehended and killed during a city-wide sweep. A photo shows his bloodied body lying in the street.

Those caught in the dragnet but not instantly eliminated were taken to detention centers that were springing up all over the cities and towns of Ethiopia. According to Amnesty International, every single *kebele* in Addis Ababa had its own prison, holding as many as 30,000 prisoners during the worst of the terror.⁶¹¹ While some prisons were used to house long-term political prisoners, the *kebele* centers were focused on the short-term, which meant detention, torture, inquisition, and quick execution. Note the complete lack of any jurisprudence. Captured

⁶⁰⁷ Taffara Deguefé, *op. Cit.*, pp. 512–513.

⁶⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁹ Abera Yemane-Ab, “The Defeat of the Ethiopian Revolution,” p. 18.

⁶¹⁰ See Kiflu Tadesse, *Part II op. Cit.*, pp. 201–202.

⁶¹¹ Amnesty International, “Human Rights Violations in Ethiopia,” Sept. 1978, p. 8.

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EPRP militants were often posed and photographed before they were executed: sometimes with the banners, literature and weapons they had been captured with, and sometimes with signs around their necks “confessing” to their “anti-revolutionary” crimes. Red flyers inscribed, “Let the red terror intensify” were posted everywhere, often pinned to battered bodies left in the street.

The scene in the *kebeles* was sheer brutality. According to an EPRP report compiled from survivor testimony,

Those suspected of being EPRP members are made to suffer more. To alleged EPRP members the torture extends from flogging to cutting a part of the prisoners’ flesh and forcing him to eat it.... When I was in prison here are some of the techniques of torture widely used on the youth to extort information: ...to tie the hand muscles above the elbow on one’s back and to hang down the prisoner and to flog and beat the soles of the feet, to put the forehead against the wall and press the sexual organs... with an iron-fist nicknamed “make him confess” to constantly hammer at the finger nails and repeat the process until the fingers swell and the nails decay and then to bend them backwards and to break them.... We thus see that the colonels and *banda* intellectuals indulge in brutal physical and psychological torture, combining barbaric and modern techniques of torture. These fascists subject political prisoners to severe beatings, sustained flogging from the sole to the shaved head, extraction of finger nails, crushing and breaking fingers, electric shock to sexual organs, thrusting hot iron rods in the anus rectum, mock executions, raping women political prisoners, threats or actual rapes of a prisoner’s wife and children, etc.... Fascism rules by the law of the jungle. It has absolutely no popular base. It is a desperate emergency regime. That is why in its desperation it is bound to make

torture and execution its normal way of rule.⁶¹²

To all this, military clerk Dawit Shifaw was an eyewitness.

This writer had shared an office building with a *kebele* in front of the US Embassy in Addis Ababa when the scream of tortured people would not give peace to anyone in the building. Unfortunately, my office was in front of the office of the *kebele* across a narrow corridor. The investigators left their office door open as they bound the hands of their victims behind their backs and beat them with lashes. The kids screamed and screamed until they were unable to scream anymore.⁶¹³

During the second *asesa*, Hiwot Teferra, distraught over Getachew Maru's imprisonment by the party, went underground herself. Her comrade Tito Hiruy placed her at a *kebele* in a house owned by a sympathizer. The house offered safety despite the danger from the government cadre running the *kebele*. At mandatory *kebele* meetings, the leader of the association, a man named Solomon, exhorted neighborhood residents to turn in "counter-revolutionaries": "Solomon asked the people to hand in EPRP members. He told them that it was easy to identify them. 'You will find them at bus stops pretending to read newspapers, telling the time, scratching the tip of their noses. In a café, they order either tea or coffee. They whisper amongst themselves. They look shabby—girls with Afros, *netelas* [traditional scarves] and sneakers, and boys with worn-out jeans and dirty sneakers.'"⁶¹⁴ Hiwot kept a low profile, and focused on her work as courier for the party.

For many, imprisonment in a *kebele* was just the prelude to a bloody, anonymous end. According to Babile Tola, "The corpses of people killed in prisons, of those who had died under torture... bloodied and mutilated corpses were thrown at crossroads, on main streets, near

⁶¹² WWFES. "Torture in Junta's Prison Cells" in *Forward* (April-May 1977, 1.6-7) reprinted from *Abyot*, Vol. 2, No. 3, April 1977.

⁶¹³ Dawit Shifaw, *op. Cit.*, p. 62.

⁶¹⁴ Hiwot Tefferera, *op. Cit.*, pp. 241–242.

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houses and exhibited for a day. No parent could pick up the corpse of a kin or an offspring, no one was allowed to shed tears. In fact, *kebelle* dwellers were gathered and forced to sing: ‘how happy it makes us/to see anarchist blood flowing.’”⁶¹⁵ Relatives who did attempt to claim a body through official channels were often charged a fee for the cost of bullets expended.

The testimony of one woman militant who survived a brutal detention ordeal reveals the politicized sadism of the death squads:

When I opened my eyes, I saw from where I was lying the familiar dress and face of Woizero Tsige, the 55 year old militant who was so popular among the people in the area that she had been repeatedly elected vice chairperson of a *kebelle*. She knew me and since we had held several clandestine meetings in her house she knew about our activities. And there she was looking sadly at me, feeling sorry for me, as if she was not in the same predicament. Later on, I found out that she had been tortured in the hall in front of all the prisoners but she had revealed nothing. The AETU representative and confirmed killer [and prison guard] Mola came over to her and told her to stand. “I am going to intensify the red terror on this old anarchist bitch and five others,” he fumed. He picked five other prisoners at random and took them out.... In the morning... Mola burst in walking in his cocksure way and shouting “I should have killed those six anarchos with one bullet! I feel sorry wasting six bullets on them!”⁶¹⁶

The low point of the second *asesa* came on the eve of May Day, 1977. The international revolutionary workers’ holiday had been the scene of deadly confrontations between the EPRP with its labor movement allies and the government before, but also the occasion of propaganda triumphs as EPRP contingents waving red banners emblazoned

⁶¹⁵ Babile Tola, *op. Cit.*, p. 154.

⁶¹⁶ Quoted in Babile Tola, *op. Cit.*, pp. 188–189.

with the EPRP's hammer-and-sickle logo subverted officially sanctioned celebrations.

Apparently the EPRP had not intended to march openly on May Day that year⁶¹⁷, but its enthusiastic mass organizations, especially the Youth League (EPRYL) made plans for smaller demonstrations on April 29. At the last minute, the EPRP leadership found out that the mobilization plans had been leaked to the *Derg*. Kiflu places blame on EPRP defectors and on increased secret police activity sponsored by East Germany and Cuba and the latest in Soviet bloc surveillance technology. The Party leadership discovered evidence of government wiretapping, and it was soon obvious that many of its safehouses were compromised; but due to the chaos caused by the wave of repression and the elimination of key Party organizers, they were powerless to stop the demonstrations by the mass organizations.

It was a massacre.

Amnesty International reported what happened.

On the night of 29 April 1977, soldiers and *kebelle* guards in Addis Ababa launched a massive attack on gatherings of young people who were suspected of preparing an EPRP-organized demonstration against the *Derg* for May Day. It is estimated that about 500 people were killed. The *Derg* denied the killings but they were confirmed by the reports of several foreign journalists and diplomats present in the capital at the time. Killings continued for some days afterwards, particularly in Addis Ababa, but also in nearby towns. On 17 May 1977, the Secretary-General of the Swedish Save the Children Fund stated that "One thousand children have been massacred in Addis Ababa and their bodies, lying in the streets, are ravaged by roving hyenas.... The bodies of murdered children, mostly aged from eleven to thirteen years, can be seen heaped on the roadside when one leaves Addis Ababa." He claimed that between 100 and

⁶¹⁷ See Kiflu Tadesse, *Part II op. Cit.*, p. 316.

150 young people were being killed each night.⁶¹⁸

Other estimates suggest that the total number of children killed by the regime before May Day was in the thousands. Revolutionary activists in the Leninist tradition have long recognized that mass action is more effective than even heroic individual acts of resistance (or terror). The May Day raids serve as grim testimony that under extreme conditions it's not quite so simple to implement such a strategy.

The leadership of the movement continued to take devastating blows. In May, the Secretary General of the EPRYL, Aklilu Hiruy, Tito Hiruy's brother, was caught, tortured and executed. He was walking with a friend of Hiwot Teffera when a death squad surprised them; he fled into a hospital, but was seized and taken away.⁶¹⁹

Student movement veteran and former CELU stalwart Germatchew Lemma was killed in June, when he attempted to find sanctuary at a safe house in Addis; but the safe house had been betrayed and a trap was laid. Germatchew, a lawyer and a leader of the underground ELAMA and of the Party's Urban Defense Wing, was shot dead.⁶²⁰

As the repressive vice closed around the EPRP, its internal contradictions became major points of weakness. According to Babile Tola:

The EPRP leadership concentrated on the urban political struggle and did not even take adequate steps to strengthen or declare its rural guerrilla force; "the peaceful path had to be exhausted" was the line of the leadership, and this was not positively appreciated by its own "more Left" members. In fact, as the EPRP grew tremendously, so did its problems. The huge influx of the youth into the Youth League (EPRYL), and the party, brought with it a certain degree of extremism. The formation of a broad democratic front in Addis Abeba [and] in other towns militated against clandestine structures and work. The growth led also to political

⁶¹⁸ Amnesty International, "Human Rights Violations in Ethiopia," Nov. 1978, pp. 14–15.

⁶¹⁹ Hiwot Teffera, *op. Cit.*, p. 261.

⁶²⁰ Kiflu Tadesse, *Part II op. Cit.*, p. 323.

variations within the party itself. Some of its members (at home and also in the USA) were “die-hard Maoists” with little inclination to analyse the Ethiopian situation soberly. There were also others who thought that the urban political struggle would by itself bring about the demise of the Derg. In the complex and fast-developing situation, the party leadership was unable to fully and politically explain the party positions; slogans which had to be withdrawn in time were not pulled back and new positions were not explained in all their ramifications and subtleties.⁶²¹

The result was factionalism and disunity.

There’s no apparent evidence that Getachew Maru or Berhane Meskel Redda themselves betrayed the Party to the government, but there is plenty of suggestion that other individuals in their orbit did, causing grievous damage to the Party as lists of members and Party locations were handed over to death squads. The Party lost members, lost caches of weapons, money and literature and lost valuable duplicating machines.

The EPRP responded harshly to factionalist defectors who aided the *Derg’s* repressive campaign. The foreign section of EPRP wrote in *Abyot*,

While being within the party, these reactionaries secretly schemed to divide and destroy the EPRP. They violated the party’s democratic centralism and rules of clandestinity by publicising their identity and putting out gutter leaflets prettified with revolutionary names (“Bolshevik” being one). They carried out a series of sabotage activities which caused the party damage during the junta’s house to house searches. Abandoning all pretenses, they joined the fascist junta and started to act as spies and informers. They exposed telephone numbers, cars and the party’s secret houses in the capital. As a result, we lost several comrades from sever-

⁶²¹ Babile Tola, *op. Cit.*, p. 113.

al zones and one of our foremost long-standing member and determined fighter, comrade Girmatchew Lemma, was ambushed and killed by police who were waiting for him in his hideout using the information these scums gave them. Though these traitors continued to spread rumours about the party and tried to cover up the reasons for their treason, it has now become clear for all that they are no different from the Meisone thugs of Haile Fida. These reactionaries have no[w] become the elements who try to fill in the void left by Meisone and are seen together with the Madebo assassin squads roaming the streets looking for EPRP members to kill.⁶²²

Regardless of the underlying political reasons for disunity, the spectacle of former EPRP comrades turning on each other under the pressures of an intensely violent historical moment marked a low point for the revolutionary movement.

In what can only be described as a tragic episode, the bitterness between the EPRP and some of its ex-members claimed the life of Getachew Maru, the heroic young activist (and founder of the *Abyot* group) responsible for building the movement at home while so many Ethiopian revolutionaries were still abroad just a few years before.

In June, the safehouse in which he was being detained by the Party was raided by the *Derg*, and in the confusion, Getachew was killed—allegedly while trying to free himself—apparently by an EPRP member guarding him.⁶²³ Kiflu Tadesse is disappointingly sparse on the details of what happened, and there is speculation that the whole truth about Getachew's death and exactly who was involved is yet to be discovered. All told, his death was not the Party's finest moment.

Tito Hiruy, recruited to the movement by Getachew, broke the tragic news to Getachew's friend, and apparent lover, Hiwot Teffera, whose faith in the EPRP was profoundly shaken, though she did not

⁶²² EPRP, *Abyot*, "The Principled Unity of the EPRP Is Unshakeable!" special issue February 1978, p. 29.

⁶²³ Kiflu Tadesse, *Part II op. Cit.*, p. 322.

abandon the Party. “Are we justified to do away with peoples’ lives in the name of the revolution? How can we do good if we kill one of our own? We started out with a sense of comradeship, love and trust but where are we going? Have we forgotten where we are going? What about our collective mission?”⁶²⁴

In June, the PMAC launched a national popular militia to enlist popular support against the Derg’s enemies. Mengistu spoke to a mass gathering and parade in the capital; his words were reprinted under the screaming headline, “Red Campaign to Crush White Terror.”⁶²⁵ Using revolutionary rhetoric and popular memory to paint his opponents as un-Ethiopian, Mengistu made the militia’s true purpose very clear:

The revolutionary flag I have given you in the name of the broad masses of Ethiopia who have chosen and armed you as the vanguard fighting force, the genuine Ethiopian progressive patriotic citizens and in the name of the living and the dead war veterans who have preserved Ethiopia with their sweat and blood as well as in the name of the Provisional Military Council, is an emblem of the proud and victorious people.... This is a force organized to completely crush once and for all those elements like EDU, EPRP, and the reactionary Eritrean secessionist groups who are making a frantic attempt to throw the Ethiopian broad masses back into that repugnant system.⁶²⁶

A film clip from about this time shows Mengistu’s henchman Legesse Asfaw distributing rifles to a gathering of civilians.

Courage and Resistance

In spite of this massive repression that continued well into 1978, in spite of the devastating loss of life, and in spite of the loss of so many of

⁶²⁴ Hiwot Teffera, op. Cit., pp. 269–270.

⁶²⁵ *The Ethiopian Herald*, June 25, 1977.

⁶²⁶ “PMAC Chairman Reiterates, ‘Our Struggle Is to Consolidate Gains of the Ethiopian Masses,’” *The Ethiopian Herald*, June 25, 1977, p. 4.

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the Party's original leaders, the EPRP held out its urban bases as long as it could. Incredibly courageous resistance remained an everyday affair.

Even in 1977, EPRP members would come up for air and brave death to get the message out. "Urban units conducted what they termed 'armed propaganda'. These were short propaganda speeches delivered by armed units of the EPRP at locations where a large crowd had congregated. By this time, areas that had been relatively safe for conducting political activities had turned into danger zones."⁶²⁷ The distribution, even the possession, of *Democracia* or leaflets of the Party could mean detention, imprisonment, torture or death, but the activists of the EPRP and its mass organizations didn't give up on the dream of the revolution for a free society.

Sociologist Indrawatie Biseswar has excavated the story of the Ethiopian Mother's Associations (EMA):

Among all the EMAs, the strongest and most vocal EMA was located in an area called Teklehaimanot, Addis Ababa. Mothers within these associations were found to be active in many areas of resistance and protest. For example, they tried to protect all children, irrespective of whose children they were, hiding, sheltering and feeding them whenever the Derg's soldiers were on the march looking for them. They also carried leaflets to the marketplaces in their baskets campaigning against the Derg and agitating for support among others. Due to its clandestine character, it was easy for women to work in this manner, not risking capture. During the Red Terror Campaign in 1977 they formed an *U-uta* (ululation, or women's screaming) Committee composed of older, illiterate women.... Whenever the soldiers would come to conduct house searches, the mothers committee members would get out of their houses and make the *u-uta* calls. They would use additional instruments such as their pots and pans to bang and shout. This high level of

⁶²⁷ Kiflu Tadesse, *Part II op. Cit.*, p. 286.

noise drew many people out of their houses, sometimes preventing the soldiers from proceeding, thus helping children to escape. One of the most remarkable activities organized by the EMAs was in 1977 when its members marched to the Derg office demanding a halt to the atrocities committed against their children.... Regrettably, that demonstration was dispersed by the army.... Many mothers were also brutally killed during this raid.⁶²⁸

The EPRP's *Abyot* reported on one act of resistance by the Mothers:

Among recent developments which show the undisputed leadership of EPRP are direct involvement in revolutionary politics of mothers and the old. A case in point is the participation of the dwellers of the 5th High Zone of Addis Abeba in the famous "Battle of October" that took place on the night of October 10. The participation of mothers and the old through their mothers'-committee and fathers'-committees was principally motivated by the hunger strikes and political demonstrations conducted by young revolutionary pioneers (the "Little Red Devils") in opposition to the repression, imprisonment and assassination of their kin and kith. The parents of these young pioneers were touched by the seriousness and devotion of their children for a true cause that in many of the demonstrations the parents joined them.... While such developments accompanied by intense armed propaganda were taking shape, Mengistu's tottering regime launched a "surprise" house-to-house search on the night of October 10 on the 5th High Zone, one of the bastions of EPRP. The dwellers of this zone organized by our party and defended by our EPRA urban units fully put up a resistance. The soldiers were met with heavy fire and screams; the battle took about six hours and the soldiers

⁶²⁸ Indrawatie Biseswar, "The Role of Educated/Intellectual Women in Ethiopia in the Process of Change and Transformation toward Gender Equality 1974–2005," pp. 107–108.

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were repulsed.⁶²⁹

The EPRA urban guerrilla squads continued their reprisal campaign, targeting dozens of *Derg* and POMOA officials. The *Derg* said it was being targeted by terrorists; the EPRP in turn evinced a bitter, vengeful anger. *Abyot* justifies a targeted hit against a leader of the “trade union,” AETU, with utter venom: “Tewodros Bekele; a well-known fascist boot-licker, who tried to sell the interest of the workers to fascists in power who made him chairman of the non-existing ‘All Ethiopian Trade Union’, and for being directly responsible for the execution, assassination and arrest of workers and their union leaders.”⁶³⁰

While the body-count of the EPRA’s reprisals could never match the gore generated by the *Derg* and its allies over the many months of the terror, its assassination campaigns that included civilian supporters of the regime were themselves painful. In May, an EPRA hit squad killed a popular songwriter, poet, radio journalist and feminist, the 32-year-old Shewalul Mengistu, who was also a *Meison* supporter and chairman of her local *kebele*. A friend of hers remembers,

She was an amazing professional, a passionate journalist and a very kind lady. We were together just 2 days before she was shot dead by EPRP on her way to work. She told me that she found a warning letter from EPRP on her dining room table telling her to leave her Kebele or face death. I begged her to move out of the area. I offered to take her into my home but she refused to leave her ailing mother alone in the house. She knew her days were counted but she never lost her smile and her resolve. She must have seen her killer pull the trigger as one fatal bullet hit her on the forehead.⁶³¹

⁶²⁹ EPRP, “A Spectre Is Haunting...,” *Abyot*, Vol. 2, No. 6, Sept.-Oct. 1977, pp. 3–4.

⁶³⁰ EPRP, “EPRP Continues Punishing Political Criminals,” *Abyot*, Vol. 2, No. 4, March 1977.

⁶³¹ Comment from AZ on Facebook, 2017.

According to the *Ethiopian Herald*, two of her attackers—who the paper called “paid anarchists”—were immediately shot dead.⁶³² It’s hard to see if EPRP’s reprisals were militarily effective in frustrating government repression, or if they only inflamed the will of their enemies and alienated potential allies.

The Party continued to generate clandestine media. *Abyot* bragged, well into 1977,

Hundreds of revolutionary poems, short stories, songs composed and written by EPRP members and supporters are being circulated clandestinely so much so that the fascist troops have now intensified their confiscation of cassette tapes. The poems, short stories and songs are distributed via cassette tapes, recorders, pamphlets and recitals. The revolutionary poems are all together dynamic and completely new. Moreover, the revolutionary literature is developing in the various languages of the Ethiopian peoples.... The clandestine publications of the EPRP and the various militant mass organizations are playing a more crucial role than before. Aside from the widely read and popular *Democracia* and *Labbader*, the various sectors of the EPRP are producing several papers at the zone, regional and provincial level.... The proliferation of clandestine and genuinely revolutionary and anti-fascist papers (more than 30 in Addis Abeba alone) has... confounded the desperate junta.⁶³³

An excerpt from an unspecified clandestine paper reprinted in *Abyot* reflects the determination of the Party to withstand the government’s assault:

We are marching towards victory. The fascists, opportunist intellectuals (Bandas) and the EDU are heading towards

⁶³² See *The Ethiopian Herald*, May 28, 1977 for a front-page article about Shewalul’s funeral—there named as “Yeshoalul.”

⁶³³ EPRP, “Revolutionary Literature Flourishing,” *Abyot*, Vol. 2, No. 7, Nov. 1977, pp. 34–35.

defeat. We are blossoming and bearing fruit, our enemies are withering and falling. We repeat that on the grave of the fascists, the opportunist intellectuals, imperialists, feudalists and bureaucratic capitalists we shall build a free, democratic and popular Ethiopia. We ascertain ever more firmly that neither fascist terror nor the butchery of thousands of our comrades by barbarian thugs can make us flinch. We shall pay all sacrifices and march towards victory. Victory is in our hands. Beat and doom awaits the fascists.⁶³⁴

Solidarity demonstrations and rallies with the victims of the “red terror” were held across Europe and the United States, organized by the pro-EPRP wings of the surviving Ethiopian Student Movement. However, the EPRP, even as one of the largest and most active communist parties in Africa, did not capture the imagination of the lion’s share of the world’s far left and progressive movements. Once the Soviet Union and the regime signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation in May, the EPRP and its supporters embraced an increasingly sharp analysis of the USSR, complicating the Cold War narrative.

The radical fervor was fading in European and American campuses, and solidarity became increasingly complex for Western radicals because of that growing relationship between the *Derg* and the USSR, and more importantly, the *Derg* and Cuba. The culture of national liberation support on the Western left was challenged by the contradictions in Ethiopia and Eritrea that crossed the normal lines of anti-imperialist solidarity given the “socialist” pretensions of the Ethiopian military regime. Many on the world left were reconsidering their enthusiasm for Eritrean national liberation, and altogether rejecting the EPRP in favor of the phrase-mongering and swagger of Mengistu, now frequently photographed together with Fidel Castro. Others focused on the sudden military successes of the Eritrean liberation fronts, perhaps a less nuanced and challenging cause than support for a revolutionary movement being tarnished with the labels “white terrorists” and

⁶³⁴ EPRP, inside back cover, *Abyot*, Vol. 2, No. 7, Nov. 1977.

“paid anarchists.” (Ironically at the same time as the EPRP at home was honing its position in favor of Eritrean self-determination, the ESM in North America was moving backward toward a much more critical position, almost reflective of the one so importantly rejected by the younger wave of activists just a few years before.) Some anti-revisionist (“Maoist”) organizations in the United States and Europe did extend an enthusiastic hand of solidarity to the EPRP and the Ethiopian students.

A remarkable series of protests, that were acts of resistance themselves, did take place in Moscow organized by Ethiopian students. Fikre Tolossa was attending the prestigious Patrice Lumumba University, long a hub for Ethiopian students even during the Haile Selassie era. In 2010 he wrote an open letter to Mengistu recalling what happened during Mengistu’s May 1977 visit to Moscow:

[Y]ou attempted to take me and 12 of my fellow students from Russia back to Ethiopia to either execute us or let us languish in jail when some of your supporters who claimed to be Meison (All Ethiopia Socialist Party) members handed you over our names charging us of being against your Government while you were visiting the Soviet Union in 1977 (European Calendar). You requested the Russians to hand us over without questioning the charges, according to the Russian officials. My friends and I hindered your attempt, holding unexpected and illegal demonstration in Moscow. I contacted some BBC and VOA journalists and briefed them what was going to happen to us. They spread the news all over the world instantly. The Russians got scared of the scandal and allowed some of my friends to go on exile to Sweden and Germany. I was permitted to finish my studies. After I graduated a year later, I headed for West Germany and applied for a political asylum. The people you wanted to get then are now professional engineers, doctors and professors. Had they fallen in your hands, their future would

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have been uncertain.⁶³⁵

But the greatest hope for the EPRP's resistance against the regime, indeed for its survival, lay with its guerrilla armies, spread across several provinces, but headquartered in Tigray province in the mountainous region of Assimba. The Assimba base of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Army came to represent a concrete manifestation of the armed struggle that had been such an important goal of the nascent movement before 1974. Ethiopian revolutionaries lauded the legendary Assimba sanctuary by naming their military journal after the base:

The formation of the EPRA and the launching of "Assimba" is a major breakthrough in the struggle of the Ethiopian masses against imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucrat capitalism, and can definitely be said that that the new democratic revolution in Ethiopia has now entered its decisive and correct path. For, as Chairman Mao unequivocally pointed out, "without a peoples army the people have nothing," and "without armed struggle neither the proletariat nor the communist party would have any standing at all... and it would be impossible for the revolution to triumph."⁶³⁶

EPRA had heavy political and military expectations for its Assimba base area:

In the countryside EPRA's armed struggle against the organs of rule of the fascist dictatorship and against ram-paging warlord armies continues to win victories step by

⁶³⁵ Fikre Tolossa, "More Questions for Col. Mengistu, and leadership criteria," Sept. 4, 2010, *EthiopianReview.com*; An AP report suggests the protests continued into June. "More than 40 Ethiopian students demonstrated yesterday outside Moscow's Patrice Lumumba University to protest alleged mass killings by the Soviet-backed Ethiopian regime." (Associated Press Moscow via *Courier Journal*, Louisville, June 14, 1977 [www.newspapers.com/newspage/110298452/]). Another report claims the demonstrators identified themselves as supporters of the EPRP. See *Workers Vanguard*, No. 163, 24 June 1977.

⁶³⁶ WWFES, "Assimba: Symbol of the Path and Victory of the Ethiopian Revolution," *Forward*, Vol. 1, No. 5, March 1977.

step. Besides consolidating its base areas and guerrilla zones in Tigrai province the EPRA has stepped up its military, political, propaganda and organizational work in Wollo, Begemdir and other provinces. EPRA has converted its liberated zones in Tigrai and other regions into advanced military, political and cultural bastions of the Ethiopian Revolution. In such regions besides smashing the organs of rule of the regime, the EPRA has helped the masses to setup their own mass organizations (women, youth, peasant etc.), carry out agrarian revolution and establish organs of popular power. Thus, the red banner of people's war unleashed on the Assimba mountains is surging forward as never before.⁶³⁷

EPRA was buoyed, but also complicated, by the arrival of hundreds of untrained volunteers from the urban areas fleeing the terror. EPRA's forces in the Assimba base area went from a few hundred poorly armed fighters before 1977 to over fifteen hundred in just a few months. Life in the base area was hardscrabble, military discipline was harsh, weapons, resources and even food were limited, and EPRA was just one of several forces competing for the support of the local population. Kiflu Tadesse is frank that the EPRP had built a legend around the Assimba base that was hard to live up to:

The EPRA was so popular that members of the EPRP saw it as the ultimate form of organization which would enable them to build a just society, vent their frustration and anger, and fulfill their personal dreams as well. The EPRA was their ultimate institution through which they would avenge their fallen comrades. As far as they were concerned, the EPRA was a flawless organization and Assimba, the base area, was something resembling a worldly heaven.... Upon arrival, they discovered that Assimba was just one of those rugged

⁶³⁷ ESUNA, "Statement on the Present Situation in Ethiopia," *Combat, Assimba Special Issue*, Vol. VI, No. 3, June 1977, p. 22.

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Ethiopian mountains and the EPRA was a minuscule army that had to face innumerable hurdles.⁶³⁸

But successful military actions—including bank robberies and raids on supply convoys—soon netted the EPRA cash, and a share of the Eastern Bloc weapons that were flooding the country. EPRA published two clandestine journals, not only *Assimba*, its regular organ, but *Amitsu*, its theoretical organ. It used these journals not only in its own ranks but in attempts to win rank-and-file soldiers away from the *Derg's* armies and militias. The army included both male and female fighters, though there were strict rules against women and men forming sexual relationships in the field.

EPRA units attempted to reach out to peasant communities, encouraging rebellion and acts of resistance against both the *Derg* and the militia of the royalist EDU. A leaflet issued to one peasant association reads in part,

We have vowed never to bow down to the rule of our despicable class enemies such as the man-eating fascist Derg, the EDU and other anti-people elements.... We cannot tolerate the fascists to plunder our houses, to rape our women folk, to slaughter our cattle.... There is one thing that unites both of us together namely our being oppressed, exploited and being considered as no better than plough share or yoke. Your sorrow is our sorrow, your happiness is our happiness.⁶³⁹

EPRP leaders like Zeru Kehishen and Iyasou Alemayehu joined the forces in Assimba early in 1977 and began to reconsolidate the Party's armed forces, waging a rectification campaign to deal with some of the political issues that had arisen in the urban areas. They attempted negotiations with neighboring forces of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), and the Eritrean

⁶³⁸ Kiflu Tadesse, *Part II op. Cit.*, p. 373.

⁶³⁹ EPRP, "EPRA Promotes Peasant Upsurges," *Abyot*, Vol. 2, No. 7, Nov. 1977, pp. 17–19.

People's Liberation Front (EPLF); unfortunately for the EPRA no breakthroughs in cooperation were achieved.

The EPRP was down, but it was not out.

The *Derg* Turns on *Meison*

Dr. Nigist Adane was a pediatrician, trained in the Soviet Union. A leader in *Meison* and its mass organizations, she was the sister of the late Benyam Adane of the Algerian EPLO base, and wife of Desta Tadesse, the high-ranking *Meison* member who had originally been named to the very first EPLO CC. She once said that if the *Derg* turned "reactionary," *Meison* should leave its alliance with the *Derg* "even if it would immediately cost our lives, in the interest of the people."⁶⁴⁰ That judgment day for *Meison* was imminent.

On May Day, shortly after those hundreds of young EPRYL militants had been ruthlessly cut down, *Meison* made a big showing at the official May Day celebrations. *Meison* was not happy with the *Derg's* embrace of the Soviets, and began to agitate over the issue. "Mass demonstrations and opposition to the *Derg's* anti-democratic and chauvenist positions and the sell out of the country's national independence reached a climax on May Day in 1977."⁶⁴¹

A POMOA speaker at the rally hurled what must have been seen by the *Derg* as a provocative insinuation: "[W]e the oppressed and the revolutionary are engaged in a life and death struggle. In order to free from the rotten... bureaucracy, the revolutionary struggle needs a leadership that is composed of progressive officers, progressive forces, and class conscious members of the oppressed people."⁶⁴² Given that the head of state was a member of the military (and prone to political favoritism even if *Meison* had often benefitted from that favoritism), it's hard to interpret this statement as other than a veiled attack on Mengistu himself.

Still in Sweden, *Meison* cadre Makonen Getu watched what was

⁶⁴⁰ HB, "Shading Light on Haile Fida's Life," 2010.

⁶⁴¹ ISEANE, *Women in the Ethiopian Revolution*, p. 50.

⁶⁴² Quoted in Kiflu Tadesse, *Part II op. Cit.*, p. 241.

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happening back home. As we have seen, *Meison* had become extremely well positioned, embedded in the state apparatus and in the mass organizations. But it was also clear that Mengistu, who finally had the backing of the Soviet Union and its allies, was no longer dependent on *Meison* for socialist credibility. This produced a dangerous situation. Makonen Getu recalls,

During the legal struggle... MEISON almost controlled the [*Yekatit* 66] Political School and the Political Office responsible for ideology and mass organization activities. This enabled MEISON to penetrate and root itself among the masses. Its influence and support base widened throughout the country. This was demonstrated during the 1977 May Day celebration at which thousands of demonstrators showed their support for MEISON through the placards/slogans they carried. The PMG didn't appreciate the show, however, and became alarmed. It began to see MEISON as a threat.⁶⁴³

Meison somewhat confusingly suggested that "rightist elements" in the *Derg* had invited "the intervention of the Soviet Bloc countries in Ethiopia's internal affairs"⁶⁴⁴ and thus provoked "white terror" (which it defined as EPRP and EDU terrorism) violence against "democratic forces" (ie., *Meison* cadre). Ironically, *Meison* began to raise demands like "immediate proclamation of full democratic rights."⁶⁴⁵ With a history of being shoved aside by Mengistu's blustery but empty call for democratic rights in February, and having long written off EPRP's demand for democratic rights as "infantilism," or ultra-leftism, and having participated—some might say, fully enabled—a cruel campaign of government repression against a hugely popular competing civilian left movement, *Meison* seems to have failed to understand the rapacious hunger of the monster that was in large part its own creation.

⁶⁴³ Makonen Getu, *The Undreamt*, p. 73.

⁶⁴⁴ ISEANE, *op. Cit.*, p. 49.

⁶⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

Surviving *Meison* member Abera Yemane-Ab blames the Soviet Union for precipitating the crisis between Mengistu and *Meison*:

[T]he Soviet attitude towards MEISON and the Revolution as a whole was one of suspicion. The prevalent revolutionary rhetorics of anti-feudalism, anti-imperialism and anti-bureaucratic capitalism, the constant reference to the new Democratic Revolution and the Chinese experience, the strength of the Revolution in the countryside relative to the urban centers and the insistence on self-reliance represented Maoist overtones which made the Soviets feel uneasy. Furthermore, during the pre-revolutionary era, the Soviets had approached one of the student movement leaders abroad, who also happened to be one of the leaders of the underground Meison, founded in 1968, and suggested the formation of a party. As MEISON was critical of the general Soviet line from its inception, it was decided not to disclose the existence of MEISON to the Soviets and the offer was rejected.⁶⁴⁶

In yet another irony, while the EPRP had been randomly tarred as Anarchist, Trotskyite and Maoist by its foes, it was *Meison*, with roots in the same movement of ideological ferment as EPRP, that was to now pay the price for ideological roots outside the limits of Brezhnev-era Soviet ideological interpretation. In a world where the USSR and the People's Republic of China—once allies—were now enemies with a history of actual armed confrontation across their mutual border, the Soviets were vigilant for signs of geopolitical disloyalty and ideological heresy.

Whether *Meison* was willing or not to examine the cost of its marriage to the state apparatus in the war against the EPRP, it was actually correct that the Soviet Union was a threat to its continued influence over Mengistu and the state. A secret Soviet memo from July 1977 reports that the Russians asked Mengistu how he was doing ridding the

⁶⁴⁶ Abera Yemane-Ab, *op. Cit.*, p. 22.

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country of Maoist influences.

The Soviet Ambassador directed Mengistu's attention to the anti-socialist and even anti-Soviet (Maoist) propaganda which is being disseminating by certain private publishing houses. Mengistu declared that implementation of the program of propaganda of Marxist-Leninist ideas has indeed been unsatisfactory. For this reason, the PMAC has reorganized the Provisional Bureau of Mass Organization Affairs [POMOA] and replaced its leadership. Concerning the Chinese, Mengistu noted that they are not only disseminating literature, but are rendering direct support to Eritrean separatists and extremists.⁶⁴⁷

On July 14, POMOA—the Provisional Office for Mass Organization Affairs that *Meison* once completely dominated—announced its restructuring with an opaque statement remarkable in its cynicism.

Since it became necessary to reorganize POMOA in accordance with the new structure of the PMAC and in accordance with the program of the NDR it was the revolutionary obligation of the PMAC to render continuous support to all those revolutionary organizations and individuals who work in earnest to found a working class party, it was believed that the restructuring of POMOA would on the one hand, serve those already existing progressive organizations and new ones, on an equal basis, and on the other would hasten the process of creating unity among these organizations.⁶⁴⁸

What the statement conceals is a sharp rift between the erstwhile

⁶⁴⁷ A. P. Ratanov, Ser. No. 276, "Notes of Conversation with Chairman of PMAC of Ethiopia Haile Mariam Mengistu," 29 July 1977; Wilson center link digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111851.

⁶⁴⁸ Propaganda and Information Committee, Fourth Anniversary of the Ethiopian Revolution, The Roles of POMOA and the Yekatit '66 Political School in the Ethiopian Revolution, p. 13 (1978).

leadership of POMOA—largely *Meison*—and Mengistu and his allies in *Seded* and Senay Likke's heirs in *WazLig*.

POMOA and its accompanying cadre school had served two purposes. For Haile Fida and Senay Likke, it had been the “Politburo” that enabled them to influence the *Derg* and its governance. For Mengistu, it was a bridge to developing an official state party that could confer long-term legitimacy on his rule. Now with a solid core of Soviet-trained military cadre in his own organization—*Seded*—Mengistu intervened to bring that party a step closer. While restructuring POMOA into powerlessness, he called for the organization of a “common front of Ethiopian Marxist-Leninist organizations,” which of course did not include the EPRP. And so *Emaledh*, the Union of Ethiopian Marxist-Leninist Organizations, was created. Its initial members were the groups *Seded*, *Meison*, *WazLig*, and two smaller organizations, *Malerid* and *Echaat*.

Its founding program accused the EPRP of being in league with EDU, ELF, EPLF, Somalia and the CIA. Completely twisting the language of armed struggle long embraced by the Ethiopian left, *Emaledh* cynically suggested the revolutionary armed struggle was now the struggle *against* the various armed rebel factions! “Through the process of the armed struggle now undergoing, a working class party, a popular revolutionary front and a peoples’ army will emerge.... Ethiopia’s peoples militia and standing army are determined to put to practice the slogan ‘Revolutionary Motherland or Death’ and go to war against the enemies that have encircled us.”⁶⁴⁹

Meison, a party of the elite intellectual cream of Ethiopian society, was certainly not stupid. They saw the handwriting on the wall; they understood what demotion meant. The day Nigist Adane had anticipated had arrived. Makonnen Getu is definitive:

Consequently MEISON felt that the day for legal struggle had ended. There was no more room for alliance with the PMG. It was time to go underground.... The official communiqué made in the special issue of *The Voice of the*

⁶⁴⁹ “Common Front of Ethiopian Marxist-Leninist Organizations Action Programme,” *Yehibret Demts*, Vol. 1, July 1977, pp. 10–11.

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Masses—*Yesefiw Hizb Dimtse* (MEISON's political journal) stated that the PMG had become anti-democratic and it was not safe for its members, as well as for the long-term revolution, to continue with its legal struggle. It ordered its leading members to go underground.⁶⁵⁰

A statement from the *Meison* women's mass organization, ISE-ANE, affirms that in August, *Meison* chose to break with the *Derg*, accusing it of walking away from the Programme of the National Democratic Revolution that had been drafted by Haile Fida for the *Derg*. "By August 1977... it became clear that the *Derg* was no more ready to honor its commitments undertaken in the NDRP of 1976. It categorically refused to enact the bill prepared by Meisone providing for the exercise of full democratic rights to the Ethiopian people."⁶⁵¹ This organization which had stood by the *Derg* as it continued the war against Eritrean rebels now complained, "In lieu of the respect of the right to self determination recognized to all Ethiopia's nationalities, the country became the scene of a most vicious and barbaric repression against the oppressed nationalities.... What is more, a systematic campaign of arrests and assassinations was launched against all those forces who denounced the *Derg*'s betrayal and demanded the respect of the NDRP."⁶⁵² As recently as June, *Meison* had reiterated its support of the military campaign against Eritrean separatists: "Meisone is not a petty bourgeois pacifist or peace worshipping organization. Thus it supports all the actions in Northern Ethiopia or other areas taken to liquidate reactionaries and to safeguard Ethiopia's revolution and unity."⁶⁵³

On August 20, *Meison* and its own mass organizations went underground. Haile Fida and the *Meison* leadership left Addis Ababa for sanctuary in the provinces. Negede Gobeze fled the country.

Mengistu responded by calling *Meison* a bunch of traitors. In his

⁶⁵⁰ Makonen Getu, *op. Cit.*, p. 73.

⁶⁵¹ ISEANE, *op. Cit.*, p. 51.

⁶⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁶⁵³ "Voice of the People," No. 59, June 1977, quoted in *Abyot*, February–March 1978 issue.

own words, “the All Ethiopia Socialist Movement (MEISON) betrayed the revolution and fled away from the revolutionary camp.”⁶⁵⁴

By the end of summer *Meison’s* local leadership was no longer at the seat of power; instead they were under arrest, killed or on the run. Makonen Getu got word in Sweden; they needed him back home:

It was at this point that MEISON decided to bring some key leaders in the foreign mission into Ethiopia to reinforce and keep the internal struggle alive. I was one of those who was approached and asked to volunteer. When the request came, I did not hesitate even once. I just said, “I’m ready to go. When should I go?” The request came in September and I was in Ethiopia by November.... To prepare for my new role as an underground political activist, I read more literature on both urban and rural guerrilla warfare. I took training in karate. I bought or borrowed numerous handbooks on clandestine struggles and urban guerrilla warfare.... I started asking myself “With all those fallen veteran revolutionaries, would MEISON make it? And with a weakened MEISON, would the revolution make it? Would I be killed or jailed?”⁶⁵⁵

Life underground was now as dangerous for *Meison* members as it had been for EPRP members in the previous period. Again, Makonen Getu:

The worst moment came when one of my contacts showed up unexpectedly to find shelter for the night.... I told him that he could not stay with me, because I had somebody else spending the night with me. So he had to return and look for a place somewhere else. He ended up going to the flat of one of the most important leaders of our movement

⁶⁵⁴ Mengistu Haile Mariam, “Fourth Anniversary of the Ethiopian Revolution,” Sept. 12, 1978, published by the Ministry of Information and National Guidance, p. 10.

⁶⁵⁵ Makonen Getu, *op. Cit.*, pp. 74–75.

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who was still free. That same night the PMG security forces broke into the flat, took both of them, and shot them. The MEISON leader was Yohannes Mesfin.⁶⁵⁶

The EPRP, watching the machineries of repression they had been fighting for a year come down on *Meison*, embraced *schadenfreude*. “Those like Meisone who allied with the junta and went all-out for open, legal and peaceful struggle are now dead and buried (and they did not die peacefully!) or are languishing in jail.”⁶⁵⁷

The rapacious brutality that had been expressed against EPRP was now consuming *Meison*. While traveling around the country undercover engaged in his clandestine work, Makonen Getu met a civil servant who had no idea of his role in *Meison*. Makonen recalls the words of the man:

“They were trying to stage a coup and usurp power from the PMG... so they ran for their lives without proper preparation.... They went to nearby villages, and they were chased and caught. I was one of those who hunted them. I really enjoyed it.... The ones whom we dug out from the villages were about 20. We should and hanged 12 of them over there.... If I find anyone that is a MEISON supporter or member, I will eat his flesh,” and then with his mouth on his hand again as if he was sucking liquid off his hand, he said “And I would drink his blood”.⁶⁵⁸

After only a few months back in Ethiopia, Makonen realized that *Meison*'s underground apparatus was no match for the repression and he joined the new exodus of Ethiopian radicals and escaped his homeland to return to Sweden.

The organization, which had been leading death squads not a year before, was now to claim that the “Red Terror” began in earnest in Janu-

⁶⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 109–110.

⁶⁵⁷ EPRP, “EPRP Charting and Applying the Correct Line,” *Abyot*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Feb-March 1978, p. 8.

⁶⁵⁸ Makonen Getu, *op. Cit.*, pp. 103–104.

ary 1978, when the *Derg* started eliminating anyone who had belonged to a mass organization that *Meison* had helped organize. *Meison* claimed that 20,000 of its members and sympathizers were arrested by early 1978.⁶⁵⁹

It wasn't long before *Meison* suffered the same kind of violent decapitation endured by the EPRP. Haile Fida, Nigist Adane, Desta Tadesse, and others in the *Meison* leadership were arrested in rural Shoa province. Top *Meison* members Kebede Mengesha and Daniel Tadesse killed themselves to avoid imminent capture by the *Derg*.⁶⁶⁰

A handful of the captured *Meison* cadre were eventually taken back to Addis Ababa and placed with other long-term political prisoners. Taffare Deguefé, the imprisoned technocrat, recorded in his prison diary that the whole jail knew exactly when they arrived:

17 November 1977: We were surprised to find among the prisoners brought in last night and this morning, members of "MEISON" headed by Haile Fida, the "eminence gris" behind the Dergue—who is credited with the propagation of the dogma that has been flooding us in the last two years. This group had been under detention at the palace for the last three months since they fell in disfavour. The MEISON leaders were jailed when they turned against the Dergue at the end of their honeymoon.⁶⁶¹

Other *Meison* leaders suffered a more immediate fate. Under the headline "Seded and Bandas Continue Killing Each Other," the EPRP noted when a key pro-*Derg* leftist figure who, though not so mentioned here, had once been an EPLO cadre:

On Nov. 11, the well-known notorious banda, Mekonen Jote, was killed in his car in central Addis Abeba while on his way to work. Mekonen Jote was a central committee member of the one-time Meisone, who played an import-

⁶⁵⁹ ISEANE, *op. Cit.*, p. 52.

⁶⁶⁰ See Kiflu Tadesse, *Part II op. Cit.*, p. 243 .

⁶⁶¹ Taffare Deguefé, *A Tripping Stone, Ethiopian Prison Diary (2003)*, p. 189.

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ant role in the recruitment of the so-called “peoples militia.” As a well known anti-people ready to blow with the wind, Mekonen remained in his official post in the government untouched when then entire Meison was uprooted.⁶⁶²

Crescendo

The violence was only increasing toward the end of the year. Repression, assassinations by rebel factions, assassinations by government agents, assassinations by one group disguised as actions by another, had become ubiquitous. The U.S. embassy took notice of a *Derg* security statement issued in mid-October:

Statement focussed especially on EPRP, citing numerous examples how revolution being subverted. It noted continued assassinations of progressives, obstructions being raised against weeding out anarchists, increasing production and educating children in peace, hijacking of cars, anti-revolutionary mobilization, distribution of money received from CIA and EDU to attain goals, hidden munitions poised to crush masses, hunger strike by EPRP insurgents to incite parents against revolution, robberies later blamed on soldiers, collaboration with bureaucrats, obstruction of normal education schedule, efforts to demoralize defense campaigners, thus assisting invaders, and coercion of people to chant anti-revolutionary slogans in streets to create clash between masses and PMAC.⁶⁶³

The embassy cited evidence that most but the charges of collaboration with the CIA seemed based in observable facts.

The state-approved media continued to incite action against the *Derg*'s opponents, apparently to full effect. The embassy noted that one

⁶⁶² EPRP, “Seded and the Bandas Continue Killing each other,” *Abyot*, Vol. 2, No. 7, Nov. 1977. p. 32. Note there is apparently some dispute over whether this report lays blame accurately.

⁶⁶³ October 20, 1977 Cable; Wikileaks link search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1977ADDIS06076_c.html.

day's headline, "White Terror of EPRP to Be Crushed with Red Terror Around Schools,"⁶⁶⁴ was followed the next day with the dispersal of a student march by gunfire, leading to the deaths of many.

The waves of repression continued to inflict serious losses on the left. Ironically, at about the time Haile Fida was captured, Haile's long-term rival, Berhane Meskel Redda, now estranged from the EPRP he had devoted his life to building, was also captured by *Derg* forces in the rural north, and sent to a prison in Addis Ababa for interrogation.

In November, Tito Hiruy, promoted to secretary general of the EPRYL to replace his slain brother Aklilu, was captured, betrayed by a *Derg* infiltrator in the leadership of the EPRYL. He was also imprisoned and interrogated. Hiwot Teffera had been transferred from the EPRYL leadership to an EPRP party committee and narrowly escaped capture herself.⁶⁶⁵

The so-called Red Terror lasted throughout the end of 1977 into 1978, becoming a broader tool of social control than simply an extermination campaign against a few left organizations. Hiwot Teffera recalls Addis Ababa at the height of the terror:

Armored cars, uniforms, corpses in the streets, martial music, intimidations and warnings over the mass media, forced meetings, rallies and demonstrations, constant raids, imprisonment, mass massacre and mass graves fragmented by everyday existence. The whole array of government machinery—*Kebeles*, *Abyot Tebakis*, *Nebelbal*, army, police, secret service agents and cadres—not only altered the physical landscape of cities, but also the very fabric of social and human existence. It seemed like there were more armed people in the streets than civilians and more spies in bars, restaurants, hotels and hair salons than customers. The level of trust that existed among family members, friends, neighbors and colleagues became as ancient as Biblical times. The

⁶⁶⁴ October 28, 1977 Cable; Wikileaks link [search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1977ADDIS06188_c.html](https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1977ADDIS06188_c.html).

⁶⁶⁵ Hiwot Teffera, *op. Cit.*, p. 289.

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world they lived in was no longer recognizable.⁶⁶⁶

Hiwot herself was finally captured and imprisoned in February 1978.

By the end of the year, the last two surviving EPRP CC members in Addis Ababa were moved out to rural regions, Samuel Alemayehu to Tigray and Kiflu Tadesse first to Begemdir province.⁶⁶⁷ It certainly wasn't the end of the Party's presence in the cities, but it marked the beginnings of a real change in the Party's focus.

But the two biggest milestones of the fall of 1977 were the elimination of Mengistu's final original rival within the *Derg*, Atnafu Abate, and the intensification of the military situation with the neighboring Somali Democratic Republic and the Eritrean rebels.

Vice chairman of the *Derg* Lt. Colonel Atnafu Abate was out of Addis Ababa the day of the February coup; he seems to have been largely aloof from that moment of intra-*Derg* scheming, and so he survived that purge of Mengistu opponents. Atnafu certainly understood the stakes, and in 1977 he joined the organization game though he was not generally assumed to have particularly deep socialist sympathies. As reported in *Abyot*, "Outright pro-US elements within the *Derg* led by Atnafu formed a political grouping called 'Abyotawi Seif', which means Revolutionary Sword."⁶⁶⁸ *Abyot* suggested Atnafu and former premier and aristocrat Mikael Imru were attempting to engineer a rapprochement with the U.S.

And this seems to have been Atnafu's fatal error. On November 12, after rumors that he had fallen into disfavor with Mengistu, he was executed. There was a strong suggestion that Atnafu was eliminated as an obstacle to Mengistu's agenda at the behest of his Soviet and Cuban advisors. The U.S. embassy summarized for Washington a *Derg* media announcement of the reasons for purging Atnafu:

a) Failing to give support of National Democratic Revolu-

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 294.

⁶⁶⁷ Kiflu Tadesse, *Part II op. Cit.*, p. 332.

⁶⁶⁸ "The Fall of Atnafu," *Abyot*, Vol. 2, No. 6, Sept.–Oct. 1977, p. 8.

tionary Program, b) Opposition of PMAC decree nationalizing rural lands and to other revolutionary decrees, c) Manifesting feudal arrogance when traveling around country, d) Maintaining contacts with various enemies of revolution and especially with CIA agents, e) Not believing in ideology of working class, f) Being intoxicated with reactionary thirst for personal power, g) Effecting release from prison of assassins, who then resumed their terrorist activities, h) Arming enemies of revolution, I) Opposing establishment of Politburo, j) Opposition to search operations in cities.⁶⁶⁹

There are several ironies in this list, not least of which is how the accusation that Atnafu failed to actually support the NDRP mirrors the accusations of *Meison* against Mengistu. Point “J” serves as a reminder that death squad activity was fully endorsed by the government.

An alleged direct quote from Atnafu was repeatedly broadcast by the *Derg* as proof that Atnafu was an enemy of the revolution: “In name of socialism and class, entire people are today deprived of justice, peace and democracy.... We have deprived country of friends in name of socialism. This is a mixed economy, and we have to be friendly with the east and the west.”⁶⁷⁰

A conversation between the Soviet Ambassador and an East German official held in December in Addis Ababa, from a declassified memorandum, assesses Mengistu’s move approvingly:

Mengistu has further consolidated his position since the elimination of Atnafu Abate. He has further gained stature as a revolutionary statesman. One senses in speaking with him that he views things realistically. At the same time one has to reckon with his complicated character.... Atnafu was criticized for problems which he rightfully brought up. He

⁶⁶⁹ October 13, 1977 Cable; Wikileaks link search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1977ADDIS06403_c.html.

⁶⁷⁰ Quoted in US embassy cable of Nov. 14, 1977; Wikileaks link search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1977ADDIS06421_c.html.

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avored the development to a mixed society. It was another thing that he opposed socialism altogether. Now nobody dares to say anything anymore.⁶⁷¹

Few, it seems, shed tears for Atnafu, certainly not the Soviet, Cuban and Eastern European advisors to Mengistu's regime.

Back in May, Mengistu and the Soviet Union had signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation as a prelude to a game-changing arms deal replacing the increasingly hesitant military relationship between the *Derg* and the United States. Tensions between Ethiopia and the avowedly socialist Soviet-armed regime of Maxamed Siyaad Barre in Somalia had long been brewing, and at first the Russians hoped to quiet these down. Aiming on keeping the two neighboring countries in its camp, the Soviet Union engaged in urgent shuttle diplomacy to forestall open conflict, including floating a proposal for a regional federation of Ethiopia, Somalia, Djibouti and South Yemen. But working out any real peace between the Horn of Africa's neighbors proved elusive.

Mengistu's summoning up external enemies as an existential threat to the nation was not entirely hyperbolic. Through 1977, an EPLF offensive in Eritrea had begun to liberate towns from Ethiopian government control, aiming squarely at the major prizes of Asmara and Massawa. In July, forces of the Somali Democratic Republic, claiming to act in support separatist rebels in Ethiopia's Ogaden region, had crossed the border into Ethiopia's easternmost province. By autumn, the town of Jijiga had fallen to the Somali army. And so the Soviet Union dropped its relationship with Siyaad Barre, and doubled down on its support of the Ethiopian government. Siyaad Barre, in turn, found himself back in the arms of Russia's main enemy, and the war between Ethiopia and Somalia soon became weighted with cold-war ramifications. Although it was not until 1978 that a counteroffensive would turn the tide in favor of Ethiopia, 15,000 Cuban soldiers and thousands of Soviet and South Yemeni military advisors descended on the country. Starting

⁶⁷¹ "Memorandum of Conversation, East German official with Soviet Ambassador to Ethiopia Ratanov, Addis Ababa, 6 December 1977" (dated 7 December); Wilson Center link digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110964.

in late 1977, Ethiopian troops began to win back territory lost to the Eritrean rebels while the Cubans focused on defending Ethiopia's eastern border. The *Derg* doubled down on its repression of Somali nationalism in areas of the Ogaden still under its control.

The EPRP felt that the key issue in eastern Ethiopia was the national question: the rights of oppressed Ogaden Somalis and Oromos to self-determination. They thought the war would be ruinous on the Ethiopian economy and devastating to the people in conflict regions. They criticized the *Derg* for hyping Ethiopian nationalism and asking Ethiopia's people to make further sacrifices in an avoidable conflict. In the end, despite the Party's sympathies for the cause of oppressed Ogaden Somalis, they eventually issued a statement against the Somali incursion. "[N]either the Derge nor the Somali regime will ascertain the rights of the Ogadeni and the Oromos, but the people themselves.... The Somali regime's interference... will create serious impediments to the Ethiopian revolutionary struggle. Therefore, we will condemn and struggle against it."⁶⁷²

The *Derg* proved adept at using patriotism to rally the population. First, it invoked the barbarism of the invaders:

Now, using as a camouflage a fictitious [sic], so-called Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF), the renegade ruling clique of Somalia is nakedly attacking Revolutionary Ethiopia. In this naked and blatant aggression committed by the reactionary regime of Siad Barre, Revolutionary Ethiopia has sustained heavy human and material losses. Innocent children, women and old men have been slain by the soldiers of the reactionary Siad Barre; economic development projects worth billions of dollars have been destroyed, peasant associations have been dismantled and their leaders slain; bridges and railway lines have been destroyed.⁶⁷³

⁶⁷² EPRP, *Democracia*, Vol. IV, No. 9, quoted in Kiflu Tadesse, *Part II op. Cit.*, p. 235.

⁶⁷³ Ethiopian Revolution Information Center, *Revolutionary Ethiopia Fact Sheet*, January 1978; pp. 18–19.

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For the record, Marx and Lenin posters were a favorite of the “reactionary” Siyaad Barre regime as well.

The government singled out Siyaad Barre for ridicule: “Siad Barre... has no scruple himself to swear in the name of Marxism-Leninism for arms, in the name of Islam for petro-dollar, and worship imperialism for his annexationist ambition.”⁶⁷⁴ But most successfully, under the slogan “Revolutionary Motherland or Death!” the government began to conflate Ethiopian nationalism, the resistance tradition of Emperor Menelik at the battle of Adwa, and defense of the revolution in a call for mass resistance to the Somalis and the Eritrean rebels. The constant drumbeat of Ethiopian patriotism invoked by the *Derg* was militarizing society... and isolating civilian opposition.

⁶⁷⁴ Propaganda and Information Committee, *The Men-in-Uniform in the Ethiopian Revolution* (Sept. 1978), pp. 30–31.

Chapter 12

Playground of Empires

“It was Menelik’s calculated defiance of [the Treaty of] Uccialli that brought about the battle of Adwa in 1896, which resulted in the first Dienbienphu.”—Aklog Birara, ESUNA (1971)⁶⁷⁵

“The question of national liberation is intimately tied to the problem of imperialism. With its global system of control and its gigantic military power, international imperialism today is the most serious opponent of national liberation struggles. Without imperialism, the life span of the puppet regimes in many countries, Ethiopia included, would be much shorter.... It is therefore essential for any popular struggle, at every stage of its development, to make adequate ideological, political and military preparations against imperialism. Any movement that fails to put the question of imperialism at the heart of its calculus cannot be revolutionary.”—Melesse Ayalew, ESUNA (1971)⁶⁷⁶

“For the new Tsars in the Kremlin turning Ethiopia to a Russian neo-colony constitutes the cornerstone of their African policy. That requires maintaining Mengistu’s regime in power and destroying the Ethiopian revolution.”—EPRP, Abyot (1978)⁶⁷⁷

⁶⁷⁵ Aklog Birara, “Notes on European Imperialism in Ethiopia,” *ESUNA Challenge*, Vol. XI, No. 1, Jan. 1971.

⁶⁷⁶ Melesse Ayalew, “Editorial: Imperialism and National Liberation,” *ESUNA Challenge*, Vol. XI, No. 1, Jan. 1971.

⁶⁷⁷ EPRP, “Social-Imperialism Undertakes ‘Rescue’ Operation to ‘Save’ Fascist Junta from Crumbling,” *Abyot*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Jan. 1978, p. 3.

A Feast for Vampires

For centuries Europe, joined later by the United States of America, has treated Africa as a kind of miraculously bottomless well out of which it could draw an endless supply of resources for the construction of its own wealthy, modern societies, with ultimately very little concern for what the draining of that well meant for Africa itself—or its population. The free labor of slaves and later the cheap labor of the impoverished and dispossessed; agricultural products, oil, ores and minerals; mercenaries and cannon fodder; such was the harvest of the feature of capitalism eventually labelled “imperialism.”

When it is not being falsely caricatured as antiquated jargon, imperialism is usually but incompletely understood as the colonial or military domination of underdeveloped countries by the rich and powerful countries of the global north. But Lenin’s still useful 1916 exploration of imperialism⁶⁷⁸ goes far beyond this, adding further dimension and insight: an understanding of how those rich and powerful countries use capital itself to dominate and indeed enslave underdeveloped economies. Imperialism also conquers by *exporting* capital from rich nations to underdeveloped ones. Such capital builds industry, plantation-based or industrial agriculture, and trade, creating local economies that become dependent on the jobs, consumer goods and cash flow controlled by the agents of the dominant power, whether state actors or business conglomerates. Thus while pretending to be engaged in mutually beneficial endeavors, imperialism weaves a sticky parasitic web that suppresses independent national development and elevates the local comprador class while ruthlessly exploiting local labor. The expansion of imperialism through the postwar phenomena of neocolonialism and neoliberalism is beyond the scope of this investigation, but just because the age of competing colonial masters seems ever more historically distant, it doesn’t mean that imperialism is a thing of the past. Imperialism is actually an evolution of simple capitalism into a world system. In the post-colonial era, those who have found Lenin’s economic insights

⁶⁷⁸ See Lenin’s *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, via Marxist Internet Archive www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/imp-hsc/.

too Eurocentric have coupled them with Frantz Fanon's exploration of the psychologically brutal effects of colonial exploitation and oppression for a more complete understanding of the devastation imperialism leaves in its wake.

It is also useful to understand imperialism as a conjuncture of interests between the owners of capital and the political state which serves those masters: the aggressive state policies of imperialistic nations become materially and intimately bound with the interests of the monied classes, and so the bolstering of military machines of conquest become synchronous with the priorities of banks and corporations. When outright conquest is off the table, as is largely the case in the post-colonial world, imperialist nations now pursue parallel tracks of domination: political meddling and vying for influence, matched with an aggressive drive for favorable terms for exploitation and profit. Such policies that are linked to outright colonialism, but not identical to it, allow imperialism to tolerate antithetical political systems if its vampiric tendrils are otherwise allowed to spread unimpeded.

The trouble with imperialism, as wags have said, is that eventually one runs out of other people's countries. This means that wealthy developed nations often find themselves at odds with other nations practicing the same vampiric trade, competing for what actually turn out to be finite resources. Enter war and the quest for global or regional strategic dominance. Thus, the repeated Italian imperialist effort to subjugate the Horn of Africa was not only a mission to conquer the resources and peoples of the region, but part of a broad conflict for hegemony between the powers of Europe that joined the battlefields of Ethiopia to the battlefields of Europe.

The Ethiopian experience of imperialism via the Italian invasion of 1935 was brutal and burned into the memories of its survivors and their descendants. Just one quote from a pamphlet put together by the legendary anti-fascist, Ethiopianist, and former communist Sylvia Pankhurst in the 1940s gives us an inkling of the trauma experienced by every surviving Ethiopian witness:

Every able-bodied Italian in the place appears to have

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been encouraged to slaughter natives. With rifles, pistols, bombs, knives, and clubs served out for the occasion, gangs of Blackshirts and workmen went through the native quarter killing every man, women and child they came across. Others, with flamethrowers and tins of petrol, fired the flimsy huts and houses and shot down those who tried to escape.⁶⁷⁹

When Italy was defeated, the UK and the USA assumed the role of primary predators in the region, though Italian businesses maintained strong “investment” relationships in the Ethiopian (and Eritrean) economy not seen in countries without the legacy of Italian colonial occupation. The emperor and his regime became an integral cog in the British efforts to control decolonization in Africa and then in the American effort to combat the radicalization of newly independent states. Haile Selassie’s role in the Organization of African Unity became an important part of the attempt to outflank “African socialism,” acting as a pro-American pole in continental politics during the independence wave of the 1950s and 1960s. Joining its much stronger allies, the State of Israel cultivated a relationship with the Ethiopian government that also involved military cooperation, economic exploitation, and strategic positioning against the Arab states lined up with various Ethiopian and Eritrean rebel movements.

For the radical left in Ethiopia, all this meant that the decades-long traditions of militant resistance to Italian imperialism informed and inspired the struggle they hoped to wage against both the feudal regime and the modern imperialist domination of the country. It deeply informed their commitment and expectation of eventual revolutionary armed struggle.

It’s worth noting parenthetically that the Eritrean national liberation movements came to hold an understanding that named the Eritrean question as not just an issue of self-determination for an aspiring national minority, but as the case of a captive nation victimized by

⁶⁷⁹ *The Times of London*, March 3, 1937, quoted in *Italy’s War Crimes in Ethiopia*, p. 23

the expansionism, colonialism and exploitation of the Amhara/Ethiopian empire. This argument became a bit of a wedge between revolutionary Ethiopians and Eritreans who debated the political and national implications of this analysis.

Anyway, by the early 1970s, the Ethiopian radical movement succinctly summarized Ethiopia's relationship to imperialism like this:

- 1) Ethiopia today is in the grip of international finance and international imperialism;
- 2) the domination of the economy by foreign capital results in serious exploitation of resources and profound misdirection in the deployment of the country's potential;
- 3) there is symbiotic interdependence between imperialism and the present social system in Ethiopia.⁶⁸⁰

This perspective placed the Ethiopian student movement—and the political movement that it spawned—squarely inside the global movement against imperialism. A 1975 flyer issued by the Ethiopian Students Union in West Berlin contextualizes the Ethiopian struggle:

We are in a historic phase, in which the working masses gain victory by victory. The example of Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Guinea Bissau, Eritrea, Oman and Dhofar, Palestine, the unity of the Arabs and the defeat of Kissinger, the defeat of fascism in Greece and in Portugal, the intensive struggle of the working class in Italy, Spain and other capitalist and absolutist countries show all the great achievements of glorious socialism towards the death struggle of ailing imperialism. The more united and cohesive the world proletariat struggles, the closer comes the death of the international bourgeoisie.⁶⁸¹

⁶⁸⁰ New York Chapter of ESUNA, "Imperialism in Ethiopia Today," in ESUNA, *Challenge: Imperialism in Ethiopia*, V9N1, January 1971, p. 33.

⁶⁸¹ ESU leaflet, "1 Mai 1975"; English translation at abyotawi.blogspot.com/2017/10/snapshot-may-day-1975.html.

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Imperialism as a global system absolutely oppressed and exploited Ethiopia. In specific, though, the period of the revolution was a period of international disengagement by U.S. imperialism in the aftermath of its defeat in Vietnam. The Ethiopian revolution involved the overthrow of a valuable U.S. ally and client, and yet American response or censure was minimal: this temporary loss of aggressive appetite on behalf of imperialism was an important window of possibility, and one that precluded the arrival of direct American military intervention. The sole American military base in the region, the Kagnew Airforce Base in Eritrea, was seen as out-dated and expendable. In the 1960s, none would have guessed that it would be the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics that would fill the void of foreign domination.

Through the early seventies, the trajectory of the Ethiopian revolution brought the country from a period of intense exploitation by one imperialist power to a period of domination by this second world power. This was a profound challenge to a left which a few years before might have unanimously lined up on one side of this conflict; but by the mid-1970s that second power, the USSR, was viewed not as a socialist ally but as a malignant force of repression by several silos of the international left. As the USSR had gained a material interest in controlling the revolution through its relationship with the military regime, it became clear that the relationship of the Soviet Union to the country mirrored the worst of U.S. domination under the *ancien régime*. Both the EPRP and *Meison* wings of the left movement would come to this conclusion, though the river of blood between these two factions had become far too deep for that to be the basis of any unity.

The EPRP saw this as a continuum: drawing in its analysis a thread between the Ethiopian struggles against Italian imperialism, against U.S. imperialism, and then ultimately against what they called Soviet social-imperialism. Here pro-EPRP Ethiopian students in the diaspora spell it out:

The Ethiopian peoples have a bitter experience of various treaties with imperialists that have subjected them to the latter's flagrant interference and domination.... During the

reign of Menelik the Italian Imperialists managed to conclude the treaty of Ucciali in 1889 that served their imperialist design to annex Ethiopia.... After the Second World War, when U.S. Imperialism became the gendarme of the world, Haile Selassie signed a mutual defense pact with the U.S. in 1953 and various agreements of “cooperation” in subsequent years that opened the door to U.S. enslavement and domination of Ethiopia.... Yet the counter-revolutionary military regime that never learns from history signed on November 20th, 1978 the treacherous “Ethiopian-Soviet friendship and cooperation treaty” that subjects the Ethiopian people to the further domination by Soviet Social Imperialism.⁶⁸²

A stated opposition to imperialism was a defining characteristic of all factions of the left; all agreed it was a primary threat. But imperialism was also used as a club inside the revolution: Accusations of colluding with imperialism were frequently employed by all factions against each other. Ultimately, despite its own deeply compromised position, the *Derg*'s invocation of national patriotism turned out to be the trump card for cementing its victory after the violent suppression of left opposition. All sides in Ethiopia invoked the nation's two defeats of Italian imperialism not only for the visceral evidence of resistance but as a suggestion that victory over imperialism was within their grasp. Ironically, with the qualified exception of the defeat of the nominally U.S.-supported Somali invasion of 1977–1978, it's entirely debatable how much imperialism's grip on the country was concretely thwarted during the entire revolutionary and post-revolutionary period. Despite all the rhetoric, Ethiopia's economy had not been built to stand alone.

Ethiopian Radicalism in an American Century

As we've seen, Ethiopian revolutionaries were prepared to confront the might of U.S. imperialism as part of their struggle to overturn the

⁶⁸² ESUNA, “Firmly Oppose the Treacherous ‘Ethiopian-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation’” circular, December 8, 1978.

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feudal monarchy. The Kagnew air force base in Eritrea and shipments of napalm to the regime notwithstanding, however, American meddling in Ethiopia never reached the level of an anti-insurgency campaign in support of the empire. Nevertheless, the mutually beneficial relationship between the Ethiopian ruling class and Western imperialism was quite real.

Recognizing its centrality, the revolutionary ESM spent a great deal of time studying and excavating the role of U.S. imperialism in Ethiopia. As one ESUNA member wrote simply, “The Ethiopian feudal ruling class saw an indispensable ally in American imperialism from the outset.”⁶⁸³ The hundreds of Ethiopian students studying in the United States witnessed American imperialism from the inside: they also witnessed domestic opposition in the forms of both the Black Power movement and the anti-Vietnam war movement.

The 1971 ESUNA *Hand Book* summarized the many ways imperialism was understood to afflict Ethiopia in the late Haile Selassie era:

[E]very day imperialism strengthens its grip. Our country has been sold to the Americans and Israelis who have installed their military bases of aggression on our soil. The Americans and Israelis totally control the army, the police, and the security organs of Ethiopia, and they direct and supervise the repression of the masses. Through the system of loans our country is finding itself mortgaged or sold to the United States. The misappropriation of mines, land, industries, transportation, trade, banks, etc. by the United States and other imperialist countries continues at an increasing pace. The wealth of our country is robbed—with the help of the Ethiopian feudalists and big bourgeoisie—by the United States, Israel, Britain, Italy, “West” Germany, Japan, etc. All national activities such as education, agriculture, medical care, post and telegraph, production,

⁶⁸³ Wondwossen Hailu, “Origins of American Imperialism in Ethiopia,” in ESUNA, *Challenge: Imperialism in Ethiopia*, Vol. 9, No. 1, January 1971, p. 19.

labour union organization, the press, national defense, politics, economics, etc. are filled, controlled and run by imperialist personnel, mainly American. These new Italians, new fascists called American and Israeli have mapped and remapped the terrains of our country, sent their spies throughout the country, spread their reactionary and decadent cultures, increased their moral and material aid to the Ethiopian autocracy, prepared invasion plans of our country and are doing all other things that bring misery to our people. Truly, our country is a neo-colony of American imperialism.⁶⁸⁴

There's some hyperbole in some of these claims, but it's evidence of the deep hostility and revulsion the movement felt in the era of American aggression in Vietnam. As we saw in chapter one, this connection between Ethiopia's domestic rulers and imperialism was always near the surface for the developing radical movement. It was all of a piece, as radical Ethiopian students wrote from Amsterdam in 1971: "With the growing collusion of feudalism and imperialism plus zionism, above all based on the openly-secret agreements the landlord class has made with these two world-wide reactions, no wonder this same infamous class is responsible for a possible Black Viet-Nam."⁶⁸⁵

American influence was ubiquitous, and if Ethiopian young people appreciated imports like soul music and jazz, other imports crossed a line. The radical ESM called, for instance, for the withdrawal of the Peace Corps from Ethiopia as an agency of "cultural imperialism."⁶⁸⁶ It's a little ironic that American imports might be said to have included the military training received by a roster of Ethiopian officers hosted at bases in the United States—a roster that included Mengistu Haile

⁶⁸⁴ ESUNA, *Hand Book On Elementary Notes on Revolution and Organization*, p. 16.

⁶⁸⁵ Ethiopian Students in Benelux, "The Socio-Political Reality and the Ethiopian Peoples' Struggle in Perspective," in *Ethiopia Uncovered*, December 1971, p. 60.

⁶⁸⁶ See WWUES/ESANA, *The Liberation of the Imperial Ethiopian Government Embassy in Washington, DC*, 1969, p. 10.

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Mariam—and the radical educations of quite a number of revolutionary activists.

As for the claims that Israel was a junior partner in American exploitation of Ethiopia, this was acknowledged by the Palestinian resistance and was a substantial reason the liberation fronts offered concrete military support to both Eritrean and Ethiopian revolutionaries. One Palestinian resistance group wrote,

Although the opening speech of Emperor Haile Selassie at the African summit conference last May (1973) supported the demand of the international community that Israel should withdraw from the occupied Arab territories, the attitudes taken by the Ethiopian delegation to the conference... gave further proof of the three way political-military linkage of the United States, Israel and Ethiopia and of Israel's "colonial master's role in that country. The linkage, which is designed to serve the interests of world imperialism in the African continent, is manifested in the existence of American military bases in Ethiopia as well as in Israel's efforts directed toward the economic exploitation of the country."⁶⁸⁷

This particular publication goes on to summarize Israel's extensive military cooperation with the imperial regime and its deepening economic relationship.

When the emperor visited the United States in 1969, radical Ethiopian students in the United States were quick to use the occasion to highlight the oppressive nature of the American alliance with Haile Selassie. They occupied the Ethiopian embassy in Washington and published exposés on the relationship of the two countries.

Haile Selassie's present sojourn in the United States does not come as a surprise. This has been established practice since his infamous escape to Europe during the popular

⁶⁸⁷ PLA-PLF, "The US, Israel and Ethiopia," in *Arab Palestinian Resistance Monthly Magazine*, No. 7, Damascus, 1973, p. 37.

resistance against fascist Italy. At the end of the Italian occupation, he was reinstated by British imperialist forces who subdued the popular revolts against his return. In 1960, there was an uprising to overthrow Haile Selassie's regime during one of his frequent trips overseas. At that time, the United States was instrumental in engineering his reinstatement. Haile Selassie's present mission is yet another attempt to secure United States's help to salvage the defunct regime. The United States is fulfilling its bargain to suppress all opposition to Haile Selassie's reactionary regime in return for maintaining its most important military base in Africa on Ethiopian soil.⁶⁸⁸

But by the 1974 revolution, things became complicated. The United States was actually preoccupied elsewhere, facing defeat in Indochina and political demoralization at home, and the contours of struggle the revolutionary movement initially anticipated began to evaporate. U.S. intelligence agent Paul Henze reveals,

The United States... was very diverted during this period. This was the period when the United States was recovering from the confusion in Vietnam. The United States was pretty passive in terms of its own third world commitments. It is true that somewhat later in that period, the United States got very much involved in Angola, but there was no direct connection between Angola and other activities and Ethiopia.⁶⁸⁹

The avowedly socialist *Derg*—carrying forward the military campaigns in Eritrea and elsewhere started by the *ancien régime*—remained militarily dependent on the United States for its first two years in power.

⁶⁸⁸ WWUES/ESANA, *The Liberation of the Imperial Ethiopian Government Embassy in Washington, DC*, 1969, pp. 14–15.

⁶⁸⁹ National Security Archive, Interview with Paul Henze. Date of interview not clear, apparently 1990s. (via nsarchive2.gwu.edu/coldwar/interviews/episode-17/henzel1.html).

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Mengistu himself openly acknowledged that in a 1978 speech that “The United States of America has, for the past 25 years, been the main supplier of arms to Ethiopia.”⁶⁹⁰

The U.S. remained keenly aware of its strategic interests, even if its appetite for intervention in the aftermath of Vietnam was low. An American embassy outline of the situation two years after the *Yekatit* revolution observes weakness within the *Derg*, and in fact praises many of the military regime’s actions:

The revolution that began over two years ago has produced a number of desirable changes—land reform; better use of trained manpower; redistribution of income... competent management of nationalized business enterprises have minimized economic stress.... The absence of strong, charismatic leadership, however, has had the cumulative effect of weakening the whole fabric of society, causing increasing dissensions and undermining unity and mutual confidence. Ruling junta (Dirg), originally 120 members elected by military units, finds itself unable to agree on next steps, except for vague egalitarian “socialist” goals.... A sense of helplessness that has enabled first v/chairman Mengistu to emerge as primus inter pares and to achieve at least passive Dirg acquiescence in present innovations.⁶⁹¹

The U.S. did eventually begin to show some ambivalence to aiding a “socialist” military regime, and in the months before the *Derg* sealed a deal with the Soviets, agreements for American weapons continued in place but the actual deliveries failed to materialize.

In the early days of the military regime, the civilian revolutionary movement made much of this fact that the *Derg* continued to be dependent on the West for arms.

⁶⁹⁰ Quoted in *The Ethiopian Revolution and the struggle against U.S. imperialism*, World View Publishers/Workers World Party, 1978, p. 73.

⁶⁹¹ April 27, 1976 cable; Wikileaks link www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1976AD-DIS04993_b.html.

The military regime in Ethiopia is an American-backed reactionary force that has unleashed repression against the masses. Benefitting from the struggle of our masses, who toppled one of the most barbaric autocracies in contemporary history, and aided by imperialism which wanted to cut the struggle of the masses short, the American-trained officers took over power and set-up their dictatorial rule over the labouring masses. The military have openly rejected all the democratic demands of the workers, students, peasants, etc.⁶⁹²

While U.S. military backing of the *Derg* was a fact, the regime responded by branding—perhaps more accurately, slandering—its opponents on the left as being agents of the American CIA. As we have seen, these charges escalated after the events of September 1976 when the EPRP’s urban armed wing began to respond to government attack. What is fascinating, though, is that the U.S. embassy was quite concerned about these accusations. In this secret cable from the U.S. embassy in Addis Ababa back home to Washington, the embassy details the *Derg*’s accusations and expresses great worry that accusations of CIA meddling would have a negative effect on popular opinion. While it might seem laughable that meddling imperialists would worry about how they were perceived, the fact that *secret* communications between American agencies refute Mengistu’s charges seems significant. Here are excerpts from the memo:

EPMG staged large rally morning Sept 26 of workers from peasant and urban dwellers associations to demonstrate support for PMAC and condemnation of Sept 23 assassination attempt on PMAC First Vice Chairman Mengistu Haile Mariam. Despite large crowds, rally was orderly and passed off without incident. Numerous placards linking anti-regime EPRP with CIA were evident. This cable

⁶⁹² “The Fight Against the Reactionary Leaders of ESUE,” in *The Proletariat*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Jan. 1974 (misnamed/numbered, probably Jan. 1975) p. 6.

recommends that new representations be made to EPMG in this latter regard.... As means of counteracting possible harmful effects on public opinion of Sept 23 ambush and wounding of Mengistu, EPMG marshalled its faithful legions of peasant associations and urban dwellers association workers from city and neighboring areas to converge on Revolution Square for large Sunday morning solidarity rally. Although streets were heavily guarded by armed troops, four-hour demonstration was orderly throughout, as masses passively listened to harangues of organization leaders to effect that revolution would go on, despite desperate efforts of anarchists and imperialists, such as attempt on Mengistu's life.... Large number of placards were in evidence. Most of these quoted Mengistu to effect that "Revolutionaries may die or be killed, but the revolution goes on." More disturbing, however, were frequent references to alleged CIA involvement in Ethiopian anti-regime activity. Among such placards, which were then given prominent play on news broadcasts throughout day, were the following: "EPRP Is CIA", "Away with CIA Agents, Disguised [sic] as Tourists", "Yankees Go Home", "No More Children and CIA," "Paid CIA Agents", "Anarchists Drunk with CIA Money".... This latest outburst of anti-CIA publicity after week of quiet could only have taken place with EPMG approval (or at least acquiescence) and would appear to necessitate follow-up.... Our argument should be that placards are graphic evidence of Charge's contention to Kifle that PMAC official statement of Sept 15, which incorrectly linked CIA to activities of Ethiopian anti-regime organizations, can only serve to have harmful effect upon public opinion and attitudes toward USG and its representatives in Ethiopia. Hence, it all the more important that some means be found, such as disavowal, to counteract harmful

impressions created by PMAC statements.”⁶⁹³

For its part, *Meison* consistently insinuated that imperialists were behind every obstacle in their path. A post-1978 *Meison* account reads,

During the year 1976 and a part of 1977, American imperialism closely worked with the anti-NDRP⁶⁹⁴ forces in Ethiopia. It fomented a series of reactionary and fascistic coup d'états, most serious among which was the one attempted by Major Sisay Habte and general Getachew Nadew in July 1976. When this attempt was foiled, American imperialism not only continued to arm feudal bandits in the rural areas but also unleashed assassination squads to spread terror in Ethiopia's urban centers.⁶⁹⁵

There is a muddy and self-serving elision here between dissenters inside the *Derg*, the London-based aristocratic EDU—which fielded armed forces in Ethiopian border regions and openly sought support from the West—and the EPRP's urban defense wing.

In smearing the EPRP as an agency of imperialism they cast themselves as the prime victims of what they paint as a shadowy global conspiracy.

In fact, international imperialism waged simultaneously a vicious propaganda campaign aimed at discrediting the Ethiopian revolution in the eyes of the world progressive forces. They spoke of fascism and terror knowing very well that the fascists and terrorists in the country were those very forces who had their political and material support. They said little about the white terror that was raging in Ethiopia and that was claiming the lives of hundreds of the country's valourous sons and daughters among whom the vast major-

⁶⁹³ September 27, 1976 cable; Wikileakslinkwikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1976AD-DIS10527_b.html.

⁶⁹⁴ National Democratic Revolutionary Programme, see chapter 9.

⁶⁹⁵ *Meison*, “Me'isone and the Struggle for National Independence” in *New Ethiopia Newsletter*, Nov./Dec. 1980, Spanga, Sweden, p. 12.

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ity were members of *Me'isone*.⁶⁹⁶

For the record, in the process of this investigation, this researcher read various conspiratorial accusations that this or that EPRP figure was in the pay of Western or other intelligence; all were based on supposition and accusation not hard evidence, and ultimately a spy-versus-spy investigative exposé is outside of the scope of this work. There *is* evidence that the Soviets later used Mengistu's *fear* of the CIA to manipulate him: In September 1977 the Soviets passed along to Mengistu a frightening—but apparently totally fabricated—report of a CIA conspiracy to launch an assault on Ethiopia from Kenya and the Sudan to be set off by an assassination mission against Mengistu himself.⁶⁹⁷ When the Ethiopian government confronted American officials about *that* conspiracy, the Americans assured the *Derg* representative that no such conspiracy existed, and noted, "In Embassy view, notable aspect this conversation was not so much story itself as fact that prominent Dirg member was willing to bring story directly to our attention and enable us to shoot it down."⁶⁹⁸

The dramatic switch in alignments between Ethiopia, neighboring Somalia, and the two superpowers in 1977 was certainly significant, and next we will look at the challenges the massive shift to Soviet sponsorship brought, but there is an important footnote here. The fact that U.S. imperialism was now arming Ethiopia's enemy did not mean the end of U.S. imperialist involvement in Ethiopia, thanks not only to the political long view of the American government, but also to the insidious nature of imperialism itself; and here we must remember that imperialism is more than war and aggression. A Soviet report from 1978 on the Ethiopian economy spells it out:

At the same time, it would be incorrect to consider that

⁶⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁶⁹⁷ See *CWIHP Bulletin*, pp. 80–81 for the Soviet memorandum on the alleged "FAKEL" conspiracy. See Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The KGB and the World: The Mitrokhin Archive II*, p. 457, for a brief discussion of the actual provenance of the leak.

⁶⁹⁸ September 15, 1977 cable; Wikileaks link search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1977ADDIS05463_c.html.

Ethiopia was fully liberated from its dependence on Western countries, particularly in the economic sphere. The state of Ethiopian debts to the West in May 1978 comprised 351 million rubles. Meanwhile, Ethiopia, as a rule, pays off its debts and credits in a timely fashion, as well as the interest on them, and allots annually approximately 13 million rubles to this end, which comprises approximately 5% of the annual export earnings and does not represent a burden for the country's finances. Such a policy makes it easier for Ethiopia to receive new means for the development of the country's economy. It is precisely the economic factor that the Western countries are bearing in mind as they pursue a long-term struggle for Ethiopia.⁶⁹⁹

So even though the Ethiopian government was loudly proclaiming the Somali invaders as the spearhead of U.S. imperialism, "Socialist" Ethiopia was actually continuing to hold a place in the neocolonialist web.

Setting aside any discussion of the rights to self-determination or otherwise of the significant ethnic Somali population in eastern Ethiopia that was the pretext for Somali leader Siyaad Barre's invasion in 1977, the invasion was a real threat to the territorial integrity of Ethiopia and to the regime, and the *Derg* was able to muster support for its resistance to the invasion on exactly that basis. The *Derg* (and its new formal allies in the Soviet Union and Cuba) pointed fingers at Washington for being the motor force of the invasion. But quite frankly, in historical hindsight it seems far-fetched to see Somali actions as mere American puppetry. Greater Somali nationalism dictated parts of Ethiopia as one point on the star on the Somali flag and the 1977 conflict was not the first border war. It's also an inescapable fact that before 1977, the avowedly socialist Somali regime was in close alliance with the Soviets. The support for Somalia from Washington was a mutually opportunistic reaction to the Somali agenda coinciding with the *Derg*–

⁶⁹⁹ Soviet Embassy in Ethiopia, background report on "Ethiopia's Relations with Western Countries," August 1978, *CWIHP Bulletin*, p. 101.

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USSR pact signed in May 1977. The Cold War between the Soviet Union and the U.S. certainly had a reflection in the Ethio-Somali conflict but it wasn't the *cause* of it in the first place. It was dangerous because rulers sitting in Washington and Moscow were happy to ensure that the bodies counted on the battlefields of hot breakouts in their cold conflict would be brown ones.

New Tsars?

The story of the massive Russian shift in support to the Ethiopian military government begins with the factionalism inside the *Derg*.⁷⁰⁰ Although the invocation of an Ethiopian path to socialism began in 1974 as the military seized power, *Derg* figures regularly denied over the next two years that this meant Ethiopia was entering the Soviet bloc. However, the regime's military and development agenda was not possible with the growing political ambivalence from the United States. Through the first years of the revolution, the story of every diplomatic effort between *Derg* hardliner Mengistu and foreigners seems to have involved seeking sponsors for money or weapons.

Captain Moges Wolde-Mikael visited the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) in March 1976. His request for aid came after apologizing for the role of Ethiopia in participating in the Korean war on the side of the U.N. "The DPRK was surprised by this request for such an immense amount of aid. They did not expect such a bulky list of requests. Jeong Jun-gi merely told the Ethiopian delegation that the DPRK would examine the requests, and it would restart talks about those ones whose fulfillment it considered possible."⁷⁰¹ Contacts with China were similarly inconclusive.

⁷⁰⁰ For a further, extended discussion of the relationship between the Soviet Union and Ethiopia in this period and more citations from the time, see the author's essay "Ethiopia, Revolution, and Soviet Social Imperialism" in the new edition of *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism*, Second Edition edited by Immanuel Ness and Zak Cope, Palgrave/MacMillan 2020.

⁷⁰¹ Reported by Ferenc Szabó, Hungarian ambassador to the DPRK in "Hungarian Embassy in the DPRK, Report, 28 April 1975. Subject Visit of an Ethiopian Government Delegation in the DPRK. Wilson Center link digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/115818.

A formal relationship with Russia was slow to develop, but off to Moscow went Moges in July 1976. A Soviet report from 1978 outlines those diplomatic efforts:

In January 1975 the PMAC leadership raised in principle the question of developing Soviet-Ethiopian relations. It was announced by our side that the Soviet Union regarded sympathetically the measures taken by the PMAC for building a new society on progressive principles, and that we shared their opinion about the need to develop comprehensive contacts between Ethiopia and the Soviet Union.... On 6–11 July 1976 an Ethiopian state delegation led by former Chairman Mogus Wolde-Michael of the PMAC Committee of Ethiopia came to the Soviet Union on an official visit. The Soviet delegation at the negotiations was led by Comrade A.A. Gromyko. Members of the Ethiopian delegation were received by Comrade A.N. Kosygin.⁷⁰²

In the last chapter we saw evidence that strongly suggested the Soviets were aware in advance of Mengistu's coup. Immediately after February 3 (which saw the execution of Major Moges), Mengistu started asking for weapons. A conversation between Soviet and Cuban diplomats in Addis is documented in a declassified Soviet memo:

Mengistu requested that the Ambassador pass on to Fidel Castro a verbal message in which the PMAC requests Cuba to provide assistance to the Ethiopian People's Militia via deliveries of small arms. In this regard Mengistu declared that the Americans had already refused to provide spare parts for tanks, [and] had suspended deliveries of spare parts for all kinds of weapons, and that the PMAC expects the USA, after the events of 3 February to apply even harsher sanctions against Ethiopia. At the same time the USA is

⁷⁰² Soviet Foreign Ministry, "Background Report on Soviet-Ethiopian Relations," 3 April 1978. Secret. Single copy orig. No. 167/3 ag 03.IV.78 SOVIET-ETHIOPIAN RELATIONS via www.banadir.com/77/36.shtml.

providing military assistance to Sudan, [and] Kenya, and is encouraging officials of these and other countries to act against the Ethiopian regime. The PMAC, reported Mengistu, intends to follow Cuba's example of creating in factories and agencies, and in villages, committees for defense of the revolution, which will act in close contact with detachments of the people's militia, which are formed under the supervision of urban and rural associations. However, the effectiveness of these measures will depend on whether the PMAC has available and at its disposal the necessary quantity of weapons."⁷⁰³

And so Mengistu flew to Moscow and a treaty was signed. "On 4–8 May 1977 a state delegation of Ethiopia led by Chairman Lieutenant-Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam of the PMAC came to the Soviet Union on an official friendly visit. Mengistu Haile Mariam was received by Comrade Brezhnev."⁷⁰⁴

This meant a recalibration of the civilian left's attitude toward both the *Derg* and the Soviet Union. Neither the EPRP nor *Meison* were buying the message that Soviet sponsorship and the massive Cuban military airlift represented any kind of "proletarian internationalism." Holding to the spirit of anti-imperialist principles, the EPRP embraced the harshly critical language of the anti-revisionist movement. Following the lead of the People's Republic of China in its 1960s rupture with the Soviet Union, it labelled the Soviet Union "social-imperialist" and accused the Soviet leadership of acting like "new tsars" who had traded in internationalism for the designs of empire.

An editorial in the EPRP's *Abyot* in January 1978 read,

On basis of what considerations the Kremlin Tsars decided

⁷⁰³ "Memorandum of Conversation between Soviet Ambassador in Ethiopia A.P. Ratanov and Cuban Ambassador in Ethiopia Jose Peres Novoa," 10 February 1977. Wilson Center link digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111626.

⁷⁰⁴ Soviet Foreign Ministry, "Background Report on Soviet-Ethiopian Relations, 3 April 1978." Secret. Single copy orig. No. 167/3 ag 03.IV.78 SOVIET-ETHIOPIAN RELATIONS via www.banadir.com/77/36.shtml.

to be committed to a crippled regime, is not yet known. One thing, however, is obvious, i.e.: they are trying to fulfill an imperialist task which US imperialism could not succeed in fulfilling: mainly to maintain a stable neo-colony in Ethiopia. To keep a tottering regime in power, which is threatened by a dynamic social revolution from below, they had to do exactly what the US imperialists did in Indo-China. When the French colonialists left Vietnam, US imperialism stepped in to maintain a neo-colonial administration in the south. As if military hardwares could decide the destiny of oppressed peoples, US imperialism did all it can materially and in terms of personnel in the south of Vietnam. Just like the US imperialists, the social-imperialists are also doing all they can to keep the fascist junta in power.⁷⁰⁵

The EPRP backed up its accusations against the Soviet Union not with anti-communism but with arguments straight out of its vision of Marxism-Leninism.

Russia today is no longer the Union of *Soviet Socialist Republics*. The changes that took place in the one time USSR have transformed that country greatly. The dictatorship of the proletariat has been replaced by the dictatorship of the ruthless bourgeoisie. The party of Lenin, the CPSU, has become a counterrevolutionary bourgeois party. In their foreign policy, the present day rulers of Russia have thrown overboard the Marxist-Leninist motto of “proletarians and oppressed peoples of the world, unite.” The revolutionary principle of proletarian internationalism has been replaced with counter-revolutionary and imperialist interference in the internal affairs of other countries, parties and revolutions in order to destroy proletarian or national democratic revolutions. They are involved in a fierce con-

⁷⁰⁵ EPRP, “Social-Imperialism Undertakes ‘Rescue’ Operation to ‘Save’ Fascist Junta from Crumbling,” *Abyot*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Jan. 1978, p. 4.

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tention with US imperialism to divide and re-divide the world.... Like other imperialists, it has become not only an imperialist power but one of the two super-powers in the world.⁷⁰⁶

References to how the Soviet Union became capitalist and therefore social-imperialist abound in the late-1970s materials of the Ethiopian student diaspora groups like ESUNA.⁷⁰⁷ The rhetorical and political influences of Chinese foreign policy and American communist groups like the Central Organization of U.S. Marxist-Leninists, which had an orientation to work in support of ESUNA, influenced the movement to adopt more explicit anti-revisionist rhetoric in its critique of the Soviet Union's role in Ethiopia.

The struggle against modern revisionism must be closely linked with the struggle against imperialism. We must not only oppose and criticize the various revisionist "theories" of the modern Czars, but we must also expose the socialist-in-words and imperialist-in-deeds nature of the Soviet Union. This is the only road.... [W]e must thoroughly reject and repudiate all subjectivist, pragmatist, centrist, or apologist arguments with respect to the real nature of present-day Soviet Union and with respect to its role in our country and elsewhere.⁷⁰⁸

The Soviet embrace of a regime that was engaged in a massacre of the left was really a bitter pill to swallow. As ESUNA wrote, "However much the Soviet revisionists trumpet their propaganda alleging theirs is a socialist country, their theory and practice and real life shows that they are, in fact, socialists in words and imperialist-in-deeds. Lenin says that,

⁷⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 1.

⁷⁰⁷ See for instance, ESUNA, *Combat*, Vol. 7, No. 3, March 1978.

⁷⁰⁸ Statement of the CC of ESUNA, "Soviet Social-Imperialism and the Ethiopian Revolution," Special issue of *Combat*, ESUNA, Vol. 7, No. 3, March 1978, p. 39.

‘We judge a person not by what he says or thinks but by his actions.’”⁷⁰⁹

The EPRP began to talk about Russia as it had previously talked about the United States:

The Soviet Social imperialists are striving frantically to turn Ethiopia into their colony and to exploit our people blindly. At the same time, the Moscow hegemonists are advocating the “sanctity of Ethiopia’s frontiers” as if they had not been the most notorious violaters of other nations’ frontiers. The aim of the social imperialists is quite clear—they want to control Ethiopia and at the same time they want to assure that “their” Ethiopia assumes full control of Eritrea as Moscow needs the Red Sea ports as part of its grand hegemonist design in the whole region. Thus, the social imperialists manoeuvres vis a vis Eritrea.⁷¹⁰

Amidst all the symbolic confusion we have already discussed, EPRP graphic propaganda, already well practiced depicting Mengistu as a fascist, now began to show menacing Soviet tanks adorned with Hitlerite swastikas. The EPRP retained its Marxism-Leninism, but it faced a daunting challenge in trying to cut through the Derg’s co-option of the Marxist-Leninist language, more and more following a template set by the Soviets. A late 1977 *Abyot* editorial ideologically contextualizes the moment:

We fight the Soviet and other revisionists because we want to keep our country free from such pests. We fight them because the society we want to build, i.e. a genuinely socialist Ethiopia, is contrary to theirs. The EPRP firmly believes and zealously guards its independence. It will fight the Soviet revisionists just as it will continue to fight the US imperialists. It will fight revisionism and will struggle dogmatist currents inside and outside the party. Marxism-Leninism is

⁷⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 16.

⁷¹⁰ EPRP, “Eritrea: The Soviet Manoeuvre Must Fail!!,” *Abyot*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Feb-Mar. 1978, p. 16.

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a vibrant, ever developing correct and scientific ideology. It is alien to all those who want to revise or ossify it.⁷¹¹

Once *Meison* had lost its seat at the side of the Derg, it joined the chorus against Soviet influence. A *Meison* publication wrote,

[T]he Soviet Union and its allies had their own reasons to fear the development of the revolution in Ethiopia. In fact, it was clear to every one that the democratic and patriotic camp was led by *Me'isone* and that this camp struggled for the integral implementation of the NDRP. The establishment of a democratic power in an independent Ethiopia ran counter to the hegemonic designs of the Soviet Union. It was clear that the later's interests would only be served by an anti-democratic and puppet regime, isolated from the people and entirely [sic] depending on foreign powers. The Soviet Union understood that neither the "maoist" and "bourgeois nationalist" *Me'isone* nor any other democratic government that may come as a result of a victorious revolution could be counted upon to serve this purpose. Just as american imperialism and internal reaction, the Soviet Union was therefore interested in the dismiss of dual power.⁷¹²

Meison makes the unsubstantiated claim that unnamed "anti-imperialist" forces on the international scene dominated by the Soviet Union initially backed the EPRP until the "rightist coup" of February 1977.⁷¹³

In *Meison's* version of the *Derg* factionalism, the Soviet Union moved to back Mengistu only after the February 1977 coup, something that is not supported by obvious historical evidence. Surviving *Meison* cadre Abera Yemane-Ab wrote,

⁷¹¹ *Abyot* Vol. 2, No. 7 quoted in "Soviet hegemonism exposed," WWFES, *Forward!* Vol. 2, No. 4, Jan. 1978, p. 5.

⁷¹² *Meison*, "Me'isone and the Struggle for National Independence" in *New Ethiopia Newsletter*, Nov./Dec. 1980, Spanga, Sweden, p. 13.

⁷¹³ See *Ibid.*

The Soviets ventured into the scene first by cautiously backing the Alemayehu/Moges faction which also had the backing of EPRP. In December 1976 when the restructuring of the Dergue aimed at ousting Mengistu was underway, Soviet representatives in Addis Ababa volunteered their views by privately stating that “the proposed change is a good step for the Revolution and for democracy.” But they quickly changed sides in February 1977 when they realized that Mengistu has come out of the struggle as the victor. In fact, the Soviets were the first to offer their congratulations to Mengistu after the elimination of the Alemayehu/Moges faction.⁷¹⁴

Naturally in this narrative, Soviet meddling was aimed squarely at combatting *Meison's* influence over the *Derg*.

Their second objective was to drive a wedge in the rift between the Dergue and the civilian left, Meison in particular. Immediately following Castro's visit in March 1977, Meison went on record publicly expressing its concern over the newly found love between the Soviets and the Dergue in these terms: “*Getting the support of socialist countries and other progressives of the world for the Ethiopian Revolution is important.... Nevertheless whatever the circumstances... however much the sacrifice and however long the struggle may be revolutionaries should, above all, rely on the 28 million Ethiopians and Ethiopia's resources. The moment our belief waivers from this line and the day we place our hopes on foreign powers, it should be understood that we are assisting to reduce the Revolution to impotency and endangering our national independence.*” The infuriated Soviets, of course, responded by intensifying their campaign against Meison. Exploiting the widening rift between Meison and the Dergue, the Soviets accused Meison of petty-bourgeois nationalism and advo-

⁷¹⁴ Abera Yemane-Ab, “The Defeat of the Ethiopian Revolution,” p. 26.

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cated that such elements should be eliminated.⁷¹⁵

Meison's critiques of Soviet involvement at this juncture seem less comprehensive than that of the EPRP and its allies; and they heavily rely on an appeal to Ethiopian nationalism. After Fidel Castro's visit to Ethiopia, *Meison's* underground publication *Voice of the Masses* warned,

No matter how serious the economic, political and social problems may be, no matter how many revolutionaries may fall, in short no matter how great the sacrifices or how protracted the struggle may be, revolutionaries must, under all circumstances, rely on the 28 million Ethiopians and on the resources of the country. The day we start to deviate from this correct path and put our hope on foreign forces, let us stand warned that we are contributing towards the crippling of our revolution, endangering our age old national independence and preparing the country for a day of a new enslavement.⁷¹⁶

It's clear *Meison* felt a sense of betrayal in being replaced as the "leftist" advisors to the regime. Abera again:

Yet, the progress of the Revolution continued until the Soviets came to the scene and put their entire weight behind the forces of reaction. Soviet intervention disrupted the internal balance of power which, in my view, constituted not only the underlying driving force of the Revolution but also set the tone and pace at which revolutionary measures were initiated and instituted.⁷¹⁷

The program of the *Derg's* party-building formation, *Emaledh*,

⁷¹⁵ Abera Yemane-Ab, "The Defeat of the Ethiopian Revolution," pp. 27–28. The *Meison* citation is from "Socialist Countries and the Ethiopian Revolution," *Voice of the Masses*, No. 53, March 1977; Abera notes that that final accusation came from the Soviet Ambassador during a meeting with Mengistu in June 1977.

⁷¹⁶ Quoted in *Meison*, "Me'isone and the Struggle for National Independence" in *New Ethiopia Newsletter*, Nov./Dec. 1980, Spanga, Sweden, p. 14

⁷¹⁷ Abera Yemane-Ab, *op. Cit.*, p. 2.

written before *Meison* was purged, made an utterly cynical appeal to the “self-reliance” of the Ethiopian revolution at the exact moment when the PMAC opened the floodgate to Soviet, Cuban, South Yemeni and East German advisors. “If all the steps undertaken in the economic, political. Diplomatic and military spheres are based on the principle of self-reliance, it is certain that Ethiopia will be able to protect its revolution, territorial integrity and independence.”⁷¹⁸ (After the purge of *Meison*, *Emaledh* would be free to write, shortly before dissolving in 1979, “We need the support of the socialist countries in order to ensure our existence and integrity and then embark on a fast road to progress.”⁷¹⁹)

The EPRP called out the flood of advisors. A 1978 article in *Abyot* read,

The social imperialist drive to control Ethiopia in all spheres is being intensified. High ranking envoys of all sorts continue to flock to Addis Ababa from Moscow and its puppet countries. Economic agreements are signed, “courtesy visits” increased, goods are dumped on Ethiopia and more vital materials taken out of the country to Moscow and Eastern Europe. The Social imperialist drive to neo-colonize Ethiopia fully is a vivid reality.⁷²⁰

Behind the scenes, the Soviets were clear that the *Derg* was incompetently managing the Ethiopian economy. In fact they were keen to direct the Ethiopian economy, and keen to do so *by pulling back from socialism*. This is revealed by a declassified record of a discussion between East German and Soviet advisors in Addis Ababa in late 1977,

On the question of non-capitalist development with Socialist orientation: Within the leadership there is nobody who

⁷¹⁸ CFEMLO, *Program*, 1977, p. 13.

⁷¹⁹ *Emaledh*, “The New Decisive Chapter, *Yehibret Demts*, Vol. 2, No. 5, February 1979, p. 10.

⁷²⁰ EPRP, “The Process of Ethiopia’s Neo-colonisation” *Abyot*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Feb.-Mar. 1978, p. 26.

knows what this state of development really means. It is presented as a Socialist revolution. For example, the development of kulaks is rejected. 75% of the rural population .is still involved in a produce-based economy. Who should develop agricultural production? There are no social statistics on which the development of the Ethiopian village could be based. There are regulations for private investments but they are not propagated. The bourgeoisie has money but is afraid to invest because it fears nationalization. One should follow the example of the USSR and develop a NEP [New Economic Policy], thus providing a prospect for all social classes. Atnafu was criticized for problems which he rightfully brought up. He favored the development to a mixed society. It was another thing that he opposed socialism altogether. Now nobody dares to say anything anymore. The mood of the workers and peasants is extremely leftist. It will take great persuasion to convince them of the necessity of a NEP. On the other hand there is the danger that the PMAC will become too distant from the people.⁷²¹

The opposition attempted to expose what was really behind the political showboating: old-fashioned economic exploitation. Here, ESUNA exposes some of the reality.

Capital export in the form of joint enterprises by the Soviet Union and its puppets is also on the rise. The expansion of the Czechoslovak-run meat canning plant in Ethiopia, the setting up of East German-run commercial farms in Wollega, the recent conclusion of an agreement by the latter to expand the Assab harbor, are only a few examples showing that the Soviet revisionists and their allies are making rapid inroads into Ethiopia's neo-colonial economy.⁷²²

⁷²¹ "Memorandum of Conversation, East German official with Soviet Ambassador to Ethiopia Ratanov, Addis Ababa," 6 December 1977 [dated 7 December], *CHWIP Bulletin*, p. 83.

⁷²² Statement of the CC of ESUNA, "Soviet Social-Imperialism and the Ethio-

The Soviet Union acted as a brake on the revolution. It is an unfunny joke of history that the Soviets were among the harshest critics of the Ethiopian left, and not only on the basis of false charges of being Western agents. *Pravda* correspondent Valentin Korovikov repeatedly attacked the left for challenging... capitalism.

In their *Kebeles*, the leftists pushed through unlawful requisitions, forbade retail trade, and enforces their own laws, resorting even to open plunder and murder. They put to full use the young people from the lumpen-proletariat, recruiting them for the terrorist groups of the so-called Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party that in 1976 launched a campaign of outright terror.... [R]eactionaries who had wormed their way into the trade unions and the *Kebeles* were fomenting unrest and disorder, hoping to turn back the tide of the revolution. Shedding crocodile tears, they complained: "Power belongs to the people. So what are you waiting for? Take over the tea houses, the transport, the mills, the shops and everything else!" This kind of agitation and actions to match created conditions favourable for the reactionaries who wanted to bring back the old system.... Realistic measures (not the pseudo-revolutionary "Grab everything and share alike!") were taken for the first time to solve one of the most difficult problems of all—that of the lumpen-proletariat.⁷²³

Privately, the Soviets embraced a cynical *realpolitik* even to the extent of denying that the Ethio-Somali conflict was actually the war of the worlds that Mengistu and the Cubans publicly and repeatedly proclaimed it to be. Again, the 1978 Soviet report on the Ethiopian economy:

Drawing a general conclusion, one can say with certain-

pian Revolution," Special issue of *Combat*, ESUNA, Vol. 7, No. 3, March 1978, p. 16.

⁷²³ Valentin Korovikov, *Ethiopia—Years of Revolution*, pp. 81–82.

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ty that a long-term course for the USA and the Western countries for the struggle for Ethiopia is being plotted. This is evident if only from the fact that, in spite of the Somali adventure, they do not intend to exchange Ethiopia for Somalia. While creating their position in Somalia, they are setting their strategic sights on Ethiopia. This can be seen both from the degree of patience with which the USA, England, and the Federal Republic of Germany are regarding the sharp anti-imperialist attacks in the speeches of the Ethiopian leaders and in the press.⁷²⁴

What the Soviets did want, however, was a complete break with any Chinese influence. High on the list of Soviet priorities was purging Ethiopia of any vestiges of Mao or Chinese-inspired radicalism. *Derg* insider Dawit Shifaw recalls,

[Originally] Chinese books on socialism flooded the streets with Mao's red books for everyone in the cities especially for those who could read English.... [Eventually] the Soviets advised Mengistu to burn Chinese communist books and condemn Maoism. They also instructed cadres to burn valuable historical books on Ethiopia, published in the West.... While playing a role of destroying Ethiopian and Chinese books in the country, the Soviets advised the cadres to observe Soviet holidays, such as Lenin's birthday, Soviet Armed Forces Day, and the Bolshevik Revolution Day.⁷²⁵

Solidarity and Cynicism

There was an understandable Cold War narrative, accepted by both pro-imperialists on the right and by many communists on the left, that the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union (and their

⁷²⁴ Soviet Embassy in Ethiopia, background report on "Ethiopia's Relations with Western Countries," August 1978, *CWIHP Bulletin*, p. 102.

⁷²⁵ Dawit Shifaw, *The Diary of Terror*, pp. 110, 117.

respective allies and clients) was by nature an ideological one. This narrative began—rooted in truth—when the powers of Europe and America invaded Russia after the 1917 October Revolution in a desperate attempt to destroy the first successful workers’ revolution. By the 1960s and 1970s, the world’s left rallied to the anti-colonial, anti-imperialist struggles taking place under the shadow of that cold war, but by then ideology was only part of the story. The sad reality is that by the 1970s what started as a grand ideological conflict expressed itself largely as a territorial and strategic one. While politicians on both sides of the cold war invoked lofty ideological themes, on the ground those ideological concerns often became subsumed by the same old quest for resources, for profits, and for regional domination that had marked the colonial era.

This devolution of the importance of ideological issues also manifested in the schism between the two self-identified socialist giants, the USSR and the People’s Republic of China. An exploration of the ideological roots of this schism is rewarding (and largely outside our scope here), but by the late 1960s when a brief border war between the two powers caused the Chinese leadership to ponder nuclear conflict with its northern neighbor, those ideological questions also began to take a back seat to global strategic concerns. In the Chinese case, ideology was harnessed as a tool in the interests of geopolitical concerns with increasing disingenuousness.

With the Chinese leadership deeply conflicted by the ongoing Cultural Revolution that would not end until Mao’s death in 1976 and the subsequent repudiation of most of Mao’s policies shortly thereafter, the compass of Chinese foreign policy came to be dominated by the “Theory of Three Worlds,” which posited in part that the Soviet Union was a greater political and strategic threat to Chinese interests, and indeed to the world, than the United States. Acting on this theory, China’s foreign policy took a hard swing to the right, and support for various global liberation struggles was traded in for diplomatic advantages with everyone from the Shah of Iran to General Pinochet of Chile. One of the most scandalous examples of this policy in Africa was the

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continued Chinese backing of the UNITA rebel force in Angola against the Soviet-backed MPLA government even when UNITA became the open ally of the CIA and the apartheid regime of white-minority ruled South Africa⁷²⁶. In another sad chapter, the leftist guerrillas in Oman were quickly routed by Iranian troops after Chinese support was withdrawn; the Omani rebels were among those regional anti-imperialist movements whom the Ethiopian student movement had lauded and identified with.

In the irony of ironies, emperor Haile Selassie himself was feted with red street banners when he was invited to visit China in 1971. The same 1971 issue of *Peking Review* which bears the frontispiece quotation from Mao Zedong, "The just struggles of the people of all countries support each other," bears a glowing, albeit apolitical, account of the emperor's visit. "Chairman Mao extended a warm welcome to H.I.M. Emperor Haile Selassie I on his state visit to China and had photographs taken with him and his entourage. H.I.M. Emperor Haile Selassie I said that he was very glad to meet Chairman Mao. Chairman Mao and H.I.M. Emperor Haile Selassie I had a friendly conversation."⁷²⁷ It's worth remembering that about this time "Ethiopia's first Maoist" Getachew Maru was being regularly thrown behind bars in Addis Ababa.

A second article gets to the point, translating a statement from *Renmin Ribao*:

The Chinese and Ethiopian peoples have always sympathized with and supported each other in their common struggle against imperialism. The Chinese people resolutely support the Ethiopian people and other African people in their just struggle against imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism and racial discrimination and for safe-

⁷²⁶ The MPLA, or Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola, led by Agostinho Neto, was arrayed against Jonas Savimbi's UNITA, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, and Holden Roberto's anti-communist FNLA, the National Liberation Front of Angola.

⁷²⁷ "Chairman Mao Meets H.I.M. Emperor Haile Selassie I," *Peking Review*, Vol. 14, No. 42, October 15, 1971, p. 3.

guarding national independence. The Ethiopian people, on their part, give positive support to the Chinese people's struggle. We are grateful to the Ethiopian Government for its just stand of supporting the restoration to China of all her legitimate rights in the United Nations and opposing the U.S. imperialist scheme to create "two Chinas."⁷²⁸

It should have been a warning to Ethiopian radicals that despite all the cheap Marxist literature China would export to Ethiopia, world politics would push Chinese policies into a double game. *Peking Review* noted the eventual overthrow of the emperor but reacted to all the players in the revolutionary era with increasing caution.

Where the Ethiopian radical movement had been inspired and spawned by a wave of global solidarity of the world's oppressed and exploited majority in the 1960s, the Ethiopian left of the mid-1970s revolutionary era was confronted by the deeply cynical machinations and maneuvers of governments that claimed to share the same values but actually offered a succession of bitter pills. Forget the revisionist-led Soviet Union: once-militantly anti-imperialist China and even Cuba, the adopted home of the heroic guerrilla Che himself, would bring mostly disappointment to the civilian left as their actions switched from expressions of solidarity to exercises in self-interest.

The EPRP initially tried to avoid alienating potential solidarity and appealed to various international players despite contradictions among them. But even back in the days of the Algiers center, the movement found its appeals for support frustrated. A participant in the early days of the movement, here using the *nom d'guerre* "Kassahun," recalls the difficult narrow path they had to walk in appealing for material support from what they had hoped would be natural allies.

The Cuban negativity to the Ethiopian revolutionaries had a history. It was clear that Cuba did not take a stand that in any way did not tag along with the Soviet stand. The

⁷²⁸ "Emperor Haile Selassie I Visits China," *Peking Review*, Vol. 14, No. 42, October 15, 1971, p. 5

contact with what was to become the EPRP and Cuba took place in Algiers, Boumedienne's Algeria the early 1970s. The Ethiopians who were to establish the EPRP were looking for passports to use for travel outside of Algiers and asked Cuba for one single passport as an initial aid. Cuba, which gave Miriam Makeba a diplomatic passport she did not need, refused to help. Not only that it did not need any relations with the EPRP. When the EPRP held its founding congress it resolved that it did not go along with Soviet line and policy but will keep this position to itself and will not take any part in the Sino-Soviet dispute in any way. This was a position forced upon it by the concrete situation it had to face, to work under. Obviously this was not a position appreciated by the Soviet bloc.... The EPRP was strongly independent, did not bow to pressures (from China and South Yemen for example), kept its revolutionary line intact and paid high cost for that (expulsion from Aden, break with China, hostility from the Arabs especially from Sudan and Somalia).... Secondly, given the actual world reality and the encirclement of Ethiopia by reactionary and pro-imperialist forces the party has to move carefully. In the past it rejected the so called non-capitalist path of the Soviets and the Third World theory of the Chinese and the whole Maoist line. As I said the cost was high.⁷²⁹

It was a difficult time to abide by principles. In yet another strange array, in 1976 the *Derg* government, still hosting the Organization for African Unity in Addis Ababa, and not yet a formal ally of the Soviets and Cubans, waffled on the crisis unfolding in Angola. An extraordinary session of the Organization for African Unity was held in an attempt to resolve the crisis. The EPRP took the bold step of distributing a special English-language edition of *Democracia* to conference attendees. The

⁷²⁹ Kassahun, "An injustice towards those who died for democracy and socialism," <http://abyotawi.blogspot.com/2017/09/contribution-injustice-towards-those.html>. The actual identity of Kassahun is known to the author.

Party took a sharp stand in favor of recognition of the new MPLA government against rivals in the post-independence civil conflict including the once-Maoist UNITA. The EPRP used the occasion to make a strong statement against imperialist meddling in all of Africa:

The Angolan question is a very simple case of black or white. Every African head of state or government will have to show where he stands: whether, like his predecessors, the chiefs of yester-years, he is on the side of American and Afrikaner slave-masters and condones the Angolan traitors who are organizing modern slave raids to deliver the Angolan people to American and South African slavery; or, whether, like a true leader of a freedom-loving African people, he is ready to frustrate the bloody schemes of U.S. imperialism and the blatant aggression of racist South Africa, by resolutely lending support to the heroic patriots of Angola.⁷³⁰

The statement goes on to condemn the *Derg* for having “the position of not taking a position”: “In other words it is a position of keeping silent in the face of the invasion and rape of Angola by Africa’s worst enemy U.S. imperialism and its aggressive outpost in Africa—apartheid South Africa.”⁷³¹ The Soviet Union and Cuba became the MPLA’s chief backers in what would turn out to be a long and bloody proxy war against various U.S. allies (and eventually the *Derg* would take the side of the MPLA), but no apparent capital was earned for the EPRP by the Party’s willingness to express support that the pre-1977 *Derg* failed to offer.

One could be forgiven for presuming that the Ethiopian struggles and more particularly the Eritrean national liberation struggle would be among those assisted by Cuba’s OSPAAAL⁷³² and lionized in the same

⁷³⁰ EPRP, “Statement of the EPRP on Angola Issued on the Occasion of the Extraordinary Session on Angola of the Meeting of OAU Heads of State and Government—Held in Addis Abeba,” *Democracia* special issue, January 10, 1976.

⁷³¹ Ibid.

⁷³² OSPAAAL is the Spanish acronym for the Organization for the Solidarity of the Peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America.

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Tricontinental magazine that built support for global anti-imperialist struggles and other African guerrilla movements. The *realpolitik* of the 1970s would have a harsh effect.

When Cuban troops became the vanguard of Soviet support for the *Derg* regime against the Somali invasion, the Cuban government claimed it would not intervene against Eritrean separatists. The EPRP called this a lie.

[W]hile Soviet, Cuban and South Yemeni officers are active in the war front in Eritrea, the Cuban Vice-President Rodriguez makes an official statement to the effect that Cubans will not fight in Eritrea as the Eritrean question is an “internal question that must be settled peacefully”!! That this deceitful statement has confused some can be gauged from a statement made by an ELF representative in Rome who considered the declaration as “positive”, according to press reports. The Soviet and Cuban murderers cannot [t]alk of peace because they are invaders and aggressors and war-mongers.⁷³³

In fact, Castro himself privately expressed a complete willingness to sacrifice the Eritrean struggle for the sake of the Ethiopian military regime. In a note to East German leader Erich Honecker, Fidel Castro laid the basis for a betrayal of the Eritrean guerrillas:

Meanwhile the situation in Eritrea is difficult. There are also progressive people in the liberation movement, but, objectively, they are playing a reactionary role. The Eritrean separatist movement is being supported by the Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. Ethiopia has good soldiers and a good military tradition, but they need time to organize their army. Mengistu asked us for 100 trainers for the militia, now he is also asking us for military advisers to build up regular units. Our military advisory group is active at the

⁷³³ EPRP, “Eritrea: The Soviet Manoeuvre Must Fail!,” *Abyot*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Feb.-Mar. 1978, p. 16.

staff level. The Ethiopians have economic means and the personnel necessary to build up their army. Rumors have been spread lately that the reactionaries will conquer Asmara in two months. The revolution in Ethiopia is of great significance.⁷³⁴

The turning of natural allies against each other was ultimately a product of superpower dynamics. For all the rhetoric from Addis Ababa and Havana about international solidarity being the motivation for Cuban assistance to the regime, the Soviet ambassador to Ethiopia is alleged to have said, “The decision of how many Cubans will come and what Cuba will do here is going to be made in Moscow, not in Havana.”⁷³⁵

If one Cuban defector is to be believed, Cuban soldiers themselves had fairly cynical views on their role in Ethiopia. According to “Santurce,” an officer captured by Somali forces, interviewed by an American magazine while waiting in Morocco for American asylum, recalls,

There is no difference between the French, Cubans and the Russians of today, and the English and the Portuguese of a hundred years ago. It's all just part of the same thing, the different culture coming in and killing and destroying and taking what they want and moving out.... I feel that Cuba has been used by the Russians, that the Russians hope to establish a base in Africa, and they will use Cuban blood to build it. I feel that Fidel has been fooled by these people, that he has been seduced by these people.... Yes, I think that Cuba now is doing what for so many years we said the United States was doing in Cuba, that we are using economic and military force to create what we want, despite

⁷³⁴ “Transcript of Meeting between East German leader Erich Honecker and Cuban leader Fidel Castro, East Berlin (excerpts),” April 3, 1977. Wilson Center link digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111844.pdf.

⁷³⁵ Soviet Ambassador to Ethiopian officials, quoted by US intelligence officer Paul Henze in an interview, <http://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/coldwar/interviews/episode-17/henze2.html> Of course the words of an imperialist spy must be taken with a grain of salt.

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what the people in those areas want.⁷³⁶

With the Somali invasion pushed back, the presence of a Cuban army on the country's eastern border allowed the PMAC to launch a nearly successful counter-offensive against the advancing Eritrean rebels. While Cuban forces did not apparently join the fight against the Eritreans directly, the Soviet advisors freed up by the defeat of Somali certainly did. The EPRP summed it up bitterly, "With the withdrawal of the Somali troops, the Soviets and Cuban criminals have lost one of their cherished arguments to justify their intervention. Thus, it has become clear to all that the social imperialists intervened not to be 'frontier' guards but to neo colonise Ethiopia and consequently to gain control of the whole region."⁷³⁷

As for China, at the height of the period of its global militancy in the 1960s dozens of Eritreans were invited to Beijing for military and political training. Arms followed them home. Surviving photos show crowds of young Eritreans including future Eritrean leader Isaias Afewerki beaming with their Chinese hosts. However, this kind of relationship was not widely extended to the civilian Ethiopian left after the 1974 uprising.

According to Kiflu Tadesse, the EPRP attempted to maintain a relationship with the Chinese government, some indirectly through side-dealing by Captain Moges, one of the *Derg's* chief diplomats and secretly a partisan of the Party, and some through direct contact and negotiations. Even as the horror of 1977 unfolded, a representative of the EPRP met with the Chinese in their Addis Ababa embassy. "In the course of the discussions, the Chinese official demanded that the EPRP condemn the system in the Soviet Union. He was informed that the EPRP had condemned the Soviet involvement in Ethiopian affairs. As for the nature of the Soviet system, it was disclosed that the question was under study and the party would take a position when it was ready....

⁷³⁶ Chuck H. Keilus, "Cuban Soldier: A *Players* Interview," *Players*, August 1978, p. 27, p. 52.

⁷³⁷ EPRP, "Victory Over Social-Imperialism Is Certain!" *Abyot*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Feb.-Mar. 1978, p. 1.

The EPRP characterized the Soviet Union as Social-Imperialist sometime in mid-1977 and informed the Chinese about the new policy. That disclosure assisted in improving Chinese-EPRP relationship.”⁷³⁸ Eventually EPRP delegations visited post-Mao China, representing the Party’s army after it had been largely forced out of its urban base. Kiflu says that China offered money in 1978 and some military training in 1979; apparently the Chinese were harshly critical of the EPRP’s urban guerrilla activities. Ultimately, EPRP activists would come to believe that Chinese assistance was increasingly motivated more by Chinese national geo-political interests than by revolutionary internationalism.

While the EPRP’s relationship with the Chinese could hardly be called that of a client and sponsor relationship, it was fodder for Soviet hostility and ultimately derision by Mengistu himself. In 1977, the Soviet Ambassador reported a discussion between Mengistu and the Cubans about Chinese influence:

Arnaldo Ochoa also informed me that in one of their recent conversations Mengistu said that Ethiopian-Chinese relations were becoming more and more complicated with every day. The PMAC found out that the PRC was providing military assistance to the People’s Front of Eritrean Liberation [EPLF]. In relation to this, the PMAC made a decision to limit all relations with Beijing to the minimum without engaging in an open confrontation, and to devise measures against Chinese ideological penetration in Ethiopia.⁷³⁹

By 1978, the mood had passed from behind-the-scenes maneuvering to open hostility. Mengistu included a lengthy attack on China and the EPRP in his 1978 speech marking the fourth anniversary of the PMAC’s seizure of power:

⁷³⁸ Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, p. 311.

⁷³⁹ “Memorandum of conversation between Soviet Ambassador to Ethiopia A.N. Ratanov and Cuban military official Arnaldo Ochoa,” July 17, 1977. Wilson Center link digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111849.

In this connection we have been observing patiently and calmly... the Chinese situation, whose reactionary stance has become more and more evident. The Communist Party of China which has been degenerating from time to time... has been a matter of concern among the progressives of the world. Revolutionary Ethiopia has been expressing her concern on this daily worsening reactionary tendency to members of China's Communist Party and to Chinese diplomats who have been to our country on different occasions.... If we consider China's stand regarding the Ethiopian Revolution, when she posed as a supporter at the initial stage and wanted to give some petty assistance, we expressed our goodwill and friendly feelings believe that it was done in a revolutionary spirit. True to the adage, with a handful of grain, approach the full sack, China continued to undermine us internally and divide Ethiopian revolutionaries. Nor did she stop there. By arming the so-called EPRP and separatists in collusion with the CIA, China had also become instrumental for the massacre of any oppressed Ethiopians. While all these machinations were in progress, apart from registering our concern and keeping the situation under control, we did not hasten to publicly expose her. When a few reactionary Arab regimes claimed the Red Sea to be an "Arab Lake" as a pretext for triggering off hostility and thereby assail the Ethiopian Revolution, China fully supported that conspiracy.⁷⁴⁰

It's hard to resist reflecting here that in the long run, the Chinese and American geopolitical long-games would pay off. In the late 1980s Mengistu turned away from the unravelling Soviets in a last-ditch attempt to save his regime. When it was overthrown, China and the United States would reap the benefits; China through massive invest-

⁷⁴⁰ "Fourth Anniversary of the Ethiopian Revolution: Speech delivered by Lt. Colonel Mengistu Haile-Mariam, Chairman of the PMAC (Derg) September 12, 1978, Addis Ababa," p. 21.

ment in the Ethiopian economy, the U.S. through the adoption of a reliable regional military ally in the TPLF regime. The EPRP, for its part, would remain illegal. But at the moment of time when the *Derg* was on the verge of major military victories, such a future would have been hard to imagine.

In 1978, the streets of Ethiopia's urban areas were still filling with the blood of leftists, and the countryside was increasingly the scene of military confrontation. The final purges of the so-called "Red Terror" were coming, and their motivation would include finally ridding the country of all traces of "Maoist" subversion and removing the last independent left opposition to Mengistu's consolidation of power.

Chapter 13

1978–1979, Revolution's End

“The failure of urban guerrilla warfare was the beginning of the end of the revolution. Comrade, this is the end of the revolution itself. There is no more revolutionary Party or Army. What started in Addis, ended in Addis.”—former EPRA fighter Ayalew Yimam⁷⁴¹

“The struggle among parties for political power is common in any country, but it is not by murdering innocent people as Mengistu did.”—Derg insider Dawit Shifaw⁷⁴²

“The difference between the socialism we are fighting for and the ‘socialism’ of the social-imperialists and fascists is as wide as heaven and earth.”—EPRP’s *Democracia*⁷⁴³

The EPRP Retreat

Nationalism and patriotism are powerful and time-tested weapons in the hands of demagogues. In the face of various threats ranging from the Somali invasion, the Eritrean and Tigrayan insurgencies, and persistent political and military opposition from both left and right, the Derg’s increasingly loud call of “Motherland or Death!” was an effective supplement to its military activities. Building on the regimentation and organization attempted with the earlier *zemetcha*, one-day rallies, participation in top-down mass organizations, militia mobilizations, and extended campaigns like the rural literacy campaign that was soon to be undertaken, all became exercises in social militarization and government mass popular control. With the civilian left in retreat from the extreme brutality of the terror, there was less chance of such mobiliza-

⁷⁴¹ Ayalew Yimam, *Yankee Go Home*, p. 323.

⁷⁴² Dawit Shifaw, *The Diary of Terror*, p. 106.

⁷⁴³ *Democracia*, Vol. 5, No. 4, quoted in *Abyot*, Feb.–March 1979 issue, Vol. 4, No. 2.

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tions getting away from their intended *Derg* mandates.

There was broad popular support for 1978's successful counter-offensive against the Somali invasion, made possible by Cuban troops and Soviet arms. It's notable that even today many Ethiopians with only bitter memories of the *Derg*, remember the Cuban intervention as a nation-saving grace than as part of a wedge that allowed the military regime to consolidate itself, though that is certainly what actually also happened. When the summer counteroffensive against the Eritrean liberation fronts began to turn back the rebel offensive that had come extraordinarily close to an Eritrean victory, the *Derg* seemed more confident and stable. With the Somali army driven from the country, and the Eritrean fronts forced back to their rural base areas and their liberated bunker town of Nakfa, the military regime sounded and acted increasingly triumphant.

At the beginning of 1978, the left was on the defensive but not yet silenced. Recalling the days when a minority of Europe's socialists bravely resisted competing nationalisms during the First World War, the EPRP called on Ethiopians to avoid being swept up in the fervor for war. It said in a 1978 statement,

The position of the EPRP on the situation has been quite clear from the outset. The EPRP has opposed the reactionary war between the two states and condemned it as anti-people and reactionary and which works against the self-determination of the masses involved.... War is a terrible thing and it entails millions of victims and it cannot be brought to an end so easily, as Lenin had pointed out. The only way we can put an end to the war is by developing the revolution and by making power pass into the hands of workers and peasants led by the proletarian party. Aside from this, the "solutions" brought by Soviet tanks and Cuban mercenary troops will not be an end to the war but a prolongation of the war and the suffering of millions of people for more years to come. The realisation of this should lead to the combined struggle of genuine revolu-

tionary forces in Ethiopia, Somalia and the whole region against reactionaries and the two super powers.⁷⁴⁴

It's worth noting that EPRP supporters who had sought refuge in Somalia or who were caught behind the lines of the Somali military advance faced severe repression from the Somali government.

On the subject of the Eritrean war, *Abyot* clearly stood in defense of the rebels. "The national question has been denied a democratic solution. The regime has raised the slogan of 'Unity or Death!' and unleashed war against the oppressed nationalities in the Empire. To the Eritrean people who have been struggling for years to realise their independence the junta has responded with massacres and the empty talk of 'autonomy'."⁷⁴⁵

The Party faced existential crises in its urban strongholds but it refused to set aside its principles and give up its fight. Another *Abyot* editorial from 1978 read, "For four years, the struggle of the masses continues to rage because the popular aspirations remain denied. The struggle continues because the masses want power, democracy and socialism. The people have shown that they are capable and determined to rule themselves. They have amply shown that their vision of socialism is intrinsically linked with democracy for the oppressed masses."⁷⁴⁶

As late as 1979 the EPRP kept taking about its vision of socialism in contrast to the society the military regime was consolidating. *Democracia*, still being published underground, wrote,

Socialism is a system which arms the proletariat and broad masses with broad democracy. Socialism is a system which is based on the power and supremacy of the proletariat. Socialism is a system in which the proletariat and broad

⁷⁴⁴ EPRP, "The Ogaden War: The Soviet Solution Leads to War" in *Abyot*, Vol. 3, No. 2, February–March 1978, pp. 6–7.

⁷⁴⁵ EPRP, "From February 1974 to February 1978 the Revolutionary Struggle Continues Unabated!!" in *Abyot*, Vol. 3, No. 2, February–March 1978, p. 5.

⁷⁴⁶ EPRP, "From February 1974 to February 1978 the Revolutionary Struggle Continues Unabated!!" in *Abyot*, Vol. 3, No. 2, February–March 1978, p. 6.

masses organize themselves in many forms to be able to administer themselves. Socialism is a system in which the proletariat and broad masses acquire more democracy, welfare and development than the capitalist system in the political economic and cultural fields. In the Soviet Union, however, the party which still works in the name of the proletariat is trampling the proletariat and broad masses underfoot and deprives them their democratic rights. It has kept the proletariat aside from political power. It has concentrated all the power in its hands and has become an anti-socialist party of few bureaucrats which defends their bourgeois interests.... For the social-imperialists and fascists, socialism means a system of which a regime of handful few dictators has the control of the masses and when the people do not have any control of the government. For them, socialism is being against democracy, anti-proletarian, anti-people and which combines the reactionary superstructure and practices which enables them to maintain their fascist and exploitative rule. The difference between the socialism we are fighting for and the "socialism" of the social-imperialists and fascists is as wide as heaven and earth. To us socialism is a system in which the proletariat and broad masses hold state power; in which they take part in all responsible positions, in which the right of the people to call or change the officials of the government elected locally or at a country-wide level is guaranteed, in which there is a proletarian-led regime that stood for the broad masses of the people.... There is no socialism if the proletariat and broad masses do not take part in decisions of government affairs and if they do not administer themselves in a democratic system. Socialism is not democracy for the ruling class and government officials and dictatorship over the masses as it is like in the Soviet Union and its allies. Socialism cannot be a system in which those who oppose are imprisoned, kept

in concentration camps, tortured, executed and where the freedom of speech of the masses is abolished.⁷⁴⁷

But even as the Party clung to its visionary politics and program, the terror continued and its urban activities crawled to a halt, its network of zonal committees and cells cracked apart by sustained brute force, its youthful base terrorized into submission, many of its supporters fleeing to seek refuge in neighboring countries or abroad.

An Addis Ababa resident quoted in *The Times* of London in early 1978: “Blood fills the streets. Mothers are demented with worry. But worry is not the right word. It is the concentration of all the senses on one question: When will it be the turn of my child, when will its body be placed in front of my door.... The blood in the streets is thick like oil. It does not disappear. At times a note may appear next to a corpse saying: Sorry this killing was due to a mistaken identity.”⁷⁴⁸

Amnesty International issued a report in 1978 which painted a picture of the “Red Terror” as a highly organized national campaign, spreading out from Addis Ababa to cities and towns across the country. It was unstinting on the details of how the *kebeles* had been transformed into institutions of repression, with grisly details about what went on inside. “Other alleged methods of torture include: dipping the body in hot oil and splashing hot oil on the face; raping of women, including young girls; inserting a bottle or heated iron bar into the vagina or anus; tying of a bottle of water to the testicles; pulling-out of the nails of fingers and toes; severe beating on the soles of the feet; tying in a contorted position.”⁷⁴⁹

While Mengistu's speeches were full of bloodthirsty calls to crush the government's enemies, pro-*Derg* apologists issued cynical denials. Here *Pravda's* Korovilov paints an idyllic picture of justice in the *kebeles*: “One of its members told us that, although they had the right to

⁷⁴⁷ *Democracia*, Vol. 5, No. 4, quoted in *Abyot*, Feb.–March 1979 issue, Vol. 4, No. 2.

⁷⁴⁸ *The Times*, March 22, 1978, quoted in *Abyot*, Vol. 3, No. 2, February–March 1978, p. 29.

⁷⁴⁹ Amnesty International, “Human Rights Violations in Ethiopia,” 1978, p. 10.

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punish and fine, they resorted to this very rarely, only when dealing with a hardened lawbreaker. ‘In most cases,’ he added, ‘we use persuasion to convince people that it is necessary to live in friendship, to help each other out and to work for the common good.’”⁷⁵⁰

Despite the resolute optimism and the tone of rebellious righteousness expressed by the EPRP, especially in its diaspora press, the heavy losses the Party was taking meant it was simply losing the numbers game.

Suspected EPRP members were being rounded up and executed nationwide well into 1978. Activist Gizachew Tiruneh had fled to the villages and laid low. While hiding with family he was told about the execution of his 21-year-old brother Misiker in August 1978:

[S]ecurity forces came to each jail cell and started calling names. Those persons whose names were called were told to get up and leave their cells. Not surprisingly, those individuals knew that they were going to be executed.... Many of those people, including my brother, started shouting aloud and made antigovernment remarks as they left their cells. The slogans that they said included “Down with fascism!” “EPRP will win!” and “Long live the EPRP!” Of the eighty-three persons who were killed that night, four were from Bichena. Besides my brother, Geremew, the teacher who oversaw our district committee’s meetings, was also executed.⁷⁵¹

Gizachew eventually crossed into the Sudan and left Ethiopia.

The situation was just as bad for the Derg’s former *Meison* allies; and *Meison* was less well-prepared for underground work. *Meison* member Makonen Getu, who had come back to Ethiopia from Sweden at the request of his party, recalls the bleak situation for what was left of the civilian left in 1978.

⁷⁵⁰ Valentin Korovilov, *op. Cit.*, pp. 127–128.

⁷⁵¹ Gizachew Tiruneh, *On the Run in the Blue Nile*, p. 250.

During my eight months of clandestine political activity, I was engaged in reviving broken organizational networks and cells, keeping our youth movement politically and organizationally alive by providing direction, information and encouragement. I was involved in undermining the military regime through the publication of propaganda materials. Despite the arduous effort I made with other committed and courageous comrades, we were not able to see any major political and organizational comeback. On the contrary, we continued to be weakened by the day. I saw this happening particularly when two other comrades and I suddenly became the senior body developing MEISON's strategic direction at a small hotel room in Markato. The decreasing number of combatants in the field meant less political impact. The absence of political progress was followed by frustration and hopelessness that began to take its toll on those who tried their best in isolation.⁷⁵²

Certainly acts of resistance carried on into 1978.

The example of the woman fighter who blew up an armored car and a truck full of fascist thugs and sacrificed herself to let her comrades escape is only one of the many feats of heroism committed by the revolutionary women in Ethiopia at present. The 15 mothers who were members of the Parents' Committee, and who died shouting "*Long Live the EPRP!*" in mid February are vivid proof of the fact that fascist executioners can in no way halt the struggle of the oppressed women. In the rural areas, the struggle of the oppressed women continues to deepen and heighten. In areas where the Revolutionary Union of Poor Peasants (*Yediha Arso Aderoch Abiyotawi Mahber*) is active, peasant women are clandestinely organised within it to struggle against the fas-

⁷⁵² Makonen Getu, *The Undreamt*, pp. 101–4.

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cist junta.⁷⁵³

But in urban areas, the basis for mass, organized left-wing resistance was disappearing.

When the violence on the street began to subside, Ethiopia's towns and cities were left with prisons and detention centers packed with dissidents. As Amnesty International reported,

Although the "Red Terror" officially ended in mid 1978, it is believed that a considerable number of those detained during the campaign are still in detention, and that other arrests have taken place since then. For example, Amnesty International learnt of the arrest of six students in July 1978 who had been forcibly returned to Ethiopia by the USSR Government. They had been studying in the Soviet Union on USSR Government scholarships, but had expressed their political opposition to the Derg through an opposition Ethiopian student organization.⁷⁵⁴

Hiwot Teffera was finally arrested in February 1978 and imprisoned in a *kefitegna*, a kind of district-wide *kebele*. Her first few months in jail were marked by the constant worry she would hear her name called out for selection. "Nine prisoners were called out.... Everybody knew what that meant. The first three were members of the Party IZ Committee in southern Ethiopia. Meseret, who was in her teens, was the youngest among them.... I couldn't stand there and watch all that.... The next morning, news of the nine prisoners came. They had all been shot and their bodies displayed in the streets!"⁷⁵⁵

Eventually she settled into the routine of life as a political prisoner where fellow inmates cared for each other for survival. "One of the cadres then made his entry into the room carrying a woman in his arms. He put her on the floor close to the door and left. I knew she was the

⁷⁵³ EPRP, "March 8—Long Live the Struggle of Oppressed Women!" in *Abyot*, Vol. 3, No. 2, February–March 1978, p. 11.

⁷⁵⁴ Amnesty International, *op. Cit.*, pp. 8–9.

⁷⁵⁵ Hiwot Teferra, *Tower in the Sky*, pp. 340–341.

wife of the Meison leader.... I went over and made the woman lie down comfortably. Her feet were swollen and blue. I had never seen anyone tortured the way she was.... She threw up when we gave her tea.... I soaked Emebet's feet in warm water.... Emebet did not know that [her husband] had been killed."⁷⁵⁶

The exodus of Party supporters to rural base areas and even to exile in neighboring countries accelerated. One Party leader told activist Worku Lakew that leaving Addis Ababa just made sense. "He had said that the party organisation had been decimated and disorganised by the Red Terror and shoot to kill policy of the fascists and the Bandas and until it could reorganise itself there was no point in being sitting ducks specially for those members of the party that were well known and easily recognizable to the other side."⁷⁵⁷

It was a new reality for the EPRP. A 1978 editorial in *Abyot* tried to make the most of it, and made the case for continuing opposition to the military regime. Doing nothing was simply not an option.

1. While taking revolutionary violence as the base it has engaged and continued to engage in political struggle. 2. While taking clandestine work as the base it has carried out open and semi-overt struggle. 3. While carrying out illegal struggle as the main form it has also carried out semi-legal forms of struggle. 4. While taking the countryside as the base it has combined armed struggle in the rural areas with armed struggle in the urban areas.... In the junta's Ethiopia, almost all forms of struggle are illegal. Every protest is a "provocation".... The Meisone fascist bootlickers headed by Haile Fida used to argue that to oppose the junta means to provoke it and to push it to be more repressive. This ridiculous position advocating total capitulation did not save the Meisone killers from becoming victims of the junta's repression despite the fact that they behaved so "rea-

⁷⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 347.

⁷⁵⁷ Worku Lakew, *Revolution, Love and Growing Up*, p. 223.

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sonable.”⁷⁵⁸

As we discussed in Chapter 4, Ethiopian revolutionaries had long supposed that eventually their organizing would move to the countryside, where liberated base areas full of sympathetic peasants would support guerrilla armed struggle. As the Party moved out of the cities, it attempted to initiate organizing among Ethiopia’s vast rural population. Activist Makonnen Araya remembers his work as he crisscrossed Tigray province in 1977:

Continuously working hard to win hearts and minds, we tried to increase our areas of control and spread our propaganda machine among the various populations. Wherever we went, we entertained the complaints brought before us by individuals or communities and provided them with instant solutions. To further boost our support, we sometimes arrested criminals and other social parasites who used their power or governmental affiliation to take advantage of the weaker, poorer peasants.⁷⁵⁹

The following year, Makonnen moved to Begemdir province where such work continued: “Whenever we had the chance to aid the people in organizing into associations and becoming masters of their own destiny, we did. We repeatedly explained to them that no one had the right to exploit their labor for free without their consent. We explained that they had the right to keep the fruits of their farm for themselves only.”⁷⁶⁰ But stable, defensible base areas the Party might call a liberated zone were largely elusive.

The work was difficult, the challenges immense. Forced out of Addis Ababa, Worku Lakew remembers that EPRA faced sometimes insurmountable barriers. “The army was unable to get any supplies from outside the country, it was unable to communicate with the national

⁷⁵⁸ EPRP, “EPRP: Charting and Applying the Correct Line” in *Abyot*, Vol. 3, No. 2, February–March 1978, p. 8.

⁷⁵⁹ Makonnen Araya, *Negotiating A Lion’s Share of Freedom*, 2010, p. 107.

⁷⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

leadership of the party in other regions, and it was unable to benefit from links with party organisations in the urban areas who were under total fascist siege themselves. It was unable to launch big attacks against the fascists and liberate more areas as we has no sufficient ammunition for the purpose and morale within the military command in the armed forces began to wane.”⁷⁶¹

Although culturally the EPRP, indeed the entire Ethiopian civilian left, was rooted in a deep tradition of study with a loving propensity for the written word, it's not clear how much political education happened in the constantly shifting rural base areas. It's not even clear to what degree the EPRP's own political publications circulated in the base areas. Another EPRA veteran, Ayalew Yimam, reports that printed materials were in short supply, including the crucial EPRP program. Ironically many of the reading materials floating around the base areas were worn copies of journals and pamphlets from diaspora groups like ESUNA.

Indeed Ayalew claims he was persecuted by the EPRA leadership for trying to fix this problem. “I had believed that political consciousness was the source and strength of guerrilla warfare, in particular for an organization which had embarked for the long haul, protracted armed struggle.... I suggested selecting and training people's cadre, to agitate and organize what the party called the Ethiopian peasantry, to create the ocean where EPRA could easily swim. I indirectly criticized the leadership for lack of armed propaganda, of curtailed movement and of being caught in a waiting game.”⁷⁶² Ayalew felt that the politics of the revolution were being left behind and said so; he was accused of disloyalty and chose to flee to Sudan.

The unity of the EPRP had been shaken in the face of its mortal combat with the *Derg*, and internal tensions continued outside the cities. As we discussed in Chapter 11, internal factionalism ripped apart the Party from within, exposing Party structures to informants and costing hundreds of lives. Before himself deciding to leave Ethiopia, Makonnen

⁷⁶¹ Worku Lakew, *Revolution, Love and Growing Up*, p. 230.

⁷⁶² Ayalew Yimam, *Yankee Go Home*, p. 273–4.

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Araya also felt the internal tensions while assigned to the Beyeda highland in early 1979: “At this period, the witch hunt for members of the supposedly sinister group, *anja*, had reached fever pitch, spying on and searching for those comrades thought to harbor different views considered to be undermining the guerrilla movement and the Party from inside. Comrades entertaining such views were treated as traitors. More and more the emphasis of trust and reliability shifted to only those comrades who blindly followed orders.”⁷⁶³ It was a tragic side effect of state repression, and subsequent disillusionment hurt the Party dearly.

There are accusations, referenced or recounted in a number of the memoirs listed in this volume’s bibliography and elsewhere, that the EPRP leadership committed acts of repression in its rural base areas against internal dissidents, including capital ones; these accusations became part of the complaint by *anjias* or factionalists (and later the TPLF) against the EPRP. Surviving EPRP leaders note in response the military conditions of effective civil war, and attempts at due process, rough as it was under the circumstances of clandestinity and bush life; and suggest exaggerations on the part of their opponents for political purposes.⁷⁶⁴ They note that armed challenge to the Party’s leadership isn’t quite the same thing as mere dissent. Still, intense feelings from this period mark continued political division among Ethiopian political actors today.

In the student and Party diaspora, the source of vital funds and solidarity, sections of the movement began to waiver in their fealty to the EPRP and its line. Interestingly, parallel splits in the Eritrean student diaspora challenged the relationship of Eritrean student diaspora groups and the Eritrean Fronts at the same time. Some of the debates were over the line and actions of the EPRP back home, especially trying to sum up the armed urban struggle. Others reflected international conflicts as Chinese foreign policy became more militantly anti-Soviet and arguably pro-U.S., and as Enver Hoxha of Albania stepped out of China’s shadow to attempt to rally international parties to his own

⁷⁶³ Makonnen Araya, *op. Cit.*, p. 182.

⁷⁶⁴ See in part exchange of notes between the author and Iyasou Alemayehu, 2020.

ideological pole. The fruits of these factional conflicts in the diaspora, removed from the actual struggle back home, were largely demoralization and demobilization, leading to the ultimate dissolution of groups like ESUNA. Ethnic based student associations in support of the TPLF or the Somalia-based Oromo Liberation Front lasted through the 1980s.

The student movement adopted a more defensive posture, campaigning against violence and repression in the homeland, and calling for the freedom of political prisoners. But as they replaced optimistic treatises on the theory of armed struggle and the goals of the inevitably victorious revolution, such calls for solidarity carried the whiff of defeat. An October 1978 leaflet issued by Ethiopian students in West Berlin is an example:

We know from unofficial sources that almost 20,000 political prisoners are jailed under inhuman conditions in prisons. Because these 20,000 prisoners “cost much money” for the military junta, it cedes them—without any medical care—to illnesses and epidemics and starvation. Thousands have been partly or fully crippled by brutal torture and or have lost their mental abilities by brain injuries. Many are disappeared, some are killed. . . . We Ethiopian students who live in Germany appeal to all who are for peace, freedom, independence and democracy, to unite in solidarity with the Ethiopian people's masses and to condemn the repressive actions of the military junta and protest against it in public. We invite all democratic forces to withdraw support the military regime and stand against them with the democratic cause in Ethiopia.⁷⁶⁵

In the EPRA base areas, the Party engaged in processes of rectification and reorganization. Samuel Alemayehu—EPLO cofounder Iyasou Alemayehu's brother—along with Zeru Kehishen and Tsegaye Debteraw, took over the reins of leadership. *Abyot* described the goals of

⁷⁶⁵ “The Situation of 20,000 Political Prisoners in Ethiopia,” ESU Berlin flyer, October 1978. English translation of German original via abyotawi.blogspot.com/2017/10/the-face-of-repression-political.html .

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the rectification campaign in 1978:

All that is stale, revisionist and opportunist must be cleansed in time. All that is revolutionary and democratic must be preserved and developed. Bringing our shortcomings into the open and getting rid of them democratically is not a sign of weakness or division (as some petty-bourgeois sections who believe in hiding their weaknesses and in settling their differences by liquidating each other may declare) but a proof of our strength and solid unity.⁷⁶⁶

There were many issues to confront: The Party's violent response to the state's violence against it and its strategies in the urban armed struggle; the challenges of the rural armed struggle; the ultimate inability to prepare for any kind of mass insurrection against the regime; the Party's intolerance of internal dissent: These were crucial issues that in some ways continue to haunt the reputation of the Party to this day. Over the course of the next few years, the internal movement to come to terms with the events of 1974 through 1977 would preserve EPRA and the EPRP, but it would also ultimately and drastically change its political line.

With all the challenges to the Party's survival, the most existential threat to the EPRA base areas was military. The *Derg* created and armed government-loyal peasant militias to combat its many rural opponents. These militias were frustrating to the EPRP, as Makonnen Araya recalls: "The issue of how to deal with attacking peasant militia was a difficult and troubling one for us to resolve. One of the main purposes of our armed struggle was to help the poor and downtrodden fight ignorance and exploitation. We wanted to win their support by educating them on their human rights and civil responsibilities.... The peasant militias did not stop fighting us and shedding our blood."⁷⁶⁷

With its rough wilderness around Assimba, the province of Tigray

⁷⁶⁶ *Abyot* Vol. 2, No. 7 quoted in "EPRA carried out rectification," WWFES, *Forward!* Vol. 2, No. 4, Jan. 1978, p. 4.

⁷⁶⁷ Makonnen Araya, *op. Cit.*, p. 126.

had been chosen early on as the main base for the rebel army. But Tigray was also home to a growing national liberation insurgency, and it was the forces behind this insurgency that inflicted the greatest blow to the Party's attempt to build a rural base. The Tigray People's Liberation Front, organized in 1975 by radical nationalists among the Tigrayan ethnic minority, had been more successful than the EPRP in positioning itself among the many armed groups in the region. Crucially, it negotiated the kind of ongoing successful relationship with the growing Eritrean People's Liberation Front in neighboring Eritrea that had eluded the EPRP.

Though some members of the TPLF were familiar figures from the radical Ethiopian student scene, and though there had always been many ethnic Tigrayans in the EPRP, the TPLF was not interested in sharing Tigray with the multinational EPRP and its army of former city-dwellers. Kiflu Tadesse, now based at Assimba, explains that the TPLF saw an opportunity to deal with EPRA: "It was while the EPRA was engaged in this internal crisis and while morale was low that the TPLF... began getting ready for the final confrontation.... [The TPLF] also knew that the EPRP's relationship with the ELF and EPLF was fast deteriorating. The TPLF was also aware that the EPRP was undergoing a severe repression in the urban centers and thousands of fighters were joining EPRA."⁷⁶⁸ The TPLF sealed a deal with the EPLF and prepared its militias to do battle with the EPRA. The fighting was heavy and did not go well for EPRA. Aside from the human cost, the worst part of the conflict was that the EPRA was forced to evacuate Assimba and surrender the region to the TPLF.

It was yet another damaging and violent explosion of the sectarianism that had plagued the Ethiopian left. In the final analysis, though the paper politics of the EPRP and the TPLF had certain similarities—both avowedly rooted in Marxism-Leninism and an analysis of national liberation—the inability of the two groups to cooperate wasn't really based on programmatic differences, though it is fair to ask how the TPLF succeeded with an agenda of rural armed struggle where the

⁷⁶⁸ Kiflu Tadesse, *Part II op. Cit.*, p. 401.

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EPRP essentially failed at the same thing. Fundamentally neither group trusted each other to share power or find common ground. A 1980 EPRP internal document evaluates the history of TPLF, and comes to this conclusion: “TPLF is an anti-democracy organisation, murder organisation. It decided to be the supreme Tigray leadership and is not ready to work with other organisations.”⁷⁶⁹

Both EPRP and TPLF accused the other variously of starting the internecine conflict and of collaborating with the EDU of the feudal aristocracy. TPLF had granted EPLF its argument that Eritrea was a colonial question and was rewarded with a military alliance; though TPLF’s relationship with ELF was apparently hostile. The TPLF accused the EPRP of being a petty-bourgeois organization with inconsistent principles, and accused the EPRP of being “putschists,” looking for an insurrectionary short-cut to an extended military struggle.⁷⁷⁰

The EPRP called TPLF member Meles Zenawi “arrogant. He is anti-democracy. He is a boaster, and feels himself he is superior to others. He has anti-EPRP tendency.”⁷⁷¹ Meles rose to leadership in the TPLF during the late 1970s and emerged as its chairman in the late 1980s. He would become Prime Minister of Ethiopia in 1995 after the *Derg* was overthrown. Interestingly, “Meles” was a *nom de guerre* adopted in honor of fellow Tigrayan Meles Tekle, the student leader executed by the *Derg* in 1975. The EPRP felt that the Marxism-Leninism of some of the TPLF leadership was simple opportunism and convenience, a sheen applied to the politics of narrow nationalism. Most importantly supporters of EPRP criticized the TPLF for not understanding that that Tigrayan ruling class (even as exemplified by *Ras* Mengesha Seyoum, the aristocratic leader of EDU) acted as junior partners of the Amharic ruling class in oppressing Ethiopians of all nationalities, thus misdiagnosing the primary contradictions of Ethiopian society.⁷⁷²

⁷⁶⁹ *EPRP Evaluation of TPLF*, 1980, p. 5.

⁷⁷⁰ See “Some Stands of the Marxist-Leninist Core in the TPLF,” May 1984.

⁷⁷¹ “EPRP Evaluation of the TPLF,” 1980.

⁷⁷² See Semere Hagdu, “Behind Tigreyan Nationalism,” WWFES, *Struggle*, May 1978, in Ayalew Yimam, *The Ethiopian Student Movement and the National Question*, especially part III, p. 445 and following.

The TPLF's view of the role of the national question was codified in its program adopted in the 1980s:

Most of the multi-national organizations in Ethiopia had in-correct political lines. Thus, they were weakened in the course of the heated struggle. But contrast, the TPLF, which has waged the national and class struggles inseparably, and which has advocated the co-operation of the forces of the Ethiopian revolution, has emerged as an inspiration to the Ethiopian revolution.... The TPLF's aim is the elimination of national oppression.⁷⁷³

The TPLF's political critique of the EPRP is implicit; but it's important to keep in mind that its solution to dealing with the EPRP was military.

The TPLF seemed to oppose multi-national organizations as ineffective. "The presence of acute national contradictions were being manifested in mass actions, and therefore, the national contradiction was the central issue of the revolution. Furthermore, it [the TPLF's Marxist-Leninist core] said that democratic national movements would be able to harness these mass actions to the overall interest of the revolution and help to democratically resolve the issue."⁷⁷⁴ Unfortunately, the net political effect of the differences between the two groups was the counterposition of the EPRP's vision of mass, participatory democracy led by a proletarian party to the TPLF's prioritizing of national liberation struggles, with a subtext strongly informed by the different interests of urban and rural social classes. As one EPRP supporter put it,

The overall argument of the TPLF lies in the following: There is no working class in Tigray; therefore there can be no word of working class movement, no word of a multi-national working class party and its leadership of the New Democratic Revolution. The only alternative for Tigray can

⁷⁷³ People's Democratic Programme of the TPLF, May 1983.

⁷⁷⁴ "Some Stands of the Marxist-Leninist Core in the TPLF," p. 8.

thus be only a national movement, a national organization. This very well suits to the general policy of the TPLF, its line of struggle and its sectarian, isolationist and local nationalism. As far as Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tse-Tung Thought and the Ethiopian democratic revolution is concerned, it is only wishful thinking of the TPLF and its likes.⁷⁷⁵

It is of course undeniable, however, that adhering to a doctrine of armed struggle the TPLF succeeded in eventually overthrowing the *Derg* where the EPRP failed.

In a 1984 document, the TPLF attempted to explain its success over the EPRP by claiming that it alone applied Marxism-Leninism correctly:

The so-called “Black Bolsheviks” (the label that the EPRP gave themselves) had temporarily hood-winked a large section of the Ethiopian “left” and had gained very wide international publicity as a Marxist opposition to the *Derg*. With all the emotional fanfare and mystification of the so called communist party’s existence, it was not that easy for a national organization like the TPLF to challenge it. It needed the courageous loyalty [sic] to Marxism-Leninism and its general line that characterised the TPLF. The well-grounded political and ideological exposure of the EPRP was very decisive in liberating a good section of the revolutionary minded intelligentsia which had temporarily fallen under its influence.⁷⁷⁶

Ironically, the core leadership of TPLF was promoting its version of Marxism-Leninism at the same moment that the new EPRP leadership started to question the value of contesting the mantle of “true adherent of Marxism-Leninism” with the *Derg*.

Fascinatingly, where most Ethiopian left groups had made an art

⁷⁷⁵ Semere Hagdu, “Behind Tigreyan Nationalism,” *op. Cit.*, p. 449.

⁷⁷⁶ “Some Stands of the Marxist-Leninist Core in the TPLF,” pp. 16–17.

of avoiding rigid leftist silos from the world communist movement, the TPLF leadership came around to adopting one that was very much of the rarified post-Mao moment. As the TPLF explained, “[A]t the beginning of 1980 comrade Enver Hoxha’s latest writings managed to find their way to the TPLF. It was a very important event in the history of the development of the (ML) Core. Mao Tse Tung’s thought which hitherto, had been taken as a development of Marxist-Leninist by the Core was mercilessly exposed in comrade Enver Hoxha’s book, *Imperialism and the Revolution*, and set the Core reading and re-reading this book.”⁷⁷⁷ The TPLF organized its first congress in liberated areas in 1979 and would formally explicitly renounce “Mao Tse Tung’s thought” in favor of Hoxha’s avowedly more “orthodox” analysis by its second congress in 1983. The TPLF eventually organized the Ethiopian Peoples’ Democratic Movement, a multinational united front, recruiting a number of surviving but disillusioned EPRP members. Despite the adoption of the Hoxhaite version of Marxism-Leninism and the creation of the semi-hidden Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray at the core of the TPLF, the TPLF’s eventual success in routing all of its rivals—ultimately including the central Ethiopian government itself—was not followed by praxis particularly identifiable as communist once it seized state power in 1991, on the contrary; though that would be the subject for a different volume than this one.

But returning to 1978, the brief but intense war between the TPLF and the EPRP eclipsed the conflict against the military regime in Addis Ababa, whose attention was focused for the moment elsewhere. According to Kiflu, “At the end of the war, both the TPLF and EPRA sustained heavy casualties. It was known that peasants buried hundreds of corpses.”⁷⁷⁸ The EPRA in Tigray made a strategic decision to retreat to the anarchy of Eritrea, to the base areas of the ELF where it could take stock. Internal factionalism and demoralization continued until the main EPRA force could relocate to Begemdir. Kiflu saw the EPRA’s loss as a historically significant moment:

⁷⁷⁷ “Some Stands of the Marxist-Leninist Core in the TPLF,” p. 21.

⁷⁷⁸ Kiflu Tadesse, *Part II, op. Cit.*, p. 402.

The defeat of EPRA meant that the only formidable military opposition to the military regime in Tigray was the TPLF.... Above all, the defeat of the EPRA by the TPLF, that is, a multinationalist force, at the hands of a nationalist group was a setback to the multinational cause. *The defeat of the EPRA signaled the ascendancy of nationalist forces. The victory of the TPLF over EPRA was one of the first steps that brought the TPLF to power in 1991.*⁷⁷⁹

The loss of Assimba was an emotional blow to the EPRP. It had become such a symbol of resistance and hope for eventual victory, that the loss of the base was at first not widely announced: diaspora publications refer to Assimba even after EPRA was routed from Tigray. While the regime in Addis Ababa was doubtless concerned about the growth of TPLF, the *Derg* counted EPRA's loss as a victory: there would be fewer guns in the field arrayed against its own forces.

By the time of the fourth anniversary of the PMAC's seizure of power, the government began to project an air of triumph, and *Derg* publications began to celebrate the defeat of the EPRP: "[T]he men-in-uniform... have foiled EPRP's plan of capturing state power via a short cut before the masses were politically conscious, organized and armed. In collaboration with the genuine progressive forces of Ethiopia, they have helped to expose and defeat the bankrupt political line of the EPRP. Military political cadres have contributed and are still contributing to the effort being made to unite Ethiopia's Marxist-Leninist groups."⁷⁸⁰ Never mind that behind this rhetorical flourish rooted in a sort of self-serving stagist rationalization were the brutal murders of thousands and thousands of people.

An extended EPRP CC Plenum was held in the Begemdir base areas in mid-1979. There were still divisions between wings of the leadership, so the CC used the occasion to sum up some of the Party's past work, including evaluating whether its urban military policies shared

⁷⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 407.

⁷⁸⁰ Propaganda and Information Committee, *The Men-in-Uniform in the Ethiopian Revolution*, Addis Ababa, September 1978, pp. 17–19.

any of the blame for the two years of terror that followed the events of September 1976.

In its deliberations, the Fourth Plenum supported the urban military activities of the EPRP. However, the meeting criticized what it termed were major shortcomings of the policy regarding the urban activities of the EPRP. Among the points of criticism was lack of clarity regarding the relationship between the urban and rural armed struggles, failure to clarify when and how the urban military activities should have been intensified, cooled down or withdrawn. Furthermore, the meeting severely criticized the PB for linking the issue of urban military activities to that of popular uprising.⁷⁸¹

Also according to Kiflu, the meeting reaffirmed its support of Eritrean independence despite its poor relations with the EPLF. But the Plenum also dissolved the existing PB, and a crisis of leadership continued for some months. Kiflu Tadesse was forced out, accused of attempting an effective liquidation of the EPRP's army. When the leadership reconstituted itself—the lives of most of its key players and thousands of members lost to violence since 1974, with many more imprisoned, forced into exile, or silenced by fear into submission—it was not the same organization under the same circumstances in which it had come to view itself as a proletarian vanguard Marxist-Leninist party. Those days were over.

Indeed EPRP's tactical decisions started to diverge from some of its earlier principles. Although some EPRA members objected⁷⁸², by 1980, surviving units of EPRA were engaged in common work with units of the EDU.

The second congress of the EPRP took place in Quarra, near the border with Sudan, in March 1984. Only a handful of the leadership of

⁷⁸¹ Kiflu Tadesse, *Part II op. Cit.*, p. 446.

⁷⁸² See Solomon Ejigu Gebreselassie, *The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party: Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, p. 82.

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pre-Red Terror times were still alive and present. One of those was Iyasou Alemayehu, one of the original 1969 hijackers. He did not pursue a seat on the newly constituted CC.⁷⁸³

The EPRP program was reworked, and “Marxism-Leninism was jettisoned as a guiding ideology for the party.”⁷⁸⁴ Eritrean secession was no longer endorsed, political pluralism was embraced. While popular democracy remained the goal, class struggle and revolution were de-emphasized. The hammer and sickle party logo was replaced by a fiery torch. The Party rebuilt the EPRA in its new base areas a long way from the legendary Assimba, fending off continued *Derg* attacks.

By the late 1980s however, the EPRA and the advancing TPLF once again clashed, preventing EPRP from sharing in the glory of defeating the regime. The TPLF even accused the EPRP of being in *de facto* alliance with the *Derg* for welcoming elements of the government’s last-ditch appeal for national unity in the face of the TPLF’s ultimately successful 1991 final offensive. “Such statements by the EPRP and its chauvinist allies reveal where their true interests lie. For the past two years, they have rejected every attempt by the EPRDF⁷⁸⁵ to unite all opposition forces against the *Derg*’s repression and war program. They have adamantly refused any participation in the transitional program proposed by the EPRDF.”⁷⁸⁶ When TPLF forces ultimately dislodged the remnants of the *Derg* from power, they continued the *Derg*’s policy of repression against the EPRP, disappearing a number of its leaders and activists, including Tsegaye Debteraw.⁷⁸⁷

As a legacy of its past popularity, EPRP veterans may be found on many sides of the continuing civil conflict in post-*Derg* Ethiopia,

⁷⁸³ Today, in exile, he is recognized as the leader of the Party.

⁷⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁷⁸⁵ EPRDF stands for Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front; it was the Tigrayan TPLF’s multi-ethnic national coalition. See the following chapter.

⁷⁸⁶ “EPRP and Company Welcome the War Declaration of the Shengo,” *EPRDF News Bulletin*, Vol. 1, No. 5, May 8, 1991; pp. 5–6.

⁷⁸⁷ It was not revealed until 2014 that Tsegaye Debteraw and seven other EPRP members and leaders were executed by the TPLF in June 1991. See EPRP Press Release of October 6, 2014, “EPRP Political Prisoners Executed by the Ruling TPLF.” Many others remain officially missing.

as well as in the many Ethiopian expatriate communities around the world that had been created by so many people fleeing hard times at home. Today identifying as a social-democratic force with a commitment to promoting people's power in the context of a multi-national Ethiopia, EPRP remains functionally outlawed, its leadership presuming that their return to the country would be met with arrest.

An EPRP statement from 1989 communicates a sense of the Party's continuing commitment to democracy, though it is now detached from overtly Leninist language:

The EPRP has passed through ups and downs. It has gained valuable lessons through the process of the struggle. Our party has further deepened its understanding of democracy in the school of the popular struggle. For us, democracy has substance in so far as it enables the people, "the excluded", to play a more direct and effective role in governing themselves. The sovereignty of the people, in other words. The Ethiopian people are not obviously preordained (racially or culturally) to live only under dictatorships. But the transition to democracy will not be easy either. Economic backwardness, the tradition of authoritarian rule, the evil legacy of the military rule and the one party system are all serious obstacles. But we contend these are hurdles the Ethiopian people can overcome.⁷⁸⁸

Its 2009 program, "The Democratic Alternative," makes a fairly nuanced argument for both multi-party bourgeois democracy and an understanding that democracy is not fully defined by elections.

As a social democratic party, the EPRP believes that democracy should embody political ideals and essence. It cannot and should not be reduced to a modality of electing leaders; it cannot be equated with simple elections however free these may be. The fact that every four or six years people

⁷⁸⁸ EPRP statement of December 1989, cited in EPRP, *Ethiopia: The Democratic Alternative*, January 2009.

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come out to go to the ballots does not make that society democratic. The political essence of democracy is important. The people must directly participate in the political affairs of their country, in other words what we call popular sovereignty must be in existence. The people's direct role in decision making requires first and foremost that their basic democratic and human rights be respected.⁷⁸⁹

Today's EPRP takes some clear lessons from its past experience:

It is important to emphasize that freedom or democracy have no content and substance if it is not respectful of the freedom to dissent. A country cannot be run on democratic centralism like a leftist clandestine political party. The tendency to repress differing stands, political positions and ideologies is therefore opposed to democracy. The demand for multi partyism is also part of the insistence on the civil society to have its free space, to organize in autonomous associations without State control imposed upon them. The control of civil associations, trade unions, etc by the State is not democratic but totalitarian.... Social democracy is the democracy the EPRP considers appropriate and feasible for Ethiopia.⁷⁹⁰

While its resilience and survival into the post-*Derg* era are significant, and while no last word can yet be written on the EPRP, the end of the 1970s marked the effective, albeit perhaps not permanent, silencing of its message of revolutionary popular democracy on the ground in the face of state repression.

The Last Purge

If it can be said that the first years of the Ethiopian revolution were a story of chaotic, open-ended contention for power between

⁷⁸⁹ EPRP, *Ethiopia: The Democratic Alternative*, January 2009, p. 5.

⁷⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8, 10.

various social and political forces, the year 1978 marked a significant shift. Mengistu Haile Mariam had eliminated the other members of the ruling triumvirate and won absolute leadership and control over the remaining layer of military officers who had first entered the political fray. He had used the leftists in *Meison* as political advisors (and political cover) for his own personal agenda until he no longer needed them, at which time they were discarded. In his invitations to the Russians, and with them the Cubans and representatives of other countries in the so-called socialist bloc, Mengistu had finally gained committed international sponsorship. This came with some costs, but Mengistu, with his canny ability to survive, found that he was at the nexus of power. But there were loose ends.

Even as the blood was still flowing freely in early 1978, the Russians and Cubans began trying to pull Mengistu back from his reliance on mass killings. One secret memo between the Soviets and East Germans makes it clear that Mengistu's allies in the socialist bloc wanted the "Red Terror" to end: "Comrade Ponomarev expressed his concern over the extremes in the Ethiopian Revolution. In talks with Mengistu, [Cuban] comrade Raul Valdes Vivo has already stated that such events as the mass executions of prisoners led by the 'Red Terror,' which would not be advantageous to the Revolution, are incomprehensible."⁷⁹¹

In one incident, the Cubans tried to force-heal the breach between Mengistu and its former civilian left allies by smuggling one of the few high-ranking *Meison* leaders still free and alive back into the country. In 1977 Negerde Gobeze had fled to South Yemen, but in 1978 he turned up at the Cuban embassy in Addis Ababa, with the Cubans suggesting that Mengistu meet with him. According to a declassified East German memo,

A few days ago, Comrade Negere, [sic] member of the politburo of the Meison group (supposedly in the second

⁷⁹¹ "Memorandum of Conversation between East German official Paul Markovski and CPSU CC International Department head Boris N. Ponomarev in Moscow, 10 February 1978" - dated 13 February 1978; *CWIHP Bulletin*, p. 84.

rank of this organization behind Prof. Haile Fidda) has asked the Cuban comrades for consultation. The Cubans have consulted with Mengistu who did not oppose such a meeting but characterized Negere as a traitor. He will come in the next few days to Havana, and our Cuban comrades will inform us immediately about these talks via our ambassador.⁷⁹²

Mengistu was furious, the Cubans seemed momentarily embarrassed, and Negede Gobeze was returned to exile. But a point had been made. In order to lay a basis for the domestic peace his sponsors required, Mengistu began a final push for political hegemony. He had to start by making sure all the leftists he had facilitated into the state apparatus were loyal, and then he could create the political trappings of Soviet-bloc-style state socialism that he knew would draw the respect and approval of his sponsors.

It was still hoped that *Emaledh*, the *Derg*-sanctioned coalition of a shrinking number of left organizations that had effectively replaced POMOA in 1977, would serve as the nucleus for Mengistu's new state party. *Emaledh* didn't stint on support for Mengistu's agenda, including his violence:

When *Meisone* was shouting that "Ethiopia is disintegrating", "the revolution is arrested", "the government forces have been seriously hit", and was courting EPRP, the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU) and the Somali soldiers that have infiltrated into our country, the heroic and revolutionary broad masses of Ethiopia, genuine militants, *Emaledh*, patriots and democrats were saying: "everything to the war front", "the revolution above all else", "we will not allow the revolution to be crushed", "the war in which we the oppressed are engaged is a revolutionary war", "we

⁷⁹² SED CC, Department of International, Relations, 16 February 1978, "Report on Conversation with [Vice-president] Carlos Rafael Rodriguez, Member of the Politburo of the CP Cuba, in Havana, 13 February 1978," *CWIHP Bulletin*, p. 86.

will always triumph" They have watered the revolution with blood. The same process is still continuing.⁷⁹³

And so *Meison* was formally expelled from Emaledh in April 1978, even though *Meison's* members had been already been showing up on death squad hit lists for months.

We saw how the independent Ethiopian trade union movement was gutted leading up to the Terror. An independent working-class movement was replaced with a top-down state-allied association backed by a labor law that promoted production and banned strikes. As *Pravda's* Valentin Korovikov wrote in 1979:

The bankrupt Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions had to be replaced by a new Trade Union Association. The law emphasized that in their political and production activities the unions should be guided by socialist principles and by the overall programme for the country's progressive development.... The new labour legislation showed that the military government was taking practical steps to secure the interests of the working people and to improve their life, even though the underdeveloped Ethiopian economy offered few chances for this. The proclamation of workers' rights helped to expose the demagogy of the ultra-left and anarchist groups that had sought to depict the Dergue as the anti-democratic dictatorship of a military junta.⁷⁹⁴

The replacement All Ethiopia Trade Union seemed to be anything but a genuine and free association of workers. Even the U.S. embassy, which kept a sharp eye on the labor movement due to past American involvement, recognized its true social purpose. A declassified memo from January 1978 spells out what role AETU was actually playing:

Almost since its inception AETU has limited its activities,

⁷⁹³ *Yehibret Demts* No. 4, April 1978, quoted in *Emaledh*, "The New Decisive Chapter," *Yehibret Demts*, Vol. 2, No. 5, February 1979, p. 12.

⁷⁹⁴ Valentin Korovikov, *Ethiopia: Years of Revolution*, p. 51.

either forcibly or by choice, to politicization of workers and non-wage demands. Because of the fluid political situation among the civilians AETU has been indoctrinating, AETU has moved from one PMAC-sanctioned Marxist-Leninist faction to another without maintaining any real independence. Rather than be an advocate of worker demands, AETU has become a political and sometimes security tool of the PMAC. It appears that PMAC will use AETU to fill gaps in cadre formation program left since July '77 by decline of All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (AESM or Me'isone). However [sic], AETU's lack of trained ideologues and highly-educated managed will only contribute to its dependence [sic] on PMAC for its continued survival. As a civilian arm of the PMAC, all AETU leaders are prospective assassination targets.⁷⁹⁵

A follow-up U.S. embassy cable in late May shows that the captive AETU, that "civilian arm of the PMAC," was still not conforming to the regime's needs, blaming all the *Meison* cadres who had been rushed in to its positions of leadership, and announcing their removal. Note the remarkable cynicism displayed in the views of the new leadership regarding their attitude toward democratic rights, something one might presume were of great concern to an organization meant to assist and represent workers:

In continuing effort to eliminate All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (AESM or Me'isone) from political competition, on May 25 All Ethiopian Trade Union (AETU) dismissed all former office holders from AETU Executive Committee after 37-hour emergency meeting and replaced them with new nine-member committee. Among reasons given for change were corruption, political sabotage, abuses of authority, advancement of self-interest, exercise of dictato-

⁷⁹⁵ January 13, 1978 Cable; Wikileaks link www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1978ADDIS00203_d.html.

rial powers and misappropriation of funds by Me'isone-affiliated leaders of AETU. New Executive Committee was elected to meet challenge facing AETU in its role for eventual establishment of Proletarian Party. AETU statement announcing dissolution of former executive committee was interesting in its forthright denouncement of Me'isone as a whole, dropping pretense of Me'isone "right-roaders" as only antirevolutionaries within Me'isone. Slogan previously promulgated by Me'isone, "Democratic rights for the masses, now", was labelled subversive because democratic rights can only be obtained through struggle, not "delivered on a silver platter." AETU was allegedly under "iron grip of few ambitious pseudo-progressive individuals opposed to concept of Union of Ethiopian Marxist-Leninist Organizations (UEMLO)."⁷⁹⁶

The cable identified *Seded*, Mengistu's own "Marxist-Leninist" faction as the force behind the drive to remove figures once associated with *Meison* from government:

There are also rumors that remaining Me'isone high-level officials will soon be replaced, including the mayor of Addis Ababa, Dr. Alemu Abebe; planning commissioner Taye Worku; and minister of health Dr. Teffera Wonde. Rumors are indicative of depth to which Me'isone fortunes have sunken. It has been primarily Revolutionary Flame (*Seded*), which has benefitted from this development in civilian politics. While it is not yet known whether new AETU leaders are *Seded* members, it is quite likely they are. Because of *Seded*'s close connection with *Dirg*, it is probable that AETU will continue to be more of a politicizing organization than a truly labor oriented one.⁷⁹⁷

⁷⁹⁶ Embassy Cable from May 26, 1978; Wikileaks link www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1978ADDIS02387_d.html. "UEMLO" refers to *Emaledh*.

⁷⁹⁷ *Ibid*.

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It was very bad news for *Meison* that it was now targeted by the same government-issued screeds that railed against the EPRP:

Ethiopia's men in uniform... have waged a sustained political, ideological and military struggle against the so-called Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Party (EPRP), which conducted an all-out campaign to subvert the Ethiopian Revolution. During the white terror launched by the reactionary EPRP, the men-in-uniform have sacrificed a great many lives. By smashing the white terror of EPRP, they have been able to free Ethiopia's youth who were victimized by the EPRP and have enabled it to join the camp of the revolution.... In collaboration with Ethiopia's progressive forces, the men-in-uniform have played an important role in disseminating the ideas of scientific socialism among the laboring masses of Ethiopia, within their own ranks, and with the peoples militia. They are still continuing to do this. They have foiled EPRP's plan of capturing state power via a short cut before the masses were politically conscious, organized and armed.... Since a class shift occurs in all revolutions, the Ethiopian revolution has also witnessed the emergence of rightist tendencies. There is for example the case of the right opportunist All Ethiopia Socialist Movement, (MEISONE), which deserted the revolution at a very critical moment. Ethiopia's men-in-uniform are currently waging a struggle against this rightist MEISONE, just as they struggled against the EPRP.⁷⁹⁸

In a 1979 interview conducted secretly in Ethiopia, Frewe Abayneh, identified as a member of *Meison's* underground leadership claimed, "No organization in Ethiopia has ever been subjected to anything near to the counter-revolutionary terror unleashed against our organization. During the time of its alliance with the military govern-

⁷⁹⁸ Propaganda and Information Committee, *The Men in Uniform of the Ethiopian Revolution*, Addis Ababa, 1978, pp. 17–18.

ment... hundreds of its members and sympathizers were assassinated in the streets of Addis Ababa and the Provinces by counter-revolutionary forces opposed to the military government and the revolution.⁷⁹⁹ The difference between *Meison* and EPRP narratives is striking.

Frewe continues:

In the year that goes from August 77 to September 78 alone *Me'isone* saw hundreds of its members assassinated by “unknown” elements and summarily executed by the henchmen of the Derg. Today more than 20,000 members and sympathizers of our organization fill the over-crowded prisons of Ethiopia.... [W]ith the total liquidation of the counter-revolutionary EPRP and the political and organizational bankruptcy of the right opportunist organizations which once paraded as “marxists”, *Me'isone* is not only the oldest of all Ethiopian revolutionary organization but now stands as the only national force organized under the banner of the National Democratic Revolution Programme of April 1976.⁸⁰⁰

Frewe goes on to make great claims about the clandestine role of *Meison* after the Terror, but the unfolding of history suggests overstatement. Frewe makes the extraordinary claim that the “Red Terror” began in January 1978; waving away the thousands of EPRP-supporters who had already perished at the hands of the regime, many with the collaboration of his own party.

Frewe blames the regime for entrusting the defense of the country against the Somali invasion to foreigners rather than arming the people so they could do it themselves. “Most important of all, arming the Ethiopian masses and their revolutionary vanguards would not only have defeated the aggression but also the counter revolutionary forces inside

⁷⁹⁹ Me'isone Foreign Section, “Full text of the interview given to two foreign journalists by Frewe Abayneh...,” *New Ethiopia*, March 1980, Spanga, Sweden, p. 3.

⁸⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

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the country itself.”⁸⁰¹

While he doesn't really discuss the TPLF, he suggests the future of opposition to the *Derg* lay with the movements of national minorities. “We also call upon all the forces that are fighting against national oppression to coordinate their struggle with that of the oppressed masses and revolutionary forces in Ethiopia.”⁸⁰² He suggested *Meison* would build or participate in united fronts, which it ultimately did upon the fall of the regime, years later. But as with the EPRP, the *Derg* had vastly diminished *Meison* as a significant force through sheer repression.

The remnants of *Meison* conducted self-criticism in 1981, publishing a lengthy statement in Amharic, and at least one of its cadres, Andargetchew Assegid, has written a memoir, also in Amharic. These are blocked to English readers, but elsewhere *Meison* repeatedly casts themselves as central victims of the military regime rather than as its enablers. In a 1980 balance sheet they claimed *Meison* was targeted for “the immediate proclamation of the democratic rights bill that it prepared in early 1976. However, the *Derg*, which by this time was under the full control of the rightist forces gave a deaf ear to the popular demands. In fact at this time some *Derg* members were secretly providing arms for the EPRP.”⁸⁰³

Meison continues to exist today, the hammer and sickle also pried off its own logo in favor of a flower, though it retains “socialist” in its name. As with today's EPRP, its internet presence originates outside Ethiopia.

With *Meison* and the EPRP effectively eliminated in Ethiopia's urban areas, Mengistu's speech on the fourth anniversary of the regime tried to put all the threats to his regime in the past.

This was a period when imperialism and other reactionary forces felt that their design to encircle and isolate the Ethiopian revolution was effectively realized. By strengthening

⁸⁰¹ Ibid., p. 10.

⁸⁰² Ibid., p. 12.

⁸⁰³ *Meison*, “Me'isone and the Struggle for National Independence” in *New Ethiopia Newsletter*, Nov./Dec. 1980, Spanga, Sweden, p. 12.

the secessionists in the north, by invading our country from the east and south, by coordinating the white terror of the EPRP in the central part of the country, they tried to put revolutionary Ethiopia into a major crisis. This was a time when the country was in a great difficulty and when counter-revolution seemed certain. It was also during this time that the right-roader, the All Ethiopia Socialist Movement (MEISON) betrayed the revolution and fled away from the revolutionary camp. This was also a time when imperialism and other reactionary forces made a major propaganda campaign to distort the image of the Ethiopian revolution.⁸⁰⁴

With so many of his opponents dead, in prison, or on the run, there was still one last independent left group to be dealt with before Mengistu could legitimize his rule with the creation of an organization that would be unquestionably loyal to him and the military regime. It was *WazLig*, the Proletarian or Labor League, the organization founded by the late Dr. Senay Likke. A participant in *Emaledh*, its members were spread throughout the state apparatus, and *WazLig* had wound up recruiting heavily inside the armed forces. This put it in direct competition with Mengistu's own organization, *Seded*, or the Revolutionary Flame.⁸⁰⁵

Full of tidy euphemisms, an editorial in an *Emaledh* publication attempts to explain what happened in the late summer of 1978:

Something unexpected developed recently. This is the complex contradiction that was discovered between Revolution-

⁸⁰⁴ Mengistu Haile-Mariam, "Fourth Anniversary of the Ethiopian Revolution, speech delivered September 12, 1978, Addis Ababa," published by the Ministry of Information and National Guidance, p. 10.

⁸⁰⁵ Note: I have omitted any discussion here of the smaller groups in *Emaledh* since detailed information in English is very hard to come by. *Echaat*, or Organization of the Oppressed, was a small predominately Oromo-nationality left group led by Baro Tumsa. It was suppressed during the Terror. The trail of *Malerid*, apparently made up of EPRP splitters, ends about the time *Emaledh* was replaced by COPWE; without offering much detail, Kiflu Tadesse says most leaders of *Malerid* were arrested; see *The Generation Part II*, p. 244.

ary Flame and Labour League. Since the contradiction was unexpected and very disheartening, the concerned parties did carry out an extended struggle to resolve it. The source of the contradiction was that the former reactionary leadership of Labour League was controlling both organizations from one centre by having infiltrated some of its members into the ranks of Revolutionary Flame. Through the struggle that was carried out, this practice which is anti-organizational and is devoid of any communist morality has been put to an end. The old leadership has been dismissed and a new one constituted.⁸⁰⁶

Derg analyst Pliny, writing shortly after the events in question, puts the dispute squarely in the center of the *Derg's* party-building process:

However once *Me'ei Sone* had been ousted from POMOA and from the ideological school, it became clear that *Seded*, or rather some of its members, had ideas which did not always coincide with those of the *dergue*. A serious split developed in the latter part of 1978 over the question of the military cadres—whether they should be subject to POMOA or whether they came under the *dergue's* own political military affairs committee, headed by Lt. Legesse Asfaw. Well over a hundred of the military cadres, including Major Getachew Asegid, the *Seded* representative on POMOA's three-man central committee, were arrested between August and October 1978. The dispute has delayed the establishment of the united front party which had been scheduled for September 1978. Notwithstanding the apparent split in *Seded* over the matter of control, it should be emphasized that from late 1976, the organization has played a significant part in the *dergue's* control over the armed forces. Equally, *Seded* has proved an invaluable device controlling the bureaucracy,

⁸⁰⁶ *Emaledh*, "The New Decisive Chapter, *Yehibret Demts*, Vol. 2, No. 5, February 1979, p. 15.

just as the united front party will be, once in place. Given the *dergue's* record, one might prognosticate that it will not relinquish complete control over the military cadres, any more than it will turn the united front party totally over to the civilians. As with Haile Selassie, the *dergue* has become obsessed about its authority and power.⁸⁰⁷

Delving deeper, he explains *WazLig's* role, double-recruiting within *Seded*.

Most of these cadres were accused of having been members of both *Seded* and *Wasleague*, the other major surviving Marxist-Leninist organization. It was argued that they were trying to ensure, whether *Seded* or *Wasleague* predominated in the new party, that they at least would be at the top. The dispute certainly had an ideological flavor, however. Most of the arrested cadres believed that the new party should be built up from the grassroots, and not imposed from above, which they alleged was the way the *dergue* was working.⁸⁰⁸

After the September festivities for the triumphant fourth anniversary of the PMAC's seizure of power, Mengistu placed his protégé Legesse Asfaw in charge of the purge. Former *Derg* insider Dawit Shifaw provides the details of what happened in Addis Ababa:

Legesse secretly executed the elimination process of the *Woz League* members in the former parliament, which later became the party head office. League cadres who have been in Addis Ababa for the festival have been called to attend a conference in the party office where Legesse had an office. In the conference room, they waited anxiously for someone to come to the podium. Later they had been told that they

⁸⁰⁷ Pliny the Middle-Aged, "The PMAC: Origins and Structure: Part Two," from *Northeast African Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1979), pp. 10–11.

⁸⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

would come one by one as their names were called to meet Legesse in his office. That was okay because such a procedure was common at that time. As he received each League cadre warmly, Legesse offered him a cup of tea... he then thanked the cadre for his contribution and told him to go to the next door to meet Fikresellassie, the Derg Secretary for a similar debriefing. In fact, there was no Fikresellassie in that room but a bunch of chock squad. They surprised him with punches and threw him on a truck waiting for them. Then they drove them to a location where they were executed by firing squad. At least one hundred Woz League members including leaders have been executed.”⁸⁰⁹

WazLig members outside the capitol were also apprehended, including ones on active military duty. Dawit recounts what happened on the Eritrean front: “According to an eyewitness, most of the League members were suddenly shot by Seded cadres at their foxholes by instruction from Legesse as the crackdown started.”⁸¹⁰

As previously noted, back in the earlier days, Senay Likke associated with American leftists during his education in California, and at least one of those Americans was in Ethiopia in 1978 to witness *WazLig*'s demise. Even though Senay was assassinated in early 1977, apparently *WazLig* maintained a close relationship with Senay's former American comrades organized in the Communist Labor Party USNA.⁸¹¹

Veteran Black American communist Nelson Peery, the cofounder of the California Communist League and its CLP USNA successor,

⁸⁰⁹ Dawit Shifaw, *op. Cit.*, p. 105.

⁸¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁸¹¹ Ever vigilant for Ethiopian connections to global subversion, the U.S. embassy had taken note of an earlier visiting delegation from the CLP USNA's newspaper to Addis in late 1977. The embassy considered the visit important enough to cable back to Washington: “Two journalists from People's Tribune (both American) visited Ethiopia as paid guest of EPMG for 2–3 weeks at time of 3rd anniversary of revolution Sept 12.... Their visit allegedly arranged by Ethiopian friend whom one of 'journalists' knew during her student days at UCLA.” (Cable of November 8, 1977, via Wikileaks, www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1977AD-DIS06343_c.html).

was interviewed by a Chicago publication in 1996, and discussed his visit. Peery had gone to Ethiopia, apparently to advise *WazLig*, and was caught up in the moment of repression.

Peery recollected that his group had worked with Ethiopian students years before in the U.S.

When the revolution began there, some of them went back and became part of the government.... If ever there was a tragedy in the world it was Ethiopia.... There were three forces in the revolution—the army, the national bourgeoisie, and these young ideological students. They got organized and asked me to come over. When I saw the situation—these idealistic young people in government positions, but the real power slipping into the hands of the senior army officers and bourgeoisie—I told them it was going to be like China in 1927. They had no base for their revolutionary aspirations. I said, “All of you are going to get killed. You have to go back into the trade unions and peasant associations.” They couldn’t do it. When aid started coming from the Soviet Union they demanded that the “Maoists”—that was me and the students—be liquidated. And eventually there was a counterrevolution in the revolution. The senior army officers and the bourgeoisie seized power and executed the entire Labor League in Ethiopia. I got out by the skin of my fucking teeth. It was very, very sad. The students knew it would happen, but they couldn’t back down.⁸¹²

If only Peery’s Ethiopian comrades hadn’t been among the first to urge civilian leftist unity with the military and the state apparatus.

Despite this experience, the murder of their Ethiopian comrades didn’t stop the CLP USNA from continuing their political support of the military regime, including issuing a gushing statement in support of

⁸¹² Nelson Peery, interviewed by Harold Henderson in the *Chicago Reader*, “Thunder on the Left,” March 28, 1996; Via www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/thunder-on-the-left/Content?oid=890093.

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COPWE's first congress in 1980.⁸¹³ Less than surprisingly for a group allied with Senay Likke, the group had previously described the EPRP as CIA thugs and called for people in the United States to give "unconditional support to PMAC to ensure success of revolution."⁸¹⁴

Dawit Shifaw was not sympathetic to the fate of *WazLig*. Calling out the members of *WazLig* as willing allies of the murderous *Seded* and *Malerid*, he angrily suggests they were victims of their own karma.

The cadres of the three parties killed thousands of dissidents as well as innocent people to buy loyalty from Mengistu. They finally hoped that the revolutionary leader would surprise them by embracing them in the new party that would soon be formed.... These men may have regretted helping Mengistu. But it was too late. They murdered the EPRP, the Maeson, and the Echat members as well as innocent people to satisfy Mengistu. While doing this, they did not know that he would soon turn against them. The Maeson made the same mistake. Yet the League leaders could not learn from the fate of the Maeson. They didn't even try to run away like the Maeson. They gave up and went to the slaughterhouse. They died like rats.⁸¹⁵

Some *WazLig* cadre survived, remaining loyal to the government and moving over to what would eventually become the state party. Another *Derg* defector, Dawit Wolde Giorgis, also with a harsh verdict on *WazLig*, singles out one of its surviving leaders for scorn in his 1980s memoir of those times: "Shewandagan Belete, the former head of the leftist faction *League*, a shabby and repulsive character, is now a member of the Politburo. He lives in constant fear of Mengistu because his life was spared when all the other *League* members were executed. He will do anything Mengistu tells him to."⁸¹⁶

⁸¹³ See for example *Tribuna Popular*, Vol. 6, No. 13, July 5, 1980.

⁸¹⁴ See Embassy Cable of November 8, 1977; Wikileaks link [search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1977ADDIS06343_c.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1977ADDIS06343_c.html).

⁸¹⁵ Dawit Shifaw, *op. Cit.*, p. 103–105.

⁸¹⁶ Dawit Wolde Giorgis, *Red Tears: War, Famine and Revolution in Ethiopia*, p.

After two years of covering for brutal repression, the surviving left still acceptable to the government mastered the art of rhetorical cover. Months after the purge of *WazLig*, the ever loyal and deeply cynical *Emaledh*, now reduced mainly to the members of *Seded*, wrote, “In the process of attempting to form the working class party, genuine militants have gone through several ups and downs.”⁸¹⁷

It was perfectly clear who was really in charge; the role of the military in governing Ethiopia would be unchallenged. Again from *Emaledh's* journal, “[F]rom the beginning of the revolution up until today the revolution was being led by one center, that this center is the Provisional Military Administrative Council and that the PMAC is revolutionary.”⁸¹⁸

Now that the independent civilian left had been scoured from Ethiopia's cities, *Emaledh* made a hollow call for unity.

The pressure to subvert the revolution can only be effective if it is coordinated with the counter-revolutionary activities of the domestic fifth columnists. Therefore, we have to be vigilant and keep a close watch on the activities of EPRP, EDU, *Meisone*, the separatists, narrow nationalists and chauvinists who are still operating in our midst.... From now on, the rumour campaign against one another, under the umbrella of one organization or the other, must stop. What is needed is not to try to weaken each other by exaggerating differences in shape but to go to war against our class enemies united.⁸¹⁹

On November 20, 1978 the PMAC and the Soviet Union signed the “Ethiopian-Soviet Friendship and Cooperation Treaty.” Mengistu had convinced his sponsors he was their man. A statement from ESUNA in the diaspora condemned the deal:

62.

⁸¹⁷ *Emaledh*, “The New Decisive Chapter,” *Yehibret Demts*, Vol. 2, No. 5, February 1979, p. 15.

⁸¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁸¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

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[T]he agreement stipulates that Ethiopia can not “enter into any international agreements [sic] incompatible with this treaty”. Such a treaty that bars Ethiopia from making any agreements [sic] with other nations that will affect the global or regional designs of this Superpower is a typical imperialist deal that dictates the foreign policy of a sovereign state. This is what the “Ethiopian-Soviet friendship treaty” has in store for Ethiopia.... ESUNA is confident that the anti-imperialist struggle of the Ethiopian peoples will eventually shake off such treacherous and unequal treaties.⁸²⁰

The future course of the regime was set.

The Defeat of a Generation

Although the wars with national liberation movements and against the remnants of EPRA and EDU continued until Mengistu's regime finally fell, the campaign against *WazLig* marked the end of the period of mass political killings. Ethiopia's jails and prisons were, however, left full of political prisoners. In 1980 Amnesty International issued an appeal calling attention to political prisoners in Ethiopia. It listed the names of the leadership of *Meison*. “The five ‘disappeared’ are: Haile FIDA, Chairman of the Central Committee; Dr Negist ADANE, head of the women's organization; Desta TADESSE, former Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Culture and Sports; Kongit KEBEDE, a women's organization official; Hailu GERBABA.”⁸²¹ It would be years before the world knew for sure, but these people were already dead.

Taffara Deguefé, the prison diarist and technocrat from the *ancien régime*, provides us a view of what happened in those years out of sight behind the walls of various jails and prisons. A parade of high-profile detainees passed through the institutions in which he was held, and he was left behind as a witness.

⁸²⁰ CC of ESUNA statement, “Firmly Oppose the Treacherous ‘Ethiopian-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation,’” December 8, 1978, p. 3.

⁸²¹ *Amnesty International Newsletter*, May 1980, Volume X, Number 5.

One of the people he got to know was the key EPRP youth activist Tito Hiruy, frequently mentioned in Hiwot Teffera's accounts. Taffara writes,

I recall sadly the grim fate of an EPRP activist from the Wingate High School who was for many months my mattress neighbour. His name was Tito Hiruy, a very intelligent and handsome young man. I learned much about the student activist movement during our quiet conversations in the evenings. From our private discussions, I realized how students reflected more accurately than the rest of us, the widespread dissatisfaction with the status quo. Tito Hiruy was in the active leadership of the EPRP Youth League and was impelled by the idea of changing Ethiopian society through revolution and thus making it a better place to live. Tito talked excitedly of the youth political structures in the provinces, how such groups had mushroomed in the rural areas as a result of the student *zemetcha*, and how the students had bravely faced the hardships and discomforts of rural life and proved themselves as agents of change.... The EPRP's goal had apparently been to slip out the capital city and to the provinces to organize the peasantry and then to surround and capture the capital as the Chinese had done in their revolution. Tito talked with disappointment of their clandestine activities in towns being infiltrated by traitors, and the betrayal of their plans. Their sad failure was due to lack of experience and maturity. While Tito was detained with us, he was frequently taken out for investigation. Then one Friday evening he was suddenly called out. Tito was handcuffed as he was led out through the gate. He never returned.⁸²²

Other pages from Taffara's diary tell of watching the fate of *Meison's* Haile Fida:

⁸²² Taffara Deguefé, *Minutes of an Ethiopian Century*, pp. 543–544.

1 August 1978

Today Haile Fida was taken and as he was manacled on departure everyone assumed the worst. But he was returned at noon. He went for “investigations.”

10 July 1979

Yesterday Haile Fida and his learned assistants were taken for investigations but were returned in the evening. He comes and goes quite frequently and we wonder what is happening to him and his group. Are they still engaged in the power game?

25 July 1979

The investigators came yesterday morning to interview the “Meison” members who are held in No. 4. Their former leader, Haile Fida, with his companion has not been seen since he was taken away some days ago.⁸²³

Ayalew Temesgen, also a former EPRP member, was imprisoned with Berhane Meskel, the EPRP founder whose break from the Party caused so much grief. Years later he recalled to Hiwot Teffera, “They took away Berhanemeskel every day, from morning til evening, for interrogation. Sometimes they brought him back for lunch and took him away. He often played chess with a fellow prisoner. I played with him once. The pieces were made of torn slippers.”⁸²⁴

According to rumour, Haile Fida and several other *Meison* leaders, along with Berhane Meskel were all strangled to death in July 1979 by a graduating class of state security officers.⁸²⁵ After the fall of the *Derg* regime, typed transcripts of the prison interrogations of Hiruy Tito, Berhane Meskel and Haile Fida leaked out. They are as yet untranslated from Amharic.

⁸²³ Taffara Deguefé, *A Tripping Stone, Ethiopian Prison Diary*, pp. 233, 281–285.

⁸²⁴ Recounted in Hiwot Teffera, *op. Cit.*, p. 365.

⁸²⁵ Dawit Wolde Giorgis says all were executed in July 1979; Kiflu Tadesse gives a date of July 10, 1978, which seems incorrect. The rumour of how these high-profile prisoners died was stated to me by a longtime veteran of the struggle.

In the years that followed there would be fewer executions, and many political prisoners of this era would be released, many of them quickly choosing exile, but a whole layer of pre-1974 Ethiopian leftist leaders were gone. So many student activists who had found themselves dedicating their lives to a revolution against an imperial autocrat wound up being snuffed out by either former comrades or by a military regime protecting its iron grip on society.

Having eliminated all leftist opposition to his rule, Mengistu could now pursue his agenda unopposed; finally there could be progress on his project of forming a state communist party. *Emaledh* had written that creating a party was a prerequisite for carrying the revolution forward. "In order for us to be able to soberly analyze our present condition struggle against its harmful aspects and foster the useful ones and thus make the transition to socialism, the necessity of a working class party is not debatable."⁸²⁶ But *Emaledh*, like POMOA before it, turned out to be a failed project.

The regime wanted, indeed, needed, that state party to legitimize its rule. An editorial in the EPRP's *Abyot* in early 1979, says:

This unholy alliance of "forming a party from above" by the Derg had its blessings from all sorts of social-fascists in the country and the social-imperialists.... The Derg had officially come out to admit that all the talk about the formation of a party was a failure. On March 12, 1979, Fisseha Desta, assistant secretary [sic] of the Derg said on the radio that "previous attempts at forming a party, the grouping together of underground Marxist-Leninist organizations, have been impractical, and therefore a centre had been established to recruit genuine communists as a first step towards establishing the workers' party."⁸²⁷

The Commission to Organize the Party of Workers of Ethiopia was

⁸²⁶ *Emaledh*, "The New Decisive Chapter, *Yehibret Demts*, Vol. 2, No. 5, February 1979, p. 11.

⁸²⁷ EPRP Foreign Committee, "Derg Admits Crisis of Emaledih," *Abyot*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Feb.–March 1979, pp. 45.

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formed out of the surviving wreckage of *Emaledh* in December 1979; its membership heavily drawn from *Seded* and heavily based on ranking members of the military. Legesse Asfaw was made head of the organizational department. A congress followed in June 1980; COPWE's new seven-member politburo were all military men. The long-sought state party would be declared into existence in 1984 on the tenth anniversary of the military coup, and of course Lt. Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam himself was made general secretary of the new Workers Party of Ethiopia, the only legal political party in the nation.

Dawit Wolde Giorgis was a member of the *Derg*, and both the CC of COPWE and later the WPE. In his memoir written after he defected to the West, he wrote that upon the consolidation of the regime,

[Mengistu] moved into a bigger, more lavish office in the Palace of Menelik. He got new, highly trained bodyguards—men who watched you nervously, ready to shoot at any time. We now were frisked whenever we entered his office. He began to use the Emperor's cars and had new ones imported from abroad—bigger, fancier cars with special security provisions.... For public appearances he no longer sat with the other senior members of the Military Council; now he was seated separately on a special gold-painted chair. This was hardly the spirit of the Revolution.... We were supposed to have a revolution of equality; now he had become the new Emperor.⁸²⁸

Two observant foreign visitors to Ethiopia in the period of the regime's consolidation provide us a window into conditions on the ground in the New Ethiopia. British leftist Ken Tarbuck arrived in Addis in late 1978 to lecture at the university. He wrote,

The secret police were all pervasive. They were not so secret either. One could usually spot "security", as they were referred to, by their sharp suits and perennial sun-glasses.

⁸²⁸ Dawit Wolde Giorgis, *op. Cit.*, pp. 48–49.

They could stop anyone anywhere, and ask for identification papers, where you were going, etc. It became a part of life to be stopped for questioning almost at every turn and often searched for weapons. But one never actually got used to it. There was, of course, the 10pm to dawn curfew. At night armed soldiers patrolled the streets. Occasionally one would hear gun shots, sometimes single, sometimes volleys, and one could spot dark patches on the road some mornings that were not oil leaks or holes in walls that had not been there the night before. Telephones were tapped as a matter of routine.⁸²⁹

He watched some of the mass mobilizations that filled Revolution Square.

Like nearly all dictators Mengistu loved to give speeches to captive audiences. The result was that mass demonstrations were a regular part of life, all ending up in Revolution Square where 'The Chairman' would expound the latest line. These demonstrations were freely attended and spontaneous, except that there was a fine levied by the local committee if you didn't attend! Needless to say the masses turned out in great numbers.⁸³⁰

Noted European scholar of the Ethiopian Student Movement Randi Balsvik recalls a disturbing climate of fear during her 1980s research visit:

When I visited Ethiopia in 1984, ten years after the revolution, I found that the university, as well as society in general, was permeated with fear in a way that I did not experience either under the rule of the Emperor or at the end of the century, under the Meles Zenawi regime. The ears and eyes

⁸²⁹ Ken Tarbuck, *Ethiopia and Socialist Theory: The Blood on the Wall*, part II; via Marxist Internet Archive.

⁸³⁰ Ibid.

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of the government were believed to be everywhere. It was a well-known fact that even the university had informers among both staff and students; in fact this was always the case, no matter what the regime.⁸³¹

Anything to prevent a new wave of student radicalism?

Babile Tola estimates 250,000 people died in the various phases of the “Red Terror.”⁸³² There are smaller and even much larger estimates of the fallen, but in the aftermath of incomplete post-*Derg* official investigations and failed attempts at a complete reckoning of the “Red Terror,” amidst countless informal tallies from relatives of so many martyred people, it seems unlikely that an accurate toll might ever be known. What is clear, though, is that the ranks of a generation of young people who had sought to free Ethiopia from chains of oppression and exploitation were decimated, and when the killing in Ethiopia’s cities finally stopped, all that was left was a corrupt, anti-democratic and unpopular regime doing its best to imitate the doomed systems of the Soviet bloc that were about to collapse in a great plume of dust and ash.

* * *

Northern Ethiopia was hit with a terrible famine in the mid-1980s that eventually became the focus of a massive, global relief effort featuring pop musicians and TV stars. The deadly famine struck as the government was preparing for the declaration of the WPE and the tenth anniversary of the regime.

Dawit Wolde Giorgis, then chief commissioner of the government’s Relief & Rehabilitation Commission, remembers the disturbing juxtaposition of his government’s disinterest in dealing with the famine with the festive planning for the anniversary.

It is still incredible to me that the RRC’s most difficult task was convincing our own leaders of the very existence of a

⁸³¹ Randi Rønning Balsvik, “Addis Ababa University in the Shadow of the Derg, 1974–1991,” *Proceedings of the 16th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, p. 269.

⁸³² See Babile Tola, *To Kill a Generation*, p. 163.

widespread famine that was now swallowing up the entire nation. But their sights were set solely on upcoming anniversary celebration. Throughout the country, red flags and pictures of Mengistu, Marx and Lenin were being distributed.... The usual slogans were posted everywhere: “The oppressed masses will be victorious!” “Marxism-Leninism is our guideline!”... Preparations for the celebration were in full swing, including the phony elections for the newly-formed Marxist-Leninist Party.... Hundreds of North Koreans were in Addis decorating the city. They had been invited during Mengistu’s recent visit to North Korea, where he had been impressed by the colorful ceremonies and meticulously planned parades. Money was poured into new buildings, highways, conference halls, and a huge statue of Lenin in the center of Addis. There was no mention of famine anywhere except in my office.⁸³³

It was a dire echo of Haile Selassie’s failure to take the famine of the early 1970s seriously.

In his official capacity, Dawit traveled to the famine-ravaged region to investigate. At a refugee shelter in the town of Korem,

There were a few who still had the strength to shout at us in anger and despair, “Why are you coming to see us? We’ve had so many visitors, why doesn’t Mengistu come to see us?” As if to mock them, even here the streets were decorated for the upcoming celebration. Heroic posters of Marx and Lenin frowned down upon them in the streets and even inside the shelters. Some, having nothing further to fear from the authorities, were bold enough to point a bony arm at the red flags and shout, “That cloth should be covering our bodies, not hanging in the streets! This isn’t our wedding, it’s our funeral... it’s not a time to celebrate it’s a time for grief.... Where is the bread? Where is the

⁸³³ Dawit Wolde Giorgis, *op. Cit.*, pp. 134–135.

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bread?"⁸³⁴

The revolution was over.

⁸³⁴ Ibid., p. 140.

Chapter 14

Epilogue: The Poisoned Well

“Mengistu and others may lie, they may label our party as a ‘CIA agent’ or collaborator of EDU, they may accuse us of anything and put all the lies down; but, the Ethiopian masses, who are the decisive forces of the revolution, would never listen to them let alone believe them; because as the popular Chinese saying goes: ‘A thousand lies written in ink cannot hide a single fact written in blood.’”—The Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Party in *Abyot*, 1977⁸³⁵

“This was a generation that believed it can assault the sky, grasp and tame the clouds, defeat a well armed enemy supported by a superpower, a generation that welcomed sacrifice with revolutionary songs convinced that victory will in the end smile at the people and all pests and monsters will be defeated.”—Modern supporters of EPRP, 2006⁸³⁶

“Should our generation die in the course of this struggle, a still more determined generation shall rise to take up the historic task of building a new Ethiopia free from internal exploitation and foreign domination.”—The World-Wide Union of Ethiopian Students, 1969⁸³⁷

The Actual Black Vietnam

On May 23, 1991, the massive bronze statue of Soviet communist leader VI Lenin in Addis Ababa, erected less than a decade before with North Korean assistance, was pulled down by an enthusiastic crowd

⁸³⁵ EPRP, “The Mengistu-Haile Fida Clique: What It Is and What It Does,” *Abyot*, Vol. 2, No. 4, March 1977.

⁸³⁶ ESPIC, “The Truth About the EPRP,” 2006, Washington D.C. (PDF).

⁸³⁷ WWUES, *The Liberation of the Imperial Ethiopian Government Embassy*, 1969 ESANA, p. 1-15).

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in advance of the fall of the city to the forces of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). According to an account published in the *Los Angeles Times*, "When the cranes gave a mighty tug and pulled the figure loose, then laid it on its back on a flatbed truck to be taken away, the crowd cheered and danced, chanting, 'Mengistu's a cannibal!'"⁸³⁸

Lt. Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, who had been declared President of the new People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia in 1987, had fled two days before to seek sanctuary in Zimbabwe. In 1990, as the Soviet bloc which had sustained his regime was cracking and disengaging, he and his ruling Workers Party of Ethiopia had attempted some modest reforms in the direction of democratization and economic privatization, but the moves failed to abate the rapid escalation of a nationwide popular rebellion. That rebellion was led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front, now constituted within the EPRDF, a multi-ethnic military coalition. The Front's military campaign to liberate the entire nation from the former *Derg* regime was called "Operation Walleign," in honor and memory of Walleign Mekonnen, the revolutionary student who had been martyred nearly twenty years before. On May 28, the EPRDF seized Addis Ababa, and established the Transitional Government of Ethiopia. Also that May, and hardly coincidentally, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front liberated the Eritrean capital city of Asmara, the fruit of a final offensive that had already freed the port city of Massawa the year before. The entire region of Eritrea was now under EPLF control.

In an interview on the eve of victory, TPLF/EPRDF spokesman Meles Zenawi clarified the political agenda of the Front:

Therefore, to be precise, the EPRDF is a broad Front that struggles for the implementation of revolutionary democracy and is not a Marxist-Leninist organization struggling for

838 "Lenin Statue Takes a Tumble After Dictator's Ouster : Ethiopia: The monument was a reminder of the Marxist regime. But glee in the capital is tempered by advancing rebels." *Los Angeles Times*, May 24, 1991. (Via www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1991-05-24-mn-2356-story.html)

socialism. The EPRDF does not accept members that won't struggle for the actualization of the revolutionary democratic program. Within this confine, though, it is anybody's right to democratically and peacefully agitate for any ideology they choose.... It is for these reasons that we believe that it is erroneous to propagate the view that the EPRDF is an organization that struggles to implement socialism.⁸³⁹

The new transitional EPRDF regime issued a statement later in the year motivating and detailing its plans for righting Ethiopia's failing economy.

The reasons behind Ethiopia's economic crisis are many and varied. Foremost among them is the anti-democratic nature of the regime which trampled upon the human and democratic rights of the people. The totalitarian regime had denied the people the opportunity to participate in all issues that concern their lives and became a major hindrance to economic [sic] growth. The system denied individuals to own and manage economic activities and the wrong policies that were pursued generally discouraged private investors from engaging themselves in productive activities.... Inefficient management, bureaucratic red-tape and the absence of intersectoral coordination stifled economic growth. In addition, embezzlement of public funds, nepotism, bribery, etc. that were widely practiced by public officials contributed to a slackening of labour discipline and morale. A few high officials and their cohorts become sole beneficiaries while the majority of the population suffered.... The task of cleansing these evils will admittedly take a long time, but the struggle should commence immediately.⁸⁴⁰

839 "Meles Zenawi, General Secretary of the EPRDF, Holds Radio Interview," *EPRDF News Bulletin*, Vol. 1, No. 5, May 8, 1991, p. 4

⁸⁴⁰ The Transitional Government of Ethiopia, *Ethiopia's Economic Policy During the Transitional Period*, Addis Ababa, Nov 1991, p. 12, 48.

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Development, privatization, and foreign investment were seen as key.

After a civil referendum, in 1993 Eritrea became an independent state; the head of that state was (and still is, as of this writing) Isaias Afewerki, the Chinese-trained guerrilla veteran and Chairman of the EPLF. In 1995, the Transitional Government of Ethiopia became the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, following a constituent assembly and popular elections which saw the EPRDF formally coast to power. TPLF leader Meles Zenawi assumed the prime ministership until his death in 2012. Eritrea and Ethiopia returned to the battlefield, fighting a brutal and bloody border war at the end of the 1990s. Both EPRP and *Meison* attempted participation in various political opposition fronts against the TPLF/EPRDF regime, but their members were targeted for repression.⁸⁴¹

While there is a museum and memorial in Addis Ababa to the victims of the “Red Terror,” the process of truth, reconciliation and national accounting was seen by many as partial. Some of those with the most blood on their hands from the period of the terror or the years that followed, like Legesse Asfaw, were tried and imprisoned, with death sentences commuted. (Legesse Asfaw died of liver cancer, a free man in 2019.⁸⁴²) There have been several cases of people accused of

⁸⁴¹ As part of the Coalition of Ethiopian Democratic Forces (COEDF), the EPRP was rebuffed in its attempt to rejoin the domestic political dialogue after the EPRDF victory. *Meison* was also part of this coalition. “The EPRP stayed true to its principles and championed the path of dialogue and peaceful political struggle. Through COEDF, it was behind the 1993 Paris Peace and Reconciliation Conference attended by various opposition groups and fronts. The ruling TPLF (also called the EPRDF) refused to attend. In December 1993, the EPRP sent its delegates, as part of COEDF, to the Ghion Peace and Reconciliation Conference in Addis Abeba. All the peace delegates were arrested as they arrived in Addis Abeba, EPRP leader Ghennet Girma stayed in Addis Abeba Prison for two months, EPRP leader and COEDF chairman, Mersha Yosef, was blocked by the arrests from arriving in Addis Abeba and Abera Yemaneab, head of the COEDF Foreign Relations Department is still in the Addis Abeba central prison despite a court order calling for his release.” (via EPRP.com) Abera Yemane-ab, quoted repeatedly in this book, spent 17 years in prison before his release and exile in 2011.

⁸⁴² His daughter, named Abiyot, said of Legesse in his obituary “He was a people’s person, articulate and loved to work.” See *Addis Fortune*, Vol. 18, No. 979, February 2, 2019. (Via <https://addisfortune.news/legesse-asfaw-cohort-of-com->

atrocities during the terror being followed and tracked down into exile and then pursued for prosecution.

The political foundation of the EPRDF state was described as “ethnic federalism,” and the country was divided into several ethnic regions, each administered by an ethnic nationality-based EPRDF contingent party such as the TPLF, the Amhara National Democratic Movement, the Oromo People’s Democratic Organization, etc. But rather than offer a resolution to the national question as challenged by the ESM so many decades before, Ethiopia’s enforced federal system seems to have fostered cronyism and bred ethnic discontent, now adding the Amhara people to the list of national minorities who feel that the system disadvantages them. The modern EPRDF decried the corruption and oppression of the TPLF-dominated national government as “*Woyanne* fascism.”

During the writing of this volume the situation in Ethiopia on the ground has changed quite a bit. Executive power has moved out of the hands of the TPLF leadership, with Abiy Ahmed (as a child he was called *Abiyot*, or “Revolution”; he was born in 1976⁸⁴³) becoming the nation’s prime minister; Abiy has presided over a rearrangement of parties away from the former ethnic models. Abiy is Oromo, and Oromos currently constitute the largest ethnic group in the country. His accession to power came after a period of repression aimed at Oromo people and has coincided with a rise in Oromo nationalism from groups both in- and outside government. Fears that Ethiopia is heading for a further fracturing along ethnic lines are widespread.

Interest in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is heavier than ever among Ethiopia’s non-Muslims. Socialism and communism are widely understood as synonymous with the horror of the *Derg* era; and if there are young Ethiopian left groups outside the 1970s generation, this

plicated-painful-history/) In addition to his actions during the Terror, Legesse was held responsible for the deaths of 2,500 civilians in an air raid on a market in Tigray in 1988.

⁸⁴³ Dawit Endeshaw, “The rise of Abiy ‘Abiyot’ Ahmed,” *The Reporter*, 31 March 2018. <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/article/rise-abiy-abiyot-ahmed>.

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researcher was unable to discover them.⁸⁴⁴ Despite the TPLF's Marxist-Leninist roots (and these seem to have been forgotten about the same time their tanks rolled into Addis Ababa), the TPLF/EPRDF regime was recruited by Washington D.C. to serve as its regional proxy for enforcing Western order in strife-torn Somalia and South Sudan. In the greatly expanded vibrant communities of the Ethiopian diaspora—now made up not of students but of professionals and their families—there is, particularly in the Amhara diaspora, intense nostalgia for the emperor Haile Selassie and the historic traditions of the Ethiopian royalty. Eritrean independence seems to be widely resented.

So what happened to the 1960s' revolutionary student dream of the Black Vietnam? That dream had represented empowerment, righteous struggle against overwhelming odds, and solidarity; it implied uniting in struggle to free Ethiopia's peoples from global and domestic oppression and exploitation. It was a call to arms, and shorthand for a clear revolutionary vision of the world and its antagonists.

For sure Ethiopians watched in celebration with the rest of the world as the last American forces and a host of its Vietnamese puppets fled Saigon in helicopters in 1975. The United States had suffered a tremendous defeat, and Vietnam was reunified as a socialist republic. A celebratory statement from the Eritrean student movement in 1975 echoes the sentiments of Ethiopian revolutionaries of all stripes:

[A]s was fully realized on April 30th, 1975, neither unparalleled atrocities nor the presence of 550,000 United States soldiers at the height of their strength, was able to thwart the people's historic goal of driving away the foreign aggressors, reunifying their nation, and building a society wherein no

⁸⁴⁴ The author is in possession of English-language documents from "Red Horizon" (1980), apparently a split from *Meison* of unknown size, location or impact, and the "All-Ethiopian Communist League" (2009–2011) which may or may not be the same thing but strongly gives the impression of being merely an internet phenomenon. A post-1991 factional offshoot of the EPRP called the "EPRP-Democratic" has a broadly progressive and democratic program that makes no mention of socialism and suggests mostly organizational differences with today's EPRP; it calls the Iyasou Alemayehu-led EPRP the "Reactionary" EPRP.

small class would parasitically live at the expense of the great majority of impoverished workers and peasants.⁸⁴⁵

But history can be unkind. Soon, Ethiopian revolutionaries had cause to apply the metaphor of Vietnam not to Western imperialist meddling in Ethiopia, but to the meddling of the Soviet Union and Cuba.

The social imperialists and their Cuban mercenaries will sink deeper and deeper into the mire. In Ethiopia, they will find their Vietnam. The more they kill the more they assure this, the higher becomes the determination of the EPRP and the Ethiopian masses to crush thoroughly, completely and mercilessly the social imperialist hordes.⁸⁴⁶

When one Eritrean group stated directly, “Eritrea has become the Soviet’s Viet Nam,”⁸⁴⁷ it served less to invoke the heroism of the Vietnamese people, than to *condemn* the behavior of the world’s oldest ostensibly socialist country.

As for Vietnam itself, the defeat of U.S. imperialism and the puppet Thieu regime in the South marked an end to a decade of near-genocidal carnage. The peace it delivered was a welcome respite for the Vietnamese people, and the defeat of one of the world’s superpowers by a poor and tiny country struggling to find its way out of a century of colonialism was a world-historic victory for the oppressed and exploited peoples of the global south. Although Ho Chi Minh had died in 1969, his lifelong goal was realized and Saigon was renamed Ho Chi Minh City in his honor. Unfortunately the pressures of the global economy and super-power dynamics brought a military invasion from its erstwhile Chinese ally in 1979, followed by economic hardship with the

⁸⁴⁵ EFLNA, “Victory in Southeast Asia,” *Liberation*, Vol. 4, No. 4, April–June 1975, pp. 17–18.

⁸⁴⁶ EPRP, “Victory Over Social-Imperialism Is Certain!” *Abyot*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Feb.–March 1978, p. 2.

⁸⁴⁷ EFLNA, “Demagogy of EPLF Leaders Exposed,” *Eritrea in Struggle*, Dec. 1978–Jan. 1979; quoted in COUSM-L, *The Workers’ Advocate*, Vol. 9, No. 2, Feb. 12, 1979.

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crisis in the socialist camp in the late 1980s/early 1990s. Still ruled by the communist Workers Party of Vietnam with due homage to the country's revolutionary past, Vietnam preserved itself by becoming a consumer goods sweatshop for Chinese and American industry that provided survival for the Vietnamese economy but pulled it back into the web of capitalist exploitation and oppression.

Decades after the route of the Mengistu regime, with metaphors about Vietnam fading into memory, by 2018 the economy of Ethiopia became the fastest growing in Africa.⁸⁴⁸ The second largest African country by population after Nigeria, Ethiopia has annual economic growth zooming to over ten percent a year.

How did Ethiopia do it? By finally becoming the Black Vietnam, but not in the sense of being a locus of resistance to imperialism, nor in the sense of being imperialism's quagmire of defeat, but in the sense of becoming a consumer goods sweatshop for Chinese and American industry. Highly regimented working conditions in industrial parks in the service of profit and efficiency now rule the days of Ethiopian workers. According to one worker in a Chinese-owned pants factory, "Whenever workers didn't meet a goal, the bosses would yell."⁸⁴⁹ It's not what a generation of revolutionaries expected.

While the TPLF/EPRDF government promised the trappings of popular rule long advocated by the left, its reality has been something far less than democratic and egalitarian. Cheap labor has not meant prosperity for the masses of Ethiopians, but instead inspired massive corruption. Industrial disregard for the ecology has brought environmental crisis to a country still subject to the ravages of drought in the changing climate. The country's largest employer is a Saudi sheik. The ethnic policies of the government have not resulted in autonomy and empowerment but in distrust, victimization and suppression of dissent. Ethiopia hosts almost a million refugees from neighboring countries

⁸⁴⁸ Chris Giles, "Ethiopia is now Africa's fastest growing economy," CNN, April 24, 2018.

⁸⁴⁹ Bill Donahue, "China Is Turning Ethiopia Into a Giant Fast-Fashion Factory," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, March 2, 2018 (via www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2018-03-02/china-is-turning-ethiopia-into-a-giant-fast-fashion-factory).

while generating thousands of its own internally displaced people.

Was it Ethiopian socialism that failed, or something else?

The Ethiopian people paid a tremendous human cost during the *Derg* era. If everything the *Derg* did was tainted by its callous expenditure of blood, not everything the *Derg* did was awful in and of itself. For example, literacy increased dramatically and feudal land ownership was ended. But despite the extreme rhetorical flourishes of the military regime, actual democracy or actual socialism were never established. While institutions that mimicked the appearance of popular power were a trademark of the regime—the mass organizations, the peasant associations, the *kebelle* neighborhood associations, the massive regimented parades—none of these forms transcended their function as vehicles for government control over the people rather than popular control over the government. Political participation was a product of duress, the price of deviation potentially lethal.

American intelligence asset Paul Henze's observation here rings true: "The primary appeal of Marxism-Leninism to Mengistu and his group appears to have been as a formula for consolidating a hold on political power without permitting any real test of popular will either through elections or consultative procedures."⁸⁵⁰ If anyone understands behind-the-scenes manipulation of power it would be the CIA: Game recognizes game.

The living Lenin that the *Derg* claimed to uphold had been absolutely clear: "Socialism cannot be decreed from above. Its spirit rejects the mechanical bureaucratic approach; living, creative socialism is the product of the masses themselves."⁸⁵¹ In the revolutionary conjuncture of 1974 Ethiopia, the masses had just begun to understand and flex their own power. The revolutionary left brought an ideological understanding and agenda to the struggle, but barely had time to develop a relationship between themselves with their vision for society, and those

⁸⁵⁰ Paul B. Henze, *The Ethiopian Revolution: Mythology and History*, The Rand Corporation, July 1989, p. 4.

⁸⁵¹ V.I. Lenin, *Meeting of the All-Russia Central Executive Committee*, Nov. 4 (17), 1917. (via Marxist Internet Archive www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/nov/04a.htm).

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who had the social power to see that vision through. The EPRP, and arguably to a limited extent *Meison*, sought to mobilize the Ethiopian people to take what was theirs.⁸⁵² The military regime, on the other hand, sought to harness the people to rubber stamp the military's plans, and to legitimize its leading role in society. Despite the nation's economic and political underdevelopment, the left chose the approach of popular appeal in clear confrontation with the condescending message of the *Derg* that it alone could decide when the people were ready to stand on their own. This appeal found a receptive audience. As EPRP insider Babile Tola writes, "The EPRP's popularity at the time did not grow just because it opposed a regime which was killing people, but mainly because it was able to articulate the basic demands of the people."⁸⁵³

What we have in Ethiopia is not a lesson in the failure of socialism, it is a lesson in the failure of *pretending socialism involves something less than the seizure of power by the exploited and oppressed classes themselves*. Standing on a Potemkin village of red flags, Lenin posters and revolutionary phrase-mongering, the *Derg* ruled with cruelty, corruption and duplicity. The substance of Lenin's teachings was betrayed. Mengistu the man today lives on comfortably in Zimbabwe; but his memory lives on in Ethiopia among those who now equate socialism with murder, war, hardship and lies... and among some dissatisfied with the state of Ethiopian society today.

The Soviet Union, whose founders hoped its red banners would be beacons of hope to revolutionary movements across the globe, is remembered for making things *worse* in Ethiopia. As *Meison* cadre Abera Yemane-Ab wrote in the late 1980s,

[T]en years of overwhelming Soviet presence in Ethiopia

⁸⁵² The most particular error of *Meison* was in believing it could use the existing state and its army to leverage social change; its vision of dual power was deeply flawed by its integration into the repressive apparatus. Without excusing *Meison's* shared responsibility for the *Derg's* brutality in any way, it seems only fair to acknowledge that its original professed intent was not dissimilar from that of EPRP.

⁸⁵³ Babile Tola, *To Kill a Generation*, p. 112.

has resulted in the reversal of the democratic gains of 1974 to 1977 and the virtual annihilation of the Ethiopian Revolution. During the last ten years, with Soviet approval and encouragement, the military government of Mengistu Hailemariam has committed untold crimes against the Ethiopian peoples and their Revolution. The National Democratic Revolution Program (NDRP) has been systematically undermined and repealed but for its name.⁸⁵⁴

It's not an accident that right-wing, fascist and xenophobic ideas are resurgent in the nations of the former Soviet bloc in Europe. The legacy of socialism is reduced there to nostalgia for the social safety net provided by the expired "communist" regimes; meanwhile socially conservative ideas, national chauvinism, racism and even old-fashioned antisemitism are now rampant in these places, bred by national resentment. There, the bitter equation of socialism with repression has poisoned the well and isolated the remnants of the far left. That poison now taints the political dialogue of Ethiopia, where the red past is associated with "red" terror, despite the fact that most of the terror's victims were themselves reds.

While it is somewhat divorced from the ideology of the times, on the bright side there is still tremendous respect for the generation of the revolutionary period. Modern supporters of the EPRP look back on the revolutionary generation for inspiration.

EPRP members showed fantastic courage in the struggle against the brutal Derg. They manifested ingenuity and inventiveness never before recorded in the country. Young and old citizens turned into "*mot ayf ere'y*" death-daring fighters by their faith in the cause of the people blazed the path for a generation to come. The martyrs continued the history and heritage of Ethiopia—that of saying no to servitude by any local or foreign force, that of striving to live a worthy life negating horrible existence as a quiet, zombie

⁸⁵⁴ Abera Yemane-Ab, "The Defeat of the Ethiopian Revolution," p. 32.

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like and subdued being.⁸⁵⁵

Every historical tragedy leaves questions behind. Given that so many social problems challenged by Ethiopian revolutionaries a few short decades ago remain largely unresolved, those who continue to believe in the possibility of a more just and humane society—or indeed a more just and humane world—need to be able to gaze into the polluted well and identify more than just poison. That said, there are some issues that need to be confronted directly.

Was it inevitable?

The inescapable tragedy of the Ethiopian revolutionary period is the body count. Students, children, men, women, the innocent along with the guilty: the scale of the loss of life is horrifying. It is easy and common, in the way of historical narratives that aren't actually as neutral as they pretend, to blame "both sides" for the orgy of violence that culminated in the so-called "Red Terror." Many lump the civilian left and the military together as an ideologically singular catastrophe that scoured the region until they were swept away along with the Soviet Union and its imperial detritus at the end of the late and unlamented Cold War. Others, partisans of an attempt to whitewash Mengistu's historical record—especially certain trends of modern leftists—brush over the death toll that made his rise to power possible with condescending mutterings about violence-prone ultra leftists.

A few years before his passing, Alem Habtu, the former ESUNA leader last seen in our discussion of early-1970s intrigues between his brother Mesfin and Senay Likke, and by the time of this statement a college professor in New York, issued a harsh verdict on the fellow members of his generation:

What needs to be underlined is that between 1970 and 1974, the vast majority of rank and file students at home or abroad were not aware, at least for a good while, that they were being used as puppets of two underground com-

⁸⁵⁵ ESPIC, "The Truth About the EPRP," 2006, Washington, D.C. (PDF).

munist parties that were struggling for hegemony of the student movement, and through it, of the revolutionary process in Ethiopia. After coming out of the closet in 1974-75, both parties continued to use the student movement as their social base. No revolution has ever succeeded with students as its social base. As such, it was inevitable that the student-based communist parties would fail in their quixotic efforts to seize state power. The tragedy is that they used students as cannon fodder for their blind ambitions. As I used to say at the time, the leaderships of these parties have criminal responsibility for the thousands of students who died needlessly.”⁸⁵⁶

Given the extraordinary pain felt by the survivors of the “Red Terror” era, such a viewpoint is certainly understandable. But to embrace it is to surrender to the idea that the liberation of a people is a cause too dangerous to risk.

How then to understand what happened?

First of all, let us dispense with the idea that the Ethiopian left was merely “students with blind ambition.” Babile Tola argues to correct the record that:

The EPRP’s predominant membership was made up of students and intellectuals, but those elements who declare that it was a party of students fail to grasp the picture. Neither the EPRP nor Meisone were “the party of students” and it is wrong to assert that both were not in reality mass organizations. In fact, the EPRP from 1975 to 1978 and Meisone from (late 1976) to May 1977 were mass parties, in so far as their organizations had a big number of people from the various walks of life as members.⁸⁵⁷

He goes on to suggest that it was their rapidly growing size that

⁸⁵⁶ Alem Habtu, “The Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM): My Experiences in ESUNA, 1964–1971,” 2015.

⁸⁵⁷ Babile Tola, *To Kill a Generation*, pp. 113–114

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contributed to a loss of “organizational tightness” and turned the parties into “easy targets” for repression. Not said is that all these “students” graduated very quickly into the university of the streets. If their first discussion of armed struggle began in the realm of ideas, the sound of gunshots from the assassination of Tilahun Gizaw in 1969 to the PMAC’s murder of royal detainees toward the end of 1974 should have made the stakes quite clear. These “students” were not play-acting.

Today’s EPRP supporters in the diaspora lay the blame for the violence at the feet of the military regime and contextualize it within an ongoing struggle for democracy in their homeland.

The Red Terror was preceded by violent repression, murder and mayhem of the Derg. Long before the EPRP resorted to self-defense or fired a single shot. This is the reality. The EPRP did not provoke the Derg, did not resort to urban armed struggle, and did not choose the armed struggle path while the political situation in Ethiopia was peaceful. The EPRP undertook self defense action only after years of repression and after the Derg publicly declared war against it and the repression became unbearable. As we are seeing now with the Meles regime, the repression was the reply of a politically defeated Derg to a victorious people’s struggle as bankrupt regimes can stay in power only by repressing the opposition and murdering the people at large. The people are duty bound to struggle for their rights. If provocation there were, it is primarily provocation by the ruling regime that denies the people their rights. Freedom never comes cheap and people have to pay the necessary sacrifice to regain their basic and inalienable rights. Tolerating a repressive regime is not wise and advisable—fighting against it is just and called for.⁸⁵⁸

This investigation has documented many of the ways this statement can be validated.

⁸⁵⁸ ESPIC, “The Truth About the EPRP,” 2006, Washington, D.C. (PDF).

They go on to reject the idea that the EPRP's actions were provocations:

A really democratic regime does not turn violent because people stage protests and thus talk of provocation is misplaced. But, freedom never comes cheap. It is fair to say that the EPRP should have adopted tactics that exposed it less to the violent frenzy of the regime but it committed no error by opting to fight in self-defense. The Resistance against the Nazi regime in Europe cost very many lives. For every German officer killed the Nazis rounded up hundreds of hostages and shot them to death—we have not heard up to now any condemnation of the Resistance as provocateurs. The EPRP did not carelessly and callously throw its members into the jaws of repression.⁸⁵⁹

Marx wrote in *Capital*, “Violence is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one.”⁸⁶⁰ This is most wisely interpreted not as a license to commit brutality, but as a profound *observation* of the material reality of class rule and what it takes to challenge it. To this observer, the EPRP deserves some criticism for failing to integrate its turn to urban armed struggle into what had been a highly successful process of building mass support. Its defensive violence, its targeted assassinations, sacrificed mass resistance in favor of something the regime was able to dismiss as terrorism. The Party's urban armed struggle may have served a defensively disruptive purpose, but it wasn't going to win the revolution. The complicated circumstances of repression may be ultimately behind the left's internal failings, but a sense of disappointment lingers that a generation with such selfless commitment, and such clarity of vision, found itself trapped in a web of defeat.

In Russia, the successful Bolsheviks had decades of revolutionary organizing behind them. There was a period when revolutionary

⁸⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital, Chapter Thirty-One: Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist*; 1867. “Violence” is sometimes translated as “Force.”

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terrorism was the chief form of opposition to Tsarism; but it was to the movement's benefit that it was able to outgrow that strategy as it developed its politics and ideology. In Ethiopia, the civilian left only had a few years of organizing experience before government repression increased quantitatively. Their preparations were intensive, but by the time of Mengistu's February 1977 palace coup, the EPRP was just not well enough positioned for an immediate mass contention for power. It's possible their presumption that the struggle for socialism and democracy would always entail a *stage* of rural armed struggle prevented the EPRP from considering strategies more in tune with the reality of the Party it had actually become. Unfortunately, the period of rapidly escalating government repression starting in late 1976 was effective in throwing the Party off balance, and brutally swift in denying it time to effectively recalibrate its response.

One is reminded of another of Karl Marx's key innovative observations, that communists are positioned to confront capitalism because of the social power of their base at the choke-points of production. The EPRP's social base was broad, but Ethiopian capitalism's lacking was also the EPRP's lacking. The Party had penetrated the urban proletariat, but was not hegemonic inside it; and most importantly the proletariat itself was simply outnumbered by the social forces which the *Derg* was able to mobilize. The EPRP had never really aimed toward leading a sudden mass insurrection, and its rural people's war, based in part on Mao's theoretical compensation for a majority-peasant society, seemed calibrated to the long term. Meanwhile their enemies were cruel, ruthless and unstinting. Time wasn't on their side.

It is possible that moves toward a broad social united front, as envisioned by the *Derg* factionalists eliminated by Mengistu in February 1977, would have halted the sectarian violence. But such a front seems more like a recipe for temporary class peace than a resolution of the social problems which provoked the revolution in the first place. History teaches us that revolutionaries have not done well in coalition with anti-revolutionaries, so it's also possible such a moment would have been brief and followed by an inevitable return to bloodshed. In

any case, we cannot know that untaken road.

The Italian conquest and occupation were brutal; the Ethiopian resistance did what it needed to do to liberate their country from that scourge. That resistance didn't inspire the admonitions of thousands of clucking-tongues; it turned generations of Ethiopians into proud partisans of their nation's fighting spirit: Ethiopians learn the names of resistance heroes by heart. Schooled by the sixties and a worldwide global struggle, the Ethiopian left had a romantic streak, building on those traditions. Early issues of *Abyot*, after it was reestablished as the international voice of the EPRP, bore as an epigraph Shelley's classic stanza from "The Masque of Anarchy," evoking the heroism of mass rebellion against an outnumbered foe: "Rise like lions after slumber / In unvanquishable number / Shake your chains to earth like dew / Which in sleep had fallen on you—/ Ye are many—they are few."⁸⁶¹ These were heroic individuals who acted selflessly in a struggle against tremendous odds.

Sadly, in the event, the left was not defeated by the forces of the Ethiopian crown. It was defeated by opportunists from its own ranks, in concert with military careerists who in turn swallowed up those opportunists.

As one modern Ethiopian activist puts it, "In Ethiopian reality, opportunism means the rejection of the power of the Ethiopian people and acceptance of and aggrandizing the role of the few. Opportunists oppose and diminish the fundamental belief that the broad-mass of the Ethiopian people are the makers and builders of Ethiopia!"⁸⁶² It's not hard to identify "opportunists" like that behind the tragedy that unfolded. And if all that carnage was the worst tragedy of the revolution, tugging at the bloody roots of all that loss of life is the willful manipulation and revision of an ideology in the service of enabling its opposite.

⁸⁶¹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, "The Masque of Anarchy" (1819), epigraph printed on Vol. 1, No.2 of *Abyot*, January 30, 1976

⁸⁶² CT, in personal conversation with the author on Facebook.

Ideology, Language, and Marxism-Kornilovism

History doesn't repeat itself, but a materialist understanding of history helps us see patterns in the predictable actions of social forces based on their class and material interests when challenged with historical conjunctures arising in their own predictable patterns. The Russian Revolution that culminated in October 1917 has been closely studied and observed and upheld as an example by Marxist revolutionaries and their opponents ever since the event itself. In earlier chapters we discussed how the lens of revisionism has meant that different leftist tendencies can frame the same lessons and legacies of that revolutionary history in dramatically different, often contradictory, ways. The ways in which these lessons are interpreted, and the resulting actions in support of them, speak eloquent volumes about true intent and meaning.

It's potentially enlightening to compare the Russian events of 1917 and the Ethiopian events of 1974. Each year opens with one uprising and its ends with a definitive societal transformation after a middle period marked by the return of exiles. To be sure, comparisons like these were inevitably exploited at the time in the service of seizing the narrative, and some of them are clarifying. But the comparison of Mengistu to the Bolsheviks inside this narrative is actually a dramatic failure of both analysis and morality. Sadly, this failure was carried forward not only by forces renowned for their cynicism like the propaganda machine of the late-period Soviet Union, but by international far leftists who might otherwise be presumed to share the goal of worldwide socialist revolution. If this investigation has been a challenge to some of the conventional wisdom about those times, it is now worth examining some of the specific ways ideological revisionism has been expressed in the Ethiopian context, leading ultimately to a failure in the class solidarity that is the supposed heart of worldwide revolution.

The problem starts with interpreting what happened in 1974. Writing in 1979, Professor Michael Chege of the University of Nairobi makes an astute observation about the events of that revolutionary year. "It was the Co-ordinating Committee of the Armed Forces (the *Dirgue*), slowly edging into power since the mutinies early in the year,

which arrested, prosecuted, judged, and executed leading members of the nobility and the bourgeoisie, most notably in the massacres of 22–24 November 1974. It was as if General Kornilov's attempted *coup d'état* in September 1917 had succeeded in toppling Kerensky and suppressing the Bolsheviks."⁸⁶³ Chege then faults the "Ethiopian Marxist intelligentsia" for failing to mobilize against the *Derg* at the inceptionary moment when the success of the Petrograd Soviets in halting Kornilov could have been emulated. But the real insight here is that Mengistu, far from being the Ethiopian Revolution's Lenin, was its *triumphant* Kornilov.

General Lavr Kornilov was an ally of Alexander Kerensky, who led the Russian provisional government after the overthrow of the Tsar in the February revolution of 1917. Kornilov was an opportunist who used his alliance with Kerensky to attempt a *coup d'état* in order to crush the nascent forms of popular power, the *soviets*, or workers and soldiers councils, led by revolutionaries in cities like Petrograd. In the face of a popular mobilization led by the Bolsheviks from inside the *soviets*, Kornilov's coup collapsed. The Bolshevik seizure of power followed a few short weeks later. Kornilov himself would become a casualty of the post-uprising civil war.

By all accounts Kornilov was a committed rightist who might have restored imperial rule in Russia, and Mengistu at least proved he was absolutely committed to abolishing the monarchy. But as we have seen, in 1974 there is no evidence that Mengistu or any of the other original officers of the *Derg* was actually any kind of ideological leftist until they had been schooled by the likes of Senay Likke and Haile Fida. Mengistu, like Kornilov, was a member of the bourgeois state's officer corps who ultimately followed his own personal career agenda to power. His deliberate casting as a kind of Ethiopian Lenin was the work of mutually opportunistic maneuvering by Mengistu and his leftist advisors; a process that ended when Mengistu purged the last of his civilian left allies in 1978. The military's hijack of the 1974 revolution had in fact effectively prevented the development of instruments of popular

⁸⁶³ Michael Chege, "The Revolution Betrayed: Ethiopia, 1974–9," *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 3, September 1979; p. 369.

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power like *soviets*. As its leadership was winnowed by successive executions, the *Derg* hardened its line, and consolidated a sort of personality cult around Mengistu. Only the EPRDF offensive of 1991 dislodged Mengistu from his position as master of the state itself. The underdeveloped, bureaucratic nature of Ethiopian capitalism allowed for the displacement of certain elements of the imperial ruling class, but to Mengistu, the words “socialism” and “democracy” remained just that, words. A Lenin he was not.

Mengistu clearly mastered the art of survival along with Marxist-Leninist rhetoric. But he never risked giving away his own ultimate power over the state, even when he allowed for the creation of a national *Shengo*, or parliament, in 1987. The Ethiopian state never passed into the control of the Ethiopian popular classes.

In the words of Paul Henze, “The Derg never found a mass base. The WPE,⁸⁶⁴ when finally formed, was (and remains) an agglomeration of co-opted military officers, officials, and opportunists. Peasants and workers have almost no voice in it.”⁸⁶⁵

Dawit Wolde Giorgis knew what the *Derg* was like from inside:

The WPE now controls the entire population. It has extended its reach into all walks of life, thus effectively heading off every possibility of dissent or insurrection. Established with a democratic facade, it is now thoroughly despised by the average Ethiopian as the ultimate hypocrisy. The crude, phony election process of 1984 insulted every honest Ethiopian’s sense of justice. Deliberations within the Party lack even the semblance of democracy, but Party “decisions” are used as instruments to implement the decrees of the ruling circle in the name of the people.⁸⁶⁶

It’s a damning portrait.

It’s simply not enough to take the revolutionary sounding claims

⁸⁶⁴ Workers Party of Ethiopia.

⁸⁶⁵ Paul B. Henze, *The Ethiopian Revolution: Mythology and History*, The Rand Corporation, July 1989, p. 6.

⁸⁶⁶ Dawit Wolde Giorgis, *Red Tears*, p. 60.

of the *Derg* at face value. Under the logic of revisionism that propelled the regime, Marxist texts which actually politically *contradicted* the practices of Ethiopia's professed Marxist military rulers were eventually made widely available when the government began to publish them in Ethiopian languages. Included were many works of Lenin that could be used to justify the *Derg's* policies only if one turned a jaundiced eye to the obvious meanings of the text and closed one's eyes completely to the murder of thousands of professed communists. Either hilariously or tragically, the *Derg* even published an Amharic translation of Josef Stalin's seminal 1907 polemic *Anarchism or Socialism* as a weapon against the EPRP, despite the fact that the EPRP was "anarchist" only in the imaginations of its opponents.

It might be the Christian Bible that brings us the idea of "words made flesh," but the Ethiopian revolution is a case study in the importance of words and their true meaning in contrast to their misuse and distortion. The misuse of words became a kind of flesh in 1970s Ethiopia.

After leaving the precarious EPLA base areas for Europe in the 1980s, EPRP co-founder Iyasou Alemayehu reinvented himself in exile as Hama Tuma, a literary satirist who combined biting political commentary with a rich appreciation for Ethiopian culture. His poems, novels and short stories in both English and Amharic detail the experiences of living through a traumatic era. But they're also bitterly sad and funny in the way they reveal human truths amidst political cruelty by calling out absurdity and moral dishonesty. He uses words as a weapon to carry on the fight against the lingering memory of military rule. He conveys the importance of fighting for the true meaning of words; the importance of taking a stand and carrying it through. And the cost of surrendering to lies.

In "The Case of the Traitorous Alphabet," Hama Tuma relates a kind of absurdist parable, totally based on an actual dispute, which says something profound about the connections between revisionism and power:

Take the bloody struggle between the government and those

whom it calls anarchists. They fought over words and the difference had a life and death importance. The anarchists referred to workers as *labader*—those who live by their sweat. The government preferred to call them *wozader*—those who live by their sweat. You may ask “So where the hell is the problem?” but be patient and I will explain. The problem lies in the type of sweat. The anarchists say *lab* is the sweat of the workers while *woz* is the sweat of rich people; the former is sweat oozing out of your body if you have to labor in some dismal factory... the latter is the sweat of the rich and fat people acquired from too much cholesterol and lack of exercise. The difference between types of sweat defined the political colouring, so it was said. The government said sweat is sweat and anyway it could not be expected to use the anarchist word for workers even if they happen to be the first to translate politically the word “worker” into the local language. No self-respecting government could be without its own words and mottos, could it? In short, if you said *labader* instead of *wozader* it was ample proof you were an anarchist and you got killed for it.⁸⁶⁷

In another of his stories, “The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor,” he tells of a man called before the authorities to face charges during the *Derg* era, and in so doing exposes the hypocritical collision of reality and rhetoric:

“You knew witchcraft is a crime in our country?”

“Yes.”

“You knew spreading mystification and ignorance is punishable by law?”

“Yes.”

“You knew all this but you just went ahead and broke the law?”

⁸⁶⁷ Hama Tuma, “The Case of the Traitorous Alphabet,” *The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor and Other Stories*, pp. 73–74.

“I broke no law. I did not engage in witchcraft. Why do you insist on calling it so?”

“The people who came to you believed you were a witch doctor.”

“States in which workers are not in power call themselves workers’ states.”

“That is different. Leaders and parties who represent the interests of workers are in power.”

“It is a deception. The label does not fit. Either workers are in power or they are not... if you are ready to condone such deceptions why do you fume against me just because people believed I was a witch Doctor?”

“Because you made them believe that you were.”⁸⁶⁸

These two tales lead us to ask *why* revisionists choose revisionism. There are class and other forms of material self interest, for sure. There is expediency. There is simple duplicity. Deeper than all that, there is a risk in any ideology-based pursuit, and it has to do with waiting for a pattern of reality to emerge in order to confirm a theoretical presumption. If something does not quite fit, why not make it fit? In early chapters we discussed the competing visions and expectations of Berhane Meskel Redda, Haile Fida and Senay Likke. Berhane Meskel anticipated a crisis sooner rather than later and focused on building an organization that might be ready to greet an imminent moment of conjuncture with mass empowerment. Haile Fida expected a long march, and when the pace quickened faster than he expected, gravitated to power in uncertainty and to building mechanisms for control. Senay Likke, advocating for armed struggle, gravitated to the military who already had the guns. And then Mengistu arrives with a goal in search of a method: a clear intention of manipulating power itself for his own benefit. These four men all eventually claimed to share more or less the same ideology; it should be obvious that can't actually be true, not without serious misappropriation of language.

⁸⁶⁸ Hama Tuma, “The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor,” *The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor and Other Stories*, pp. 46–47.

Mengistu was interviewed in exile by Riccardo Orizio in 2001. He says,

Democracy works in Europe. The traditions in Africa are different. Look at Ethiopia today. They say they have introduced the multi-party system, but what they have really done is bring back tribalism. Everyone stands by his own tribe or his own religion, not by party.... As we say in Ethiopia, the world insists on trying to give us fine new shoes. And we have to adapt our feet to these new shoes. But, sometimes, new shoes hurt their feet so much that people throw them away. Do you understand this paradox? Instead of adapting your shoes to fit our feet, you in the West have demanded the opposite. When all's said and done, the sandals I offered would not have been thrown away.⁸⁶⁹

It is frankly remarkable how much this professed socialist chairman sounds so very much like the Haile Selassie interviewed by Oriana Fallaci in our epigraph for Chapter 1.

Deirdre Griswold, editor of an American leftwing party newspaper, interviewed Mengistu at a press conference in 1978 for international leftist media. In response to one of her questions, he answered,

What does set the Ethiopian Revolution apart from other revolutions is the ability to introduce drastic measures without a proletarian party and still manage to foil subversive activity. The fact that the armed forces which were molded under a feudo-bourgeois system have until now stood and struggled with the democratic revolution of the broad masses is the other novel aspect of our revolution.... There are areas of activity which justify us in saying that Lenin's great lessons in militancy and leadership have served us well. Making decisions promptly and without hesitation or constraint can be counted as decisive factors for the triumph of

⁸⁶⁹ Riccardo Orizio, *Talk of the Devil: Encounters with Seven Dictators*, Walker Books, 2004; via "2001 interview with Mengistu" at soviet-empire.com.

our revolution.... That is to say, that the anti-people forces who had lined us up for their lunch—we have had them for breakfast.⁸⁷⁰

Thus Mengistu is effectively bragging about more than a year of ruthless, bloody murder, while obliquely referencing his self-serving claims about the role of the men-in-uniform in an attempt at rationalizing the military regime.

Griswold would go on to become a lifelong apologist for Mengistu and the *Derg*, cheerfully echoing the *Derg*'s murderous point of view. On that same 1978 junket, recounting an interview with a regime supporter, she writes,

Said a young woman from the Provisional Office for Mass Organizing Affairs (POMOA).... “[We] answered the white terror with the red terror, and now it is much better.” The “red terror” is not some faceless, clandestine force of repression, as the capitalist press is making out. It is the armed people.... The counter-revolutionaries have not all been killed, or imprisoned or exiled—far from it. Most are still around. But the people know who they are....⁸⁷¹

The chances are high that the POMOA representative she interviewed didn't survive the year. In 1996, watching from afar the genocide trials of certain *Derg* officials, she practiced the well-worn “big lie,” writing, “Today we read in the big-business press that the Red Terror was the brutal suppression of dissenters, students, and other innocents by a cruel military machine. Reading about the trials going on, I am reminded of the way ‘Gone with the Wind’ depicted the U.S. Civil War. Only the revolutionaries were cruel; the slave-owning class was genteel, sensitive, fun-loving.”⁸⁷² As though the thousands of EPRP youth cut

⁸⁷⁰ Deirdre Griswold, *Eyewitness Ethiopia: The Continuing Revolution*, New York 1978; this interview bylined Addis Ababa, Feb. 15, 1978; pp. 40–41.

⁸⁷¹ Deirdre Griswold, *ibid.*, p. 3, p. 6; bylined Addis Feb 10, 1978.

⁸⁷² Deirdre Griswold, “Ethiopia: Can a revolution be put on trial?” *Workers World*, May 23, 1996.

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down in the street were the “slave-owning class.” By 1999, she was representing all opposition to the regime in retrospective as “CIA”: “The CIA was busy trying to dismember the country by assisting, or having its allies assist, separatist movements and outright invasions.”⁸⁷³

One long-gone U.S. socialist grouplet attacked the independent soft-Maoist *Guardian* collective based in NYC for opposing the *Derg*, by actually invoking Mao.

Finally, the *Guardian* objects to the harsh treatment by the revolutionary government of its adversaries, such as the EPRP, Meisone, and some anti-communists in the Military (Michael Andom, Teferi Bante and General Atnafu), as if revolution were a “tea party”, as Mao Tse-tung once said. The *Guardian* refers to the campaign against counter-revolutionaries as something horrible, as if the reactionaries have pampered, historically, the laboring classes, or as if they would not have dealt a deadly blow to the headquarters of the revolutionary masses, had they been given a chance.⁸⁷⁴

Mao’s admonition about revolutions and dinner parties was aimed at preparing for adversity; here it is transformed into a rationalization for slaughter.

By comparison the exiled South African Communist Party, whose leadership was squarely under the influence of the Soviet Union, offered a damnation dressed with the faintest of praise.

The EPRP cannot be merely dismissed as a hired gang of thugs, as they do arise from a certain social class. It seems that the EPRP consists mainly of disgruntled intelligentsia from the old upper classes and middle strata. Coming basically from a feudal bourgeois or pettybourgeois background

⁸⁷³ Deirdre Griswold, “Why do the imperialists hate Mengistu?,” *Workers World*, Dec. 30, 1999.

⁸⁷⁴ Margo Nikitas & Arman Omid, *Ethiopia: Revolution in the Making*, New York 1978; p. 52.

they are especially susceptible to petty-bourgeois revolutionism, adventurism and dogmatism in their interpretation of the revolutionary process. Some of them claim to be Marxists fighting for a proletarian revolution.⁸⁷⁵

Such polemical condescension.

Once the Ethiopian Revolution's Kornilov had been papered over as its Lenin, it was downhill from there. It really is quite remarkable how poorly so much of the Western world's left responded to the Ethiopian revolution, attaching themselves to shallow understandings of important developments, tossing around convenient revisionist concepts like "socialism from above," and thoroughly washing its hands of a generation of comrades. Ken Tarbuck, the British leftist who visited Ethiopia in the late 1970s, had harsh words for those Western leftists enthusing over Mengistu.

Lastly I want to say a few words about the support given to the Derg's regime by some socialists in Western Europe. At every conceivable opportunity there has been a rush to support the most vile and bloody regimes because they have claimed to be socialist. All those who did this have helped further to tarnish the image and prospects of socialism in the advanced capitalist countries by making socialism appear as something repulsive and oppressive. The next time such a regime appears on the world stage I suggest that some of our intellectuals go and live there for a time, as I did, then they will see that the red on the wall is not the Red Flag of socialism but the blood of socialist victims and the odour is not the scent of roses but the smell of fear. Perhaps when they have done this they will be a little less ready to support any little dictator that comes along singing the Internationale.⁸⁷⁶

⁸⁷⁵ W. Jones, "Problems of the Ethiopian Revolution," *The African Communist*, No. 69, Second Quarter 1977 (London), p. 91.

⁸⁷⁶ Ken Tarbuck, *Ethiopia and Socialist Theory (II: Ethiopia and Socialism)* via Marxist Internet Archive, www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/tarbuck/1993/

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Unfortunately Tarbuck's horror at the regime is coupled with what comes across as patronizing disdain for the regime's leftist opponents when he accuses those same European socialists of "help[ing] to feed the illusions of the EPRP and similar groupings in Ethiopia and elsewhere by their own confusion about the world we live in and its readiness for socialism."⁸⁷⁷

A similarly condescending dismissal came from one group of American Trotskyists. Their Horn of Africa correspondent, Ernest Harsch wrote,

The other main leftist group, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party, refused to collaborate with the regime. But at the same time, it was influenced by Maoism and followed an ultraleft course, incorrectly dismissing the Dergue as "fascist" and adopting an adventurist policy of terrorism against it. The EPRP also isolated itself by refusing to work within the existing trade unions, *kebeles*, and peasant associations. This gave the Dergue an opportunity to crack down on it and many of the EPRP's supporters or suspected sympathizers were killed.⁸⁷⁸

This particular group made a universal habit of condemning other socialist groups as "ultralefts," so the fate of the EPRP is enlisted by their correspondent as a wedge against their polemical opponents. Unfortunately for the left such simplistic dismissals deprived the left of the will to actually dig deeper, serving up predictable bromides for points but ultimately erasing the importance of exploring what was actually happening.

It was primarily only in the national liberation support milieu, and among groups usually labelled as Maoist, that the *Derg's* claims to socialism were met with skepticism. For example, the Liberation Sup-

ethiopia.

⁸⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁷⁸ Ernest Harsch, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, Pathfinder Press, New York 1978, p. 18; Pathfinder is the publishing arm of the Socialist Workers Party, at the time the largest Trotskyist group in the U.S.

port Movement, based in Oakland, California, and heavily involved in supporting struggles in the so-called Third World, anguished but in the end made a mostly correct diagnosis: “The Dergue is indeed a contradictory phenomenon. Socialist rhetoric cannot mask its many anti-socialist actions. We question how responsible revolutionaries can justify the incredible brutality with which the Dergue asserts its rule.”⁸⁷⁹

If the solidarity from international Maoist parties expressed to the actual Ethiopian revolution and to the EPRP could be faulted for anything, it was in the way it was suborned to the Maoist movement’s late-1970s internal ideological crisis. That crisis was over the fate of post-Mao China and its questionable international line; it was to end in the 1980s with the movement largely in disarray. That movement was also afflicted with the curse of a nearly impenetrably dogmatic written culture beneath the calibre necessary to confront the fresh ideological challenges the Ethiopian revolution offered up. Was solidarity being offered or was a self-serving point being made?

It’s not too late for Western leftists to educate themselves about what happened in Ethiopia in the 1970s; and it’s also not too late for those who believe that Marxism and Leninism remain relevant both as tools for understanding the ongoing global class struggle and as tools for effecting change. But the details of this story demand a recalibration of the far left’s values if the communist promise of a better, freer world expects to win new partisans.

The Next Generation

Toward the end of the period where it self-identified as Marxist-Leninist, the EPRP’s European office published an English-language journal in Rome called *The Ethiopian Marxist Review*. With articles on the proletarian party, modes of production in Ethiopia, self-determination in Africa, book reviews, and even an excerpt from Marx & Engels, the journal appeared in August 1980 and unfortunately proved to be a one-off. Remarkable for a clarity of language and absence of dogmatic

⁸⁷⁹ Liberation Support Movement Information Center, “Hurricane in the Horn,” *LSM News* 15, Winter 1978, p. 11.

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writing, the journal should easily have garnered the attention not only of global socialist cadre but of a European-American academic Marxist audience, had the gaze of that audience not been otherwise engaged in rationalizing the novelty of “socialism from above.”

The centerpiece of the journal is an article credited to F. Gitwen on “The Struggle for Democracy in Africa,” that confronts the claims made by supporters of authoritarian regimes like Mengistu’s about the nature and utility of democracy in an African revolutionary context. “Gitwen” is actually none other than EPRP co-founder Iyasou Alemayehu.

[T]he declared attempt to establish a “socialist” society is deemed incompatible with all notions of democracy, and the “need for the iron fist of the proletarian dictatorship” is invoked in order to justify the extensive repression which, as in Ethiopia, claims the proletariat as its main and favourite victim. Official socialism in Africa, whether it takes the lable “African” or “scientific” to define itself, is basically authoritarian and professedly anti-democratic.⁸⁸⁰

The author goes on to discuss the limitations of interpretations of bourgeois democracy in African countries, and to extensively cite Lenin’s views on the crucial relationship of socialism and democracy. He then writes,

The critics of the struggle for democracy in Africa sever Lenin and Marx from the above fundamental points and seek to legitimise their anti-democratic actions of criticism [of] bourgeois democracy. But a genuine criticism of bourgeois democracy cannot be viewed outside of a genuine struggle for socialism, i.e. a real effort to eliminate the limitations of bourgeois democracy establishing a fundamentally different type of democracy, proletarian democracy. A seizure of power or even a revolution which perpetuates the

⁸⁸⁰ F. Gitwen, “The Struggle for Democracy in Africa,” in EPRP, *Ethiopian Marxist Review*, No. 1, August 180, p. 82. “Gitwen’s” identity confirmed with the author in conversation with Iyasou Alemayehu, 2020.

separation of the masses from power and their dependence to the State cannot be considered socialist or will not, at least realize the transition to socialism.⁸⁸¹

As though anticipating Mengistu's claims cited above, Iyasou goes on to criticize leftists who consider the demand for democracy irrelevant due to underdevelopment "by asserting that though these acts may be considered undemocratic and paternalistic in Europe they are not so in Africa. It is a vicious argument which victimises the African masses—their economic level of development, which is itself linked to the existing state of oppression and exploitation, is invoked to deny them the right to demand broad democratic rights."⁸⁸²

Iyasou challenges the views of how socialist democracy unfolds according to post-war Soviet advocacy:

The problem is not solely the fact that the dictatorship being exercised is not that of the proletariat (be it in Ethiopia, Angola or Mozambique, for example) but that the conception of the proletarian dictatorship itself is wrong. The proletarian dictatorship, at least as conceived by Marx and Lenin, basically assumes the possession of power by the proletariat *itself*, its organization and self-administration in the concrete and the prevalence of broad democracy for the workers and broad masses.⁸⁸³

The author concludes with a call for the struggle to recommit itself to actual emancipation.

[T]he revolutionary forces struggle for democracy having in mind an objective that will assert the workers and masses as the rulers of society. For such forces, the question of the struggle is not "to transfer the bureaucratic-military machine from one hand to another" but to smash the whole

⁸⁸¹ F. Gitwen, *ibid.*, pp. 85–86.

⁸⁸² F. Gitwen, *ibid.*, p. 86.

⁸⁸³ F. Gitwen, *ibid.*, p. 89.

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state apparatus and set-up new, fundamentally different institutions which reflect and make possible the self-government of the masses and their rising to the level “of taking an *independent* part not only in voting and elections, *but also in the everyday administration of affairs*”. For, as Lenin added, “under socialism all will govern in turn and will soon become accustomed to no one governing”.⁸⁸⁴

It might be time to dig new wells to give new life to this popular struggle whose cause remains vital.

Time cannot be reversed: So many of the important figures in this book laid down their lives for what they believed. Like the Ho Chi Minh and Che Guevara they admired, they died before seeing the realization of their dreams. Berhane Meskel lost his life at the young age of 35; Haile Fida lost his at age 39. In ill health, the EPRP’s Zeru Kehishen left Ethiopia in 1979 for a life in exile in the Netherlands; he died in 2002 at the age of 60. Kiflu Tadesse is still alive and writing. Iyasou Alemayehu is still alive but blocked from returning home; he resides in exile in Europe with his companion and fellow revolutionary Ghenet Girma, and continues to serve in the leadership of today’s EPRP while pursuing his pseudonymous literary career. He recently marked the fiftieth anniversary of the airplane hijacking that changed his life—and Ethiopia—forever.

Before his death in Bolivia, Che Guevara left an inspiring message to his supporters; this was no doubt part of the legend that enamored him to so many young Ethiopian revolutionaries with his single-minded and selfless pursuit of revolutionary ideals.

Wherever death may surprise us, let it be welcome, provided that this, our battle cry, may have reached some receptive ear and another hand may be extended to wield our weapons and other men be ready to intone the funeral dirge with the staccato singing of the machine-guns and new battle

⁸⁸⁴ F. Gitwen, *ibid.*, p. 94. The citations from Lenin are from *State and Revolution*.

cries of war and victory.⁸⁸⁵

As stirring as his words remain, in the post-modern world it becomes increasingly hard to remember this conception of heroic, meaningful violence in the service of human liberation. One notes the spirit of selflessness while now questioning the utility of isolated acts of individual sacrifice. It's not, to this writer's mind, that Lenin and Marx's ideas about the intrinsically violent nature of the state and the necessity of using force to unseat it are outdated, but that the world is exhausted by unceasing conflict that makes promises few believe and delivers results everyone fears. No decent person is in a hurry for a new generation of dead children. And as if global politics aren't problematic enough, we are paralyzed with worry that environmental collapse might be sealing our destinies while the same old short-sighted forces of capitalist self-interest fail to rouse themselves to action.

The end of the twentieth century saw Africa wracked by violence; not the purposeful measured armed struggle for liberation envisioned by a previous generation, but in a kind of brutal, nihilistic post-ideological wave dominated by careerist warlords, ethnic and religious strife, child soldiers, and mass killings. The romantic 1960s vision of armed fighters at one with the people competes with the realities of this wave of violence in a new era of endless global war and terrorism seemingly for its own sake. Vast swathes of African territory have been dotted with American military bases purportedly aimed at counteracting terrorism, mostly of the Islamic fundamentalist variant. American drones controlled by keyboard warriors sitting at desks can bring fire from the skies anywhere within moments. In counterpoint, Chinese penetration of African economies is massive and widespread, and is now also joined with a Chinese military base in Ethiopia's Red Sea neighbor, Djibouti. The next war, likely the cruelest of all, is not hard to imagine.

Hama Tuma's 1995 poem, "The Old Is Dead" is a lament for this new reality.

⁸⁸⁵ Che Guevara, "Message to the Tricontinental," April 1967, published in *Venceremos*, p. 424.

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Comrades, the old word is dead
the selflessness it symbolized
profaned.
Comrades, the old ideals are gone, spent,
replaced by the white man's junk
prescribed by the IMF.
Comrades, the rebel days are not in sight
only the self seekers and safe players thrive.
Nowadays no one dies for a cause
but kills each cause for his appetite.
Comrades, the old word, the old world are
dead
the African wears his shame with pride.⁸⁸⁶

Current EPRP supporters note with some sadness the evolution of the popular imagination in this new world.

Other times, other realities. What was then, at the time of Emperor Haile Selassie, is lost on most of the youths of today. The Emperor has joined his ideological opposite, Che Guevara, in being an inoffensive icon, a photo on a tee shirt, popularized by the Rastas and their worship of him. The reality of his rule was very vicious even though, as we say in Ethiopia, the fresh corpse has made us forget the old one.⁸⁸⁷

Still, sixty-three percent of modern Ethiopia's population is under age 25.⁸⁸⁸ Ethiopian students might no longer be studying Marxism in the universities of the world, but these young people are engaged in the destiny of their country. They are avid users of social media, so much so that the current regime regularly silences the internet during moments

⁸⁸⁶ Hama Tuma, "The Old Is Dead," in *Eating an American and Other Poems*, Washington D.C., 1995, p. 24.

⁸⁸⁷ ESPIC, "The Truth About the EPRP," 2006, Washington, D.C. (PDF).

⁸⁸⁸ Statistic from Wikipedia: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Ethiopia#Age_structure

of political disturbance. Judging from this author's reception, they are hungry to understand the lessons left by "The Generation" despite the memories of tragedy passed down to them. Feudal land ownership might be a thing of the past, but the struggle for real democracy and a quest for an equitable and just solution to the country's ethnic divisions are as fresh as they were back in the day. The repeat of a moment of conjuncture and rupture as happened in 1974 is an absolute possibility. Imperialism continues its globe-spanning harvest of human misery.

Will Ethiopians be ready for a revolutionary moment should it come? Will the vastly reduced far left of the world be there in solidarity to join battle? Revolutionaries in imperialist countries will need to redouble their commitment to fighting the selfish and subversive machinations of their "own" countries abroad. Hopefully a worldwide far left will reawaken and stand shoulder to shoulder with the now much more developed proletariat of Ethiopia, and re-coalesce around a renewed vision of liberation and a commitment to pursue the radically egalitarian and cooperative global visions of the best Marxist actors and philosophers. It's not necessary to embrace every facet of Ho Chi Minh's and Che Guevara's political legacy to understand that they were more than just revolutionary leaders, they became near religious icons of inspiration, liberation and hope. Look long enough at pictures of any global struggle today, and eventually a Che flag or t-shirt will appear. That's not for nothing.

The Ethiopian revolution certainly reminds us of the human capacity for inflicting horror and cruelty on the least deserving. But it should also remind us of the selfless sacrifices made by a generation of people who looked at Ho and Che and reached out to grab the future, to make it better than the past. To them we owe a debt; we owe them the respect of giving their lives meaning, and ultimately, of trying, once again, to get the world right. There may be a new Tilahun, or Walleign, or Martha, waking this moment, or the next, to lead us to a new and better time.

And if someday, like so many revolutionaries before us, we die
for this human ideal that has become our reason for living,

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it will not be as martyrs or heroes but as simple soldiers in the daily and universal struggle of peasants, workers, students and young peoples. And when we die we shall neither be the first nor that last, neither the best nor the worst. We shall just be one of the labouring masses fighting for the total liberation of mankind.⁸⁸⁹

⁸⁸⁹ ESUNA, *Hand Book on Elementary Notes on Revolution and Organization*, 1972, p. 44

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