

Background to war - from friends to foes

Martin Plaut

Introduction

The war that broke out between Ethiopia and Eritrea on 6th May 1998, and was finally concluded by a peace treaty in the Algerian capital, Algiers, on 12th December 2000 can be summarised in a paragraph.

The neighbouring states, previously on good terms, were involved in a skirmish at the little known border town of Badme. The town lies in an inhospitable area towards the western end of the one thousand-kilometer border separating the two countries, not far from Sudan. The initial clash escalated dramatically. The conflagration spiraled out of control, and resulted in all-out war along the length of border. The international community, including the United States, Rwanda, the Organisation of African Unity, the United Nations and the European Union attempted to end the hostilities. They met with little success. Eritrea made initial gains on the battlefield, including taking Badme, but the frontlines soon solidified. After a month of fighting President Bill Clinton managed to persuade both sides to observe a temporary truce in order to allow further diplomatic efforts. However, these failed to bear fruit, and in February 1999 Ethiopia successfully re-captured Badme. Despite heavy fighting in May that year, Eritrea was unable to re-capture the area. For almost a year diplomats unsuccessfully sought to end the conflict, but to little effect. In May 2000 a frustrated Ethiopia launched its largest offensive of the war, breaking through Eritrean lines in the Western and Central sectors, and advancing deep into Eritrean territory. Having re-captured Badme and other land it had lost, and under considerable pressure from the international community, Ethiopia halted its advance and both sides signed a cease-fire on 18 June 2000. Six months later a final peace treaty was signed, with both countries agreeing to resolve the dispute through binding international arbitration.

These are the bare bones of this war – a conflict that cost as many as 100,000 lives, and resulted in over a million people being displaced. For two of the poorest countries in the world the economic costs were also immense. Yet the war remains something of a mystery to military analysts and historians. Despite being one of the bloodiest conflicts of the last decade of the

twentieth century, involving over half a million troops, using some of the most sophisticated military technology, even the progress of the fighting is little understood.

At its outbreak the leaders of both countries professed ignorance as to its causes. Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi told Ethiopian journalists on May 21st, 1998 that he had no satisfactory explanation for why relations had deteriorated so badly.

"I really cannot make head or tail of this puzzling development. In fact I may have my own guesses, but they can not be satisfactory. As you all know there were certain misunderstandings between the two governments arising from measures taken after changes in currency on both sides. There were more or less certain misunderstandings even before this change, but it is very difficult for me to believe that the composite effect of all this would draw us into open conflict. That is why I still maintain I have no satisfactory answer for this baffling question." ¹

Eritrean President, Isaias Afwerki responded in similar terms when asked by a reporter from the Washington Post why he thought the conflict had come about. "It's very difficult to easily find an answer", he replied. ²

It is, of course, possible to treat these replies with a fair degree of scepticism. Both leaders were attempting to explain why force had been unleashed with so little warning; why so much military muscle had been deployed over such an apparently insubstantial prize. But it may also be that both were numbed by the turn of events. It is certainly possible that they unleashed far more than either had bargained for, since the war ended an alliance that had put both men in their respective seats of power.

So why was there a war? As one writer suggested within months of the war beginning, the answer is anything but obvious.³ "International wars are usually fought to acquire territory, to gain economic advantage, to overthrow a hated or dangerous neighbouring regime, for religious or ethnic reasons or in order to improve a country's position on a regional or international geo-

¹ Ethiopian television, Addis Ababa, Amharic 21 May, 1998. BBC Monitoring 22 May 1998

² Washington Post, 17th June 1998.

³ Gerard Prunier. "The Ethio-Eritrean conflict: an essay in interpretation. November 1998. Writenet.

strategic chessboard.” The complexity of the relations that brought about this war means that none of these appear to be provide satisfactory explanations on their own.

Before considering any other factor the idea that this was a struggle for Badme – the flash point that ignited this conflict - can be easily disposed of. This is what a visitor had to say about the town.

“The focus of the conflict lies in the village of Badme, on the Mereb-Setit stretch” (of the frontier), “which is located 5km West of the internationally-recognised border, as calculated by GPS, and its surroundings, particularly to the South. This is a broken, stony table-land, with few wells, but which in lucky, rainier years can be persuaded, after the thorn-bush and prickly-pear have been cleared with a bulldozer, to produce a fair crop of cereals, such as sorghum or wheat. Badme itself, home to 300 families, is an unprepossessing element of human settlement – though that does not preclude the smiling welcome, with the traditional two glasses of tea, given to the occasional visitor. It is a dusty-one-street place, sited on a slight eminence, and consisting of crude huts, including the traditional conical *tukul*,” (traditional hut) “interspersed with vegetation, a hamlet which nothing whatsoever – so the new cliché has it – predisposed it for its elevation overnight from total obscurity to the corridors of the Security Council.

Badme is unlikely to detain the attention of the Ministry of Tourism, which is carrying out a national survey of tourist potential, for long. At one end of the ‘town’ as its former, Ethiopian administrators style it, a flagpole outside the only more modern house, on a small hill, indicates the office where the shooting incident which marked the start of hostilities took place.”⁴

⁴ Margaret Fielding. “Bad times in Badme: bitter warfare continues along the Eritrea-Ethiopia border”. IBRU Boundary and Security Bulletin, Spring 1999.

Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, made it clear that Badme itself was not the issue. “For us Badme is nothing, but the principle behind invading Badme is everything. For us, what is at stake in Badme is not a piece of real estate but a cardinal principle of international law.”⁵

In fact anyone searching for a simple, easy to understand reason for the conflict is likely to end up confused and frustrated. This war had many causes; most of them intertwined. The history of Ethiopia, and the Horn of Africa, with its many disputes and diverse and overlapping ethnicities, religions and languages predisposes the region to conflicts. Unraveling the factors that contributed to the Ethiopia – Eritrea war is no easy task. Both sides are secretive by nature, and this impedes any investigation of these events. Both countries have long memories, and seldom forgive or forget past wrongs, whether real or imagined. At the same time issues that were important at one time were sometimes laid aside when there were more pressing issues at hand. There is no doubt that at times peace and harmony prevailed, and movements and individuals worked closely together. Indeed, ties were sealed in blood, as troops fought and died together to overthrow Mengistu Haile Mariam’s dictatorship. In the end, however, the divisions that separated the two sides were allowed to fester.

No single issue caused this war. It was the outcome of years of suspicion and hostility that finally exploded into open conflict.

A troubled history

Until the end of the nineteenth century Ethiopia was rarely more than a loose confederation of kingdoms. The Ethiopian empire was alternatively dominated by Amhara or Oromo princes from the provinces of Gondar and Wollo in the centre of the country, or by Tigrean rulers from the northern region of Tigray, which at times included the Tigrinya speaking areas of what is now Eritrea. The empire’s boundaries were fluid. When Tigrayan princes were in the ascendancy they extended their influence towards Eritrea’s Red Sea Coast, exacting tribute from the Muslim lowland chiefs around Massawa or in the West. They brought Coptic Christianity to the Eritrean highlands, while the lowlands along the coast and towards the western border with Sudan

⁵ “Report of the meeting between Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and the OAU Committee of Ambassadors on the Peaceful Resolution of the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea. 20 July 1998. Chronology of the Ethio-Eritrean Conflict and Basic Documents, Walta Information Centre, Addis Ababa, 2001, p.153

remained Muslim.

In the sixteenth century the coastal plain of Eritrea became part of the Ottoman empire, though for most of the 17th and 18th centuries the rulers of the coast who were appointed by the Ottoman Pasha of Jeddah, sporadically acknowledging the overlordship of Tigray's rulers. As the Ottoman Empire declined, Egypt inherited its place along the Red Sea coasts, first taking over Massawa in the 1820's. In the 1870's, the Tigrean Emperor, Yohannis IV (1872 - 1889) defeated two Egyptian attempts to penetrate the Eritrean highlands. Subsequently he believed that in return for allowing the evacuation of Egyptian garrisons from Sudan after the rise of the Mahdi, he had British and Egyptian agreement to take over Massawa. In the event, Britain, worried about expanding French influence in Africa, encouraged Italy (which had laid claim to Assab in 1870) to take Massawa in 1885. Yohannis, rightly, felt betrayed, the more so as Italy promptly attempted to use the port as a base from which to extend its influence into Ethiopia. These hopes were dashed when the Italians were defeated in 1896 by Ethiopian forces of Emperor Menelik in the battle of Adua. The Italians accepted their reverse, and signed treaties with the Emperor in 1900, 1902 and 1908 establishing the border between their new colony of Eritrea and Ethiopia.

With the rise of fascism under Mussolini, Italy was determined to extend its presence in the Horn of Africa. In October 1935 Italy invaded Ethiopia. Despite the League of Nation's condemnation of the Italian action aggression it was not until the outbreak of the Second World War that the world took a decisive stand against their aggression. By 1941 Emperor Haile Selassie had been returned to his throne by a combined force of British, South African, Indian and Sudanese troops fighting alongside Ethiopian patriots. While Ethiopia was independent once more, the international community was left with the problem of what to do with Eritrea, which was under temporary British Military Administration. It took until 1952 for the United Nations finally to decide that the territory should be federated with Ethiopia. These matters might have rested. However, the Emperor's absolutist rule alienated the Eritrean population by a series of decrees. These included outlawing the teaching of Eritrean languages, dismantling industries and removing them to Addis Ababa and repressing the trade union movement and political parties allowed under the British military administration.

By the early 1960's this repression was being met by armed resistance from the Eritrean

Liberation Front. Despite this there was still considerable support inside Eritrea for unity with Ethiopia, particularly from among the Christian highlanders. In November 1962, after intense pressure from Addis Ababa, the federation was ended, and Eritrea was absorbed into Ethiopia. This served to spur on the opposition, led at first by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), whose origins can partly be traced back to the Muslim League of the 1940's. It found most of its support in the Muslim community, although some Christian highlanders, including the future leader of Eritrea, Isayas Afeworki, were also drawn into membership. Disputes within the ELF, and particularly hostility towards Christian recruits, resulted in the formation of the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) in the early 1970's. The EPLF rejected ethnic differences and stood for a secular and socialist state. An uneasy truce between the two ended in a bitter civil war that the EPLF finally won in 1981, forcing the ELF out of Eritrea.

Despite these divisions, Ethiopia's campaign against Eritrean self determination did not go well. Discontent inside the Ethiopian army over the conduct of the war and the handling of a devastating famine, led to the overthrow of the Emperor in 1974. Haile Selassie was killed and his rule was replaced by a committee, the Dergue. In time this came under the dictatorial rule of Mengistu Haile Mariam. After initial discussions with the Eritreans failed, the war was continued and intensified. But the events of 1974 led to a second, equally important development. Students from Tigray, angered by the lack of development of their province, and building on the ancient claims of Tigray to be the centre of the Ethiopian state, launched their own campaign to break Amhara rule. In 1975 the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was formed, and began waging its own war against Addis Ababa.

Nationalism

On the face of it the EPLF and the TPLF had much in common, since they both opposed Ethiopian absolutism, whether exercised by Haile Selassie or Mengistu Haile Mariam. In reality, however, the forms of national identity that the two movements pursued, and in a sense embodied, were rather different. These factors contributed to the origins of the current conflict. The Eritreans saw their struggle as an anti-colonial movement designed to regain a lost political independence. The Tigrayan leadership, on the other hand, moved from a Tigrayan nationalism to an acceptance that they were part of the Ethiopian empire. The TPLF came to see their rightful place as being at the heart of events in Ethiopia, as had occurred during the reign of the

Tigrean Emperor, Johannes IV. They regarded the current regime as an oppressive state, which should be overthrown, although they reserved the right to self-determination up to and including independence.

Eritrean identity was more complex and more difficult to forge precisely because it reflected a more diverse population. Eritrea's 3.5 million people are divided between two major religions and speak nine different languages. The Christian agriculturalists of the central highlands share a common language, religion and ethnic background with the mainly Tigrinya speakers inside the Ethiopian region of Tigray, south of the Mereb river. Inter-marriage between Tigrinya speakers of Eritrea and Tigray has traditionally been common. As an Eritrean put it in 1994, "Tigrayans are our brethren, part of our soul."⁶ These areas had been part of the Ethiopian Empire; the mainly Muslim lowland pastoralists, on the other hand, who live to the West, North and East of the highlands, had little in common with them. The lowlanders support for the ELF was predominantly motivated by a sense of alienation from a highland government, speaking a different language and espousing a different religion. The first decade of the armed struggle, from 1961 to 1974 was largely confined to the Muslim lowlands, and driven more by this sense of alienation than a positive sense of Eritrean nationalism.

The EPLF attempted to mobilise Eritrean opinion irrespective of religion, but came up against considerable difficulties. Not all of the Christians in the highlands supported the cause of independence, and as late as 1982 some were still willing to act as armed militia for the Ethiopian administration. Outside the highlands, despite the terror employed by the Mengistu regime, a majority within the Kunama and the Afar people were at best ambivalent about the EPLF, while some actually supported continued unity with Ethiopia. As a result the EPLF had to fight a vigorous campaign within its own community to win their support, or acquiescence.

While it recognised and even celebrated Eritrea's ethnic diversity, the EPLF resolutely refused to allow ethnicity to undermine its campaign for an independent state. This is not to suggest that ethnicity did not play any part in the Front's activities; great care was taken to represent the whole of the population within the leadership, even when they were not as well represented among its membership. The EPLF also spent a good deal of time and effort inculcating a wider sense of Eritrean identity in its new recruits.

⁶ *Identity Jilted or re-imagining identity?* Alemseged Abbay, Red Sea Press, 1998, p. 151

For the TPLF mobilisation in Tigray was relatively simple, since it could call upon an existing concept of Tigrayan nationalism and a history of oppression common to all the areas in which it operated. They shared a common language, religion and mode of livelihood. The TPLF's activities were an attempt to end Amhara rule. In Tigrayan eyes the Amhara had usurped the traditional power base of Ethiopian society, and transferred it from the ancient Tigrayan capital of Axum to Addis Ababa. In its first political programme, released in 1976, the TPLF specified that it was fighting for the independence of Tigray from Ethiopia.⁷ Shortly thereafter a TPLF congress repudiated the manifesto, but it was not publicly disowned for some time. This has been a recurrent issue for the movement, and has also been seized upon by its critics.

Since the TPLF's war aims, at least in the beginning, centred on achieving power in Tigray itself, its successes against the forces of the Dergue posed something of a problem for the movement, and led to considerable internal debate. Would the movement be satisfied with capturing Tigray, or would a hostile government in Addis Ababa require them to fight for the control of all Ethiopia? By early 1989 the TPLF exercised almost total control over the Tigrayan countryside, and was having increasing success against Ethiopian troops in garrisons across the province. In February 1989 TPLF forces, bolstered by an EPLF armoured brigade, took the area around Endaselasie, in western Tigray. Within two weeks garrisoned towns across the province were abandoned, sometimes without a fight.

The TPLF had achieved its initial objectives, and held most of Tigray. The question now was whether to press on to Addis Ababa. The movement had by this time established the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), together with a number of other Ethiopian organisations, with the aim of taking power in Addis Ababa. Its leadership had ambitions to rule the whole of Ethiopia but were frustrated by many of its own supporters who, to use Lenin's famous phrase, voted with their feet. In 1990 some 10,000 TPLF fighters spontaneously returned home.⁸ After months of protracted discussion the leadership managed to convince its followers that they should continue prosecuting the war. Tigrayan nationalism was, at least for the time being, to be subordinated within a wider Ethiopian identity.

⁷ *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia*, John Young, Cambridge University Press, 1997, P99 - 100

⁸ John Young, *The Tigray People's Liberation Front* in 'African Guerrillas', Christopher Clapham [ed.], James Currey, London 1998, p 48

The EPLF and the TPLF therefore relied upon completely different nationalisms. The Eritrean struggle, from 1961, generated a powerful sense of collective identity, as did the increasingly genocidal responses of the Dergue towards Tigrayans and Eritreans during the 1980s. It was nationalism forged in blood and with a clear objective in mind, namely an independent Eritrea.⁹ Moreover, it was a nationalism that could justly claim that it was shaped by its own experience of colonialism. Italian rule had fashioned Eritrea just as other European colonisers had brought into being the other states of the continent, after the scramble for Africa at the end of the nineteenth century. Moreover, Italian colonialism had brought with it some of the benefits of European rule, in the shape of modern port facilities, roads and railways. The city of Asmara had developed into a pleasant town, with coffee shops, an opera house and fine government buildings. Eritrea also had political parties and a labour movement, neither of which were to be found across the border. By the time the Italians were driven out by the Allied forces in 1941, they left behind a far more developed state than the feudal empire that existed in Ethiopia.

The Tigrayans also had much to be proud of. They could hark back to past greatness, including the rule of the last "Tigrayan" emperor and to a history of rebellions against imperial rule. The most important of these was the "woyane" rebellion of 1943 against Haile Selassie, from which the TPLF took its inspiration. But while Eritrean nationalism was clearly associated with a nation state, Tigrayan nationalism played a difficult balancing act - at once recognising the aspirations of the Tigrayan people, but within the framework of the wider Ethiopian state. It was a problem that was to dog the relationship between the TPLF and the EPLF.

Co-operation and confrontation

Opposition to the dictatorial rule exercised from Addis Ababa temporarily united the two liberation movements, but divisions existed on a number of grounds, including ideology, strategy

⁹ The difficulty for the EPLF was that the original cradle of the liberation movement was the Muslim pastoral areas to the north and west of Asmara. EPLF support came primarily from the Kebessa, the central Tigrean inhabited Christian agricultural areas of Eritrea - Akele Guzai, Serae and Hamasien regions. These had previously been an integral part of Ethiopia, sharing culture, history, language, religion and ethnicity with Tigray. The people of the Kebessa were slow to support the independence struggle against the Ethiopian government. The major factor, in the end, was the failure of the Ethiopian regime to produce an acceptable administration. See 'Identity Jilted or re-imagining identity', Alemesege Abbay, op cit. 'No medicine for the bite of a white snake: Notes on Nationalism and Resistance in Eritrea, 1890-1940', Tekeste Negash, University of Uppsala, 1986.

and tactics. Over time these grew in importance.

In 1974 as the founders of the TPLF were preparing to launch an armed struggle, they made contact with the Eritrean movements, an obvious source of assistance. They sought support from the EPLF, rather than the ELF. This was partly because another group of Tigrayans (The Tigray Liberation Front) had been established in 1972 – 73 and had formed a prior alliance with the ELF. From the EPLF the TPLF obtained promises of military training as well as arms, and, significantly, two EPLF veterans. They were Mahari Haile (who took the field name 'Mussie' and went on to be the first military commander) and Yemane Kidane (who took the name 'Jamaica') who is a member of the present Ethiopian government. The first group of TPLF trainees, twenty in all, was deployed to Eritrea at the same time.

This co-operation was fruitful and they learned much from the Eritreans. However, not all of it was to their liking. Ideology came to play a significant part in their differences. On the face of it both shared a Marxist analysis. In reality this was more of an impediment than a spur to unity. The EPLF's Marxism tended to be mainly 'third worldist' - long on anti-imperialist rhetoric and slogans. It considered the Soviet bloc 'strategic allies', even though they never received direct assistance from Moscow. States in the region that were close to the Soviets, like South Yemen provided some training and support in the initial stages. This disappeared after the Dergue seized power in 1974, since it had the backing of the Soviet Union.

The TPLF, on the other hand, was influenced by Maoism, and admired Albania as an example of an anti-Soviet socialist state. In the early 1980's Meles Zenawi rose to authority in the movement, and in 1984 the Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray (MLLT) was formed, as a vanguard party within the TPLF. The MLLT established links with what it saw as 'genuine' Eritrean Marxist groups, notably the Democratic Movement, later the Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Eritrea.¹⁰ The Democratic Movement (itself a faction of the ELF which broke apart after its defeat by the EPLF in 1981) was allowed to continue to have bases in the Tigray region until about 1996, much to the annoyance of the EPLF.

The United States had openly backed the emperor, Haile Selassie, but his fall and the assumption of power by a military committee, known as the Dergue, led to a change in

international support. Now it was Moscow, rather than Washington that backed the Ethiopian government. This tested the EPLF's ideological commitment to Marxism. However, the EPLF resisted labelling the Soviet Union as imperialist, realising that they might one day need its support as a permanent member of the Security Council if they were to facilitate the emergence of an independent Eritrea.¹¹ The Tigrayans had no such difficulties, and had no hesitation in condemning the Soviets as imperialist. Arcane as such arguments might now seem, they were an important source of friction between the two movements.¹²

Ideology was not the only issue to divide the movements. There was also the question of military tactics. While the TPLF's military strategy was one of mobile guerrilla warfare, the EPLF combined mobile with fixed positional warfare, based on a securely defended rear area. In this base area they established a considerable infrastructure, including schools, hospitals and workshops. As the Eritreans moved towards more conventional forms of warfare, the Tigrayans became increasingly critical of their tactics.

Matters came to a head during Ethiopia's 'Red Star' campaign of 1982. It was the most sustained offensive the government forces ever undertook and came within an ace of capturing the EPLF's base area, and with it Nakfa, the last town in rebel hands. Tigrayan fighters training with the EPLF were called upon to go into action, apparently without the permission of the TPLF Central Committee, who were furious at not being asked. After heroic efforts their combined forces just managed to repel the Ethiopian onslaught. Casualties were heavy, however, and the TPLF was deeply critical of the tactics employed by the EPLF, accusing them of moving too rapidly from guerrilla warfare to positional encounters with the enemy.

According to senior members of the TPLF, the Eritreans wanted TPLF fighters to remain in Eritrea to defend Eritrean positions. By this time, however, the TPLF leadership had become determined to overthrow the Dergue. Its strategy, therefore, was to make alliances with other

¹⁰ *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia: the Tigray People's Liberation Front, 1975 –1991*. Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 157.

¹¹ In August 1977, the EPLF summed up its position. 'The democratic forces of the Eritrean revolution led by the EPLF, while criticising and opposing the erroneous stands and baseless slanders of the socialist countries and democratic forces, have not wavered from its principled solidarity and alliances with these strategic friends.' 'The *present political situation*', Memorandum, August 1978. Selected Articles from EPLF publications (1973-1980), EPLF, May 1982, p. 44

¹² See John Young, *The Tigray and Eritrean Liberation Fronts: a History of Tensions and Pragmatism*.

Ethiopian opposition movements and to take the military struggle South to the gates of the capital. They therefore withdrew their fighters from Eritrea. This did nothing to endear them to their allies, but worse was to follow.

In the mid 1980's the simmering differences culminated in a major public row. Insults were exchanged. The TPLF defined the EPLF as "social imperialist". The EPLF in turn labelled the TPLF "childish". This row masked a serious theoretical difference with major political ramifications for the national question in Ethiopia.¹³ The issue was which of its peoples had the right to self-determination up to, and including, secession. It had been a critical issue for the student radicals at Addis Ababa university in the 1960's and 1970's - many of whom went on to lead the Eritrean and Tigrayan liberation movements. The TPLF recognised Eritrea's unique status as a former colonial state. But they also came to promote the right to secession of the various nationalities within Ethiopia and - far more controversially - of those within Eritrea as well. During its exchange of polemics with the EPLF in 1986/87, the TPLF stated that "a truly democratic" Eritrea would have to respect "the right of its own nationalities up to and including secession".¹⁴

This appalled and infuriated the EPLF, which argued that it was precisely because Eritrea was a former colonial state that they had the right to independence. They argued that Ethiopian nationalities had a right to self-determination, but not to independence, as this was conditional on a colonial experience.¹⁵ The EPLF was aware that any widening of the definition of self-determination to include independence for Ethiopian nationalities would detract from Eritrea's special status, as a colonially defined territory. Moreover, giving Eritrean nationalities the right to secede would also jeopardise Eritrea's future cohesion, not least because the Tigrayan and Afar peoples live on both sides of the border.

The TPLF argued that the EPLF's refusal to recognise the right of its own nationalities to secede was an example of its undemocratic nature. For this reason the TPLF regarded its relationship with the EPLF as tactical, rather than enduring, and consequently the TPLF provided support to other Eritrean movements, such as the Democratic Marxist League of Eritrea.

Journal of Modern African Studies, 34,1. (1996) p. 115

¹³See Duffield, M and Prendergast, J. *Without Troops and Tanks, humanitarian intervention in Ethiopia and Eritrea*. Red Sea Press, 1994, p100.

¹⁴ Peoples Voice, 1986, Special Issue

According to EPLF documents, the TPLF's flirtation with other movements came as a surprise and a disappointment and led to a rupture in their alliance.

'...the TPLF had concluded that the EPLF was not a democratic organisation and that its relationship with the EPLF was "tactical". The EPLF had thought that its co-operation with the TPLF was genuine and not based on temporary tactical considerations. And so, when the TPLF's secret stand became public the EPLF realised its naiveté and although it did not regret its past actions, decided to break its relationship with the TPLF and not enter into polemics with it.'¹⁶

It was at this critical juncture, when relations were at their most difficult, that the movements sought to resolve the question of just where the border ran between Eritrea and Tigray. For a long time this had appeared of little real importance since both rebel groups ranged freely across the border, as did the Ethiopian army. Very little has been heard of the negotiations that took place in late 1984, but a founder member of the TPLF, Ghidey Zeratsion, has offered an insight into the negotiations.¹⁷ He indicates why the issue became so critical for the Eritreans.

"The border issue was raised for the first time at the meeting between the TPLF and EPLF in November 1984. At this meeting, the EPLF raised the issue and wanted to demarcate the boundary based on international agreements and documents. The areas under consideration were Badme, Tsorena-Zalambessa, and Bada. The TPLF agreed that there are areas between Ethiopia and Eritrea where they are not clearly demarcated. At the same time it argued that it was not prepared for such discussion and had not made documentary studies on the issue. Furthermore, the TPLF argued that it was not in a position to sign border agreements on behalf of Ethiopia because it did not have the legitimacy to do so. And hence, the TPLF proposed to

¹⁵ *Adulis*, May 1985

¹⁶ *EPLF Political Report and NDP*. March 1987, pp. 148-9. Quoted in John Young, 'The Tigray and Eritrean Peoples Liberation Fronts: A history of tensions and pragmatism', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 34,1.1996, p. 115

¹⁷ Ghidey Zeratsion was a senior member of the TPLF until he left for Europe in 1987 when he fell out with the rest of the leadership. Some Ethiopians suggest that a deal between the TPLF and EPLF was concluded as early as 1977, but offer little explanation as to why conflict between the two movements continued long after that date. Belai Abbai, *Ethiopia betrayed: Meles and co. cede sovereign territory to Eritrea by secret agreements*. Unpublished paper.

maintain the existing administrative areas as they are and prepare the necessary documents for the final demarcation after the fall of the Derg. The EPLF was convinced by the argument and both agreed to postpone the demarcation and maintain the existing administrative regions.

One may ask why the border issue was so important for EPLF while it was still entrenched in the Sahel area?

The EPLF was very much constrained by its ability to get recruits for its army. It has been rounding up and forcefully recruiting people all over Eritrea. In such a situation, border areas like Badme were safe havens for people who wanted to escape recruitment. At the same time, there are a number of Eritreans living in these areas who were attractive for EPLF's quest of recruits. As a result, the EPLF was intruding these border areas and provoking a reaction from the TPLF. At one instant the two fronts were at the verge of war if the EPLF had not withdrawn. The EPLF could not afford to open another front while it was confined in the Sahel trenches by the Derg's army.¹⁸

By early 1985 relations between the two movements had become mired in distrust. As the relationship deteriorated the TPLF began providing assistance to Eritrean movements hostile to

¹⁸ *"The Ideological and Political Causes of the Ethio-Eritrean War. An Insiders View"* Ghidey Zeratsion. Paper for the International Conference on the Ethio-Eritrean Crises, Amsterdam, July 24, 1999. "Ghidey Zeratsion concludes:

"To understand why the TPLF reacted violently to the intrusions, let us see what TPLF's policy was on the border issue (from my personal notes of the joint MLLT and TPLF leadership 03.01.1978 Ethiopian cal.). It states as follows (interpretation is mine):

1. Our knowledge of the border issue between Eritrea and Tigray is not well supported by documents. The TPLF should make an endeavour to have a clear knowledge and understanding of the border.
2. If the EPLF trespasses the present borders, even if we are not sure that the contested areas belong to Tigray, we will consider the EPLF as an aggressor and we will go to war.
3. If the documents for demarcating the border areas, which now are under the Tigrean administration, prove the contrary we will consider them as a Tigrean territory because they have been under 'effective administration of Tigray'. The identity of a people is determined by the unity and common history created under the same administration. This type of areas, which are under the Tigrean administration (areas in Belesa- Muna and in Erob, which in the maps are shown within the boundaries of Eritrea) will be under common administration of TPLF and EPLF. If the EPLF rejects this and tries to administer it alone, we will consider the EPLF as an aggressor."

the EPLF.¹⁹

In June 1985 the EPLF decided to teach the TPLF a brutal lesson in power politics. The Eritreans cut the TPLF's supply lines to the Sudan that passed through their territory.²⁰ This was done at the height of one of the worst famine in modern times, denying Tigrayas access to food aid at a crucial juncture. Nothing was said publicly about the incident at the time, but it is not hard to imagine the animosity that it generated. The TPLF responded with characteristic efficiency, mobilising 100,000 peasants to build an alternative route through to Sudan that did not go via Eritrea.

While the EPLF leadership still refuses to speak about these events, Tigrayans recall it with great bitterness. As one put it: "...the EPLF behaviour was a savage act.....I do not hesitate to categorise it as a 'savage act'. It must be recorded in history like that!"²¹

Despite this rupture the imperatives of war continued to drive the two movements to co-operate with each other. By 1987 both Fronts had had considerable military success, but further advances required co-ordinated action. In April 1988, after four days of discussions in Khartoum, a joint statement was issued, indicating that their differences had been set aside. At the same time there was no suggestion that they had been resolved. This was a military pact, not an alliance of like-minded organisations – a point stressed by the TPLF's Yemane Kidane. The two fronts were not reconciled ideologically or politically: "Never, never. Only a military relationship. Ideologically never, politically never. We maintained our differences. So we always say it is a tactical relationship, not a strategic relationship. If they call it strategic, it is up to them."²²

Military co-operation led to military success. By the time the Eritreans finally took Asmara in May 1991 and the Ethiopian rebels marched into Addis Ababa, supported by units of the EPLF, the

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ The Eritreans also shut down the TPLF's radio station which had been operating from EPLF controlled territory.

²¹ Tekleweini Assefa, Head of the Relief Society of Tigray, interviewed in *Identity jilted or re-imagining identity?* Alemseged Abbay, Red Sea Press, 1998, p 129.

²² Yemane Kidane in *Brothers at war: making sense of the Eritrean-Ethiopian War*. Tekeste Negash and Kjetil Tronvoll. James Currey, Oxford, 2000, p. 20.

movements had forged strong bonds.²³ Their members had fought side by side against appalling odds, while their leadership had come to know and rely upon one another, even if past differences had not been forgotten. Divisions remained, but there appeared every chance that these could be overcome, given the goodwill that existed. Agreements were made in 1991 and 1993 allowing the free movement of labour across their common border; for Eritrea's use of Ethiopian currency, the birr; for regulated Ethiopian use of the port of Assab to minimise the effects of its loss of a coastline, and so on. Above all, the TPLF honoured its promise to allow an Eritrean independence referendum in 1993, despite strong hostility from many sections of Ethiopian society. When the Ethiopian Prime Minister went to Asmara to take part in the formal declaration of independence in late May 1993 in his capacity as an Ethiopian head of state, Meles offered a warning to his audience. Although the speech appealed for reconciliation, it went on to call for both sides not to "scratch the wounds" of the past. At the time it struck an odd note, since both movements appeared firm comrades, having come through such difficult battles together. Nonetheless, the speech was well received in Asmara and relations between the two capitals appeared to be on a firm footing.

Indeed, co-operation between the two governing parties was so strong that a senior Eritrean could seriously look forward to the day when the two countries were united once more in a federal structure.²⁴ Extraordinary as such sentiments might seem today, they genuinely reflected the optimism of the time.

From the euphoria of liberation to a cooling of relations

Even at the moment of victory, cracks were appearing in the relationship. The EPLF expelled from its soil the Ethiopian army of occupation. It also insisted that tens of thousands of Ethiopian citizens, who had been involved in the Ethiopian administration, leave as well. Between 1991 and 1992 around 120,000 Ethiopians were forced to go, although a large number who had not participated in Addis Ababa's rule were allowed to stay. Some of those who were expelled had worked in Eritrea all their lives. Some knew no other home. One Ethiopian complained: 'The

²³ Even this co-operation could be a cause of friction. 'In the early years of its rule in Addis Ababa, from 1991 to 1995, the TPLF was still dependent on its ally to keep the rather hostile Ethiopian political and military situation under control. To many non-Tigrayan Ethiopians the presence of Eritrean forces in Ethiopia during those years was resentful and a cause of discomfort.' Elias Habte Selassie. *The Ethiop-Eritrean Conflict: Its causes and consequences*. Life and Peace Institute, Nairobi, Kenya, unpublished paper, p. 4

Eritrean soldiers told us we were strangers. But I was born in Eritrea like everyone else in my family.²⁵ Many were not allowed to take their possessions when they left, and some had to abandon houses, businesses and cars.

The deportees included a significant number of Eritrean born women and children who had married or cohabited with civil servants and soldiers from other parts of Ethiopia. It was made clear that 'collaborators' of this kind were considered traitors, and some who were not expelled suffered social ostracism. The newly installed Ethiopian government neither officially complained, nor retaliated.²⁶ It continued to allow around half a million Ethiopians of Eritrean origin to live inside Ethiopia. Reportedly, the Eritrean community inside Addis Ababa had been one of the most reliable sources of intelligence for the Tigrayans and their allies when they took the capital.

The Ethiopian victory threw up its own difficulties. Eritrean support for the Tigrayans in capturing Addis Ababa was seen as a sign by many Ethiopians that the TPLF was in the EPLF's pocket. This was particularly strongly felt among Amhara, whom the Tigrayans displaced from power. Their accusation that Meles Zenawi was too pro Eritrean in his policies was a potential liability to the new Prime Minister. He could be seen as either failing to be robust enough in his defence of Ethiopian interests, or - from the perspective of the TPLF - insufficiently strong in prosecuting policies that favoured Tigray.

The question of secession, referred to above, also served to drive the movements apart, since their views of state administration were diametrically opposed. The new Ethiopian government reformed the state along ethnic lines. The constitution of 1995 allowed for 'a voluntary union of the nationalities of Ethiopia' which included the right to secession.²⁷ It was a position that was abhorrent to the EPLF.²⁸ By contrast, the Eritreans, building on their vision of their country as a product of colonialism, opted for a unitary state. The Eritrean constitution specifically forbids religious or ethnically based parties. In practice neither government tolerated much in the way of dissent. Political parties, other than the People's Front for Democracy and Justice - the

²⁴ *Eritrea and Ethiopia, from conflict to co-operation* Amare Tekle (ed.), Red Sea Press, 1994, p. 17

²⁵ *The Independent* 25 July 1991

²⁶ Eritrean officials account for this by saying that this purging of agents of the former government was a strategy worked out with the TPLF, who carried out their own purge of Tigray.

²⁷ J. Abbink, *Briefing: The Eritrea-Ethiopian Border Dispute* African Affairs, Vol. 97, 1998. p. 556

²⁸ Negash and Tronvoll, op cit, p.15 – 16.

successor to the EPLF - were not permitted to operate in Eritrea. In Ethiopia political parties were tolerated, but tightly controlled.

Despite these tensions the outward signs were that all was well between Addis Ababa and Asmara. Government delegations came and went, and life proceeded as normal. Yet relations between the governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea were not put upon the kind of solid footing that would stand the strains of office. Part of the problem was the fact that Eritrea achieved de facto independence in May 1991, but this was not formalised until May 1993. In the interim there were few official channels of communication.²⁹

After 1993 the leaderships of the two victorious movements continued to treat relations between the two countries as if they were relations between liberation movements, or even between individuals. This may have been because both sides distrusted institutions, or because of a lack of experience of government structures.³⁰ Hence the bureaucratic infrastructure that should support interstate relations was either not established or else sidelined. If President Isaias had a serious issue that he wished to raise concerning Ethiopia he simply contacted Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, and vice versa. The kind of institutional checks and balances that might have served as restraining influences on both leaders in democratic states were either poorly developed, or entirely absent.

This weakened the relations between the states in two crucial ways. Firstly, it left plenty of scope for misinterpretations and recriminations. Secondly, it meant that if the relationships between individuals broke down, there was no official position to fall back upon. Even when committees were established, they operated with such informality that when challenged by the critical events that led to the recent conflict, they failed to function effectively.

While the Eritreans and Tigrayans were coming to grips with the administration of their countries events were taking place on their border. After 1991 a series of localised, small-scale disputes took place in a number of locations. These were the sort of conflicts that flare up along any ill-defined border that is straddled by farming communities. Frequently these happened during the ploughing season, as farmers clashed over the exact boundaries of their fields. Eritrean farmers, living in border areas under Tigrayan administration, found themselves being penalised

²⁹ For example, it was only after 1993 that a Joint Ministerial Consultative Committee was established.

³⁰ Ruth Iyob. *The Ethiopian – Eritrean conflict: diasporic versus hegemonic states in the Horn of Africa, 1991 – 2000*. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 38,4 p. 670

for infractions of Ethiopian laws.³¹ In earlier times village elders would have sorted out these kinds of incidents, for in reality these were 'intra-village' disputes, rather than cross border conflicts. Traditional approaches to conflict-resolution were well established, tried and tested means of reducing tension. But since 1991 these methods had largely been abandoned in the border areas, and their place had been taken by government to government, or even party to party meetings. Low level discussions did take place between local officials in an attempt to resolve these matters, but to little avail. According to the Eritreans, no fewer than six such meetings took place between November 1993 and March 1996.³²

When these talks failed to resolve matters a further series of discussions were held, this time involving senior party officials at a regional level. Again these failed to produce the desired results. Following a more serious conflict over the Bada area of southern Eritrea, President Isaias Afwerki wrote to Prime Minister Meles Zenawi on 25th of August 1997, proposing that a Joint Border Commission be established at governmental level.³³ Ethiopia presents a rather different picture of these events, maintaining that the initiative for establishing the Commission came from its side, following a deterioration in relations '...as a consequence of economic issues,...'³⁴

The first meeting of the Commission took place in Asmara on 13th November 1997. The Eritrean side evidently pressed for a speedy resolution of the border issue, given the deteriorating situation on the ground. According to Ethiopia, a common understanding was reached at the meeting:

- “To assign to a technical sub-committee drawn from both countries to examine the border question and to report to the commission to be formed.
- That each party should declare to the other side the list of its members to be represented in the sub-committee.
- That both sides respect the status quo and take measures to alleviate impending border disputes until such time that a lasting solution is attained.”³⁵

³¹ Ruth Iyob, *op cit.*, p 665

³² *A war without cause* Network of Eritrean Professionals in Europe, London 1998, p. 5

³³ *A war without cause*, *op cit.* p 8

³⁴ *Ethiopian Foreign Ministry Statement*, August 12, 1998

³⁵ *ibid.*

Despite this no further meeting took place until the 8th May 1998, with the Eritreans blaming Ethiopian procrastination for the delay.

In the meantime an apparently minor, unrelated event occurred that convinced the Eritreans that the Tigrayans were up to no good. The German government aid agency, the GTZ, operated in three regions of Ethiopia. Early in 1997 the Regional Education Board of Tigray approached the GTZ. They were asked to help fund the printing of a new map of Tigray for distribution to primary schools. The GTZ agreed and printed 1,000 maps with its logo on the bottom. The map turned out to be deeply controversial, for it portrayed the border with Eritrea in a completely new light. Several areas that had been the subject of the heated discussions between the two countries were now shown as being part of Tigray. For the Eritreans this was proof positive of the hostile intentions of the Tigrayans. Although it was the Tigrayan regional authority that undertook the printing, the Eritreans believed that this could not have taken place without the collusion of the government in Addis. Some interpreted it as the result of the long held TPLF dream of a 'Greater Tigray', that would encompass all Tigrean speakers, as outlined in the TPLF manifesto of 1976.³⁶

The German government was horrified that they were caught up in this controversy, and came in for considerable criticism, both in the Horn of Africa and in the German parliament, where several MP's supported the Eritrean cause. The GTZ insisted that all it had done was to finance the project, and that they had no responsibility whatsoever for the map's contents, which was drawn up by the Ethiopian Mapping Authority.

It was against this background that a high level Eritrean delegation left Asmara on the 7th of May 1998 for a meeting of the Border Commission the following day. Led by Defence Minister Sebhat Efrem, it was en route to Addis Ababa when the incident at Badme took place. At first the clash was apparently not regarded as particularly serious, and the Commission's discussions proceeded according to plan. Both sides say the meeting on the 8th went well. According to the Ethiopians it was agreed that two members of the Commission would meet in

³⁶ *A war without cause*. op cit. p. 10 – 11 Some Eritreans go further, arguing that the entire conflict was a deliberate attempt by the TPLF provoke a war so as to attain the long held goal of a Greater Tigray. This view portrays the TPLF as 'trapping' Eritrea into launching military retaliation after the initial clash in May 1998. Elias Habte Selassie, *The Ethio-Eritrean Conflict: its causes and consequences*. Life and Peace

Asmara in a month's time to hammer out an agreement and report back to the larger group. They say that it was further agreed that Eritrean armed units that had crossed into Ethiopian territory since May 6th would return to Eritrea and that the status quo ante would prevail until a final agreement had been reached.³⁷ When the meeting ended the Commission agreed to meet at 10.00 a.m. the following day. But when the Ethiopians arrived to pick up their guests, they discovered that the Eritreans had checked out of their hotel, and flown back to Asmara. In Ethiopian eyes this was a clear indication of a lack of good faith on the part of their guests.³⁸

Economic relations deteriorate

Economics also helped to sour relations between the two states. An examination of the economic issues is crucial to both the origins and implications of the conflict. The disputes between the two administrations over their economic relations were the only publicly acknowledged differences between Ethiopia and Eritrea prior to the outbreak of hostilities. Indeed, until then relations between the two countries appeared to be remarkably good, with economic co-operation reinforcing the political ties that had been forged during the years preceding the overthrow of the Dergue. Open animosity over bilateral trade relations surfaced in late 1997 following Eritrea's introduction of its new currency, the Nakfa. While apparently not a causal factor in the immediate crisis of mid-May, the new currency and ensuing dispute over trade relations had three consequences.

Firstly, the introduction of Eritrea's new currency necessitated a clear delineation of the border from mid-1997 in order to regulate cross border trade, taxation and foreign exchange flows. Secondly, the new currency prompted a dispute in late 1997 over the precise nature of post-Nakfa trade relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia, tarnishing relations between the two administrations. Thirdly, friction was exacerbated as the currency and trade dispute severely disrupted the flow of goods, remittances and labourers across the border, generating new political pressures on both governments. Taken together, these economic factors appear to have rekindled old animosities between the ruling groups of both countries, eroding their willingness to compromise or negotiate over disagreements.

Institute, Nairobi, Kenya, unpublished paper, p. 7

³⁷ *Background to and Chronology of Events on the Eritrean Aggression against Ethiopia*, Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 24th June 1998

³⁸ Author's discussions with members of the Ethiopian government.

The conflict's most significant short-term economic consequence was the suspension of all trade and communications links between Ethiopia and Eritrea. In December 1997 a de-facto, partial trade embargo was applied, largely at Asmara's instigation, following the dispute over the introduction of Eritrea's new currency. Nevertheless, normal air, road and telecommunications links remained open. It was only after the fighting at Badme, in mid-May 1998, that the rupture became total as the Ethiopian authorities suspended all links and halted the use of the ports of Massawa and Assab, for foreign trade, which has since been channelled via Djibouti.

Cultural factors

A number of factors came into play in this complex relationship that can broadly be called cultural. One could be described as a question of perception. The EPLF had given training and succour to the TPLF in its early stages, and tended to treat the movement as its 'younger brother'. Ordinary Tigrayans not involved in the politics of the Fronts also felt patronised by Eritreans. They had for many years taken low paid, low status jobs in Eritrea, as casual labourers and domestic servants. Tigrayans were denigrated as 'agame' - a term that implied that they were all uncouth peasants.³⁹ Most Tigrayan men working in Eritrea were hired as labourers. Some got work slaughtering farm animals, while others took up jobs such as woodcutters, potters and shepherds. Women were hired as waitresses, housemaids and washer-women. Many prostitutes in Asmara were Tigrayan. Eritreans, on the other hand, used their skills and capital to buy into or build up businesses in Ethiopia. Class, privilege, snobbery and envy were unspoken elements that ate away at the relationship between the Fronts.

A further issue that is easily ignored is the question of communication. Neither Ethiopians nor Eritreans are given to clear, open dialogue. Secrecy, always a necessity for guerrilla movements, was almost turned into a cult during the long years of fighting the Ethiopian government. Often this was required by the unfolding events. Eritreans, for example, insisted that all recruits take a nom de guerre, and forbade all discussion of family and origins. This was vital given that the entire Eritrean population numbered around three million people, and it would have been all too easy to extract information that might have endangered families still living behind enemy lines. But secrecy was not thrown off once the exigencies of war came to an end.

³⁹ The term is derived from the name of one of the poorest areas of Tigray, which abuts onto Eritrea.

While this cult of confidentiality may have served both movements well during the years of turmoil, it allowed for misunderstandings to multiply and for rumour to replace open debate that might have resolved genuine differences.

Finally there was the machismo that was an accretion of the long years of struggle. Both movements and both leaderships had been hardened by battle. They had developed a resolution that saw them through the most difficult of times. The Fronts inculcated in their members a determination to press ahead, no matter the cost. Anything less than a steely will was seen as a sign of weakness. This too militated against resolving differences through compromise.

None of these issues were insurmountable. Given time and patience they could and probably would have been resolved. But instead of eliminating their differences after they came to power in 1991 they were allowed to accumulate. Some analysts who knew both Fronts well warned that there could be trouble in store. John Young predicted as early as 1996 that "....political differences between the TPLF and the EPLF during their years of struggle will be reflected in their present and future relations, and as a result they may be far more problematic than is generally imagined." ⁴⁰

By mid-1998 old differences, compounded by fresh divisions and irritations, had turned former allies into bitter adversaries. ⁴¹

⁴⁰John Young op cit., 1996. p 120

⁴¹ "The events of 6 May 1998, when armed Tigrayan and Eritrean units confronted each other in Badme, took place amidst a heightened sense of resentment by both Eritreans and northern Ethiopians. When the bullets were fired, they were not only a cause for future hostilities, but a tragic consequence of an ill-defined and misused alliance that had outgrown its wartime *raison-d'être*....As the border war escalated into aerial bombardments, mass deportations of civilians, and the massing of troops on the border, it became clear to observers, mediators and the world at large that the old fraternal centre had not held, and that the alliance had ceased to exist."
Ruth Lyob op cit pp 675 – 676.