



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **Revisiting resistance in Italian-occupied Ethiopia: the Patriots' Movement (1936-1941) and the redefinition of post-war Ethiopia**

Berhe, A.; Abbink, J.; Bruijn, M.E.de; Walraven, K.van

### **Citation**

Berhe, A. (2003). Revisiting resistance in Italian-occupied Ethiopia: the Patriots' Movement (1936-1941) and the redefinition of post-war Ethiopia. *Rethinking Resistance : Revolt And Violence In African History*, 88-113. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/12915>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License:

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/12915>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## Revisiting resistance in Italian-occupied Ethiopia: The Patriots' Movement (1936-1941) and the redefinition of post-war Ethiopia

Aregawi Berhe\*

*During the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, a significant indigenous resistance movement, the Patriots Movement, emerged. The nature and impact of this resistance is reconsidered by highlighting aspects of its role in 'redefining Ethiopia', its internal policy and its position in the global community after the start of the Second World War. The resistance movement was based on the ideals of restoring national independence and preserving cultural identity. There is also discussion of the reasons for the abrupt end to the resistance – mainly due to an external intervening factor (the British army) and the defeat of Italy – which prevented the challenge posed by the resistance movement and its incipient ideas of political reform being taken up seriously by the post-war imperial regime.*

### Introduction

In 1935, Ethiopia, until that time a traditional polity with a predominantly feudal political system, was invaded by the industrialized nation of Italy under the Fascist regime of Benito Mussolini. In defiance of the ensuing occupation, Ethiopians became involved in a multi-dimensional 'patriotic resistance' to drive the invaders out of their country, fighting against many odds, including indifference from the League of Nations and the West. It lasted for five years,

---

\* The author wishes to express his gratitude to Professor J. Abbink for his advice and comments on this chapter.

while the Ethiopian Emperor, Haile Selassie, was engaged in a largely fruitless diplomatic struggle from exile.

This chapter explains the resistance that was launched to counter the Italian occupation in Ethiopia, reconsiders the nature and impact of the resistance, and highlights aspects that ‘redefined Ethiopia’, its internal policy and its position in the global community following the beginning of the Second World War. The chapter has three sections. The first part is a condensed narrative of the occupation itself and the resistance it triggered. In the second part I look into the historical, religious and traditional values that drew numerous people together in resistance and discuss the actual resistance as it unfolded. Finally, I consider how the resistance came to an abrupt end because of external intervention, without which it would probably have continued for as long as the invaders could have clung on to the ancient nation. The challenge the movement posed to the post-war Ethiopian imperial state is also discussed.

## The Italian occupation of Ethiopia

The Italians under Benito Mussolini were determined to have Ethiopia as their colony and make it pay for the humiliating defeat it had inflicted upon them at the Battle of Adwa in 1896, when a modern Italian army under four generals was crushed in one morning. Some years before, on 25 January 1887 at Dogali, 12 kilometres from the port of Massawa on the way to Asmara, an Ethiopian force under the command of *Ras*<sup>1</sup> Alula Ingida, the governor of the region then known as Mereb-Mellash, had destroyed another invading Italian army. As the historian Alberto Sbacchi remarked, that was ‘the first major setback received by any European power at the hands of an African army’.<sup>2</sup> The 1896 Italian defeat at Adwa, however, sent a shock wave to Rome that lingered right up until the invasion of 1935. Italy had, during this time, been contemplating a comeback to maintain its colonial interests amid competition from France and Britain in the scramble for East Africa.

‘As early as 1925, Mussolini gave orders for military preparation with a view of waging war against Ethiopia, but not until 1934 did plans for the conquest of Ethiopia receive his full attention. The preparation involved huge sums of money, and quantities of trucks, tanks, artillery, airplanes, and

---

<sup>1</sup> Traditional Ethiopian titles denote military as well as civilian administration rankings. A *ras* is a chief of a region, under the emperor, and the head of a regional army.

<sup>2</sup> A. Sbacchi, *Ethiopia Under Mussolini: Fascism and the Colonial Experience* (London, 1985), 4.

stockpiling of poison gas, to ensure Italy's military superiority.<sup>3</sup> In fact, 'De Bono's two visits to Eritrea in 1932 were more of military reconnaissance than a simple tour of inspection by the Minister for the Colonies'.<sup>4</sup> The Wälwäl incident of 5 December 1934, when Italian and Ethiopian forces clashed inside Ethiopian territory over the line of the frontier was not the actual cause of the Italian invasion. Mussolini's fervour for a major onslaught on Ethiopia to build a greater empire became obvious 'when he proclaimed that he was ready to declare war on Great Britain and France rather than give up the conquest of Ethiopia'.<sup>5</sup> Content with their victory at Adwa, the Ethiopians now had to face one of the most serious offensives in their history.

The springboard for the invasion was the land along the Red Sea coast that the Italians colonized 45 years before the 1936 invasion and which they had named Eritrea on 1 January 1890. Within two years, the final preparation for the conquest of Ethiopia was completed under the trusteeship of Marshal Emilio De Bono, the Commissioner of Colonies, who was sent to lead the invasion as Commander-in-Chief of the Northern Front, with nine divisions of 250,000 white combatants and 150,000 Africans from Libya, Italian Somaliland and Eritrea, collectively called *askaris*. Supported by 300 aircraft under his direct command, he had to advance from Asmara southwards into the hinterland of Ethiopia. On the southern front, one division with 100 aircraft, under Marshal Rodolfo Graziani, was deployed to head northwards. The plan was to converge on Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia, within the shortest possible time, so that pressure from the League of Nations, of which Ethiopia had been a member since 1923, for a negotiated settlement could be avoided.

The Ethiopian army, on the other hand, was estimated to have fewer than 300,000 men, mobilized by regional *rases* or princes whose horizontal relationship with each other was undefined and in many cases competitive, but who usually stood united when foreign enemies threatened to invade. Emperor Haile Selassie, Commander-in-Chief of the national army, experienced a lack of modern means of communication that thwarted his establishing a centralized command to coordinate the war of defence in the mountainous regions. Tactically, this was an outstanding advantage for the invaders who were to coordinate and concentrate their forces as the situation demanded. There was also the problem of armaments. 'The Ethiopian army was equipped with 200 pieces of light artillery, 1000 machine guns and rifles with 150 rounds per

<sup>3</sup> Sbacchi, *Ethiopia Under Mussolini*, 7-8.

<sup>4</sup> A. Mockler, *Haile Selassie's War* (Oxford, 1984), 41.

<sup>5</sup> R. Aron, *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations* (London, 1966), 67.

person.’<sup>6</sup> Logistics were self-supplied except for small ammunition and hand grenades that were provided only sporadically. With the few exceptions of those who had travelled abroad, Ethiopians had not even seen armoured vehicles, tanks or bomber aircraft before. What brought them together to confront the mighty enemy was a strong self-image of national pride and patriotism, a love of freedom *vis-à-vis* foreigners, and specific ideals of human dignity they had nurtured through a long history of nationhood. The determination to remain independent and defend their specific cultural and religious values was manifested in their prayers, folk music and war songs, carried through the war and the resistance that followed.

Early in October 1935 the Italians made a rapid advance towards Adwa, which was 30 kilometres from the colonial frontier that divided Eritrea and Tigray, the northern region of Ethiopia. The Ethiopian forces at Adwa were not only outnumbered but also could not withstand the long-range shelling of the howitzers, the deadly machine guns on the tanks and the bombs raining down from the air. The weapons they possessed were no match for modern Italian armaments. Before any serious engagement, they were ordered to withdraw in order to save their forces for a well-planned defensive manoeuvre deep in the country. On 6 October 1935, Adwa fell into Italian hands. Its seizure gave the invaders some psychological relief from the humiliating defeat they had suffered at Dogali and Adwa in 1887 and 1896 respectively, yet for those at the front, the war was just beginning and De Bono decided to advance with caution.

A month later, on 8 November 1935, Mekele, the capital of the province of Tigray, came under the control of the Italians. Mussolini, who was infuriated by the slow pace of the campaign, replaced De Bono with Marshal Pietro Badoglio, who was Chief of Staff of the Italian army. Following instructions from Rome, Badoglio resorted to harsh military tactics to score a quick victory, including the dropping from the air of mustard-gas bombs over Ethiopian troops and civilian areas, even though mustard gas had been banned in 1925 by the Geneva Gas Protocol, to which Ethiopia and Italy were signatories. Thousands perished.

Despite fire and air superiority and the use of mustard gas, the Ethiopian rebels and resistance fighters, who came to be known as ‘Patriots’ (locally known as *Arbegnoch*), began to regroup in their respective districts under their local leaders to confront the enemy. A series of major battles was waged over a period of three months: 15 December 1935 at Shiré and Enda-Baguna; 20-24 January 1936 at Worsege-Tembien; 27-29 February at Workamba and Abiadi-Tembien; 1-3 March at Selekhlekha; and in the second week of March at Emba Aradom and all the way to Alage. The battles were intense and the

---

<sup>6</sup> F.P. Chambers, *The Age of Conflict: The Western World – 1914 to the Present* (New York, 1962), 409.

determination of the Ethiopians was tested against all odds. In his autobiography the Emperor later wrote: 'Although the Italians were superior to us in modern arms, our soldiers had the advantage in terms of courage. While our soldiers, who had won the battles in the Tambien and Shiré regions, were fighting with obsolete rifles like the Fusil Gras, they yet managed to capture more than 300 machine-guns and many cannons and tanks.'<sup>7</sup> (Marshal Badoglio, on the other hand, estimated the number of Italian casualties in the Shire region alone as follows: 'Our losses, including dead and wounded, were: 63 officers, 894 Italians, 12 Eritreans. The losses of the enemy as ascertained on the field were about 4,000; to these must be added those inflicted by aircraft during the pursuit, the total of which was estimated at over 3,000.'<sup>8</sup>) This battlefield in the district of Shiré was just one of the several fronts in Tigray and was lead by *Ras Imru*, Governor of Gojjam Province, who later retreated to Gore in southwest Ethiopia. Virtually the whole of Tigray became a battleground for six consecutive months.

Finally, on 31 March 1936 at Maichew and Lake Ashangé, the Emperor's main force put up tenacious resistance but at the end of the day the Ethiopians were forced to retreat further south towards Dessie, the provincial capital of Wollo. Dessie fell into the hands of the Italians on 4 April 1936 after three days of long and bloody fighting. Unable to regroup and launch a counter-offensive, the Emperor and his remaining forces headed for Addis Ababa. The Battle of Maichew where the Emperor had assembled his best forces, eventually turned out to be the end of the conventional confrontation and the beginning of the Patriots' resistance movement, which in fact seemed to have already started behind enemy lines.

On the southern and southeastern fronts, however, the fighting remained intense with the forces of *Ras Desta*, *Dejazmach*<sup>9</sup> Nesibu and *Dejazmach* Mekonnen, the governors of Sidamo, Harar and Illubabor regions respectively, deterring the northward movement of Marshal Graziani, who had vowed to deliver Ethiopia to Mussolini 'with the Ethiopians or without them'.<sup>10</sup> Graziani's wild statement was a reflection of Italy's intended policy of resettling its overcrowded farmers on the fertile lands of Ethiopia. Not content with showering the Ethiopians with mustard gas, Graziani also resorted to the massacre of non-combatant villagers, for example, during battles in the Ogaden in 1936. At this time, about 900 Eritrean *askaris*, appalled by such Italian war

<sup>7</sup> Haile Selassie I, *The Autobiography of Emperor Haile Selassie I: My Life and Ethiopia's Progress 1892-1937*, translated and annotated by E. Ullendorff, (Oxford, 1976), 263.

<sup>8</sup> P. Badoglio, *The War in Abyssinia* (London, 1937), 119.

<sup>9</sup> A *dejazmach* is a duke or commander of the front.

<sup>10</sup> A. Del Boca, *The Ethiopian War 1935-1941* (Chicago, 1969), 113.

tactics, deserted to the Ethiopian side, thus testing the loyalty of the other colonial soldiers. Previously, in mid-December 1935, 400 Eritreans had already joined *Ras Imru's* forces on the Shiré front.<sup>11</sup> These desertions revealed the sympathy that many Eritreans felt for the Ethiopian and anti-colonial cause.

While Graziani was contained on the southeastern front, Emperor Haile Selassie was unable to check Badoglio who was advancing from the north. The Emperor retreated from Dessie and entered Addis Ababa on the morning of 30 April 1936, only to leave again two days later on his way into exile. On 5 May 1936 Addis Ababa fell into the hands of the invaders without any resistance but amid chaos and looting triggered by the Emperor's departure.

The day the Emperor arrived in his capital, he hastily convened an assembly of his ministers and nobles. Two important agreements were immediately reached: (a) the Emperor had to go abroad to present Ethiopia's case to the League of Nations; and (b) the seat of government had to move to Gore, southwest of Addis Ababa, and *Bitweded*<sup>12</sup> Wolde-Tsadik Goshu should act as regent. While the first decision called for a diplomatic and political struggle, the second in effect meant the launch of a resistance movement against the Italian conquest, and was aimed at regaining independence. Many of the younger Patriots, aware of the ensuing authority gap caused by the Emperor's absence, did not approve of his departure into exile. 'Even the young Crown Prince had been suggesting to his own followers – to *Dejazmach* Fikremariam and *Dejazmach* Gurassu – that he should abandon his father and go with them as *shifta* to the hills'.<sup>13</sup> But as the decision of the Emperor could not be contested, the resistance or *shiftinnet* ('banditry') had to commence without him.

## Resistance

### *Historical background to Ethiopian nationhood*

Although strictly speaking beyond the scope of this chapter, a brief sketch of important moments in Ethiopia's history is provided here in order to better grasp the essence of the resistance, as it was nurtured by strong notions of nationhood and cultural identity among large sectors of the population.

The recorded history of Ethiopia as a state dates from the third century when it was known as the Kingdom of Aksum. Around 340 AD the Aksumite kings adopted Orthodox Christianity, which quickly became the religion of the

---

<sup>11</sup> Nega Tegegn, *Ye'Ethiopiawiyān Ye'Rejim Zemenat Tiglena Zemenawi Serawit Ameseraret 1855-1974* (Toronto, 2001), 73.

<sup>12</sup> A *bitweded* is a 'beloved', a trustee of the emperor.

<sup>13</sup> Mockler, *Haile Selassie's War*, 135.

inhabitants and provided the symbolism and substance of the royal ideology. They also developed literary works, commerce through the ports of Adulis and Zeila, and the minting of coins. The empire gradually expanded over the Ethiopian highlands.

The expansion of Islam after the seventh century led to a loss of international trade routes and revenue for Aksum and a decline in its regional power. In the tenth century, a revolt by Queen Yodit of the Agew people further to the south led to the demise of the Aksum state. The kingship was reconstituted by the Christian Zagwe dynasty located in the Agew country (in the tenth to thirteenth centuries). In the thirteenth century, the Ethiopian state, now located further to the south, was revived on the basis of a restyled Aksumite royal ideology. Not long afterwards however, the expansion of Islam from the north (from the Ottoman Empire) and the assault of Imam Ahmed ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi in 1527-1543 dealt another devastating blow to the Ethiopian Christian empire, its population, resources, religious culture and architecture. After Ahmed's defeat in 1543 it recovered only slowly. Then the Oromo migrations from the south brought another challenge by forcing a periodic shift of the political centre and a transformation of central Ethiopia's civilization. The gradual loss of dynamism of the centralized state in turn gave rise to the emergence of local kings and princes who were often entangled in violent rivalry for supremacy (1760-1855).

In 1855 the powerful Emperor Tewodros II (who reigned from 1855-1868) introduced the vision of a unified and modern Ethiopia. He managed to set up some semblance of a central state and collected royal revenues from the Amhara and Tigray regions. While challenging the encroachment of the Egyptians in the coastal area, Tewodros at the same time came into conflict with the British when he took hostage and locked up a number of European missionaries. The British sent an expeditionary force in 1868 and besieged his mountain fortress of Maqdala, where Tewodros, encircled by the British and with his offers of negotiation refused, chose to take his own life on 10 April 1868 rather than surrender to the invader. After a brief interlude he was succeeded by Emperor Yohannes (who reigned from 1872-1889) who had to fight against the Egyptians and later the Italians in the north. In the late 1880s he fought the invading Sudanese Mahdists in western Ethiopia, where he finally died at the Battle of Metemma in 1889. His successor, Emperor Menilik (who reigned from 1889-1913), was a strong, modernizing leader who defeated the Italians at Adwa in 1896. To challenge the unbridled ambition of the foreign invaders, he was fully engaged in competition with France, Italy and Great Britain to expand territorial influence in the Horn of Africa, incorporating a large number of previously autonomous regions into the empire. The last of the emperors, Haile



Selassie (who reigned from 1930-1974) also had to fight invasion. He saw defeat (in 1936) and success (in 1941) while fighting Italian invaders.

These last four emperors maintained a similar vision of creating a unified modern Ethiopia, and attempted to impose new ideas of loyalty and national identity on a dispersed and diverse population. The effects of this long history of struggle against a series of invaders created a sense of identity and pride associated with ancient historical referents based on political glory and religion, not only among the elite but also among the common people.

#### *The resistance begins*

By the time the Italian army had Addis Ababa under its control and Mussolini had declared Ethiopia part of the Italian Empire on 9 May 1936, only a section of the northern part of the country was firmly under their control. Sbacchi<sup>14</sup> observed that: 'Five months after the defeat of Emperor Haile Selassie, Badoglio and Graziani controlled only one third of the country'. After the Battle of Maichew, resistance commenced more or less immediately. Many groups from the defeated army went into the bush and started resistance actions. Throughout the occupation period these Patriots remained active and made life difficult for the Italians, especially in rural northern, eastern and central Ethiopia. The country was thus never effectively occupied or colonized. For our purposes in this chapter it is also important to realize that during the struggle, which began as a 'defense of the motherland', new conceptions of politics and governance for Ethiopia emerged with and during the ongoing struggle.

Although Mussolini exerted repeated pressure on his marshals on the frontlines to demonstrate a swift and profound victory over Ethiopia so that his rivals (Britain and France) would recognize Italy's might, the progress made by his modern army remained slow as a result of the resistance it encountered. In the years that followed, the Italians were challenged in many a gorge, hill, mountain and village by units of Ethiopian Patriots.

For many Ethiopians, the occupation of their land and the subsequent flight of their Emperor into exile meant the loss of their dignity and identity as a nation. It also meant the threat to or destruction of their traditional values and institutions, and more importantly the disruption of their history of which they were proud. The common motto at the time became '*Tenes! atenesam woy, Hager sewrer zim telaleh woy*' ('Rise up! Oh rise up, you cannot sit there when the country is invaded'). In connection with this motto, Haddis Alemayehu, in his book of personal recollections entitled *Tezeta*, gives a list of poems, poetic

---

<sup>14</sup> Sbacchi, *Ethiopia Under Mussolini*, 34.

calls and war songs, like *Bälew attilim woy! Tekur anbesa aydellehim woy* (Get him, aren't you a black lion?).<sup>15</sup>

During the 1935-1936 war, behind the lines declared 'liberated' by the Italians, hundreds of Patriots emerged in their respective localities to wage a war of resistance in defiance of the occupation. While conventional battles were raging in central and southeastern Ethiopia, Tigray, the first province to be occupied in northern Ethiopia, became the first battleground for the Patriots. They operated in small groups, not far from their respective localities. *Dejazmach* Gebrehiwet Mesheha, *Dejazmach* Abbai Kahsay, *Dejazmach* Tesfay Medebai, *Fitawrari*<sup>16</sup> Tessema Tesfay, *Dejazmach* Gizaw, *Dejazmach* Taffere, *Agafari*<sup>17</sup> Birru, Kassa Sibhat, *Kegnazmach*<sup>18</sup> Aberra Adale and on the women's side *Woizero*<sup>19</sup> Kebedech Seyoum and *Woizero* Desta Gebre-Mikael were some of the prominent resistance leaders operating independently from Adwa in the north of Tigray to Maichew in the south of the province. They were engaged in activities such as the ambushing of enemy troops to acquire arms and other war materials, snowballing huge rocks off mountains and cliffs when enemy convoys passed, disrupting the enemy's communication systems by kidnapping their messengers and later cutting telephone lines, setting fire to anything under enemy control such as offices and fuel or ammunition depots by firing from long range, and harassing and killing enemy collaborators.

As the activities of the Patriots in Tigray escalated, the Italians began deploying more detachments, depleting their main force pushing southwards. The Patriots, now referred to as *shifta* by the Italians, were liable to be hunted down. The word *shifta* can be translated as 'bandit' or 'outlaw', but in the traditional Ethiopian context the concept of *shifta* was much broader than what the Italians wanted it to mean. To be a *shifta* meant to rebel against someone in authority or against an institution that had failed to render justice. To become a *shifta* was also generally accepted as a means of bringing grievances to the attention of the people in order to gain sympathy when higher authorities had failed to deliver justice or rights customarily due. Usually a *shifta* emerged from the noble classes and had some form of wider, critical vision on the social order that enabled him/her to express, in words or in action, real or perceived injustices and responses to the situation. The commitment to deliver justice that was initially denied is embedded in the concept of *shifta*, although a *shifta* may him/herself not necessarily be free from wrongdoing. Thus *shiftinnet* (being a

<sup>15</sup> Haddis Alemayehu, *Tizita* (Addis Ababa, 1985), 151 & 163.

<sup>16</sup> A *fitawrari* is a commander of the advance guard.

<sup>17</sup> An *agafari* is a master of ceremonies at the royal court.

<sup>18</sup> A *kegnazmach* is a commander of the right wing.

<sup>19</sup> A *woizero* is the title for a woman; a lady.

*shifta*) in its diverse forms had an important social function and was one form of 'conflict resolution'.<sup>20</sup>

In Ethiopia, visionary and assertive individuals who started as *shifta* had risen to the level of kingship, thus legitimizing the concept of *shifta* itself. Two late nineteenth-century *shiftas*, Kassa Hailu of Gondar and Kahsai Mircha of Tigray, had passed through this political evolution to become Emperors Tewodros and Yohannes in succession. Thus 'the *shiftas* formed the military elite and became the core of the resistance, using their military skills against the Italians'.<sup>21</sup> A *shifta*, however, whose acts surpassed the socially acceptable norms would be called *t'era-shifta* and would be regarded as a highwayman or a malefactor and be denied the affection of the people. The Italians understandably preferred to label the Patriots *t'era-shiftas* of the criminal type. Nevertheless, to be described as a *shifta*, especially in the event of Italian occupation, was an honour for an Ethiopian and this was how resistance started and spread. A commonly sung lyrical poem in the region at that time went:

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

In a lost country, you cannot stay a day,  
Through the fence, throw me the gun,  
I should go to Merebe, oh my Merebe!<sup>22</sup>

There were many such popular songs, which were in effect traditional calls for resistance *before* the official call came. Officially, though, on 9 December 1935, the Ethiopian Minister of War, Ras Mulugeta Yigezu, issued an order to all the chiefs of northern Ethiopia to carry on with 'patriotic resistance against the Italians for taking away the independence of Ethiopia'.<sup>23</sup>

While a guerrilla war, which had basically been the tactics of the *shifta*, was underway in the north in 1936 where the enemy had assumed full control, conventional battles were still raging in the centre, particularly around Addis

<sup>20</sup> T. Fernyhough, 'Social Mobility and Dissident Elites in Northern Ethiopia: The Role of Banditry, 1900-1969', in 'Proceedings of the Symposium on Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa', April 22-24, African Studies Program, University of Illinois (unpublished, 1982), 1.

<sup>21</sup> A. Sbacchi, *Legacy of Bitterness: Ethiopia and Fascist Italy, 1935-1941* (Lawrenceville, N.J., 1997), 182.

<sup>22</sup> The Merebe is a long river gorge that gave shelter to *shiftas* and from where they could launch attacks on the enemy.

<sup>23</sup> Sbacchi, *Legacy of Bitterness*, 165.

Ababa and to the south. After the defeat of the Emperor's troops at Maichew and the fall of Addis Ababa to the Italians on 5 May 1936, the *rases*, *dejazmaches* and all other notables withdrew to their respective areas but were within close range of Addis Ababa. They were based in familiar and strategic villages to recover from the exhaustion of eight months of war, and to reorganize their forces for the next phase of the patriotic fight. These villages were logistically well situated, in that the leaders were able to follow events in the capital that might cause them to launch attacks. *Ras* Abebe Aregay was in Ankober, *Dejazmach* Balcha Safo in Gurage land, *Dejazmach* Zewdu Asfaw in Mullo, *Blatta*<sup>24</sup> Takele Wolde-Hawariat in Limmu, the *Ras* Kassa brothers (Abera, Asfaw-Wosen and Wond-Wosen) in Selale, and Haile Mariam Mamo was engaged in hit-and-run tactics around the city. With more than 10,000 troops, Abera, the son of *Ras* Kassa (who had accompanied the Emperor into exile) had been entrusted by the Emperor to coordinate the resistance in that region, which he was doing his best to accomplish. On 21 June 1936, for instance, he held a meeting of some Patriotic leaders, including the Patriarch of Wollo, *Abune*<sup>25</sup> Petros, at Debre Libanos, the renowned monastery dating from 1312 and located some 70 kilometres north of Addis Ababa. They made a plan to storm enemy-occupied areas in the capital but a lack of effective means of transportation and radio communication prevented a coordinated assault from taking place. Sporadic attacks by the different groups continued, however, to dominate the battle scene around Addis Ababa.

Goré, in southeastern Ethiopia, the seat of the displaced government run by the elder regent, *Bitweded* Wolde-Tsadiq Goshu, was far from within easy reach and never became effective in providing nationwide leadership to the resistance movement. The *rases* and governors had to do without the Emperor who was considered both the legitimate leader and an able commander. Indeed for many, the unexpected departure of the authoritative Emperor into exile had created a gap nobody seemed able to fill. The few *rases*, like Imru in Wollega and Desta in Sidamo, who had made the long retreat from the defeat in the north to the south near Goré, could neither realize effective mobility nor acquire the resources to keep their troops intact. But from a distance of hundreds of kilometres, their holding out and acts of defiance helped to inspire others to resist. Thus, they were capable of continuously 'distracting the Italians' mind and attention'.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> A *blatta* is the chief of staff, and an executive at the court.

<sup>25</sup> The *Abun* is the head of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

<sup>26</sup> Salome Gabre-Egziabher, 'The Ethiopian Patriots 1936-1941', *Ethiopian Observer*, 12, 2 (1969), 70.

Early on, as information about the coordinated attack on Addis Ababa reached the Italians, they encircled the city with barbed wire and 38 cement forts. People and traffic could come into the city only through ten gates.<sup>27</sup> This was indicative of the need for precautions against resistance activity. In general, as conventional warfare had proved ineffective in the face of the modern Italian conventional army, the need to resist the enemy in another form emerged.

#### *The spread of resistance*

The prospect of conventional war gradually faded but the spirit of resistance persisted. A different attitude of defiance and ways of attacking began to surface from many quarters. Virtually the entire membership of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Ethiopian Women's Volunteer Service Association (EWVSA) and the Black Lion Organization, as well as many other small groups of individuals, appeared in the forefront of the resistance. Their activities ranged from direct assaults on top Italian leaders to providing all-round underground support to the Patriots in the villages and mountains.

The Orthodox Church, which was historically an integral part of the Ethiopian state, began to play a pivotal role in broadening the dimensions of the resistance. The Church took it as an everyday obligation, inside and outside the church, to renounce the incursion of Italian invaders in a free country with a sovereign state. Passages from the Bible were frequently cited to invoke national sentiment and loyalty. The verse 'Ethiopia shall stretch out her hands unto God'<sup>28</sup> was recited in daily prayers. It was interpreted to mean that Ethiopia deserved all the rights of a free nation as recognized by the Almighty, and the Christian world should stand by its side. Guided by such a deep-rooted belief, *Abune Petros*, the Bishop of Wollo, marched through the streets of Addis Ababa denouncing the Italian occupation and calling on the people to keep fighting for independence. Many people came out of their houses to support him. However he was soon apprehended and on 30 July 1936 executed by firing squad in a public square, where his statue now stands.

The killing of a bishop was unheard of in Ethiopia and shocked the nation, arousing the indignation of the people, especially the clergy. Defiance of Italian rule was mounting in different forms but such reactions did not stop the Italians who proceeded to execute monks, priests and deacons in many monasteries and churches, expecting submission. 'On 21 May 1937, General P. Maletti had executed in the monastery of Debre Libanos alone 297 monks'.<sup>29</sup> Five days later, more priests and deacons were massacred in the nearby church of Debre

---

<sup>27</sup> Sbacchi, *Legacy of Bitterness*, 170.

<sup>28</sup> Psalms 68: 31.

<sup>29</sup> Sbacchi, *Ethiopia Under Mussolini*, 195.



Kebedech Seyoum, a female Patriot, c. 1935  
Source: Nega Tegegn, *Ye'Ethiopiawiyān*

Birhan, other executions and repression followed elsewhere. Yet the numerous monasteries and churches of Ethiopia continued to be centres of resistance and propaganda and to offer sanctuary to the Patriots.

The participation of women in the resistance was crucial. It is difficult to estimate their real military contribution but their supplementary support activities, spying and sabotage actions in some instances were decisive. Historically, women had been active participants in previous wars defending the country. Not long before, Empress Taytu and her husband Emperor Menilik had marched to the battlefield in Adwa in 1896 and played an important role in bringing about the defeat of the Italians. Chris Prouty reports that Taytu had organized thousands of women, including Zewditu, her step daughter and later empress (1916-1928), and Azalech, her cousin, and strengthened the defence lines by supplying water and taking care of the wounded.<sup>30</sup> She was also a military tactician whose participation had helped to bring about the defeat of the Italians at the Battle of Mekele a month before the Battle of Adwa.<sup>31</sup> Ethiopian women had, thus, a reputation to uphold in defending the national cause.<sup>32</sup>

*Woizero* Shawaragad Gadle had turned the EWVSA, which was under the patronage of Princess Tenagne-Work, daughter of the Emperor, into a clandestine movement of resistance. The women in this association were involved in scores of activities, ranging from supplying bandages, clothes and ammunition bought or stolen from Italian troops to the Patriots in the field, to giving shelter and forging pass papers for the active Patriots to travel inside enemy-controlled territory. Some of the women gathered military intelligence and a few even planned military operations. It was Shawaragad Gadle 'who laid the groundwork for the storming of the Italian garrison at Addis Alem'.<sup>33</sup> It was during this time that the term *Yewist Arbegna* (clandestine Patriot) was coined.

In the countryside not only did women prepare *quanta* (dried meat), *qollo* (roasted cereals), *besso* (instant cereal powder) and various foodstuffs that may be compared to 'dry rations' in modern military jargon but also sharpened swords and shuttled between the zones of operation and their houses. According to G. Tafere's dramatized description, they also 'sent down from various slopes avalanches of stones, not heeding the shower of bombs that were coming down from the air, and women like *Woizero* Fantaye actually fought on the

<sup>30</sup> C. Prouty, *Empress Taytu and Menilek II: Ethiopia 1883-1910* (Trenton, N.J., 1986), 156-57.

<sup>31</sup> Nega Tegegn, *Ye'Ethiopiawiyen*, 35-36.

<sup>32</sup> For a more detailed account, see Minale Adugna, *Women and Warfare in Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa, 2001).

<sup>33</sup> Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855-1974* (London, 1991), 72; Sbacchi, *Legacy of Bitterness*, 180.

battlefields'.<sup>34</sup> In her documentary study, Salome Gebre-Egziabher<sup>35</sup> provides a list of 64 women patriots in the resistance movement and also gave the names of prominent Patriots from every region, including hundreds from Eritrea.

It was customary for married couples and young boys to join the resistance army and often find themselves far away from their homes for years. 'When *Dejazmach* Habtemariam was too sick to lead the battles in Ogaden in April 1936, his wife, equally a Patriot, took over commanding his troops'.<sup>36</sup> 'Woizero Wagaye and her husband *Lij*<sup>37</sup> Bitew, the secretary of *Ras* Imru, have been together all the way from the northern front of Shire to the southern front in Wollega and many other married couples too were participating continuously in the patriotic resistance'.<sup>38</sup> John Spencer adds to the list of prominent women freedom fighters, 'Kebedech Seyoum, Qelemework Tilahun, Sliva Reyed Gadle, Laqetch Demissew, Qonjit Abinet, Likelesh Beyene and Abebech Cherkos'.<sup>39</sup> Gessesew Ayele joined the resistance force at the age of 14 and fought on the southern front.

In Addis Ababa, a group called the Black Lion Organization was formed, composed of young intellectuals from various schools and colleges including the recently established Holetta Military College. Some of its prominent leaders included Dr Alemwork Beyene, a veterinary surgeon, Yilma Deressa, a graduate of the London School of Economics, Belay Haile-Ab and Kifle Nesibu, both Holetta graduates, and Fekade-Selassie Hiruy and the Workeneh brothers, three of them British-educated. Their aim was much broader than any other group in the resistance, their organization had a constitution and they were poised to undertake urban and rural guerrilla warfare. Their constitution reflected their political motivation and commitment, and their programme also referred to the period that would follow a successful resistance.

According to Taddasa, 'among the most striking features of the constitution [of the Black Lion Organization] were: the affirmation of the supremacy of political over military command, the provision for the human treatment of prisoners and the non-molestation of the peasantry, the prohibition of exile, and the injunction of suicide rather than capture by the enemy'.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Tafere in Salome, 'The Ethiopian Patriots', 78.

<sup>35</sup> Salome, 'The Ethiopian Patriots', *ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Mockler, Haile Selassie's War, 128.

<sup>37</sup> A *lij* is a young nobleman.

<sup>38</sup> Haddis Alemayehu, *Tizita*, 180.

<sup>39</sup> J.H. Spencer, *Ethiopia at Bay: A Personal Account of the Haile Selassie Years* (Algonac, MI, 1987), 82.

<sup>40</sup> Taddasa, cited in Bahru Zewde, 'The Ethiopian Intelligentsia and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-1941', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 26, 2 (1993), 281. The reference to the peasantry probably referred to an attitude of clemency to be



Detachments of this group engaged the enemy in and outside the city in various forms. One of their most spectacular actions was the burning of three planes in the night of 26 June 1936 in Bonaya, Neqemte, when twelve out of the thirteen Italian officials present were also killed, including the Italian Deputy Viceroy to Ethiopia, Air Marshall Magliocco. The only survivor was Father M. Borello whose role was to guide and give a blessing to the short-lived Italian expedition in the southwest, undertaken to exploit Oromo discontent towards the Amhara-dominated Ethiopian state and pave the way for expansion through *Dejazmach* Habte-Mariam of Neqemte, who had shown signs of collaboration some days earlier. This indicates that by no means all Ethiopians in all regions unequivocally supported the Patriots' resistance. Many were even ignorant of such a movement in central Ethiopia. While negotiations in Neqemte were underway, 'the daring assault on the Italian high ranking officials was performed by four members of the Black Lion Organisation, namely Colonel Belay Haile-Ab, Major Matias Gemeda, Captain Yosef Nesibu and Captain Benyam Nesibu, who returned safely to their unit'.<sup>41</sup> This operation infuriated Graziani and led him to order a blanket bombardment of Neqemte and its environs. History books refer to it as the Neqemte Massacre, a massacre in which hundreds of people of all ages were killed and wounded. Thus, what initially seemed to be a successful expedition for the Italians in an area thought to be sympathetic to Italian rule ended in disaster.

However, the impact of the bombardment and the negative attitude of the people in the region forced most of the Patriots to abandon the area in search of a more favourable one, while the older Patriots began retiring to remote places. *Ras* Desta Damtew, the son-in-law of Emperor Haile Selassie and Commander of the Southern Patriots, withdrew to Arbagoma but was encircled by three columns of Italian infantry under General Navarrini. After days of fighting, *Ras* Desta escaped to Eya, Butajira where he was captured and executed by firing squad shortly afterwards. The Italians estimated Ethiopian losses in these battles at 4,000 of whom 1,600 were executed by firing squad.<sup>42</sup> The Italians thought that the defeat and later the execution of *Ras* Desta would kill the fervour of the resistance but this proved to be wrong, as more people were moving to support the Patriots.

---

observed towards peasants living in Italian-occupied territories and a different view on their position and needs from that of the imperial administration.

<sup>41</sup> Nega Tegegn, *Ye'Ethiopiawiyen*, 71.

<sup>42</sup> Sbacchi, *Ethiopia Under Mussolini*, 189.

## Acts of collaboration

The Italians found a few collaborators among the Ethiopian nobility, not so much due to mere opportunism but largely because of their ambitions and claims to power, for which the Italians might be a stepping stone. Although superior force was the ultimate means upon which the Italians relied to execute their invasion and sustain their occupation of Ethiopia, they had been looking for collaborators ever since they began preparations for the invasion of Ethiopia. Their long stay in nearby Eritrea had helped them to study, contact and recruit collaborators in Ethiopia. They had focused on three elements of contradiction that might be manipulated within Ethiopian society: rivalry among the different contending (regional) leaders; traditional Christian-Muslim tensions; and the resentment of the southern Ethiopian people towards the central government for its unfair appropriation of their lands since the late nineteenth century. Initially, these contradictions seemed to facilitate the occupation, but with the spread of the resistance and the Italians treating collaborators as unreliable servants, they did not prove sufficient.

Two well-known initial collaborators were *Dejazmach* Haile-Selassie Gugsä of Tigray and *Ras* Hailu Tekle-Haimanot of Gojjam, both rivals of Emperor Haile Selassie. *Dejazmach* Haile-Selassie, whose father was the grandson of Emperor Yohannes (who reigned from 1872-1889), foresaw regaining the throne of his great-grandfather with the support of the Italians. Thus he put his followers at the service of the Italians. *Ras* Hailu, son of *Negus* (King) Tekle Haimanot of Gojjam, who had been opposed to Emperor Haile Selassie's rise to power in the 1920s, had also anticipated governing Gojjam without any imperial intervention if he collaborated with the Italians. Both received arms and money from the Italians for their services but not the power and prestige they had dreamt of. Some other low-ranking nobles also collaborated with the Italians, induced by similar expectations. However, once in power, 'Mussolini ordered "No power to the *rases*". Italy, he said, would not rule Ethiopia on a *metayer* basis by sharing power with the Ethiopian nobles.'<sup>43</sup> Mussolini seemed to have rightly grasped the deeper feelings of the Ethiopian collaborators who had their own separate aspirations that would not fit in the Fascists' policy.

With the promise of reviving Muslim states like that of Harar and reinstating Oromo kingdoms like those of Abba Jifar and Abba Jobir Abdullah – kingdoms incorporated previously by Ethiopia – the Italians gained substantial collaboration from Muslims in the lowlands and Oromos in the south and eastern highlands. Abba Jobir, who was once imprisoned in Addis Ababa by the Ethiopian government for opposing the deployment of Amhara soldiers to

<sup>43</sup> Sbacchi, *Ethiopia Under Mussolini*, 134.

collect taxes in his region, formed an army of Oromo Muslims and joined the Italians to fight the Patriots. Later when he found out that the Italians would not let him acquire the autonomous power he aspired to, he began conniving with the British councillor who had an office in Gore.

In all these major cases of collaboration, there was a feeling of victimization by the Emperor's drive to centralize authority and reign over regional power holders that also claimed authority. However, although these acts of collaboration facilitated the objectives of the invaders to a limited extent, they were essentially acts through which the collaborators hoped to secure what they had lost under the reign of the Emperor. 'Certainly they acted to protect their own interests, but these actions were not necessarily opportunistic. Instead, they reflected a long tradition of rivalry and tension between centre and periphery, particularly at times when the centre was perceived as weak or vulnerable.'<sup>44</sup>

*Intensified resistance and an attempt on Graziani's life*

On 19 February 1937, Marshal Rodolfo Graziani together with his dignitaries and guests of honour were celebrating the birth of the Prince of Naples, in front of the Viceroy's palace in Addis Ababa. Two young Ethiopians from Eritrea, Abraham Deboch, who worked for the Italian Political Office in Addis Ababa, and Moges Asgedom, a clerk in the municipal office, approached the podium and threw seven hand grenades, killing three Italian officers and wounding 52 others. General Liotta, Commander of the Italian Air Force, lost his right eye and leg while Graziani, the main target of the attack, was wounded by some 300 splinters.

Moges and Abraham escaped to join the Patriots in Wolkait, while Tadelech Estifanos, Abraham's wife, left a day earlier for the monastery of Debre Libanos. Meanwhile the city of Addis Ababa turned into an orgy of terror. Graziani ordered random retaliatory measures be carried out and Italian soldiers went out killing virtually anyone in sight, burning houses and churches, like St. George's, and clubbing children to death. Not even the sick lying in hospital were spared. The terrible scenes prompted Mussolini into action, as he 'forbade these draconian measures for fear of negative world public opinion'.<sup>45</sup> The attack launched by Moges and Abraham 'at the heart of the invaders' gave the Patriots' morale a boost and retaliatory measures taken by the invaders only further widened the existing gap between the Ethiopian people and the Italian occupiers.

---

<sup>44</sup> Taylor cited in C. McClellan, 'Observations on the Ethiopian Nation, Its Nationalism and the Italo-Ethiopian War', *Northeast African Studies*, 3, 1 (1996), N.S. 63.

<sup>45</sup> Sbacchi, *Ethiopia Under Mussolini*, 190.

After February 1937, a new mode of Patriot resistance started to grow in scope and popularity throughout the country. Yohannes Saomerjibashian, a young Ethiopian of Armenian descent, started an underground paper known as the *Pillar of Ethiopian Light*. Blatta Kidane-Mariam formed a clandestine movement of Ethiopian youth and worked closely with the women's organization in resistance activities. Printed by Yohannes and distributed systematically by youth organized by Kidane-Mariam, leaflets calling for an uprising against the Fascists started appearing in the city's public squares. The railway line linking Addis Ababa to the port of Djibouti was frequently attacked. By October 1936, the Patriots had already ambushed an armoured train, escorted by a squadron of warplanes, that was secretly carrying A. Lessona, the Italian Minister of Colonies and C. Gigli, the Minister of Public Works. Such train ambushes now increased in frequency. The British author Evelyn Waugh, who also travelled from Djibouti to Addis Ababa via Harar by train during that year and managed to interview Graziani, later observed that 'there was a machine-gun section posted at the front of the train; another at the rear. From Awash to Addis the line was heavily guarded.'<sup>46</sup> The resistance in central Ethiopia thus became widespread in numerous forms and proved tenacious. Patriot Haile-Mariam Mamo was well known for his hit-and-run tactics around Addis Ababa. In Gojjam, the professed *shifita* Belay Zelleke and his rival Hailu Belaw, although at times also raiding each other's territory, inflicted heavy damage on stationary and mobile Italian troops. In Begemder, Yohannes Iyasu and Asfaw Bogale were fighting the well-equipped enemy on many fronts. A successful attack in Bellesa forced Governor O. Mezzetti to retreat to Gondar, the capital of the Begemder region, where he found further unrest.

While resistance proliferated nationwide, the different groups of Patriots were, however, operating on their own, some in traditional ways (raiding, hit-and-run attacks) and others employing modern tactics. There was no unified, central command structure. In most provinces, including Tigray, Gondar, Gojjam, Showa, Wollo, Arusi and Wollega, similar acts of resistance could be observed. Eritreans too were joining the resistance in large numbers. As early as January 1936, about 400 Eritreans abandoned the invaders on the Shire front alone, where the Italians had the upper hand, and joined the retreating *Ras Imru*. Some 600 Eritreans came to join *Ras Desta* at Adola on 20 February 1936 (Seifu Abawaolla, cited in Salome).<sup>47</sup> Patriots from Eritrea like *Kegnazmach* Andom Tesfatsion, *Kegnazmach* Assefa Bahitu, *Kegnazmach* Seleba Wolde-Selassie and many others (see the list in Salome) joined the resistance

<sup>46</sup> E. Waugh, *Waugh in Abyssinia* (London, 1984), 226.

<sup>47</sup> Salome, 'The Ethiopian Patriots', 79.

movement on all the major fronts and hundreds were killed fighting the Italians.<sup>48</sup> This historical fact also refutes the idea entertained by some Eritrean writers that Eritreans were not involved in the Ethiopian resistance movement.

On the economic front many Ethiopians seemed to boycott the Italian lire as currency. Especially in the countryside, people continued to use Maria Theresa thalers, the original Austrian silver dollar, for transactions although the Italians had declared the lire to be the unit of currency upon their arrival. However, the Italians had to pay Ethiopian labourers at the platinum mines at Yubdo in thalers because they would not accept lire. Furthermore, when the authorities forced the labourers to accept paper money (the lire), there was mass desertion. Several local markets almost ceased to exist as commerce went elsewhere.<sup>49</sup> Such crippling resistance inflated the already rising costs of Italian occupation and severely devalued the lire. A Maria Theresa thaler could be obtained from the Royal Mint in London for 6.50 lire in 1937 and sold for 13.50 lire in Ethiopia.<sup>50</sup>

The spirit of the resistance echoed through some cities in Italy as well.<sup>51</sup> Ethiopians who were taken there either as prisoners or interpreters were expected to be moulded in Italian ideology and ways of thinking. Among the 400 notables and their families who were deported to Italy through Massawa in the summer of 1937 was the young Zerai Derres, working as an aid. 'Zerai Derres, an Eritrean interpreter of the exiled *Rases*, on 13 June 1938, in front of the monument of the fallen heroes of Dogali in Rome, pronounced words in favor of Haile Selassie. In an attempt to stop him, several persons were wounded.'<sup>52</sup> Abdisa Agga (later a colonel), a suspected accomplice of Abraham Deboch and Moges Asgedom in their attempt to kill Graziani, was taken to Libya as a prisoner. When the German army was defeated in Libya, Abdisa Agga, together with other British, Greek, Yugoslav and Albanian prisoners, was transferred to a prison in Italy from which he later managed to escape. He then engaged in guerrilla activities in the northern mountains of Italy where he met Marshal Tito, the Yugoslav resistance leader. As Nega remarked, 'Abdisa

<sup>48</sup> Nega Tegegn, *Ye'Ethiopiawiyen*, 73; Salome, 'The Ethiopian Patriots', 82-85.

<sup>49</sup> Rava, cited in C. Schaefer, 'Serendipitous Resistance in Fascist-Occupied Ethiopia, 1936-1941', *Northeast African Studies*, 3, 1 (1996), 99.

<sup>50</sup> Pankhurst, in *ibid.* 102.

<sup>51</sup> See for wider international reactions from Africans and Afro-Americans to the war in Ethiopia, S.K.B. Asante, *Pan-African Protest: West Africa and the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis, 1934-1941* (London, 1977) and J.E. Harris, *African-American Reactions to War in Ethiopia 1936-1941* (Baton Rouge & London, 1994).

<sup>52</sup> Sbacchi, *Ethiopia Under Mussolini*, 138.

fought the Fascists in their own land until he returned to Ethiopia after the liberation'.<sup>53</sup>

In late 1937 Mussolini realized that resistance was increasing in Ethiopia despite Graziani's appalling repression. He replaced Graziani at the end of 1937 with Viceroy U. Amadeo, the Duke of Aosta, who he thought would take a more 'pacifying approach' as governor and would contain the fermenting Ethiopian rebellion. In an effort to try a different tactic, the new viceroy began to engage in dialogue with the *rases* and other rebel leaders, hoping to negotiate their surrender. He offered money, titles and posts in his administration and also employed the tactic of divide-and-rule among the independently acting *rases* and a few other leaders. In fact, some leaders like *Dejazmach* Gebrehiwet Michael, *Dejazmach* Amde Ali, *Dejazmach* Ayalew Birru, *Dejazmach* Habtemichael, the author Afework Gebreyesus, Mengesha Wube, and some low-ranking chiefs responded positively, which again shows that the Ethiopians' response to Italian occupation and the opportunities of the new situation was neither uniform nor universal. But a majority remained defiant. This held for the Patriots, the Church, women's organizations, most intellectuals and the youth, many of whom subsequently joined the resistance movement. Some of the Patriots made use of the negotiation scheme, appearing to collaborate with the occupiers but only to buy time until a more favourable moment to strike back. For instance, the famous Patriot Abebe Aregay negotiated his possible surrender with the Italians but historians generally interpret this episode as a mere diversion to obtain breathing space for his exhausted troops.<sup>54</sup> Guerrilla bands, led by renowned fighters like Zewde Asfaw, Abebe Aregay and Mesfin Seleshi, continued to make the well-entrenched Italians in Addis Ababa feel permanently uneasy. In addition, the provinces remained insecure for the invaders. Patriots Gerasu Duki on the Jimma road, *Fitawrari* Taffera on the Neqemte road, Gebre-Hiwet Meshesha in the Lemelimo Gorge, Tesfay Medebai in the Merebe Gorge and Belay Zelleke in the Nile Gorge, commanding from 500 to 3,000 armed Patriots, made rural Ethiopia continually hazardous for Italian movement. Only in the south and southwest was the situation more or less stable, and road-building programmes and administrative services could be set up.

As the granting of titles, bribes and negotiations failed to bring the resistance under control, the commander-in-chief of the Italian forces at the time, General Ugo Cavallero convinced the Duke of Aosta 'that the "Graziani method" would bring the desired result'.<sup>55</sup> This meant a full-scale military campaign and

<sup>53</sup> Nega Tegegn Ye'Ethiopiawiyen, 96-97.

<sup>54</sup> Konjit Abinet in McClellan, 'Observations on the Ethiopian Nation', 62.

<sup>55</sup> Sbacchi, *Legacy of Bitterness*, 190.

exercise of sheer terror, as well as better defence works. Cavallero built road connections between strategic spots linked with chains of forts – still a visible Italian legacy in Ethiopia today. From 1938 to mid-1939 Cavallero's army was engaged in executing the 'Graziani method' in what seemed to be an endless war of terror and attrition.

### The end of resistance and post-war Ethiopia

In 1940 Mussolini embarked on what was later to prove the most disastrous venture of his career. He signed a pact with Nazi Germany and entered the European War on 10 June. Britain and France, both accustomed to diplomatic rivalry with Italy in the colonial partition of East Africa, were now set to become the arch-enemies of Italy, as they were of her Axis partner Germany. This new alliance of world forces came as a salutary gift for Ethiopia. Emperor Haile Selassie, whose repeated cry for help in the five preceding years had been disregarded by the world powers and by the League of Nations, found support from this twist of events. Many types of assistance to the Ethiopian cause and to the Patriots began to flow in, not only from England where the Emperor was living in exile but also from the other Allied powers. Haile Selassie's return to Ethiopia was synchronized with the British offensive<sup>56</sup> that was planned to drive the Italians out of the region.

The British organized the Emperor's journey via Khartoum, Sudan, from where he would start mobilizing Patriots in exile and at the border, and advance into Ethiopia. When he arrived in Khartoum on 3 July 1940, he received messages of support from the prominent Patriot leaders in the field. Yet, he was not sure how the people he left with the Fascist Italians back in 1936 would receive him. Possible rebellions in Gojjam, the Ogaden and Eritrea and more seriously, the republican ideals of Takele Wolde-Hawariat and the dynamic intellectuals in the resistance were some of the threats that the Emperor needed to address. The Patriots' resistance had created its own political momentum, with claims and implications for the post-war period in Ethiopia, with or without the Emperor. The role of the resistance in posing this kind of political challenge to a liberated Ethiopia is perhaps worthy of a separate study but it can be said that the ideals of just rebellion, social justice and people's rights that

---

<sup>56</sup> The British troops in fact were largely made up of African troops (including Sudanese, South African and other contingents). Cf. T.H. Parsons, *The African Rank and File: Social Implications of Colonial Military Service in the King's African Rifles, 1902-1964* (Portsmouth NH, 1999).



Patriots at Debra Markos market after the Italian surrender  
Source: R. Pankhurst, 'The Ethiopian Patriots and the Collapse of Italian Rule in East Africa, 1940-41', *Ethiopia Observer*, 12, 2 (1969), 114



emerged from the resistance were a development which Ethiopia, and specifically the new government, had to deal with.

From June 1940, an intensive propaganda campaign on behalf of the Emperor attempted to improve the conditions for his return (led by the British journalist George Steer). On 30 January 1941, the day Haile Selassie crossed the border from Sudan on his way to Ethiopia accompanied by General Orde Wingate and several Patriots, he declared that there would be no retaliation against the Italians. This declaration was considered the official cessation of the resistance, although nobody was sure how the Italians were going to respond. Soon the Duke of Aosta and his army retired to the strategic pass of Amba Alagie in Tigray, leaving Addis Ababa to the Patriots, who were in the nearby mountains and inside the city, and to the British general, Alan Cunningham, who was pushing his way up from Kenya north to Addis Ababa. On 6 April 1941, Addis Ababa was liberated and a month later, on 5 May 1941, Emperor Haile Selassie entered the city. His rule was restored and he remained on the throne for the next 33 years.

Although detachments of the British army, combined with the forces of the Patriots, ended the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, this period left an impressive memory of indigenous Ethiopian resistance. At the time, it was realized how much the occupation had shaken traditional institutions and the myth of the divine Emperor (as was still written in the 1930 Ethiopian Constitution). Many also related their patriotic struggle to the war in Europe where the common enemies of the Axis had to be rooted out. What people vividly remember to this day is the horrific behaviour of the invaders on the one hand and the endurance and heroic struggle of the Patriots on the other.

In the wake of their defeat and withdrawal from Ethiopia, the Italians were expecting the Ethiopians, who had suffered brutal oppression at their hands for five consecutive years, to take revenge. Resistance, after all, is a reaction to and a product of real or perceived injustice, and the Italian injustices and exercise of violence were seen as beyond acceptable limits. Such actions had no precedent in Ethiopia: the mustard-gas bombings, the mass executions, the arbitrary massacre of civilians, the wiping out of an educated class. Yet, with the Emperor's declaration not to hurt or inflict damage on the Italians in retreat, for which he later received a letter of gratitude from President Franklin D. Roosevelt of the United States, the Ethiopians did not resort to the violent style of vengeance they had witnessed by the Italians since October 1935 (the Adua Syndrome). In these five years of occupation, the Ethiopians resisted aggression, injustice and violation of their rights as a sovereign nation. Once it was over, two factors mitigated their response and their anger to avenge. Firstly there was their traditional prudence based on a religious culture of tolerance and dignity, and in this respect there is a difference in religious culture between

Ethiopians and Europeans. And secondly, the international political situation (i.e. pressure from the British and Americans) and the dependence of Ethiopia on foreign diplomatic and material assistance may have played a role in softening the Ethiopian response at a higher level.

### Concluding remarks

The Italian invasion (1935) and occupation (1936-1941) of Ethiopia were conducted by a modern and strong European army that could not be matched by Ethiopia at the time. Conventional military theories and diplomatic manoeuvres were employed in extreme forms against an Ethiopian army that did not have even a working central command structure, let alone modern weaponry systems or diplomatic backing. The Italian invaders unleashed an unprecedented campaign of violent submission both from the ground as well as from the air, to which the Ethiopians had no defences and which caused huge loss of life. At the beginning of the occupation, the collapse of the Ethiopian army before Mussolini's war machine followed by the flight of the Emperor into exile led many to believe that the fate of a long-independent nation was doomed. Any possible emergence of patriotic resistance also looked far-fetched. 'Mussolini's dream, one shared by the Italian people and constantly reiterated in the press, that millions of Italians would be able to find land and work in Ethiopia'<sup>57</sup> then seemed to gain ground.

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

Ethiopians decided to resist even without the Emperor, who some said should have been there as a symbol of unity. Thus the formal Italian war of occupation was confronted with an informal, open-ended and community-based resistance. The traditional form of resistance, *shiftinnet*, had found a new terrain to spread to and a new enemy to counter, this time enjoying a much broader popular support. Unlike the old *shiftinnet* inspired by a rebellious noble or a few politically ambitious individuals, anti-Italian resistance drew upon all sectors of Ethiopian society: the peasantry, the nobility, the clergy, intellectuals, women and the youth alike. 'From this point resistance was no longer an aristocratic

---

<sup>57</sup> Schaefer, 'Serendipitous Resistance', 103.

affair' but in fact 'serendipitous', as Schaefer<sup>58</sup> rightly observed – gifted with the ability to find novel ways of revolt and action. For the Italians, however, resistance was an act of violence by irrational outlaws or *t'era-shiftas* who deserved to be hunted down, flogged, publicly hanged or executed by firing squad in order to create a state of fear and submission. Despite the repression and atrocities against the resistance fighters, the Italians never achieved the desired result.

While the resistance expanded in scope and tenacity, the Italian human and material costs were growing, and driving the Italians to a state of increased fury. Not only was the whole objective of their occupation thwarted but also 'never in their quinquennium of rule did the fascists feel secure in Ethiopia, and their anxiety came to border on neurosis'.<sup>59</sup> To the relief of Ethiopians, Italy entered the Second World War on the side of Germany, and the Allied forces began to pour in support to bolster the resistance movement in Ethiopia. After the Italians were defeated, resistance, which had become nationwide, came to an abrupt end.

The five years of Italian occupation shook feudal Ethiopia and the impact the occupation created in traditional Ethiopia was significant. As McClellan put it: 'It was an event that swept away old myths and created opportunity for Ethiopians to re-examine the nature and meaning of their state. For Ethiopia, the war highlighted a need to move fully into the modern world'.<sup>60</sup> The fact that Ethiopia had failed to repulse the predatory Italian invasion in itself proved to many that the country had a long way to go, among other things, in building a modern system of self-defence. But, given the whole purpose of the invasion and occupation, there was another aspect to what the 'modern world' constituted in the context of the Ethiopian conception as a free and sovereign nation that had to face unprovoked aggression. While the need to move into the modern world was deemed essential, there also emerged a rethinking of why and how the occupation was conducted and how resistance had been organized. In the first place, there was no doubt that it was basically Italy's authoritarian, nationalistic and greedy colonial ambition that led to the invasion and occupation of Ethiopia. For most Ethiopians, the invasion and occupation were executed in the most barbaric and violent manner. The perception was that if this was the guise of the 'modern world', few Ethiopians would be attracted by it. Second, the essence of the resistance was to safeguard the independence, religious values and cultural identity of Ethiopia, all taking inspiration from the

<sup>58</sup> Schaefer, 'Serendipitous Resistance', 89.

<sup>59</sup> H.G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia* (Berkeley, 1994), 148.

<sup>60</sup> McClellan, 'Observations on the Ethiopian Nation', 57.

domain of the past as heritage. In view of the violent 'present' defined by the Italians, the Ethiopians naturally oriented themselves to the past, i.e. all that defined their historical and cultural identity. In both cases, the *raison d'être* of the motivation for change was negative. Italy's modernity can hardly be seen to have positively transformed Ethiopia's traditional society. The only thing remaining and still referred to by Ethiopians is the 'heritage' of Italian road-building.

After 1941 Ethiopia moved towards modernity at its own pace within the contours of the old imperial order. The Patriots' contribution to the freedom and independence of the country was highly valued, and many of their leaders were rewarded with public positions. However, the social and political aims of the resistance – ideals relating to social justice, equality and more openness in the political system – were not really followed up. Patriot leaders were also expected to be loyal to the Emperor again, and those who dissented or actively conspired against him were removed, and in some cases (like Belay Zelleke) executed. While the Emperor promulgated a new revised constitution in 1955, installed a parliament, allowed limited non-party elections, embarked on far-reaching judicial reforms and developed the education system, the old property relations and the lack of democratic rights, such as a free press, free elections and political parties, remained unaddressed. In this respect, the Patriots' programme was not realized.