



This study on war and revolution in Ethiopia and Eritrea is the *magnum opus* of historian Gebru Tareke and presents a wide-ranging and detailed overview of the emergence of revolution, insurgency and war in Eritrea and Ethiopia over the past four decades. These are familiar themes, studied in many books and papers, but the merit of this book is its comprehensive character, its sustained focus on the military engagements resulting from the revolutionary turmoil in the Horn, its solid basis in new archival materials unearthed from the Ethiopian Ministries of National Defence and of Internal Affairs, and its bold but often controversial interpretations of Ethiopia's recent political history. The author has also augmented his research with many interviews held with eye-witnesses and protagonists.

The book (unlike, for instance, Teferra 1997 or Andargatchew 1993) is not primarily about the ideological and political history of the 1974 Ethiopian 'revolution', and in that sense the title is a bit misleading; rather, it is about revolutionary upheaval and politics *as* war in the Horn. The author has presented a fascinating and powerful history of the violent policies of the *Derg* (Mengistu) regime, of the armed insurgencies (the equally Marxist rebel fronts – Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)), and of the many battles and campaigns that blighted the region until 1991.

In this work, Gebru Tareke shows very good command of the source material, the relevant languages, and the secondary literature. In that respect, the book must be seen as a prime contribution to the history of the Horn and its conflicts. It is also valuable as a contribution to the comparative study of guerrilla warfare and state (re)formation. Compared to insurgencies and wars in, for example, China, Vietnam, Guinea-Bissau or Iran, the cases of Ethiopian and Eritrean rebel fronts contending with a 'revolutionary' Ethiopian regime were remarkable examples of 'innovative', or at least unique, warfare. At the same time, the book, in its (sometimes too detailed) accounts and its attempt at reconstructing the motives and rationales for the fighting, also gives ample food for thought on the social and cultural motives or correlates of armed conflict in the Horn: usually a combination of political-economic marginalisation; feelings of being insulted

Revolution as Warfare in the Horn of Africa

Jon Abbink

The Ethiopian Revolution. War in the Horn of Africa

by Gebru Tareke

Yale University Press, 2009, xx + 437 pp., ISBN 978-0-300-14163-4
Hb, US\$ 45.00

or humiliated; poverty; repression; dearth of opportunities, education and services; and a (fortunate) absence of day-to-day control of people's lives by the state, giving them some leeway to revolt.

The Horn of Africa has indeed been notoriously unstable, if not endemically violent, in the past century. At any point in time, some form of armed struggle was going on there – as is indeed the case right now – in Ethiopia or on its borders, in Eritrea and Somalia, or in southern Sudan. Even in Emperor Haile Selassie's *relatively* tranquil period of rule, there were peasant revolts, a coup attempt, student riots and local conflicts. In the post-*Derg* era (i.e. since 1991), there were dozens of 'ethnic' conflicts claiming thousands of lives, a two-year war with Eritrea, Ethiopian armed intervention in Somalia, and state campaigns against ethno-regional rebel fronts, such as the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF).

Gebru extensively treats the background and the acceleration of (civil) war in Ethiopia since 1974 in a series of rather self-contained chapters, highlighting the various players and major phases of armed confrontation: the development of the EPLF (Chapter 2) and of the TPLF (Chapter 3) and their combat with the *Derg* army, as well as the story of the rise and decline of the Ethiopian 'revolutionary army' (Chapters 4 and 5). Part Three of the book has five excellent case studies on decisive confrontations or battles: the Ogaden (1977-78, against the Somali invasion and a subsequent insurgency in the East in 1980), Naqfa ('Operation Red Star', 1981-82), Af Abet (1988), Shiré-Indasellasié (1989) and Massawa (1990). Little is said in this book of the confrontations with other insurgent

movements, like the OLF or the Afar movement (which were indeed of much less importance and had little positive effect on the peoples they claimed to fight for). Remarkable in this story of thirty years of war (1961-91) is the implacability and fanaticism of the warring parties, brooking no negotiation or compromise, and the readiness to continue the destruction of humans, property, armoury, etc. to the bitter end. The book gives some vivid examples (pp. 254-55, 296-97; cf. also p. 380, n. 34).

From the account, it is obvious that the national army was the central institution in Ethiopia in times of turmoil and the major locus of action. It is also abundantly clear that Ethiopia in the 1970s went through at least three 'revolutions': at the central state level in 1974 and in rural Tigray and Eritrea, galvanized in the case of the last two not only by (global) Marxism but also by the mobilisation of the masses (the 'broad masses') by aspiring local elites/students through violent agendas of change on an ethno-regional basis (or, as Gebru calls it, the 'revolution at the periphery'). That the specific Ethiopian-Eritrean social and cultural heritage was seen as a hindrance and as 'reactionary' was all the more ominous in this regard. The author gives an excellent analysis of the Marxist ideologies that all parties cherished and that kept them locked in widening cycles of mimetic violence and rivalry that could only end in the total demise of the adversary.

The process of the expansion and organizational change of the national army and of the rebel forces is meticulously reconstructed, based on archival documents and reports. Gebru remarks (p. 119) that the Somali invasion of 1977

especially provided the major impetus for the expansion and reform of the Ethiopian army, with growing assistance of the Soviets (and later also Cubans and East Germans). In chapter 5, describing the demise of the Ethiopian army, the author cogently argues that it went down not for lack of manpower and weaponry, but owing to: a) the contentious relationship between the army and the party (the only party allowed, the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE) led by Mengistu Haile-Mariam), constantly undercutting troop unity and effective command, and the frequent execution of top generals (cf. pp. 285-86); b) the weakening effect of government economic policies and political structures; and c) the serious internal weaknesses of the military (pp. 138f.), including incompetent leadership, rivalry, weak morale, abuse, misbehaviour and cruelty to civilians.

It was not thus primarily the strength and valour of its adversaries that led to the defeat of the Ethiopian army, although the former's (especially the TPLF's) persistence, organizational skill, commitment and inventive warfare did tilt the balance. It is also clear from the account that the *Derg* regime concentrated too much on the EPLF and neglected the danger posed by the emerging TPLF until it was too late (p. 88). Furthermore, the Ethiopian regime had lost its legitimacy and credit among the wider population, i.e. also outside Tigray and Eritrea, so much so that it could not continue in power (p. 175). Its flawed villagisation and resettlement schemes were deeply unpopular and contributed to its demise. The WPE was also seriously divided and corrupt. Gebru gives us a revealing picture of this, based on archival records of WPE Politbureau and committee meetings, including many reports by Mengistu himself.

The author has some harsh criticism of the undemocratic, centralist, and often ruthless behaviour of the Fronts' leaderships towards its members and the peasantry. On the other hand, he also often tends to praise their 'resolve', 'idealism', 'selflessness', 'fine fighting qualities', 'remarkable personalities', etc. This ambivalent attitude, notably in Chapter 3, is perhaps inevitable, but may cloud a proper view on the negative impact of the dogmatism, repression, and abuse that these revolutionaries often unleashed on the peoples they now rule, the roots of

which could already be discerned while they were still 'in the bush'. It was not only 'beneficial violence' that was used but destructive violence as well. Also here, the end justified the means. Opponents or those questioning the 'party line' were often executed, and many testimonies suggest that support and recruits for the TPLF-EPLF armies were often acquired by force (p. 90).

Of the questionable record of TPLF and, especially, of EPLF during the war, of which Gebru provides glimpses, much is revealed in a recent book, titled *Gehadi*, by a former TPLF insider, Asgede Gebre-Sellassie. Originally written in Tigrinya some years back, its Amharic translation has come out in 2009. The book is a scathing portrayal of the 'secret history' of the TPLF and EPLF, of their lack of democratic thinking or respect for others, their vicious internal politics, and the repression of dissent. The author also shows, or at least asserts, the lack of commitment of the post-1985 TPLF leadership to the Ethiopian national cause, as well as the movement's subservience to the EPLF before 1991. This disturbing book, while no doubt reflecting a strong personal bias, might have been taken into account in Gebru's study, or might hopefully be taken into account in a future edition.

Gebru's repeated praise and admiration for EPLF and notably TPLF leaders and fighters, with biographical excursions on their exploits, also tend to emphasize the heroism, valour, etc. of the Front members that he happened to interview (e.g. pp. 100-101, 102, 105, 332; p. 366, note 53). It is one thing to recognize the combat achievements of insurgents against an unjust and violent (*Derg*) government, but it is another thing to see the opponents as a kind of saviours, or even see a fundamental break between the politics of the *Derg* and those of the successor regimes, who abandoned Socialist economics but kept a strong Leninist political model and other ideological tenets (e.g. on 'nationalities') that fitted well within the Ethiopian authoritarian tradition. As Gebru repeatedly hints, all three regimes (*Derg*, TPLF and EPLF) are issue of the same revolutionary-socialist ferment. This bias, or rather ambivalence, in the book toward the 'historic role' of the Fronts (cf. pp. 318-19) cannot be resolved: both the fighting skills and commitment of the Fronts as well as the internal troubles and decay of the *Derg* army were important. But some of the praise will sound bitter to the victims or survivors, or even many of the idealistic

adherents of these Fronts both before and after the 1991 takeover. A more cautious and critical approach is called for, not least because many of the post-1991 problems were foreshadowed in the pre-1991 policies of the Fronts. To his credit, however, the author shows he is aware of these issues in his long concluding chapter.

The author could have been a bit more critical toward his sources. For instance, he cites liberally internal TPLF (and other) documents and testimonies, but these are – understandably – often little more than sanitized propaganda accounts. Memoirs of former key players outside the TPLF and EPLF are also to be read carefully (e.g., the unreliable book of Tesfaye Mekonnen, *Yidres leBaletariku*, 1992). In addition, some vital events and developments might need more discussion. For instance, in the battle of Naqfa in 1982, the role of the TPLF in helping the EPLF to stave off total defeat is perhaps not properly highlighted; after all, TPLF forces constituted more than 10% of the insurgent fighting force there (p. 229). Asgede (2009: 114-15) mentions that, in addition to the first two brigades of fighters, the TPLF sent another three (in total c. 4300 men and women) to assist the EPLF, and these forces arrived at a decisive moment. It was the contribution of these TPLF brigades in the EPLF counter-attack that did the trick. If that is the case, then this was most probably *the* turning point of the entire war. In the Battle of Af Abet in Eritrea, TPLF forces also played a crucial role (p. 258).

Other incidents could be cited. What about the (unmentioned) huge explosion of the army weapons/ammunition depot in Addis Ababa in 1991? The explosion, which occurred in the early morning of 28 May 1991, went on for some five hours, turning the dark morning sky blood-red. It cost the lives of scores of local people living nearby, and deprived the TPLF of huge amounts of military supplies. It is claimed by some, and confirmed by former army members, that the depot was probably ignited by EPLF troops that had entered Addis Ababa with the victorious TPLF army. What does this say about the relation between the EPLF and the TPLF and about their tactics? The case was never cleared up and no one was prosecuted. And what happened to the thousands of *Derg* army prisoners of war in Eritrea and northern Ethiopia after May 1991? Persistent rumours said that many died in the deserts of the Ethio-Sudanese borderland or were executed; many just disappeared. The allegations were never

investigated, because this would require democratic regimes with a rule-of-law tradition and independent judiciaries. Years later, I met many parents who could not get any news about the fate of their sons; making sustained enquiries about them was impossible. While the policies of the *Derg* were disastrous, those of the Fronts also had many questionable aspects and their record was never investigated or brought to courts of law. The legacy of war and destruction – by all parties – is thus still very much present under the surface.

Despite the above critical remarks, this book is a major, even indispensable, contribution to the modern historiography of war, state and society in the Horn. It is a great work of military history, presented in a very readable and engaging style, and an essential reference work based on pioneering archival research. Owing to its interpretive approach, it is bound to generate a lot of reactions. In the near future, many additional and contending voices will be heard on the subject, and on the book, both from protagonists, like former *Derg* army generals and other retired military personnel as well as from victims and survivors. These voices should be taken into account to refine the story. A few examples were mentioned by Gebru on p. xv,

and others have also come forth: ex-army commander Kassaye Ch'emedda (2007) has written his memoirs; former TPLF leader Aregawi Berhe has just published his analytical history of the TPLF (2009); Zenebe has written an amazing retrospect on the *Derg* (2007 and 2009); and Asgede's remarkable book (2009) has already been cited above. Also, Gebru needs to revisit his musings in his long and rather too optimistic conclusion, which goes far beyond the main subject matter of the book.

Needless to say, Gebru's absorbing study, to which a review essay like this cannot do justice, is a must-read for all scholars of Ethiopian-Eritrean history and military historians. It is a rich book – highly original and informative, the stuff of informed debate and critique, and a great impetus to the further understanding of this complex and tortured region. But it is not the last word. Many other works are bound to be written on the politico-military history of the *Derg* period, giving us new insights and perspectives. An example of such works based on archival sources is Fantahun Ayyele's PhD thesis in history, "The Ethiopian army 1974-1991: from victory to defeat", successfully defended in July 2009 at Addis Ababa University.

References

- Andargatchew Tiruneh, 1993, *The Ethiopian Revolution, 1974-1987: a Transformation from an Aristocratic to a Totalitarian Autocracy*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Aregawi Berhe, 2009, *A Political History of the Tigray People's Liberation Front 1975-1991. Revolt, Ideology and Mobilisation in Ethiopia*. Los Angeles: Tsehai Publishers.
- Zenebe Feleqe. 2007 and 2009. *Nebber*, 2 volumes. Addis Ababa: Illeni Printing Press (in Amharic).
- Fantahun Ayyele, 2009, *The Ethiopian Army: From Victory to Collapse, 1977-1991*, Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University, Department of History (unpublished PhD dissertation).
- Kassaye Ch'emedda, 2007, *Battle Field Days from East to North*, Addis Ababa, n.p. (in Amharic).
- Asgede Gebre-Sellassie, 2009 (orig. 2007), *Gehadi*, Meqele: Planography Press (in Amharic).
- Teferra Haile-Sellassie, 1997, *The Ethiopian Revolution 1974-1991. From a Monarchical Autocracy to a Military Oligarchy*, London: Kegan Paul International.

