

War of the Famished Worlds

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In the land of the good

The war with Eritrea left Ethiopia's capital unscarred. In fact, walk the streets of Addis Ababa and you would be hard pressed to believe that there had ever been a war. Yet amid its functional buildings and offbeat architectural experiments there remains something just beneath the surface that is more than slightly dysfunctional. The glass facades of the high rises have turned grey from dust and smog. And the painted walls come away in flakes and cracks eat away at the concrete. It's as if time here simultaneously races forward and backward, and the more one penetrates the city the more the wide, asphalt streets give way to nests of gravel roads and slums. After a week of wrestling with maps and hand-sketched directions, I give up trying to find the heart of the city, as if it were either a rumor or a well-guarded family secret.

Ask the people living here about the war and you'll be left with much the same impression. 'What's the point in bothering about a war that happened ten years ago,' they say and fold their arms. And still none of the men leave who have gathered around to hear me ask my questions, as if it were not only matter of curiosity but also of grave importance to hear the next. So I ask again about the war. They shrug their shoulders and shake their heads, saying, 'Nobody cares about that anymore.'

It isn't until a young PhD student invites me to the campus cafeteria for a cup of tea that I hear a different opinion. Natnael*, the student, wears an old-fashioned three-piece-suit and wire-rim glasses that match his Victorian table manners.

'You have to understand,' he says, looking every inch the voice of reason, 'We Ethiopians are open and hospitable people, but Eritrea continues to be a sore subject—a national trauma that no one wishes to speak about in public.'

Natnael orders his tea and, smiling, asks me if I'll have the same.

'I'll have a beer,' I say.

'No tea?'

I shake my head: 'Beer.'

Natnael continues to go on smiling at me, but all the same I can't help thinking that I've upset his view of Europeans. As he takes a sip of tea he tells me that his research is only indirectly concerned with history and society.

'I'm afraid I really can't be of much help to you,' he says, 'but if you want to hear the truth, I suggest you would be better informed meeting a friend of mine, Tesfay*.'

Tesfay as it turns out is an editor for the *Ethiopian Herald*, the largest national newspaper, and has written a number of articles about the war. Natnael has arranged for us to meet in the cantina of the *Herald* skyscraper, though by the color of the air pressing against the windows 'smogscrapper' might be the more appropriate name.

Tesfay arrives hurrying into the cafeteria half-an-hour late. He's a massive man with a pockmarked face and a drooping right eye that makes him look like Forest Whitaker's portrayal of a violent and power-hungry Idi Amin in *The Last King of Scotland*. Suddenly nervous, I return Tesfay's bone-crushing handshake.

'I have a lot to tell you, but first,' he says, looking around the room, 'we'll have to find a

“secure” table in one of the corners.’

Tesfay leads the way to a table beneath the stereo speakers. The ubiquitous bombast of an Amharic pop song plays loudly as he looks about him and then drops his voice to a conspiratorial whisper.

‘I’ve nothing good to say about the Eritrean government,’ he murmurs, ‘but it’s Ethiopia that’s responsible for the violence. Of course, it goes without saying that this isn’t the position represented in my articles. In Ethiopia,’ he says, ‘we’re paid for our loyalty not for our convictions.’

The official „truth“

To Western eyes the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea might appear as one of the more absurd conflicts in all of Africa’s rich history of seemingly senseless conflicts. Between the years 1998 and 2000, these two countries—two of the poorest—fought for control over a town in the Horn of Africa called Badme. The fighting saw as many as 100,000 killed. And yet Badme, the alleged *casus belli*, is nothing more than a one-camel desert town, of no strategic or economic importance, with neither oil nor agricultural resources—with no resources whatsoever. So why then was there war at all?

In Ethiopia the official version is quick to blame Eritrea’s President Isayas Afewerki. Afewerki, so this side of the argument runs, is a ruthless Saddam Hussein-style tyrant who has ruled Eritrea with an iron fist ever since the country gained independence from Ethiopia in 1993. And it is Afewerki who is claimed to have given the order on May 6, 1998, for the Eritrean army to occupy Badme, which at that time was enjoying peace under an Ethiopian administration. Ethiopia’s Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, of course, attempted to resolve the problem through diplomacy, but Afewerki maintained that Badme had always belonged to Eritrea and refused to recall his troops. The Ethiopian government was left with little choice, and on June 4, 1998, declared war on its tyrannical little neighbor to the north.

At the time this skewed version of events was by and large taken for fact by the Western media. Perhaps this was because Ethiopia appeared to the West as more of a democracy than the authoritarian Eritrea. Or perhaps it was because the Ethiopians controlled and manipulated the media a little less crudely than their opponents. After all, the official mandate at the time allowed for war correspondence by both domestic and foreign journalists.

‘The war correspondence was a joke,’ says Brehan*, a journalist for an association of independent newspapers in Addis Ababa. Brehan is forty-five years old, strongly built, but, apart from the few grey hairs in his mustache, he looks much younger. Surprisingly he speaks with a soft voice. And when he wants to emphasize his words, he speaks even more quietly, as if he would want to be absolutely sure that one is forced to listen. ‘If we heard gunfire, we weren’t allowed to leave the camp. If we wanted to write about what was going on in combat, we were given reports handed down to us from the military command documenting the success stories of our heroic armed forces. And if we wanted to know where our troops were really located or how many casualties they sustained, we had to contact our editors back in their offices at Addis.’

According to Brehan the control of released facts didn’t stop with journalists. Even historiographers had been forced to bury the truth beneath official propaganda.

‘The beginning of the conflict was dated to coincide with the altercations in Badme on May 5, 1998, but the fact is that two Ethiopian battalions had already crossed the Eritrean border the year before and occupied the town of Adi Murg. Believe me, there is method to such lapses of memory.’

Despite Brehan’s theories or perhaps because of them, one day remains particularly clear in

everyone's memory. On June 5, 1998, four Ethiopian MIG-23 fighter jets screamed toward what some call the devil's den, Asmara, the capital of Eritrea. Missiles and explosives lit up the city like a bonfire: the move was an unmistakable sign of war. Less than an hour later Eritrea responded, blitzing an air force base in Mek'ele, the capital of Tigray province. The blitz, however, went horribly wrong when a cluster bomb hit wide of the mark and detonated in a primary school, killing forty-seven children.

In the land of the evil

In Asmara I quickly find out that it takes a lot of patience and anise liqueur before an Eritrean will talk about his country's political situation. And even when he does, it won't be long before he starts glancing nervously over his shoulder and asking if we can change the subject and the location. As I am reminded time and again, it is enough to be seen with a foreigner to cause all sorts of rumors and anyone could be an informer. The German embassy in Asmara offers me this advice: 'For heaven's sake, don't tell anyone you're a journalist. We really don't feel like bailing you out of prison.'

Alem*, a writer for the English edition of the sole national newspaper *The Eritrean Profile*, agrees to talk with me only after the *passeggiata* has ended and apart from a handful of prostitutes the streets will be deserted.

Until then I spend my time admiring Asmara: the high street lined with palm trees, Saint Joseph's Cathedral, the Opera House, and the countless cafés and bars that look in as good a shape as when they were built in the 1920s and 30s. With its architecture and its *macchiatos* and its ancient Gaggia machines the city is a journey back in time to the colonial future envisioned by Mussolini, and it remains what the colonialists had dubbed it—*Piccola Roma*.

Around four in the afternoon the streets become noticeably more crowded. Seats at the sidewalk cafés along Harnet Avenue are quickly taken, the coffees ordered, and then the rusty, red city buses arrive to mark the beginning of the *passeggiata*, the Italian tradition of a gentle evening's stroll. Drove of young and beautiful people disembark from the buses and, dressed and veiled to the teeth, turn the central streets of Asmara into a catwalk of who-walks-with-whom gossip and the latest fashions from London, Paris, and, of course, Milan. Three hours later the show is over. The buses are gone and the coffees are cleared away to make room for the first orders of anise liqueur. It seems life here is an Eritrean version of *la dolce vita*. And it's hard then to believe the Ethiopian claims that this city is supposed to be the devil's den.

At last the time comes for me to meet Alem. Thirty-five years old, he looks more Italian than African. And even by Eritrean standards he's gangly, almost wiry, with soul patch beneath his lower lip that might just as well be whiskers overlooked while shaving. The side streets he takes me down are poorly lit. And, much to my surprise, one would think otherwise in an authoritarian regime, the prostitutes have come out, wearing tee-shirts and jeans and flip-flops, loitering beneath the street lamps.

The first question I ask Alem is about the seemingly good life in Asmara in the absence of a democracy. He responds that it would be wrong to believe that just because a particular form of government has been successful in the First World it can be simply exported to the Third World. 'A fur coat may be good for Antarctica,' he explains, 'but in the Sahara you'd die in it.'

'Well, what about freedom of the press?' I ask.

'We tried that before the war and it didn't work. The few so-called "independent" newspapers were controlled by opposition groups and demagogues, so it made sense to restrict freedom of the press.'

‘You mean abolish it,’ I correct him.

Alem shrugs his shoulders.

The only words of criticism he dares to utter are disguised in his praise for the things the government has accomplished: the AIDS, malaria and landmine campaigns which point to the presence of disease and war; the introduction of a compulsory education to wide-spread ignorance; the construction of new roads to a lacking infrastructure; the establishment of a free trade zone in Massawa to the corruptions of big business; and the social reintegration programs for street children and prostitutes to the absence of opportunities for work.

‘If we had room for improvement,’ Alem offers, ‘it would be in the way we establish foreign relations. Or perhaps we could authorize a modest democratization process. Or slowly open up the markets. Or even show a bit more generosity towards dissidents and the Eritrean diaspora.’

Suddenly he cringes as he spies his supervisor on the street.

‘Shit! That’s the last thing I needed!’

After that chance encounter the collective paranoia that Afewerki’s regime fosters is too strong for Alem and he is forced to end our talk. As I walk home I feel how the paranoia has already spread over to me like a virus: a footfall on the pavement sets my body in a sweat and sends my mind racing.

If it is true that people live *la dolce vita* in Asmara, this is only because the economy remains hooked up to a monetary life support in the form of remittance money sent home by Eritrean exiles. Otherwise most have lost faith in making their fortunes here and only want one thing—to get out.

I met Gabriel*, a soldier since the war, in Filifil where he has been stationed in the woods to guard a hardly used country road. For this he is paid 500 nakfa or approximately £20 a month—an amount impossible to live on even if you restrict yourself to the minimum needs. When he must pay for his own food, Gabriel chooses to limit himself to water and *injera*, Eritrea’s national dish, which is a pancake-like, slightly sour bread that would usually be topped with meat and vegetable stew. And Gabriel not only has himself to feed, but also must provide for his wife and his nine-year-old daughter back in Asmara.

More a slip of a boy than a man, an altar boy’s robe would suit him better than a military uniform. And it’s true, Gabriel had never wanted to become a soldier, but like the majority of the population was forced to join the army. Young and old, women and men, almost everyone I meet in Eritrea is in one of the mandatory national services. These services consist of the military, of a training camp in Sawa, or of the so-called ‘Civil Services’ in which citizens continue to work at their regular jobs but in the name of the government and, of course, for less pay. The period of service normally lasts from a year to eighteen months, but because Eritrea remains still in a state of emergency after the war, the period of service can be extended at will.

‘Every few months I ask when I’ll be discharged,’ Gabriel says wearily, ‘And every time I get the same answer: soon. For ten years now I’ve been hearing that “soon”!’

Dodging the draft in Eritrea is not an option. Gabriel tells me that deserters and dissidents are not tolerated, and when caught they are sent to state prisons or reeducation facilities such as Weya, places excluded from the regular tourist visa. ‘Weya,’ Gabriel says again and shakes his head, all the while a mixture of fascination and terror playing about his face.

Whereas Gabriel will more than likely never know what it means to have money, Mr. Brehane, a retired businessman living in the Eritrean city of Keren, knows what it means to have it and to lose it. After the deaths of the forty-seven school children in Mek’ele, the war quickly accelerated and the government offered ‘Eritrean citizens and Ethiopian citizens of Eritrean origin’ an opportunity to leave the country. According to the official Ethiopian statement, this offer was taken up by about 2,000 people. In reality, however, closer to 70,000 people including Mr. Brehane were deported.

‘We were gathered without notice and packed like sardines into decommissioned buses. Nobody made sure that families stayed together or that the elderly and sick were fit to travel. We were simply carted off across the border when,’ Mr. Brehane says in an almost apologetic tone, ‘most of us would have been able to afford air travel.’ He pauses and touches me on the arm before continuing. His white beard, I notice, has been carefully trimmed and his tie neatly matches suit. ‘You must understand, there were many businesspeople among us who had their own companies. I believe it was pure envy that we had succeeded, that we had money. And then from one day to the next they took everything from us—our companies, our houses, our friends. They froze our bank accounts and then thawed them out in their own war chest.’

Forced marriage with later separation

The real reasons for the Eritrean–Ethiopian War stem all the way back to the colonial era when Italy tried to grab the Horn of Africa while the grabbing was good. The Italians focused their efforts in Abyssinia, an empire that was made up of what is now Ethiopia and Eritrea. By 1890 they had managed to colonize land in the south. But six years later at the Battle of Adwa, the Abyssinian Army dealt the Italians a surprising defeat, and Italy was forced into a treaty. Thus the Italians were left with a colony consisting of present-day Eritrea.

However, after Mussolini rose to power Italy once again strengthened its imperialist efforts in Africa. Some 70,000 Italian settlers arrived to transform Asmara into a ‘New Rome’. And in 1935 the Italians set out to conquer the rest of Abyssinia at last. The occupation began in 1936. And although mass executions, chemical warfare, and labor camps were among the Italian methods of oppression, they were never able to take control of the entire territory—a point which Ethiopians continue to be proud of today. But it was the British at the Battle of Keren in 1941 who finally brought an end to the fascist regime in Ethiopia and Eritrea.

After the Second World War the United Nations Charter emphasized the right of national self-determination and cleared the path to independence for many former African colonies. But not Eritrea. Even though 75% of the population longed for a sovereign Eritrean state, the UN forced the country into an unwanted marriage with Ethiopia. This creation of the Federation of Ethiopia and Eritrea was meant to bring stability to the strategically sensitive region on the Horn of Africa. And yet in it the seed for all future conflicts was sown.

Shortly after the UN resolution Ethiopia’s Emperor Haile Selassie began to undercut Eritrea’s status in the Federation. Close to ten years after the Federation was created it was officially dissolved and Selassie annexed Eritrea as the fourteenth province of Ethiopia. Abandoned by the UN and undermined in the Federation, Eritreans developed a lasting mistrust of the international community and organized an armed resistance against their occupiers.

In 1974 a communist revolution overthrew Emperor Selassie and a new dictatorship came to power—the so-called Derg, which was a committee of military officers. Among those officers was Mengistu Haile Mariam who rose to become the sole ruler of Ethiopia and threatened his people with a campaign of Red Terror to rid the county of dissenters. Thousands suspected of counterrevolutionary activities were arrested, tortured, mutilated, or executed.

It wasn’t until 1991 that a collaboration of resistance movements paralyzed the government and forced Mengistu and the Derg to flee. One of those resistance movements was the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) led by Isayas Afewerki. And another was the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) led by Meles Zenawi. Zenawi went on to become Prime Minister of Ethiopia and Afewerki continued to promote Eritrean autonomy. In a referendum two years later the

Eritreans overwhelmingly voted in favor of independence, and the following week Zenawi announced his government's acceptance of the outcome. His fellow Ethiopians, however, were gnashing their teeth. With the secession of Eritrea Ethiopia had lost a profitable access to the sea and became landlocked.

...To be beside the seaside

Compared to its big brother to the south, Eritrea has seaside access galore. So should it come as a surprise if Ethiopia were to try to snatch a piece of that coastline for itself?

Before the 1998 war Ethiopia carried out most of its foreign trade via the Eritrean port city of Assab because of its proximity to the border. Additionally, Ethiopia strictly used Assab's refineries to process their resources. Although at the time a free-trade agreement was in place, Ethiopian sources claim that Eritrea pocketed somewhere between 90 and 100 million US dollars per annum for these services.

But economic consideration may not be the only ones that could have tipped the scales in favor of war. With a nationalist movement gaining momentum, the 'port issue' became a politically charged tool. Zenawi's political opposition accused him of making a fatal error when Eritrea was given the coastline and its independence.

Ahmed Gebreselassie*, a twenty-eight-year-old Ethiopian who studied agronomy, agrees with this point of view. 'I've never understood why Eritrea wanted to be separate from us. I mean, we're brothers. We're one family. And anyway they don't produce anything there. How can they survive without us?'

For two years Ahmed has been a member of Ethiopia's leading opposition party. But the politician as well as the academic in him are difficult to see. Instead, with his muscular build, he looks more like a boxer. And yet Ahmed decided early on in his life that he would fight for the things he believes in with words rather than fists.

Surprisingly, much like Ahmed implies, there is little open resentment over the war. Rather, Ethiopians speak of the hope in their hearts that their 'lost brothers' will one day get fed up with their obsession for independence and come back home. Back in the deserted streets of Amara I managed to meet up with Alem once again and ask him about this.

'That just plain stupid,' he says. 'Of course we hope for a better relationship with Ethiopia, but friendship depends on mutual acceptance and respect. As Eritreans we have never thought of ourselves as Ethiopians and we never will. What are they thinking? For thirty long years we fought for our independence. Is that supposed to be for nothing?'

Sequel in Somalia

Incidentally, the end of the war was not the end of the conflict. Instead the two countries moved from open combat to more covert action in which they followed a strict policy of ‘my enemy’s enemy is my friend.’ Thus Eritrea provided weapons and training to resistance movements in Ethiopia. And while Ethiopia courted the United States and Europe, Eritrea flirted with Libya, Sudan, Yemen and the Arab world.

Such dalliances were not without risk. In 2006 when the Eritrean-backed Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) came to power in Mogadishu, Ethiopia once again mobilized its army. A proxy war flared up in Somalia, and what little stability the UIC had managed to bring to the region was destroyed.

Officially the Ethiopian invasion of Somali territory was declared an aid to the former transitional government. Unofficially, however, the Ethiopians were concerned about the risk of a new front. And in addition, they saw it as a way of pleasing the West by joining the armored bandwagon of the war on terrorism. More than ever the Zenawi regime was eager to get back the goodwill of the Western world, which had been quickly dwindling ever since the 2005 parliamentary elections. There Zenawi’s party had declared its unequivocal victory after a mere third of the votes had been counted.

Solomon Merese* was an independent election observer at the time for the Organization of African Unity. We meet to talk one scorching afternoon on a bridge that separates the old part of Dire Dawa from the new. Both Merese and I are soaked through with sweat, on the one hand from the heat, but on the other hand from the heated discussion. According to him, ‘before the announcement, all the electoral districts in the capital showed results in favor of the opposition.’

‘They really put the screws on us,’ he adds, ‘threatening to throw us in prison. We were supposed to report that there had been no irregularities and that everything was perfectly above board when clearly it wasn’t. It was a bloody mess!’

‘And what did you report,’ I ask him.

Merese picks at his moustache and looks at me with a mixture of concern and reluctance. Then he looks away into the distance.

‘I have family, a wife and three kids,’ he says, ‘My youngest child just turned twelve.’

With or without Merese the electoral fraud was revealed. In the ensuing uproar the Ethiopian government arrested dissenters, critics, and opposition leaders by the thousands. And the subsequent student demonstrations led to the deaths of protesters and bystanders. Thus advocates from the West, of course, were not pleased. So, yes, in part Somalia was about ingratiation, but then again it was also about the sea.

As a result of the war against Eritrea, Djibouti ended up having the last laugh. Its port now serves as Ethiopia’s solitary trade link to the sea. And the tiny state knows how to capitalize on this monopoly by charging over 700 million U.S. dollars per year for the use of its two Eritrean port. To add to that, Djibouti also demands it receive electricity from Ethiopia, which causes intermittent, domestic blackouts. In fact, Ethiopia has developed an elaborate schedule which shows which streets in which neighborhoods in which towns will have electricity at a given time. For the rest there are flashlights, kerosene lamps, and candles—or the odd power generator in a four-star hotel.

Ethiopia’s military intervention in Somalia, however, created an opportunity—namely, Berbera, a promising seaport in Somaliland. Was this a potential solution to Ethiopia’s predicament with Djibouti? Perhaps, but two years after the invasion little had changed for Ethiopia. While in Somalia the ailing transitional government continues to cling on for dear life as the rest of the country turns to rubble. And worse yet, like the American troops in Iraq, the

presence of Ethiopian forces in Somalia has only boosted the threat of extremism.

Time for change?

Compared to the capital, Dire Dawa, the second-largest city in Ethiopia, seems comatose. There are hardly any bars, hotels or restaurants; at midday a number of the shops are closed, and traffic slows down to a mere trickle. The only thing that seems to shake the population out of their state of hibernation is the call of the muezzins, urging them to prayer five times a day.

Fatima*, a twenty-five-year-old fashion designer, says that ‘it used to be completely different.’ She has invited me to her and her cousin’s place for coffee, shisha and khat—which is unusual for young Muslim women. Tall and slender and beautiful, Fatima could easily work as a fashion model if not a designer, but in any case, for the past six months she has been unemployed. ‘Until a few years ago,’ she says, ‘there was practically no unemployment here. But now one company after another goes bust and there are hardly any jobs.’

Her cousin flips through the television channels until she sees Obama.

‘He’s the greatest,’ Fatima raves. ‘We need someone like him too. Not someone who cranks out more of the same old bullshit—someone who’s going to clean up this whole bloody mess.’ But she and her cousin agree: this is never going to happen in Ethiopia. ‘We were simply born at the wrong time in the wrong country.’

Not only in Ethiopia, but even in the remotest corners of Eritrea people have heard Obama’s campaign slogan: ‘Yes, we can!’ And with it there are new hopes for change—any change. Obama is seen as the new Messiah who will unite the people, build bridges between East and West, between Muslims and Christians. Obama will do the right thing, straighten things out. Children are named after him, even shoe shops and hair salons. Only Jesus and Muhammad are more popular than him, but it’s a neck-and-neck race.

‘What do you think Obama’s going to do about Eritrea?’ asks Tewodros*, a soldier in his twelfth year of service. He is stationed in Senafe, a dusty border village that looks inch-for-inch like a copy of Badme. He looks at me, this mountain of a man, full of expectation and hope, but his tone is harsh and hard. Everything about him is well-toned, even his steely, army-issue smile. I reply hesitantly, saying that Obama will probably have to tackle a few problems in his own country and that he already has more than enough on his plate with Iraq and Afghanistan.

‘I see. So when is it our turn?’ Tewodros insists. ‘When is he going to take care of us?’

‘Maybe in a couple of years?’

‘That’s too late! We need peace sooner than that. We need peace now!’ Tewodros shouts as if I were the one that needed convincing.

‘So tell me when!’ he demands.

I think of Gabriel at his post guarding a deserted road in the woods of Filifi and shake my head.

‘Soon,’ I say, ‘Very soon.’