

ATROCITY IN ETHIOPIAN HISTORY

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“ETHIOPIA” HAS LONG BEEN A VIOLENT PROPOSITION. Or, to put it a little more precisely, the exercises in state-formation and imperialism that have given rise to Ethiopia in its modern form have long been underpinned by violence, often of an extreme kind. This is not to essentialise Ethiopian national identity or Ethiopian culture, which of course are complex and multi-layered; after all, it can be safely argued – in the tradition of everyone from Thomas Hobbes, through Max Weber, to Charles Tilly – that all such political projects are rooted in violence, and that all states (and certainly empires) are defined by their deployment of extreme force against an array of “others.”¹ That, from a certain point of view, is their entire point. However, it is to argue that, profoundly disturbing though the reports recently coming out of Tigray are, such atrocities are neither anomalous nor without precedent. Violence has long attended political turmoil in Ethiopia. It has been the essential ingredient in the making and remaking of the Solomonic empire, particularly in the quest to dominate troubled provinces and peripheries, and has been both cause and effect of ideological struggle. Atrocity has routinely been deployed in the pursuit to protect – and project – the hegemonic core in ethnic, cultural and religious terms. Cycles of expansion and disintegration, and episodic challenges to the centre, have involved large-scale violence against ordinary people.

Two broad premises need to be established at the outset. The first is that we are concerned here primarily with violence against “civilians” or “non-combatants” – historically an ambiguous category, admittedly² – and with the infliction of violence against communities or even entire populations with no immediate, explicitly military target in sight. There is an important distinction to be drawn between the military confrontations on appointed battlefields, which are like rivets in the Ethiopian historical edifice, and *the killing of people*. Conflict between armed groups gives rise to its own peculiar cruelties, but that is not our central concern here. The second premise is that Ethiopia is at root and in essence an empire, and that Ethiopian imperialism – like every other variation of it – is an intrinsically violent process. It is not *exclusively* violent – again, no imperialism is that – but at its core is the physical harm inflicted on communities of people identified as an existential threat, or as obstacles to putative civilizational progress, or who inhabited areas rich in natural resources. And as with all empires, the decolonisation of historical knowledge is vital.³

¹ The idea was central to Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1651); see also Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation”, reprinted from Max Weber, *Essays in Sociology*, tr. & ed. H.H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 77-128; Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1992* (Cambridge MA: Blackwell, 1990, 1992).

² In much of African military history more broadly, there seems to have been a general lack of distinction between combatants and non-combatants: Richard Reid, *Warfare in African History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 11.

³ See for example Donald Donham, “Old Abyssinia and the new Ethiopian empire: themes in social history”, in *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia*, eds. D. Donham & W. James (Oxford: James Currey, 2002), 3-48. Strikingly, there is very little mention of the kind of violence outlined in this essay in some of the classics of Ethiopianist historiography. There are no massacres in Donald Levine’s opus, *Greater Ethiopia: the evolution of a multi-ethnic society*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), which extols the virtues of the familial menagerie that was Haile Selassie’s imperium; little indication of violent atrocity in Sven Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence* (London: Heinemann, 1976); and only the briefest of allusions in

Why do atrocities happen? There are multiple reasons, of course, and there is a large enough body of literature on the causes and contexts of such violence to arrive at a range of conclusions.⁴ Sometimes it is a matter of panic on the part of the perpetrators; singular events which are the outcome of combat stress, for example. In some ways those are easier to explain. But beyond that, what are we left with? At one end of a horrific spectrum are a series of uncontested cases of genocide, recognised as such in international law. But as A. Dirk Moses has argued, a legalistic hierarchy of violence, with genocide at its apex, can blind us to other forms of civilian death at the hands of armed forces.⁵ There are a host of scenarios in which political groups, again leaning into and/or mobilising wider perceptions of another group – geographically, religiously, culturally, or ethnically defined – feel able to attack and kill, to terrify and subdue, that group in the name of some larger political (or economic) goal.⁶ This happens frequently in Ethiopian history. Economic desperation and aspiration, too, can lead to mass killing, and such violence is frequently the corollary of ongoing struggles to overcome material deprivation. Extreme prejudice has given rise to a racial hierarchy within which certain cultures and ethnicities and socio-economic systems are judged to be insufficiently ‘advanced’: these are human lives which are valued less than others, rendering them legitimate as targets. Often it has been the same kinds of communities which are consistently on the receiving end – in particular, the imperial peripheries and the Cushitic unbelievers ‘in our midst’ – although even supposedly hegemonic groups, chiefly Amhara and Tigrayans, can find themselves marginalised within the political order and subject to violent assault, only to muscle their way back into the centre in time, once again able to mete out those same abuses to others.

But that begs a more fundamental question, perhaps, which is – why does it *keep* happening? The answer seems to lie in two things. First, the perennially fractured and contested nature of Ethiopian politics, both *within* the highlands (the Tigray-Amhara fault line as well as contestations between different power centres within the Amhara region itself); and *beyond* it, namely the perennially violent relationship between the core and the “periphery”. The fact that the pursuit of the elusive goals of “unity” and “cohesion” is paradoxically characterised by extreme violence suggests that political elites do not actually have very much faith in the idea of an inclusive, diverse Ethiopia in which all cultures and communities within its borders might be treated equally, despite a great deal of rhetoric to that effect. The frequent recourse to atrocity would seem to indicate an anxiety about the form (and, perhaps, the robustness) of the polity itself. That is in the nature of all unsettled state projects, and certainly all empires, and imperialisms, for all their apparent hubris: anxiety and agitation leads to violent atrocity, almost by default. And second, the desperation and poverty from which the perpetrators of atrocity are usually drawn speaks to the socio-economic dynamics which at a deep level facilitate acts of

Harold Marcus’s *The Life and Times of Menelik II: Ethiopia, 1844-1913* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). For quite a few in that scholarly cohort, there was only the most cursory acknowledgment that the *habesha* state might have some darkness to it, and that not everyone inside the region beheld the same montane magic that they did.

⁴ For example, Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (London: Yale University Press, 2001).

⁵ A. Dirk Moses, *The Problems of Genocide: permanent security and the language of transgression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

⁶ Work on state-sponsored terrorism, often seen as a product of modernity, is relevant here: *The History of Terrorism: From Antiquity to Isis*, eds. Gérard Chaliand & Arnaud Blin (Oakland CA: University of California Press, 2016), *passim*. For the Jacobins of Revolutionary France in 1793, “Terror” was *policy*, not a subjective category. See for example D.M.F. Sutherland, *France 1789-1815: Revolution and Counterrevolution* (London: Fontana Press, 1985), 192-247; Hugh Gough, *The Terror in the French Revolution* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010); Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: a reassessment* (London: Pimlico, 2008); *The Anatomy of Terror: political violence under Stalin*, ed. James Harris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

terrible violence. We know from Europe's savage twentieth century that relatively well-educated, putatively "advanced" societies are perfectly capable of atrocity on a grand scale. But it is clear enough that it is more likely to happen where manipulative elites prey on ignorance, hopelessness and fear to fill the ranks of armies and security apparatuses more broadly, especially in societies in which state-reach is sufficient to broadcast propaganda and invoke historic hatreds, but in which people are unable to make informed and meaningful decisions about the systems within which they live and about the things they are being asked to do and believe.

The roots of atrocity in the region can be discerned in antiquity. In a famous chronicle concerning the Axumite ruler Ezana, there is death and destruction behind the pomp and the glory: some serious atrocities have evidently been committed in the course of seizing women and livestock, atrocities which themselves are a corollary of Ezana's military campaigns.⁷ Axumite war established the parameters of behaviour for later empire-building projects in the region, and created the moral and spiritual precedent for mass violence: Ezana, importantly, was the defender of the gods, and thus his violence was sanctified, an idea which made the transition into the Christian era. It was certainly central to the creation of the Solomonic state, described at length in Ethiopia's great national epic, the *Kebre Negast* ('Chronicle of the Glory of the Kings'). The Solomonic state, the product of a late thirteenth-century Shoon *coup d'état*, sponsored the production of the grand narrative which established the legitimacy of violence in the new state's pursuit of political consolidation across the central Ethiopian Highlands.⁸ It relates the story of how Ethiopia became the New Zion, founded by Menelik I, who was the outcome of a famed encounter between King Solomon and Makeda, the Queen of Saba (or Sheba). In fact a close reading of the narrative strongly suggests that Makeda was raped by Solomon, and so at the heart of the Ethiopian empire's foundation myth is a story of sexual assault.⁹ As a result, incongruously, there was a direct bloodline to Christ, according to the genealogy outlined in Matthew's gospel, and a Covenant with God in the form of the Holy Tabernacle, or the Ark of the Covenant. Above all, the *Kebre Negast* refined the idea of mass atrocity as both method and entitlement: there is much smiting of enemies, the bloody slaughter of a range of unbelievers and resisters, including "the enemies of God, the Jews".¹⁰ The *Kebre Negast* represents many things, but the mythology at its core established a pattern of behaviour of the state for centuries to come: the legitimization of killing, and more specifically, the ideological and spiritual sanction provided to mass killing. Ethiopia, in other words, was born of a belief in the righteousness of violence against the savage and infidel communities that surrounded it, and which sometimes infiltrated it.

The consolidation and subsequent expansion of the Solomonic state involved the routine meting out of punishments to various groups of outsiders, or those whose very existence was deemed a threat to the political and cultural order. Atrocity and massacre were characteristic of the distinctively religious violence on which the early modern Ethiopian state was founded. A key exponent of divinely ordained bloodshed was Emperor Zara Yaqob in the fifteenth century. Celebrated as a colossus in the *habesha* intellectual, literary and theological firmament, in many ways Zara Yaqob established the scriptural and legal framework within

⁷ *The Ethiopian Royal Chronicles*, ed. Richard Pankhurst (Addis Ababa: Oxford University Press, 1967), 3-4.

⁸ *A Modern Translation of the Kebra Negast (The Glory of the Kings)*, tr. & ed. Miguel Brooks (Lawrenceville NJ: Red Sea Press, 1996).

⁹ Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2002), 18.

¹⁰ Brooks, ed., *Modern Translation of the Kebra Negast*, 172.

which atrocity might occur; his significance in an Ethiopian political and intellectual tradition is huge, but the legitimization of mass violence against recalcitrant communities which that tradition involved can also likewise not be overstated. Positioning the Church as a national institution, Zara Yaqob produced his own theological work, most famously *Mashafa Birhan* – “The Book of Light” – in which he railed virulently against Muslims, pagans and (perhaps worst of all) backsliders. He exhorted violence against anyone suspected of “worshipping Satan,” his reign being characterised in a chronicle as one of “great terror” underpinned by the “severity of his justice.”¹¹

“Severity of justice” was one thing; the violent convulsions which arose from existential pressures on the state were another. To be sure, such violence was sometimes confined to the military clashes between armies organised for the purpose. But more commonly, these struggles sprayed out beyond battlefields and infected swathes of the broader populace with contagious violence. The killing of non-combatants and the material desolation visited upon communities and the social and economic fabric of their lives became a core part of armed conflict. In the course of the sixteenth century, there was a jihadist invasion of the Highlands under the leadership of Ahmed ibn Ibrahim (known as “Gran,” the left-handed) from the predominantly Somali region to the southeast between the late 1520s and the mid-1540s;¹² and this was followed by the arrival of relatively new immigrants in the highlands, namely the Oromo (or “Galla,” as they were pejoratively known). The ideological foundations of the Solomonic state provided a template for violent otherization, and the migration of the Oromo provoked an extreme reaction on the part of Ethiopians fearful that their very culture and way of life were now under threat. The wars which followed involved atrocity which had become a means by which the state defended itself and sought consolidation, and ultimately further expansion. Perceptions of the Oromo as savage, brutal, bloodthirsty, an existential threat – captured by famous contemporary account from 1593¹³ – which justified, indeed necessitated, extraordinary violence against them. The revived Solomonism of the later sixteenth century was effectively couched in terms of a race war against these dreaded new enemies, notably under Emperor Sarsa Dengel, even as many Oromo were becoming more or less peacefully absorbed into Ethiopian society and politics.¹⁴

More broadly, Solomonic ideology, rooted in the myths contained in the *Kebre Negast*, was the foundation stone of the sense of cultural supremacy on which the Solomonic state rested – cultural supremacy which in time morphed into a sense of overt racial supremacy. A range of communities joined the Oromo in the pantheon of Others, witness the pejorative terms used to describe particular populations, usually darker skinned, along the western frontiers of the state. Hence the Nara were known in Tigrinya as *baria*, indicating “black slaves”, or those whom it is possible to enslave, while the Beni Shangul were called by the derogatory term *shangalla* in

¹¹ A.H.M. Jones & Elizabeth Monroe, *A History of Ethiopia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), 56-8; Edward Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians: an introduction to country and people* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 141-44.

¹² Donald Crummey, *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia: from the thirteenth to the twentieth century* (London: James Currey, 2000); for a contemporary account, see Shihab Al-Din Ahmad Arabfaqi, *The Conquest of Abyssinia: Futuh Al Habasa* (Addis Ababa: Tsehai Publishers, 2005).

¹³ The monk Bahrey’s 1593 manuscript “History of the Galla” is assessed in *Some Records of Ethiopia 1593-1646: being extracts from “The History of High Ethiopia or Abassia”, by Manoel de Almeida*, trs. & eds. C.F. Beckingham & G.W.B. Huntingford (London: Hakluyt Society, 1954).

¹⁴ *La Guerre de Sarsa-Dengel contre les Falachas. Extrait des Annales de Sarsa-Dengel, roi d’Ethiopie (1563-1597)*, tr. J. Halévy (Paris : Ernest Leroux, 1907).

Amharic, which came to be popularly applied to all “black” peoples to the west.¹⁵ During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the steady expansion of Red Sea commerce led to an increase in the demand for slaves, and slaving violence was inflicted on communities along Ethiopia’s western and southern frontiers, among the *shangalla* and Oromo and *baria* – although it was not all one-way traffic, with a number of such groups, as well as Arab slaving parties moving southward up the Nile valley, regularly raiding into the highlands.¹⁶

Such exercises in otherization legitimised violence on external frontiers, but similar killing sprees were visited upon wayward subjects closer to home. Just as in the fifteenth century Zara Yaqob urged death to pagans and backsliders, converts to Catholicism in the early seventeenth century were routinely massacred in the course of a religious civil war which tore Ethiopia asunder, until exponents of the Orthodox faith triumphed.¹⁷ During Ethiopia’s long nineteenth century, beginning in the 1770s, such large-scale violence became a part of life for communities across the Highlands. This was due in no small part to the chronic instability of the *Zemene Mesafint*, or the “Era of the Princes,” defined as lasting c.1770-c.1855, and its long aftermath.¹⁸ This is a period normatively characterised as a “civil war,” when Ethiopia ceased to exist in everything but name, and during which swollen militaries which were deemed necessary in pursuit of political and economic goals became ever harder to control, rendering ordinary people across the region vulnerable to their predations. The *Zemene Mesafint* was characterised by a virulent form of economic war which involved the deliberate targeting of farming communities and the destruction of their means of livelihood. Ras Wube, ruler of Tigray between 1831 and 1855 and one-time pretender to the imperial throne, may have expressed his disapproval when his soldiers “butchered nearly three hundred women and children”;¹⁹ but it was his practice to unleash his army to devastate communities across the north, including Shire in Tigray and Hamasien on the Eritrean plateau.²⁰

Again, however, there was little differentiation made between combatant and non-combatant in the eyes of an increasingly swollen, professional military class. Ever larger armies between the late eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries fed off the land, devastating those districts and communities unfortunate enough to have them billeted in their neighbourhoods. Tensions between peasant and soldier escalated steadily throughout this period,²¹ making instances of violent atrocity ever more likely and more common. Ironically, perhaps, for both contemporary chroniclers and subsequent historians, the tribulations of the *Zemene Mesafint* proved one thing: the importance of a strong, centralised state and the kind of militarised leadership which could offer security and protection to ordinary Ethiopians.²² Yet the reality was that that very

¹⁵ Richard Reid, *Frontiers of Violence in Northeast Africa: genealogies of conflict since 1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 11.

¹⁶ *Prutky’s Travels in Ethiopia and Other Countries*, tr. & ed. J.H. Arrowsmith-Brown (London: Hakluyt Society, 1991), 25, 152, 179; S. Gobat, *Journal of Three Years’ Residence in Abyssinia* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969; 1st pub., 1851), 39; W. Plowden, *Travels in Abyssinia and the Galla Country* (London: Longmans, Green, 1868), 20; M. Parkyns, *Life in Abyssinia* (London: Frank Cass, 1966; 1st pub., 1853), 155-6.

¹⁷ Father Jerome Lobo (tr. Samuel Johnson), *A Voyage to Abyssinia* (London: Elliot & Kay, 1789), 107; Gobat, *Journal*, 81-3.

¹⁸ Mordechai Abir, *Ethiopia: the era of the princes* (London: Longmans, 1968); Sven Rubenson, “Ethiopia and the Horn”, *The Cambridge History of Africa: Vol 5: c.1790-c.1870*, ed. J.E. Flint (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

¹⁹ Gobat, *Journal*, 426.

²⁰ Parkyns, *Life*, 55, 98; Plowden, *Travels*, 22.

²¹ For example, Richard Caulk, “Armies as Predators: soldiers and peasants in Ethiopia, c.1850-1935”, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 11:3 (1978): 457-93.

²² See the bitter lamentations, expressed in a contemporary chronicle, about the state of “the Kingdom” in Pankhurst, ed., *Royal Chronicles*, 140-2. The notion, even now largely unquestioned, that the ‘reunification’ of

same state system was capable of, and responsible for, the kinds of atrocities from which it was supposed to offer protection.

This is exemplified by the reign of Tewodros (1855-68), the emperor normally accredited with bringing the bloody chaos of the *Zemene Mesafint* to a close, and with re-establishing (if temporarily) centralised control and law- and custom-based stability. Yet Tewodros's reign became synonymous with extraordinary violence, and is one of the most powerful, dramatic illustrations in the modern era of a dominant pattern in Ethiopian history – namely the capture of the state via violent insurgency, laying claim to having created peace and order, and then proceeding to inflict extreme violence on everyone and anyone deemed resistant or unreconciled to that political order.²³ Tewodros's willingness to inflict death and/or injury on the very people whom he claimed to lead presaged successive twentieth-century regimes; for all the horror attached to his reign, he normalised the idea that this is what you did to people who would not cooperate, or who had a different set of ideas about how to live, worship, govern. Tewodros's violence drew legitimacy from his conviction that he had restored Solomonic Ethiopia, God's chosen nation which had been for too long beset by enemies little better than animals: Muslims, Oromo, pagans.²⁴ His hatred of Islam was especially ferocious.²⁵ His self-righteous anger was directed at armed opponents, who were massacred and tortured in cruel and unusual ways – starved to death, thrown from cliffs, subjected to scatological humiliations²⁶ – and at unarmed or at least poorly armed populations, whose lands were devastated and who witnessed their economies laid to waste as punishment for perceived mutiny or disloyalty, or simply as a warning to others.²⁷ Tewodros lamented that “my people are bad; they love rebellion and hate peace,” which justified continual attacks on allegedly disaffected districts and widespread killing commonly attended by the mutilation of human remains.²⁸ Scorched earth tactics leading to famine were common.²⁹ Nor was he averse to slaughtering his own troops, as he did in late 1867, massacring several hundred soldiers whom he suspected as planning to desert.³⁰

Terror was a core part of Tewodros's strategy for governance. Perceiving “traitors” everywhere, he declared that “I am now determined to follow them into every corner, and shall

the Ethiopian state was both desirable and a triumphant achievement is captured in Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence*.

²³ Insurgents themselves were often characterised in Amharic as *shifta*, “bandits”, although the term could mean different things in different contexts, from “social” banditry to rural disorder to aristocratic insurrection: see D. Crummey, “Banditry and resistance: noble and peasant in nineteenth-century Ethiopia”, in *Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa*, ed. D. Crummey (London: James Currey, 1986): 133-49.

²⁴ *Acta Aethiopica II: Tewodros and his Contemporaries, 1855-1868*, eds. & trs. Sven Rubenson, Amsalu Aklilu, Merid Wolde Aregay & Samuel Rubenson (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 1994); D. Crummey, “Tewodros as reformer and modernizer”, *Journal of African History*, 10:3 (1969): 457-69; D. Crummey, “The violence of Tewodros”, in *War and Society in Africa*, ed. B.A. Ogot (London: Frank Cass, 1972), 65-84.

²⁵ Henry Dufton, *Narrative of a Journey Through Abyssinia in 1862-3* (Westport: Negro Universities Press, 1970; 1st pub., 1867), 116.

²⁶ Asseggahen to Antoine d'Abbadie, 14 January 1866, Doc. no. 160 in Rubenson et al, eds. & trs., *Acta Aethiopica II*; and Asseggahen to Antoine d'Abbadie, 26 November 1868, Doc no. 248 in *ibid*.

²⁷ Pankhurst, ed., *Royal Chronicles*, 151; Henry Stern, *Wanderings Among the Falashas in Abyssinia* (London: Frank Cass, 1968; 1st pub., 1862), 122; Henry Blanc, *A Narrative of Captivity in Abyssinia* (London: Frank Cass, 1970; 1st pub., 1868), 5.

²⁸ Stern, *Wanderings*, 122, 128-9

²⁹ Blanc, *Narrative*, 333-335; Richard Reid, *War in Precolonial Eastern Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 2007), 130

³⁰ Asseggahen to Antoine d'Abbadie, 21 September 1867, Doc. no. 220, in Rubenson et al, eds. & trs., *Acta Aethiopica II*.

send their bodies to the grave, and their souls to hell” – for it was in his power to do so.³¹ Food shortage, outright famine, and general economic desperation made atrocities commonplace in the last months of his reign, as starving soldiers preyed on ever more desperate peasants.³² One local chronicler, writing in the 1860s, lamented the shocking levels of violence then being inflicted by Tewodros on supposedly recalcitrant populations: the emperor was inflicting “punishments hitherto unknown in the land,” the scribe recorded.³³ Shocking, it seems, because nobody could remember an incumbent regime killing quite so many people, or devastating quite so much land to such deadly effect – but only, perhaps, because a centralised state had not existed in this form since the late eighteenth century. In fact, however, our chronicler, while no doubt traumatized by what he was witnessing, was being somewhat disingenuous. The Tewodros era was painful, but it was not unprecedented. What was possibly unprecedented was the scale and strength of the army, reflecting the militarisation of Ethiopian politics which was the outcome of the *Zemene Mesafint* and the rise of increasingly powerful regional polities, driving ever greater military capacity in the course of the nineteenth century. This made atrocity increasingly likely in the course of conflict.

In the course of the 1870s, Emperor Yohannes IV finished the work begun by Tewodros in reinventing Solomonic Ethiopia. And while it might be claimed that he had established security across the land,³⁴ he embodied the deeply-rooted chauvinism – one might even venture to term it racial ideology – at the heart of the *habesha* state. As with Tewodros, any opposition to Yohannes was intrinsically illegitimate and enemies were dehumanized accordingly.³⁵ For while he wrested the imperial throne from the Amhara, and once again positioned Tigray at the apex of the empire, he expressed the same contempt for the savages and primitives on the edges of the expanding imperium as his Amhara predecessors and rivals. Again, it was bloodshed which was legitimised – indeed necessitated – by the sheer force of the histories which rested at the core of the ideological project. For many others, of course, no grand justifications were needed, but only the impetus provided by economic opportunity, itself frequently the outcome of ongoing insecurity: witness the devastating slave raiding expeditions into Hamasien in the 1870s as *Ras* Welde Michael took advantage of the turbulent northern frontier.³⁶ Nevertheless at the level of the state, the legitimacy provided by historical memory, ineradicably entwined with religious ideology, was a critical source of power. A key point of historical reference for the neo-Solomonic state was the devastation suffered at the hands of Ahmed Gran, who had led the jihadist invasion against Ethiopia more than hundred years earlier.³⁷ Ethiopian political leaders wrote to their European counterparts about how they had long been surrounded by grasping Muslims, and of the need for vengeance, retribution, restoration of territory.³⁸ This was the justification for new ways of violence; historical memory of past wrongs and violations accentuated the need for new waves of killing.

³¹ Quoted in Reid, *War in Precolonial Eastern Africa*, 95.

³² Blanc, *Narrative*, 333-335

³³ Pankhurst, ed., *Royal Chronicles*, 151.

³⁴ Augustus Wylde, *Modern Abyssinia* (Westport: Negro Universities Press, 1970; 1st pub., 1901), 29, 33, 44

³⁵ Reid, *War in Precolonial Eastern Africa*, 148.

³⁶ Wylde, *Modern Abyssinia*, 125.

³⁷ The shadow of Ahmed is evident in a detailed contemporary account from the 1890s written by the Russian military attaché to Menelik’s court: see A. Bulatovich, ed. & tr. R. Seltzer, *Ethiopia Through Russian Eyes: country in transition 1896-1898* (Lawrenceville NJ: Red Sea Press, 2000), 92-4.

³⁸ For example, Yohannes IV to Alexander II, 19 June 1879, Doc. no. 220 in *Acta Aethiopica III: Internal Rivalries and Foreign Threats, 1869-1879*, eds. & trs. Sven Rubenson, Amsalu Aklilu, Merid Wolde Aregay & Samuel Rubenson (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2000).

Yohannes's successor, Emperor Menelik (1889-1913), was the hero of the Battle of Adwa in 1896, when he famously repulsed an Italian invasion. But at the same time, he was the builder of an empire in his own right. From the late 1880s, Menelik dispatched armies and colonists across the west, south, and southeast, Ethiopian imperialism fanning out across a huge arc abutting territories being gingerly claimed by European powers. While some polities negotiated some degree of autonomy through the payment of tax and tribute – Jimma, Wellaga, Lega Nekemte – elsewhere local populations were frequently devastated by a colonialism which rested on a combination of brute force and cultural assimilation. Extreme violence was visited upon Welayta and Kaffa in the south, and on Illubabor, Aqoldi and Bela Shangul on the Sudanese borderlands. There were military expeditions resulting in massacres in the Ogaden, as *Ras Mekonnen* – father of the future Haile Selassie – laid the groundwork of the empire in the Somali region and killed and expropriated with impunity.³⁹ Menelik's empire was as brutally violent and as reliant on the atrocity-as-method genre of imperialism as the European colonial projects developing apace on Menelik's borders. Contemporary reports refer to "[t]he dreadful annihilation of more than half of the population" among the Oromo in the south.⁴⁰ Menelik's imperialism was in many ways the culmination of a century of militarisation. Such was the expansion of the army that, to a considerable degree, the continual raiding and pillaging which was a core feature of the empire was necessary to keep a youthful, armed population occupied.⁴¹ Little wonder that one contemporary British admirer could marvel at the ancient superiority of Ethiopian civilisation, and approvingly describe Menelik's violent methods as "almost European" – an association which would serve imperial Ethiopia well in the decades ahead.⁴²

All this notwithstanding, Menelik's Ethiopia, by a curious twist of logic, came to be heralded by the nascent Pan African movement as the lodestar of anti-imperial struggle. That terrible paradox – the violent African empire lauded as the symbol of African freedom – has never been fully unravelled, at least in the popular imagination, though to be sure a succession of scholars since the 1980s has sought to deconstruct and challenge the narrative.⁴³ The reality of Ethiopian imperialism and its reliance on episodic atrocities against an array of ideologically or culturally unreconciled communities offers a striking contrast indeed to the Rastafarian conception of ancient Ethiopia,⁴⁴ and indeed to the role – relished by successive Ethiopian regimes – of the country as anticolonial compass and inspiration to the African continent at large.

Clearly, then, the atrocities that have defined Ethiopia's long twentieth century have long-term precedents. The legacy of the swollen military system, particularly from the nineteenth century, and the deeply embedded culture of violence, undergirded by an excluding and otherizing ideology, continues to be felt. The Haile Selassie regime's recourse to mass and/or indiscriminate killing must be seen in that context, as should the regimes which have followed the imperial order. There appear to have been few qualms about the killing of civilians, ably

³⁹ Bulatovich provides a detailed contemporary account of imperial expansion in *Ethiopia Through Russian Eyes*; see also Donham & James, eds., *Southern Marches*.

⁴⁰ Bulatovich, *Ethiopia Through Russian Eyes*, 68, 72.

⁴¹ Wylde, *Modern Abyssinia*, 7-9, 165.

⁴² G.F.H. Berkeley, *The Campaign of Adowa and the Rise of Menelik* (London: Westminster, 1902), vii-viii, 6.

⁴³ John Sorenson, *Imagining Ethiopia: struggles for history and identity in the Horn of Africa* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993); W.B. Carnochan, *Golden Legends: images of Abyssinia, Samuel Johnson to Bob Marley* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

⁴⁴ Peter B. Clarke, *Black Paradise: the Rastafarian movement* (Wellingborough: Aquarian Press, 1986).

assisted by the UK's Royal Air Force, in the suppression of the revolt in Tigray, the *Woyane*, in 1943.⁴⁵ In the course of the 1960s, uprisings in Bale and Gojjam provinces – driven by land shortages and oppressive tax regimes – were crushed equally bloodily, with little distinction drawn between rebel fighters and the largely unarmed peasant communities on whose behalf they were protesting.⁴⁶ Civilians were massacred in the western lowlands of Eritrea in 1967 in the course of military operations against the Eritrean Liberation Front, which in any case offered very little resistance.⁴⁷ A century on from Tewodros, moreover, scorched earth tactics were still the favoured method in breaking the spirit, and the capacity, to resist among the farmers who had long formed the bedrock of *habesha* state and society. Atrocities in Bale, Gojjam and western Eritrea occurred in the political gloaming of the imperial regime, but the advent of the *Derg* regime in the mid-1970s – its violence couched in the language, and deployed in the name of, revolutionary Marxist-Leninism – signalled no change in the *modus operandi* of the state. The extraordinary violence of the “Red Terror” under Mengistu Haile Mariam is dealt with elsewhere in this forum.⁴⁸ And then there was Eritrea, by now forcibly incorporated into Ethiopia and in the throes of a major uprising. Routine atrocities and human rights violations on the part of Ethiopian security forces in Eritrea, from the late 1970s and through the 1980s, were doubtless as important for recruitment into the liberation fronts as the nationalist revolutionary programmes of the latter.⁴⁹ Mengistu himself seemed to be channelling the ghosts of past rulers in his brutal approach to local grievances: death was the only satisfactory outcome for his enemies, he declared, while theatrically smashing bottles of “blood” in a speech before his soldiers.⁵⁰

After 1991, the EPRDF regime self-consciously eschewed the imperialism of the *ancien regime*, and pursued the experiment in federalism which was putatively designed to resolve the issue of ethnic and provincial violence once and for all. In reality, however, Meles Zenawi's Ethiopia was a continuation by other means of the ongoing exercise in highland exceptionalism and empire-building, with predictable consequences for peoples who got in the way, or who were caught up in the neoliberal and developmental agendas which had largely supplanted the *Kebre Negast* as legitimising credos. The uneasy *pax* in the central highlands reflected the coalitional nature of the EPRDF itself: in the 1990s and 2000s, the Oromo, notably, would make significant gains in terms of cultural rights, even if those gains did not translate into political power, a deficit which sparked the 2016 uprising. This meant that overt violence was largely directed toward peripheries and neighbours. The violent treatment of Ethiopian Somalis in the Ogaden region in the course of counterinsurgency operations against the Ogaden National Liberation Front, and of Somali civilians following Ethiopia's invasion in 2006-7,

⁴⁵ Gebru Tareke, “Peasant resistance in Ethiopia: the case of *Weyane*”, *Journal of African History*, 25:1 (1984): 77-92.

⁴⁶ Gebru Tareke, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest. Peasant Revolts in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁴⁷ John Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 121-2.

⁴⁸ Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution, 1974-1987: a transformation from an aristocratic to a totalitarian autocracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 208-14; Jacob Wiebel, “‘Let the Red Terror intensify’: political violence, governance, and society in urban Ethiopia, 1976-1978”, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 48:1 (2015): 13-29.

⁴⁹ Mary Dines, “Ethiopian violation of human rights in Eritrea”, in *The Long Struggle of Eritrea for Independence and Constructive Peace*, eds. L. Cliffe & B. Davidson (Trenton NJ: Red Sea Press, 1988), 139-62. For the impact of the “Red Terror” in Eritrea, see also Mary Dines, “The Ethiopian ‘Red Terror’”, in *Behind the War in Eritrea*, eds. B. Davidson, L. Cliffe & Bereket Habte Selassie (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1980), 60-2.

⁵⁰ [Mengistu smashes the bottle with blood - YouTube](#); ‘Ethiopian Campaign to End Terrorism Takes a Heavy Toll’, *The New York Times*, 20 May 1977 (Ethiopian Campaign to End Terrorism Takes a Heavy Toll - [The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#))

reflected longstanding tensions and outright hostilities between Ethiopia and Somalia.⁵¹ This also needs to be understood in the context of the putative struggle against terrorism, interpreted (indeed, blatantly manipulated) in such a way as to apply to domestic as well as external opponents – and to some extent aimed at external audiences.⁵²

Meanwhile, civilians were targeted on both sides during the 1998-2000 war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and at least some of the suffering now being inflicted on the Tigrayan population represents what we can broadly term blowback, the outcome of that longstanding driver of atrocity in regional history, namely historical memory. The reports of multiple atrocities currently coming out of Tigray, including those carried out by Eritrean forces, are deeply distressing. They suggest the widespread and systematic targeting of civilians, including sexual violence and a multitude of brutalities encompassed within that term, by a range of military and paramilitary actors. Whether consciously or otherwise, Eritrean soldiers are channelling deeper historical patterns of behaviour: in March 2021, it was reported that Eritrean troops in the town of Samre, southeast Tigray, had warned locals that any further support for the TPLF would be severely punished – and threatened the amputation of a hand and a foot, the favoured punishment of nineteenth-century warriors for perceived traitors and malcontents.⁵³ They are certainly acting in ways which suggest that memories are long, for many of the massacres and much of the destruction of livelihoods, property, and sites of cultural value appear to be revenge for the violence which the TPLF and its proxies visited upon Eritrean border areas during (and indeed after) the 1998-2000 war.⁵⁴ That conflict also witnessed the expulsion of Eritreans and Ethiopians of Eritrean descent from Ethiopia in 1998 – tens of thousands of people lost their property and life savings as a result – with Eritrea later responding in kind.⁵⁵

Cycles of violent blowback; an eye for an eye. Atrocities rebound; they are remembered, and normalized. It is the cyclical nature of Ethiopian history which strikes us most in this regard: the shifting of political centres, and the morphing of in-groups and out-groups, essentially the struggle between Amhara and Tigrayan political elites to dominate the empire and, latterly, the nation-state. Atrocity is driven by memories of lost greatness, and the determination to recapture it, or to overthrow and ruthlessly punish perceived interlopers. Violence is lived experience; conflict and its manifold corollaries have long-term consequences. In this way Ethiopian history is punctuated by massacres, interspersed with atrocities, pockmarked by eruptions of violence against enemies of the state and the hegemonic culture, real or imagined.

This will only begin to cease when the young soldiers caught up in committing them are weaned off the history of doing so, and can be persuaded that the cycle must be broken, that other forms of politics are possible; and that all they are doing now is perpetuating patterns of behaviour. For all the disbelief that atrocities can be committed – in the case of Eritrea – by a largely

⁵¹ Human Rights Watch (HRW), *Collective Punishment: War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity in the Ogaden Area of Ethiopia's Somali Region*, New York, June 2008; HRW, "Ethiopia's Dirty War", 5 August 2007; HRW, "Somalia: war crimes devastate population", 8 December 2008; Amnesty International, *Routinely Targeted: attacks on civilians in Somalia*, London, May 2008.

⁵² International Crisis Group, *Ethiopia: ethnic federalism and its discontents*, Africa Report No. 153, 4 September 2009; Human Rights Watch, "'Why am I still here?' The 2007 Horn of Africa renditions and the fate of those still missing", 1 October 2008; A. Mitchell, "US agents interrogating terror suspects held in Ethiopian prisons", *International Herald Tribune*, 4 April 2007.

⁵³ Jason Burke, "Young men take up arms in northern Ethiopia as atrocities fuel insurgency", *The Guardian*, 8 March 2021.

⁵⁴ I detail this in *Shallow Graves: a memoir of the Ethiopia-Eritrea war* (London: Hurst, 2020).

⁵⁵ Gaim Kibreab, "Mass expulsion of Eritreans and Ethiopians of Eritrean origin from Ethiopia and human rights violations", *Eritrean Studies Review*, 3:2 (1999): 107-37.

conscript army whose malnourished and desperate members have been haemorrhaging into Ethiopia and Sudan for years, it needs to be borne in mind that they are doing so for the same reasons that they flee: because they are malnourished and desperate. They have been brought up in violence, and have long been isolated from the rest of the world. And now they constitute the latest traumatized and traumatizing actors in a great, unending historical pageant. The rise of Abiy Ahmed seemed to promise much in terms of the reform of Ethiopia, and seemed to herald a new enthusiasm for the breaking of old habits. It has gone disastrously wrong. What needs to happen is a much more thorough-going exercise in the decolonisation of Ethiopian imperial history, including full acknowledgement of the role played by violent atrocities over the longer term. Until there is open and unrestrained engagement with Ethiopia's history as an imperial power, with all the attendant violence associated with imperialism, there will be no peace in the region. The observation will be made from time to time that people are on the receiving end of "punishments hitherto unknown in the land." But they never are "hitherto unknown"; far from it.