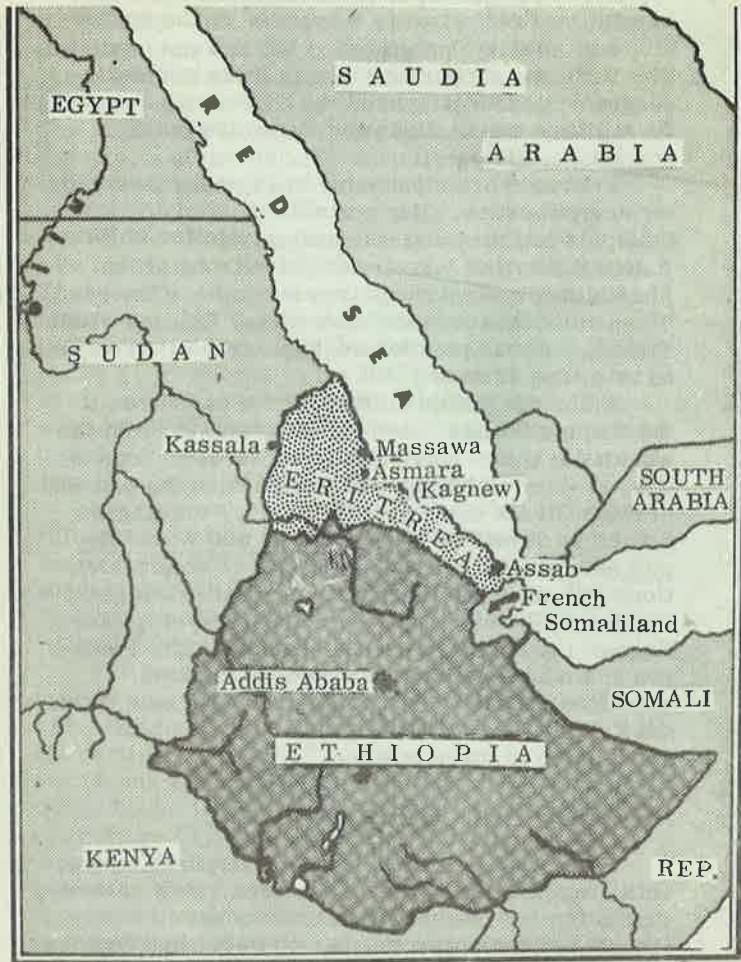


# ERITREA:



## The Hidden War in East Africa

By MARY HANSON

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In the country of Eritrea, which lies between Ethiopia and the Red Sea, revolutionary guerrillas are struggling for national liberation against the Ethiopian Army and its American backing. Eritrea was a British colony until 1952 when control was transferred to Ethiopia by the UN. The Eritrean Liberation Front grew as a reaction to the repression and injustice practiced by the new colonialists. The U.S. has supported Ethiopia in its counterinsurgency measures against the ELF which threatens its military installations and the entire political stability of Ethiopia.

Eritrea's principal value to Ethiopia lies in its strategic location. Her ports on the Red Sea are Ethiopia's military and commercial lifeline to the United States and Israel, her only strong allies. Maintaining control of Eritrea is vital to Ethiopia because there are other guerrillas, fighting within Ethiopia, whose position would be greatly strengthened by a free Eritrea.

America's prime military stake in Eritrea is the Kagnew Station, one of five crucial links in the worldwide U.S. "communications" (read: espionage) system. Although the U.S. denies the presence of surveillance equipment in Eritrea, the Kagnew Station is described by U.S. News and World Report as a unique, "irreplaceable U.S. communications and surveillance facility."<sup>1</sup> Located high in the mountains near the Eritrean capital of Asmara, Kagnew links U.S. overseas bases with the Pentagon and makes contact with communications satellites. It can intercept electronic signals from deep within Soviet territory and relay them to Washington in three minutes.<sup>2</sup>

## Historical Background

Eritrea was claimed by the Ethiopian Empire, until 1869 when Italy seized the area. Self governing--often warring--Eritrean tribes were largely ignorant of Ethiopia's tenuous claims. But they were periodically faced with Ethiopian, as well as Turkish and Egyptian attempts to conquer her Red Sea ports.

Unlike the Ethiopian Empire, Eritrean nomads and peasants, of mixed Arab and Negroid descent, did not have a feudal land-ownership system. Lands were periodically divided among families cultivating the area surrounding each village. Ownership

was an unnecessary concept. The population density was low and people were usually allocated just as much land as they could cultivate. Eritreans often lost their tribal lands to foreign occupiers, especially the Ethiopians, who assumed that "un-owned" land could be seized. Land disputes still continue and are one source of Eritrean resentment against their Ethiopian rulers.<sup>3</sup>

During the Italian colonial period (1869-1941), the Italians built seaports, roads, and cities, but generally ignored the rural areas. In 1936, six years after Haile Selassie became Emperor, Ethiopia was invaded by the armies of Mussolini. The Eritreans and the Ethiopians fought back courageously, and the Italians were finally driven out of both countries by the Allies in 1941. Eritrea was governed by the British until 1952, when her expectations of independence were squelched and she was federated with Ethiopia by the United Nations. There were guarantees of sovereignty within the federation, but it was clearly important to the United States and other Western powers that Ethiopia be given access to the Red Sea to help counter Arab and Soviet power in the Middle East. It also was necessary to have Red Sea ports to help protect Israel, who has since maintained a major military role in support of the Selassie regime.<sup>4</sup>

Some liberal members of Eritrea's Christian ruling class, like former Prime Minister Tedla Beiru (1952-58), fought to implement the UN's guarantees; but the real power in Asmara, the Eritrean capital, was held by Prince Asrate Kassa, Haile Selassie's son-in-law.

Eritrean opposition to the new feudal land system was repressed by Kassa. Political rights were eliminated, including the right to have political parties.

Young Eritreans from both the cities and rural tribes began to reject this brutal oppression, and in 1959 the Eritrean Liberation Movement was formed. In 1961, the first armed actions were initiated: these consisted of sabotage and attacks against Ethiopian installations and officials.<sup>5</sup> Early successes included the seizure of arms from police forces. This allowed the arming of the first guerrilla groups during 1961-62.<sup>6</sup>

Among the first ELM leaders was Independent Party leader Idris Mohamed Adam, head of the Eritrean National Assembly, who quit his post after the Ethiopians continually overruled assembly decisions.<sup>7</sup>

On November 13, 1962, in reaction to the

growing guerrilla threat, Ethiopian troops occupied Eritrea, dissolving its institutions and organizations and announcing total annexation. The announcement to the defunct Eritrean Congress was made in Amharic, the official Ethiopian language, which few congressmen could understand. The next announcement from Addis Ababa declared that "by decision of the Eritrean Parliament" the "integration" of Eritrea with Ethiopia had been completed.<sup>8</sup>

### The ELF in Practice

After the "integration" of 1962, an intensive program of repression was unleashed. Many ELM members were killed and the guerrillas were effectively isolated from the urban political and military planning groups. This and the exile of numerous leaders resulted in a serious weakening of the ELM. It was then that the Liberation Front of Eritrea (ELF) was formed. It was composed principally of young militants of the ELM who were anxious to continue the process of armed struggle as a means for attaining national independence.<sup>9</sup>

Information on the struggle during the years 1962-65 is scarce. There appear to have been frustrating and important internal struggles (between Muslims and Christians and between the urban and tribal fighters). I have found little description of the process whereby the Front became legitimized, where it developed its strength, how it chose its leaders and structure, or what programs it attempted.

The ELF divided the country into five zones and placed a commander with a small general staff in charge of each zone.<sup>10</sup> Each zone of operations has several detachments of rural guerrillas and urban fighters, "whose actions are closely coordinated." Idris Mohamed Adam heads the Supreme Council of the Liberation Front as President; other members are the Secretaries for Military Matters, Intelligence, Information, Finances, and Foreign Relations, as well as the commanders of the five zones.<sup>11</sup>

The guerrillas and urban fighters are men and women from the peasant, tribal, or urban laboring classes: all five ELF area commanders come from the most exploited classes. The leadership also includes ex-government men like Adam and Beiru, who are now in exile in Syria or Sudan where they maintain liaison with their Arab supporters.

The Eritrean revolution seems to be more Marxist than Arabist. A young guerrilla explained to an

American journalist, Jack Kramer, that Marxist social concepts were necessary for a proper understanding of the difficulties and setbacks of the movement. He felt that a simpler revolt might be more popular, but that it would also be easier for the Ethiopians to intimidate and discourage.<sup>12</sup> (The counter propaganda of the Selassie regime, calling the rebels "bandits", "outside agitators", and more recently attacking them as Arabs, is careful not to discuss economics.<sup>13</sup>)

In Eritrea, the peasant cadres know "what communism is" and Kramer admired their ability to discuss it in the villages in a way that earned them the respect of even the older people.<sup>14</sup> They have created a functional civil government in the rural areas where the "imperial" civil administration has been unable and unwilling to provide the simplest services.<sup>15</sup> The Front has successfully encouraged the settlement of nomads into new villages where they can practice agriculture and educate their children in village schools. The Front has also forced owners of large farms to improve working conditions of agricultural workers.<sup>16</sup> (Favorable reports of journalists on the Front's work have made it necessary for the Selassie regime to forbid them to legally travel in Eritrea.<sup>17</sup>)

The Eritreans' hatred for the Ethiopian regime, and their support of the Front, seem inevitable in view of the country's economic misery. The standard of living in Eritrea is abysmal, below that of Ethiopia in general, which even according to official figures has a per-capita income of only \$35-50 per year.<sup>18</sup> This figure includes the incomes of the feudal nobility and Italian colonist businessmen. The central government exacts taxes, in money or goods, of 75 percent from the peasants. Only fear of the ELF keeps the Government from collecting it completely in parts of the country where the Front is strong.<sup>19</sup>

### Poverty and Profit

Health conditions are criminally ignored: malaria kills many thousands yearly. "In 1958, for example, 400,000 persons are believed to have died in a malaria epidemic in Tigre" (U.S. Army Handbook). Half the adult population suffers from syphilis; leprosy, typhus, smallpox, and dysentery are rampant; infant mortality is 60%. Illiteracy is 98%,<sup>20</sup> and few schools can afford to be staffed.<sup>21</sup>

Agriculture is the primary occupation of the people, yet one cash crop, coffee, dominates agricultural output, and there is starvation every year.<sup>22</sup>

# Far away places with enchanting names



## ETHIOPIAN AIRLINES

Since 1963, the price of food in Eritrea has increased by 35.6%, and the price of clothing has increased by 26.8%.<sup>23</sup> Import duties of over 100% are often charged on "semi-essential" foods and clothing to curtail Ethiopia's severe balance of payments and trade deficit,<sup>24</sup> but efficiency of Eritrea's manufacturing and food-processing "private enterprises" is so bad that the duties simply starve the populace.<sup>25</sup> "An American economist has estimated that, if properly cultivated, Ethiopia (including Eritrea) can produce enough food to feed Western Europe."<sup>26</sup> Developing this in Eritrea would necessitate irrigation, but her present grazing lands

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"Garabeet, Ashur, Adfaki, Sanheet, Tukumbia, Sawa, Falkat: these are the names of villages and hamlets which, due to the repressive actions of imperial troops, have been decimated or have even completely disappeared from the geography of Eritrea."

--Tricontinental

are very good, and her soil is fertile.<sup>27</sup> There is almost no manufacturing; Italians, nobility and Americans operate the major capitalist enterprises.

Foreign corporations are tax exempt to encourage capital development.<sup>28</sup> These include Standard Oil (New Jersey)-Mobil Oil, who jointly share oil rights to coastal Eritrea and 10,500 square miles of the Red Sea east of her shores.<sup>29</sup> The Ralph Pearson Company has a tax-exempt \$45 million mining project in the Danakil Desert. "Dozens of American businessmen have already discovered Ethiopia, from a bookstore to a \$100 million potash mining project, from a spice firm to two of the world's largest oil companies. More than 200 American companies also have agencies in Ethiopia."<sup>30</sup> Eritreans arm<sup>31</sup> as the Selassie regime spends millions on airports, hotels, lavish homes and monuments in Addis Ababa and Asmara, making them enchanting, charming cities for rich tourists.<sup>32</sup>

In the face of this poverty, the major economic resources of the Ethiopian regime, including \$250

million of American economic and military aid,<sup>33</sup> are spent primarily on counterinsurgency against the ELF. There are 1800 American military "advisors" in Ethiopia, mainly in Eritrea, to train the 37,000-man Ethiopian Army, which is supplied with at least two squadrons of American-built T-28 and F-86 warplanes.<sup>34</sup> An entire infantry division of 8,000 men is always stationed along the Sudanese border in western Eritrea,<sup>35</sup> where they bomb and napalm whole villages in their efforts to crush the insurgency.<sup>36</sup> Commando police patrol the highways and roads, where the Front's army can and does attack them.<sup>37</sup>

The militarization of the country's economy is carried out with help from over 100 American AID experts.<sup>38</sup> Prince Kassa cooly explained that "You don't put down rebellions of this sort with the point of a gun. You can only abolish (sic) this by a vast economic development program... Unless the Government is willing to commit the money that will require, we face a long-term problem of insurgency and instability here."<sup>39</sup>

But there is always a liberal compromise between guns and economic development. The strategy of one AID program administered by the Stanford Research Institute is a "Joint Military-Industrial Project" to develop local manufacture of bullets, boots, uniforms, batteries, and tires for the commando police.<sup>40</sup> Eritreans were not enthusiastic about the job opportunities of this "dig your own grave" model of economic development, and the project has failed in its primary purpose: to build capitalist enterprise in Eritrea and to reduce Ethiopia's dependence on the U.S. for military supplies.<sup>41</sup>

### High Military Stakes

The ELF has seriously threatened the military presence of the U.S. in Eritrea. In 1965, the U.S. was forced to evacuate its WWII-built bases on Mt. Hammid and Mt. Korahabab, which are between the Red Sea and the Sudanese border, because convoys serving these bases were so easily ambushed by ELF guerrillas.<sup>42</sup> Left with its bases at Kagnaw-Asmara and Massawa, the U.S. feared that the only land route between them would be cut off. (Massawa is the base for the Ethiopian navy and the Israeli navy, as well as an American military and oil-ship port.) So the American consul informed the commander of

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the Fourth Region of the Eritrean Liberation Army that if the ELA damaged any of the bridges between Asmara and Massawa, they would bring themselves into open military confrontation with the United States.<sup>43</sup>

The Ethiopian government walks a diplomatic tightrope between publicly supporting "African unity" and "struggles for national independence of all African peoples", and getting international approval of its own battle against the "bandits in Eritrea".<sup>44</sup> Ethiopia hosts many conferences of the neutral nations, such as the African Summit Conference held in Addis Ababa in November of 1966. During that conference, the Front, in order to "harass and humiliate the enemy before his guests" attacked the camps of the Ethiopian Army in 17 Eritrean towns.<sup>45</sup> This tactic, coupled with attacks on the empire's most internationally visible assets (such as Ethiopian Airlines, whose planes were bombed in Frankfurt, West Germany and Karachi, Pakistan in the spring of 1969<sup>46</sup>), makes vital international press coverage of the ELF possible.

7 Last June, during Sellassie's visit to the U.S., Ethiopian students attacked their embassy in Washington, D.C. The Liberation News Service followed up the first major American news story about the Ethiopian left.<sup>47</sup>

### Selassie's Offensive

By 1967 the ELF had consolidated most of the urban and rural population under its leadership. In April of that year the Washington Post reported that after 5 years of small confrontations, the Eritrean rebels were making decisive blows against the Ethiopian forces, "causing the Empire to shake".<sup>48</sup> In March, the urban forces organized a successful general strike in Asmara. Both student supporters and workers were arrested.<sup>49</sup> Pictures of the arrested students and guerrillas were later used as evidence that the ELF "bandits" had "turned themselves in" by the Selassie regime.)<sup>50</sup>

When both the Ethiopian Minister of Internal Affairs and a commander of the Ethiopian army were killed massive retaliations were initiated against the ELF rural areas of strength.<sup>51</sup> Whole villages suspected of loyalty to the Front were wiped out, and the second Army of Ethiopia began rounding up the villagers remaining into fortified "strategic hamlets".<sup>52</sup> Peasants who resisted were hung in public, and thousands of their animals were burned.<sup>53</sup> In two months alone, between 600 and 700 people who did not belong to the ELA were killed, and over

20,000 peasants and nomads fled for refuge across the Sudanese border.<sup>54</sup>

During that summer, ELF military supplies from her Arab allies were cut sharply as a result of the Israeli attack on the UAR. Haile Selassie had "talks" with the U.S.<sup>55</sup> about increased "assistance" and began an all-out campaign to completely annihilate the ELF. The New York Times reported on August 27, 1969, that "the new campaign, which began three weeks ago, comprises stepped up search operations ... as well as a psychological warfare campaign that includes the public display of rebel's corpses."<sup>56</sup>

Since the government has total control of the press in Ethiopia, they blacked out all news and forbade foreign reporters during the following months. The Ethiopian government announced that "the back of the ELF has been broken", and Kassa urged foreign businessmen to invest in Eritrea to "help build up Eritrea's economy".<sup>57</sup>

But economic conditions in Ethiopia and Eritrea worsened throughout 1968, and the Selassie regime found itself in the worst economic and political crisis of its history.<sup>58</sup>

### The ELF Regroups

8 In the spring of 1969, students in Asmara joined other Ethiopian students in closing down the country's universities and high schools. The students' demands, if met, would cost the American government its use of Ethiopia. They demand that the U.S. close its bases and terminate its aid programs, including the Military Assistance Advisory group, the U.S. Mapping Institute and the Peace Corps. At least two thousand Ethiopian students were arrested, and over a thousand are presently in prisons and labor camps. Many of them have been brutally beaten and killed.<sup>59</sup>

New security laws were enacted to enable the government to detain any persons suspected of "endangering public order" for an indefinite period. Informed sources said that the security measures reflected the Government's concern that student agitation has wider connotations than the students' demands.<sup>60</sup> "The government said the regulations were more concerned with the activities of Eritrean separatists."<sup>61</sup> More than half of the Ethiopian Army has been moved in; and, according to Foreign Report, "it is often difficult to distinguish between rebel troops and government soldiers."<sup>62</sup> (The ELF has always directed its attacks against the Ethiopian ruling class's installations, and has treated Imperial soldiers taken prisoner in much the same way that the NLF and ARVN treat American prisoners.)<sup>63</sup>

A left wing coup in the Sudan last May greatly bolstered the ELF's political and military position, and the ELF is now said to control over two-thirds of Eritrea.<sup>64</sup>

The former Sudanese regime, which was fighting an insurgency in its South, made tacit agreements with Emperor Haile Selassie to impose "restraints" which kept both rebellions "within bounds."<sup>65</sup> But the new Sudanese regime is offering autonomy to southern Sudan and is giving the ELF freedom to use staging areas across the Sudanese border.<sup>66</sup>

It is difficult to obtain current information on what is happening in Eritrea because of the news blackouts, but a recent New York Times article said that the guerrillas' strength was up and the government was waging another campaign. "The operation is still going on, and no insurgent attacks have taken place in six weeks. According to... a member of the front, rebel forces are merely regrouping."<sup>67</sup> With increased aid from Syria and a new friendly Sudanese government the ELF will be able to expand its operations and strengthen its position. From this strength other groups fighting Selassie will gain courage and we can expect all resistance to Selassie's regime to grow.

## FOOTNOTES

1. U.S. News and World Report, June 19, 1967.
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3. Taha Nur, Tricontinental Bulletin, "Eritrea--Significance of its Struggle Against Feudalism", June, 1969, p. 11.
4. Donald Lockheim, "Small War in Ethiopia", Washington Post, April 30, 1967.
5. Tricontinental, "On the Shores of the Red Sea", January - April, 1968, p. 69.
6. Ibid.
7. Domenico Sasuli, Fatti (Italian newspaper), "Eritrea--New Algeria", April 28, 1967.
8. Tricontinental, p. 66.
9. Ibid., p. 67.
10. Lockheim, Washington Post.
11. Tricontinental, p. 68.
12. Jack Kramer, Venture (British), "Hidden War in Ethiopia", May, 1969, p. 22.
13. Tesafaye Kabtihar, Menen (Ethiopian), "Bandit Movement Wiped Out", November 1967, p. 16. (This is an anti-ELF government propaganda article.)

14. Kramer, Venture, p. 22.
15. Ibid.
16. Tricontinental, p. 70.
17. Kramer, Venture, p. 21.
18. Worldwide Union of Ethiopian Students "Repression in Ethiopia", in Liberation News Service (# 77), July 10, 1969, p. 15. Also published by Africa Research Group in pamphlet form. (2) See also International Financial Statistics (International Monetary Fund), p. 169.
19. Kramer, p. 22.
20. "Repression In Ethiopia", p. 3.
21. Ibid., p. 9.
22. Ibid., p. 3.
23. Ibid., p. 9.
24. Economist Intelligence Unit: Quarterly Economic Reviews: East Africa, No. 2, 1969, p. 19.
25. Ibid. See also "Repression in Ethiopia", p. 2.
26. "Repression in Ethiopia", p. 4.
27. Ibid.
28. "Repression in Ethiopia", p. 6.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. R.W. Apple, Jr., "Arab Arms Aid Revives Eritrea Insurgency", New York Times, September 1, 1969.
32. See Menen for several articles on the Government's lavish projects.
33. U.S. News.
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36. Tricontinental, p. 67.
37. Ibid., p. 67.
38. U.S. News, p. 32.
39. Apple, New York Times.
40. Kenneth Yudowitch, Project Director from SRI, interview with Mary Hanson, unpublished. Yudowitch initiated the project in 1967.
41. Ibid.
42. ELF Release.
43. Ibid.
44. Menen, p. 4.
45. Tricontinental, p. 70.
46. Apple, New York Times.
47. LNS, packet #177, July 10, 1969.
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53. Ibid.
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55. Benjamin Welles, New York Times, May 27, 1967.
56. Eric Pace, New York Times, August 27, 1967.
57. Eric Pace, New York Times, September 29, 1967.
58. "Repression in Ethiopia", p. 3.
59. Ibid., p. 12.
60. New York Times, March 6, 1969.
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62. Foreign Report, "Eritrea Stepping Up Its Rebellion", June 12, 1969, p. 4.
63. Lockheim, Washington Post.
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66. Apple, New York Times.
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**Note:** Because of the difficulty of obtaining information on the situation in Ethiopia, we urge all readers to send info to either the Pacific Studies Center, 1963 University Ave., East Palo Alto, California 94303, or to the Africa Research Group, at P.O. Box 213, Cambridge, Mass. 02138.

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