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The Aberration of Eritrean Secession, 1961-1993

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Dedication

To my wife, without whom I would not be half the person I am.

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Abstract

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Despite its reputation for instability and weak states, the continent of Africa has seen very few attempts at secession. The 1960s saw the early attempts of Katanga and Biafra to split away from their host states, only for these attempts to be crushed in short order. Since then there have only been a handful of notable attempts at secession and none of these have borne permanent fruit despite the persistence of the separatist fronts (although the Southern Sudan may now finally be embarking on its own separate existence). In each case, from Katanga to Somaliland, the theoretical state has encountered resistance on the national, regional, and global scale to their existence and has never yet been recognized. However, despite these setbacks, there currently has been a single successful secession in Africa: that of Eritrea.

Eritrea faced the same political and military difficulties that all other secession attempts have faced in Africa. Their host state of Ethiopia was perhaps the most revered on the continent and had a wealth of international support throughout the thirty year conflict. The Organization of African Unity and its members remained unrelentingly in

favor of territorial integrity for all African States. The Eritreans could not even gain regional recognition for their struggle. Despite these adverse circumstances, Eritrea prevailed in its struggle for independence. Critical to this success were four interwoven factors that allowed them to overcome those barriers that had stopped their secessionist predecessors: the anomalous history of Eritrea and Ethiopia, the Eritreans' practice of the theories of protracted war, the simultaneous social revolution the Eritreans carried out, and finally the Eritreans' pragmatic relations with their surrounding dissident groups. This work argues that these four central factors were the keys to Eritrea's aberrant and so far unique victory in their struggle for secession.

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Introduction

The advent of decolonization in Africa in the 1960s was driven forward by the global drive for self-determination following the Second World War. The formation of the United Nations had established the conception of the peoples of the world choosing their own destiny as a cornerstone of postwar global relations, with Article 1, Section 2 of the UN Charter stating the purpose of the organization was “to develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace.” With this in mind the colonized world began agitating for its own sovereign leadership, to be led by their own people and governments. The first African state to taste victory in this regard was Ghana in 1957 and by 1960 this process reached a fever pitch, with seventeen separate African nations emerging as recognized independent nations that year alone. However, with the beginning of African decolonization there began to be questions as to what self-determination meant on the continent. The process so far had been to offer sovereign status to what were still colonial constructs; the governments often followed along inherited colonial patterns, the militaries were those that had been built by their colonial masters, the economies were essentially unchanged from the days of colonialism, and most importantly the borders were still those that had been created seventy-five years earlier at the Berlin Conference. As such, what was actually being given self-determination were just those frameworks that had been created in the colonial era and this did not satisfy the aspirations of all Africans. Many wanted to determine their own states outside the boundaries drawn in Europe four generations ago and were willing to fight to get them. Their aspirations put them in direct conflict with the new

African states; the advent of African independence was also the advent of African secession.

These early attempts at secession caused considerable consternation to their host nations. In 1960 the province of Katanga attempted to secede from the Congo. Katanga was a rich province with many deposits of copper and other valuable minerals but despite its providing roughly 50% of the tax income of the new state,¹ their representation within the central government was minimal. This led them to declare their own independence from the central state and seek patronage and recognition from its former colonizer Belgium and other Western powers. As the Congo under its fiery Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba was in the middle of a political firestorm both at home and abroad, Katanga felt it had a strong chance to be the first new state in Africa. These hopes were mistaken; following a chaotic series of events culminating with the assassination of the popular Lumumba on Katangan soil public perception turned against the secessionist regime. It was brought under increasing pressure by the United Nations and eventually military action was undertaken to bring it back under the control of the Congolese government. By 1963 Katanga no longer existed as a separate entity in the Congo.

This was followed in 1967 by the secession of Biafra from Nigeria. A series of coups and counter-coups through 1965-66 ignited a pogrom against the Igbo ethnic minority across Northern and Western Nigeria. Igbos across the nation retreated to their ancestral homeland of Eastern Nigeria and following a series of tense negotiations with between the leader Colonel Emeka Ojukwu and the central military dictator Yakubu Gowon the Eastern region split from Nigeria, declaring itself Biafra and calling for

international recognition. Unfortunately, little support was forthcoming. The earlier Katanga conflict had soured the United Nations on intervention in regional African conflicts. They instead insisted that such actions were the province of the new regional organization, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), which immediately took steps to mediate the conflict. The OAU took a strict line that the territorial integrity of African states must be respected at all costs, dooming the chances of any regional intervention.² Following a daring but ultimately unsuccessful offensive, the Biafrans were slowly ground down by the larger and more well-equipped Nigerians. Their siege mentality kept the struggle alive for three years, but ultimately Biafra was dissolved and Nigeria was reunited.

By the end of the 1960s the sole sovereignty of the African states had been established in international law. The United Nations refused to intervene further and the OAU made the integrity of the current states and their sovereign control of all within them an immutable characteristic of African nations.³ This effectively killed the concept of secession in Africa; further attempts at separation, such as those of the Casamance region in Senegal, Cabinda in Angola, and the Azawad in Mali all came to naught despite popular sentiment behind them and often extremely weak host states. Simply put, the African state had taken on permanence no matter their domestic state.

This understanding changed rapidly in 1993 when the UN Observer Mission to Verify the Referendum in Eritrea reported that the voters in Eritrea overwhelmingly supported separation from Ethiopia, leading to the declaration and recognition of Eritrea

1 Jules Gerard-Libois. *Katanga Secession*, trans. Rebecca Young (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), 9.

2 OAU Resolution 51, adopted at the Kinshasa meeting of the OAU, September 1967, Section C.

as a separate sovereign nation. This was the climax of the thirty-year struggle of Eritreans for their independence, which had begun with little fanfare in 1961. While the military operations had ended in 1991 with the entry of Eritrean and allied forces into Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, it had taken two years for the proper referendum to be organized and executed. However, this did not change the fact that for the first time, an African state had seceded from its host. Despite the continued isolation of secessionist insurgencies and the enduring precedents accepted by international actors, the Eritreans secured their independence. This exceptional result was the result of four interwoven factors that allowed them to overcome those barriers that had stopped their secessionist predecessors: the anomalous history of Eritrea and Ethiopia, the Eritreans' practice of the theories of protracted war, the simultaneous social revolution the Eritreans carried out, and finally the Eritreans' pragmatic relations with their surrounding dissident groups. These factors and their overall effects in creating this unique result will be discussed at length in the following chapters, but this work contends that it was only the presence of these four factors and their interactions within the greater conflict that allowed Eritrea to achieve the previously impossible goal of secession.

Chapter 1. Eritrea: History of the Conflict

It is nearly impossible to truly pin down the starting date of the long conflicts for secession in Africa, as you may choose the formation of the mass movement that sustained it, the pivotal action that drove the mass movement, or the creation of the context which surrounded this action. The Eritrean Secession might be said to have begun in 1958 when a group of Cairo based Eritrean exiles met and established the earliest clandestine organization for the liberation of Eritrea. It equally might be said that those seeds were sown in the 1952 joining of the former Italian colony of Eritrea to Ethiopia or in the following years when various political factions fought to direct the impotent Eritrean Assembly. There is also the obvious jumping off point of the Italian conquest of Eritrea in the late 19th century and subsequent intense development of the region following their crushing defeat at the hands of Menelik II at Adowa in 1896. Some scholars have even gone so far as to trace the validity of Eritrean sovereignty and struggles all the way back to the Axumite kingdoms of central Ethiopia and their intermittent warfare against the coastal Muslim pastoralists. However, while all of these were to prove pivotal moments in the development of the nation of Eritrea, this study marks the beginning of the war proper on September 1st, 1961, when a small guerrilla band led by early dissenter Idris Hamid Awate opened fire at an Ethiopian police post in Western Eritrea.⁴ From this date until the United Nations referendum in 1993 that

4 See Dan Connell, *Against All Odds: A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1993), 58. This is also accepted by the account of Richard Sherman, *Eritrea: The Unfinished Revolution* (New York, NY: Praeger Publishing, 1980), 73. Other studies sometimes choose 1962 as the starting year of the formal beginning of the conflict as this was the year the federation was officially dissolved. A prime example of this dating of the conflict is Haggai Erlich, *The Struggle Over Eritrea, 1962-1978: War and Revolution in the Horn of Africa* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1983). The authors have chosen the 1961 start date as this book is a study of secessionist conflicts and as such the beginning of violence marks the beginning of interest.

established Eritrea as a separate sovereign nation, Eritreans fought a protracted conflict against Ethiopia and their numerous backers that featured guerrilla raids, pitched battles, a social revolution, the politicization of a population, and one of the worst famines the world had seen to date. What emerged from this crucible of conflict was the sole successful secession in Africa since independence, a remarkable undertaking and an extremely interesting process, both as a case study of the difficulties involved in secession and the anomalous circumstances required to effect such a complete separation.

When the shots were fired by Awate and his fledgling Eritrean Liberation Front guerrillas in 1961, it was in response to the rising pressures of Eritrean Nationalism that had been unleashed following the Second World War. From the late 19th century until 1941, Eritrea had been a prosperous Italian colony, dubbed in the 1930s the centerpiece of dictator Benito Mussolini's new Roman Empire. The colony served as the staging area for fascist Italy's subsequent invasion of Ethiopia and large numbers of Eritrean colonial troops were used to great effect against Emperor Haile Salassie's troops.⁵ However, with the expansion of the worldwide hostilities to East Africa in the 1940s, the Italians were driven out of their holdings by British East African forces and both Ethiopia and Eritrea were placed under British control. While Haile Selassie was able to return to his throne in 1941, at the end of the war the British were left with the uncomfortable question of how to deal with Eritrea. In 1947 Italy formally renounced its claim to Eritrea or any of its other African territories, leaving the outcome even more uncertain.⁶ While political factions were already forming in the small state and struggling for their own

⁵ Connell, *Against All Odds*, 53. There has been relatively little work done on the actual service of Eritrean Askaris in the Italian Invasion of Ethiopia but this service had lasting effects on the relations of the two regions.

particular hoped-for outcomes, the case was eventually handed over the United Nations for a final verdict.⁷ Although the United States hoped for a consolidation of their ally Ethiopia's control over Eritrea, the Soviet bloc pushed for total separation between the two nations. It was an acrimonious struggle mirrored by that within Eritrea where the Unionist Party pressed its traditional interests by supporting Union with Ethiopia against those of the Muslim League and the Liberal Progressive Party who favored Eritrean independence. In the end, there was what might be at best termed a compromise, with Eritrean being joined to Ethiopia as a federated territory under the Ethiopian crown.⁸ This of course was not much of a compromise to those favoring independence, as it still placed their foreign affairs, military, finance, and international commerce under the 'Federal' government of an absolute monarchy.

While the Eritrean nationalists were disheartened at the development, it was only the beginning of what would become complete Ethiopian dominance of the 'federal' arrangement. Haile Selassie's government completely nullified and then dismantled the Eritrean state over the next 10 years through a combination of money, informal influence, and often naked military intervention. The very year of federation was the last year that free and open elections were held in Eritrea. The constitution was suspended shortly thereafter and the jailing of dissident politicians and journalists soon followed. In 1956 Amharic was made the official language over the protests of the majority of the nation which had traditionally adopted Tigrinya or Arabic as their preferred languages.⁹ That

6 Ibid., 55

7 Sherman, *Eritrea: The Unfinished Revolution*, 21.

8 Ibid., 23. For the actual resolution, please reference Resolution 390A (V) passed on December 2, 1950.

9 Ibid., 27. For a concrete representation of this linguistic policy, see Connell's related anecdote in *Against All Odds*, 58-59.

same year the Assembly was “Temporarily Suspended.” Although elections followed they were without direction or organization, leading to bitterly contested results. The nascent Labor Union movement that had been growing in strength and organization was essentially driven from sight by a series of crushing blows dealt to it by the Federal military during protest strikes in 1958.¹⁰ This was followed in 1959 by the leaders of the Assembly voting to replace their own penal code with that of Ethiopia after one of their increasingly common visits to Addis Ababa. By 1960 the main political supports of a separate Eritrea had been dissolved, with most governmental and grassroots organizations having been reduced to irrelevancy or driven from the country. Even protests directed at the United Nations, which had created the rapidly crumbling federal system, were simply met with the response that all protests would have to pass through the federal government first- in this case the Emperor himself.¹¹ The final curtain fell in 1962, when the Assembly was at last “persuaded” to vote itself out of existence, a process aided by armed police and jets providing air cover. Eritrea was officially no more as of November 14th, 1962.¹²

Of course, as the preceding paragraph notes, the first shots of the revolt against the Ethiopians occurred on September 1st, 1961. Since 1958 there had been a group of expatriate notables that were already beginning their resistance against the creeping imperialism of Haile Selassie. Formed in Cairo, the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) was the first major organized dissenting group and consisted of members of the

10 Connell, *Against All Odds*, 58.

11 Ibid., 57-58.

12 Sherman, *Eritrea: The Unfinished Revolution*, 29. In terms of the threat of violence against the Eritrean Assembly, Connell claims Ethiopian jet fighters were buzzing the city and police had surrounded the assembly while the proceeding were underway. See Connell, *Against All Odds*, 57.

disenfranchised educated upper classes of Eritrea. Many of its earliest known members were former members of the Eritrean Assembly, driven from their homes during the increasing violence of the Ethiopian repression. Woldeab Woldemariam was a common example of the early Eritrean nationalist leadership. A newspaperman and former representative from the Liberal Progressive Party, he was driven into exile by the events of the mid-1950s. He served as an early figure for this educated dissent to rally around and still serves as a noble example of Eritrean nationalism. Another figure that proved to be pivotal in both the ELM and its successor movements was Osman Saleh Sabbe of the Muslim League.¹³ He too was a staunch nationalist and served to consistently link Eritrea's struggles with the greater post-colonial movements of the world, most notably Pan-Arabism. However, despite their growing organization and outreach, the Eritrean Liberation Movement was anything but a monolithic endeavor. While outreach was already beginning and underground urban organizing in Eritrea proper was underway, the movement itself fractured into several cliques and factions. While the ELM was still trying to organize itself as a party in exile one of its splinter groups, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), took center stage and opened fire on the Ethiopians in 1961.

The decision to form itself into an armed struggle was a momentous one for the ELF and quickly propelled it into the spotlight. Its guerrilla struggle brought it increasing attention and growth despite an incompletely articulated program, with little ideology aside from being fiercely devoted to the idea of Eritrean nationalism. This would prove

¹³ Osman Saleh Sabbe has a very unique and complex role in the Eritrean Revolution, one that this study cannot fully explore. Let it suffice to say that he served both major liberation fronts in senior positions before being forcibly removed from each in turn. He then formed his own front to lead, although this was never a major force. While a controversial figure due to his extremely conservative Islamist and Pan-Arab agenda, his strong supply and training connections with Saudi Arabia, Syria, and other pan-Arab

to be enough as the struggle continued. The ELM, never fully organized nor devoted to armed struggle, slowly came undone and from 1961-1965 the ELF made every effort to subsume or destroy its rival. By 1965 this goal had been accomplished, with the few remaining ELM cadres being absorbed into the growing power of the ELF. However, with its growth, the ELF had also inherited the same difficulties that the ELM had struggled with. Eritrea itself housed almost equal populations of Christians and Muslims which were then even more divided amongst nine separate ethno-linguistic groups across what was now Ethiopia's 14th province. These divisions gave way into factionalism and competition within the Front, threatening it even as the Ethiopian military began to increase its pressure upon the nascent movement. Taking their cue from the earlier success of the Algerian FLN, the leadership of the ELF decided to divide the nation into five "zones," each overseen by a different commander who often represented the majority confessional and ethnic group.¹⁴ Unfortunately, this simply increased the rivalries, as each zone came to be run as a fiefdom and offered little cooperation to its neighbors in the face of increased resistance by the Ethiopian armed forces. While the struggle continued and the guerrilla forces increased their pressure on both the cities and the countryside, the Ethiopian forces were being rearmed by massive infusions of aid from the United States. From 1960 on the military aid alone to Ethiopia was staggering, with \$10 million dollars a year in grants and loans being offered and from 1964 on material

states made him valuable enough for all involved to try and work with him for prolonged periods of time. He finished the struggle as a distrusted and largely irrelevant figure.

14 Sherman, *Eritrea: The Unfinished Revolution*, 74 among others including Alex DeWaal, *Evil Days: 30 Years of War and Famine in Ethiopia*. (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1991), 41.

and logistical support continued to arrive.¹⁵ This made the struggle all the harder on the Eritrean guerrillas and the Ethiopian strategy continued to evolve to incorporate the massive advantages they accrued in armor, air superiority, and special counter-insurgency forces. By 1968 it was becoming obvious that the Emperor's troops were taking increased advantage of the zonal divisions, attacking each region in turn and inflicting terrible losses upon the isolated forces. As the situation deteriorated cracks began to show within the ELF, culminating in the Anseba conference in September 1968.¹⁶ This was to prove another pivotal moment in the struggle for Eritrea as it established the Unity of three of the zones following a largely democratic process supported by both the civilians of the regions and the guerrillas fighting in them. However, this action was not sanctioned by the ELF leadership nor was it accepted by the remaining two zonal commands, beginning another rift with the united front the Eritrean forces. However, with the increasing weakness of the ELF's position and the positive military results garnered by the united zones, it became obvious which way the winds were blowing. In August of 1969 the remaining ELF leadership and zonal commanders met with the united zones' commanders at Adobha.

The Adobha conference would prove to be one of the last attempts at a truly united front in Eritrea for nearly a decade.¹⁷ While the independent minded unified zones had seen better results in the recent struggles with Ethiopian troops, the ELF and its

15 Following Haile Salassie's return, the United States became Ethiopia's primary military partner and supplier, with the total amount of aid granted from 1946-1975 equaling approximately \$286.1 million dollars. For a total breakdown of these costs, see Sherman, *Eritrea: The Unfinished Revolution*, 176-177.

16 Ibid., 43 and Connell, *Against All Odds*, 80. Connell makes the clearest case for the Anseba meeting being the first move of the new radical foreign trained future leadership in creating a revolutionary front.

17 Connell, *Against All Odds*, 80-82 and Sherman, *Eritrea: The Unfinished Revolution*, 43-44. Both emphasize the contradictory accounts and ephemeral nature of the agreements at Adobha.

remaining zonal commanders still controlled the purse strings. These offsetting dynamics combined with a strong desire for unity at any cost led to the resolutions adopted at the Adohba. All the zones were reconnected under a sole leadership council which now styled itself The General Command. This General Command would consist of 38 total members, six apiece from each of the three linked zones and ten each from the two remaining zones. This led to a structure that was inordinately stacked against the more independent and increasingly dissident unified group. Beyond this, the General Command would still serve under the previous Supreme Council of the ELF, which remained in the hands of the previously unsupportive leadership. While this arrangement temporarily re-established the ELF as a politically united force under its central leadership, it remained an untenable structure. The three unified zones continued to chafe under the current leadership and the often conservative directions it was taking the organization. By 1970 the General Command erupted into violence, with 6 members of the Command itself being jailed and over 300 guerrilla fighters being executed. The progressive and dissident elements of the ELF, already dissatisfied with the politics, strategy, and leadership of the Supreme Council, began to splinter off and slowly coalesced into the second major combatant group of the war, the Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front.

This split of the armed forces would not be the last but was certainly the most important of the conflict. The literature since the independence of Eritrea has followed various paths to analyze the reasons behind the divergent characters of the ELF and the EPLF, covering aspects of religions, ethnicity, class, even economic backgrounds of the various member groups, but perhaps the simplest explanation is that of a rising tide of

student recruits in the late 1960s brought with them newer radical ideas that had been absent in the earlier leadership of the ELF. These progressive philosophies were brought to the fore as these students assumed leadership positions and participated in overseas training courses in such revolutionary countries as Cuba and China. By 1970 the rising ambitions of these younger aspiring leaders and the faltering grip of the older conservative leadership simply could no longer coexist and the split occurred. The ELF remained a fiercely nationalist but loosely disciplined group of guerrillas and older intellectuals while the EPLF took a more rigorously revolutionary tack and began organizing a disciplined peasant base from which to grow its infrastructure. Despite their shared goals of Eritrean liberation, the two fronts immediately found themselves in military conflict, leading to a weakening of both sides as well as a reduction of sabotage, ambushes, and guerrilla strikes on the Ethiopian forces in Eritrea. The Ethiopian army launched a strong ground offensive in late 1970 that battered the ELF regions and followed this with a vigorous bombing campaign by the Ethiopian Air Force.¹⁸ Although neither of these proved decisive, they enhanced Ethiopian control over the regions and allowed for the building of further infrastructure to maintain that hold, such as a series of roads in Western Eritrea that increased the Ethiopian influence near the Sudanese border, a vital gateway for the ELF's arms and food.

Despite the military setbacks for both nationalist movements embodied in both the Ethiopian offensives and their own Civil War, the early 1970s would prove to be fruitful for the nationalist movements. The Ethiopian forces treated the “pacified” regions of Eritrea like occupied territory of blood enemies and committed numerous

18 DeWaal, *Evil Days* does an excellent job discussing the prevalence of these blunt tactics of

atrocities and indignities upon the Eritrean populace. Villagization schemes were attempted to cut back on guerrilla support without adequate food supplies or sanitary considerations.¹⁹ Livestock and crops were simply seized. Entire populations saw their homes burnt to the ground. This had the obvious effect of inciting the populace against Haile Selassie's troops and caused a resurgence in membership in both liberation fronts. The war continued to be fought in the countryside and the cities, with fighters of the ELF and EPLF striking numerous targets during hit and run raids. Both nationalist fronts were showing an increased sophistication in their strategy and tactics and were slowly building their constituencies in both urban and rural settings. While neither front was charitably inclined towards its rival, signs were pointing to a détente between the two that would allow for a greater degree of organization in their activities. However, while the war ground interminably on, events were unfolding in Ethiopia which would alter the war in ways that neither front could be prepared for.

In 1974 Haile Selassie, King of Kings, Lion of Judah, the Elect of God, who had been Emperor of Ethiopia since 1930 was overthrown in a popular coup, arrested, and later killed by his military forces, which subsequently took control of his Empire. The group behind this, the Derg,²⁰ was a loose council of 120 military officers that saw themselves as enlightened technocrats that could navigate Ethiopia through its current crises and restore its power and prestige. Although nominally headed by General Anam Andom, the committee was the site of several vicious behind the scenes struggles for

populace sweeps and random bombing.

¹⁹ Villagization is a common counterinsurgency strategy used since the days of the Boer War or even before. It consists of the forced removal of the populace to fortified and controlled villages to both protect them from and limit their contact with the insurgents, thereby cutting off the enemy guerrillas from any popular support. It generally emerged into the popular consciousness during the Vietnam War, but in that conflict as in most others the actual effects of the strategy are debatable.

power which ended with a former Major in the Ethiopian Army, Mengistu Haile Mariam as the main wellspring of power in the nation. General Andom was executed in November of 1974 and Mengistu assumed one of the two chairs of the Derg which he would dominate for the next 17 years. However, the upshot of this activity was that the already over-extended Ethiopian military was thrown into general disarray. During the course of the yearlong confusion, the two Eritrean nationalist fronts continued their slow rapprochement and patched together a ceasefire in October,²¹ leaving both organizations free to focus on both fighting the disorganized Ethiopians as well as reaching out to the numerous new dissident groups which sprang up in the confusion and bloodshed following the Derg's coup.

The next four years would prove crucial to the eventual success of Eritrean nationalism. The backlash against the growing excesses of the Derg (which shortly blossomed into what became known as a "Red Terror" as thousands of Ethiopians and Eritreans were summarily executed or imprisoned and tortured) drove massive amounts of recruits into the guerrillas' camps and opened new opportunities for alliance with other revolutionary groups such as the Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF).²² The ELF consolidated its control in Western Eritrea and grew its numbers of both trained fighters and militia. The EPLF used this period to establish several "liberated zones" where an astonishing amount of social programs were established, from land reform to literacy

20 Derg is the Amharic word for "Committee" and was the name taken by the new regime.

21 Sherman, *Eritrea: The Unfinished Revolution*, 46. This temporarily ended what has been known as the Eritrean Civil War, although the peace was always uneasy and would be shattered again in the wake of the 1978 Ethiopian offensives.

22 As will be briefly discussed, the TPLF's role in the conflict was pivotal and deserves far greater attention than is given in this chapter. For a more complete overview of their contributions, it would be difficult to do better than John Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia: The Tigray People's Liberation Front, 1975-1991*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

programs to gender liberation. Both fronts continued their harassment of Ethiopian forces and slowly began to drive them out of the Eritrean borders as best they could. In early 1975 the Eritrean fronts launched an attack on Asmara itself, which although it was beaten back set off an orgy of violence by the Ethiopian troops directed at the city itself, further alienating the urban populace. The military success of both fronts continued with the defeat of the incomparably inept “Peasants’ Crusade” set up by Mengistu’s government in 1976, where 50,000 ill-equipped and untrained Ethiopian peasants were unleashed upon Eritrea with promises of conquered land. These forces were casually picked apart by veteran fighters of both Eritrean fronts and the TPLF with few if any peasants actually ever setting foot in Eritrea.

1977 saw continued confidence on the part of both Liberation Fronts. Early in the year the EPLF captured Nacfa and Afabet, two major trading centers on the northern Sahel province of Eritrea. These conquests were followed by Decamare and Keren, both important industrial centers. Beyond this, Keren was a natural fortress that commanded the passes to that gave the easiest access to the Sudan, which continued to be both a humanitarian and logistic base for the Eritrean struggle. In the same period of time, the ELF captured the town of Tessenei and followed this feat with its liberation of Agordat, Adi Quala, and Mondefera. These successes reduced the Ethiopian presence to several isolated garrisons and the important cities of Asmara, Massawa, and Barentu. Massawa was particularly important as it was the primary port for Eritrea and was therefore a primary entry point for the food and weapons that the Ethiopian forces needed to keep their flagging cause alive. The EPLF managed to cut the road between Asmara, the capital, and Massawa, the primary port, in October of 1977 and the end of Ethiopian

resistance to Eritrean nationalism appeared to be in sight. With Mengistu's Ethiopia caught between the Liberation fronts in the North and a brutal war with Said Barre's Somalia in the West over the Ogaden territories,²³ it seemed impossible that the state could last much longer.

It was at this point that an astonishing international realignment altered the balance of in Ethiopia once again. Mengistu's Ethiopia had already claimed itself as a Marxist republic since shortly after its inception, although this had always been taken as at best a philosophical stopgap for what was essentially an ideologically empty revolt and coup. However, by 1977 the ailing Ethiopia continued to declare its devotion to Marxist ideals and had completed an arms agreement with the Soviet Union. This new arms agreement alongside the belated recognition of the human rights violations of the Derg regime caused President Carter and the United States Congress to deny any further military support to Mengistu's Ethiopia. Sensing an opportunity for a greater presence in the Horn, the Soviet Union immediately filled the military vacuum in Ethiopia, consequently abandoning its current proxy of Somalia. By July over \$500 million worth of Soviet Arms flooded into Ethiopia, dwarfing the previous United States aid.²⁴ Beyond the military hardware, which included everything from MiG-21 fighters and SAM-7 anti-aircraft rockets, military personnel from the Soviet Union, the Warsaw Pact nations, Cuba, the Peoples' Democratic Republic of Yemen, and Libya arrived to bolster and train the Ethiopian Army.²⁵ During the Siege of Massawa it was reported that

²³ The Ogaden War began in 1977 with Somalia invading the Ogaden region of Ethiopia to support the irredentist claims of the ethnic Somalis living in the region.

²⁴ Sherman, *Eritrea: The Unfinished Revolution*, 90. This section also deals with the wide array of weaponry involved in the transaction.

²⁵ Ibid., 90-91.

Soviet advisors took a direct part in the fighting against the Eritreans and even that Russian Naval vessels provided shore bombardment to help drive away the EPLF advance.²⁶ Cuban troops served openly in the Ogaden War, helping halt their recently abandoned Somali allies and aiding in their eventual defeat over the next year.

This massive aid continued, with 1978 shipments of advanced arms raising the total price of material aid to over \$1 billion.²⁷ Tanks, Katyusha rocket batteries, MiG fighters, and long range artillery all were provided along with the expertise to effectively use them. Small arms were provided in almost obscene amounts as the Ethiopian army rose like a phoenix from its past four years of defeats. This staggering amount of military aid could only have one effect on the Eritrean struggle: strategic stalemate and eventual losses. As mentioned in passing previously, the EPLF had made a bold strike at Massawa in late 1977, driving the Ethiopian troops from the city to the fortified Naval Base and two small islands off shore. However, this was to be the high water mark of the liberation struggle for the next seven years as the EPLF could not complete their control of the city and were then left to face the counteroffensive of the resurgent Eastern-bloc backed Ethiopian Army which was able to focus its energies on Eritrea following their victory in the Ogaden in 1978.

The Ethiopian counter-offensives of 1978-1979 were not tactically or strategically brilliant, but they were supported by massive amounts of men and material that even the combined forces of the liberation fronts were dwarfed by their power. By June 21st of 1978 there were reportedly 70,000 Ethiopian troops massed in Tigray preparing for the

²⁶ Connell, *Against All Odds*, 154. However, this direct ground intervention seems to have been more due to the recent arrival of the weaponry and subsequent Ethiopian unfamiliarity with it. As to the naval bombardment, it remains a pervasive but unsubstantiated rumor.

upcoming offensive and by July those number had risen to over 100,000, which if they were not superbly trained were at least equipped with new and effective material.²⁸ By mid July the offensive was underway with multiple spearheads of Ethiopian armor and troops penetrating Tigray and Southwestern Eritrea, with the heaviest blows landing on the ELF areas. By July 21st the ELF had been driven from the majority of their captured cities and towns in the western lowlands and the central highlands, exposing the western edge of the EPLF domains. Offensives also began from the Ethiopian garrisons of Massawa and Asmara, further sowing confusion and battering the overstretched Eritrean forces. The responses of the liberation fronts took different forms: the ELF attempted to hold its ground against the Ethiopian steamroller while the EPLF announced several “tactical withdrawals” in the process abandoning recent gains around such cities as Decamare and Massawa.²⁹ The end results also differed: in their attempt to hold their ground against the massed Ethiopian forces the ELF inflicted great casualties against them but also sealed their own fate. Already battered by years of warfare (both internal and external) and having been waning in prestige in comparison to the more radical and organized EPLF, the ELF were essentially broken as a military force following the Ethiopian attacks of the late 1970s and its remaining forces were slowly absorbed into the EPLF over the next several years. The EPLF in withdrawing lost a great amount of territory and also had to abandon many carefully cultivated base areas, but escaped complete destruction and instead re-entrenched themselves in Keren and the Sahel region

27 Sherman, *Eritrea: The Unfinished Revolution*, 90.

28 Connell, *Against All Odds*, 160-161.

29 For more details on this, see Connell, *Against All Odds*, chapter 10.

of the Northwest which continued to serve as safe liberated base areas for the Eritreans to draw logistical strength from.

Of course, this had only been the first counter-offensive of the Ethiopian forces. The second round directed at the EPLF stronghold of Keren began in November of 1978.³⁰ Featuring vicious struggles between veteran EPLF guerrillas and heavily armored Ethiopian columns, the second offensive again showcased the military skill of the EPLF in inflicting horrific casualties against the Ethiopian forces, but the disparity in men and material remained too great. This is not to say the Ethiopians simply came on in waves; since the influx of advisors and material, their tactics had evolved and by using multiple columns of armor and by advancing along several parallel paths, they forced the EPLF to spread their already meager forces thinner, exacerbating the disparity in number. These new tactics had their effect and on November 26th the EPLF forces abandoned Keren and fell back on their base areas around Nacfa and in the mountains of the Sahel, their last safe haven in the country. It was to prove an especially effective one however, with the mountainous terrain and prepared logistical and defensive positions serving the Eritreans very well in the months to come.

1979 and 1980 saw the Eritrean forces at bay but certainly not defeated. Ethiopian forces launched their third, fourth, and fifth offensives in 1979 against the Eritrean forces and achieved nothing against the prepared and veteran EPLF. These strikes contained over 50,000 Ethiopian troops supported by massive amounts of armor and artillery and yet were unable to make any measurable headway against the base areas

³⁰ See DeWaal, *Evil Days*, 114. DeWaal pinpoints this second offensive as the one that truly broke the ELF, noting “By continuing to engage the Ethiopian army rather than retreat, it ensured its military defeat.”

of the EPLF.³¹ In 8 days between July 14th and 22nd the Ethiopian army lost approximately 6,000 men. Indiscriminate bombing against the base regions was resumed but caused little damage as the Eritrean workshops, schools, and hospitals were generally either well camouflaged or subterranean by this point in the war. 1980 saw a general stalemate on the front while the army continued to “pacify” its reclaimed regions of Eritrea. These efforts saw the return of numerous human rights violations and often indiscriminate violence, especially against the restructured villages that the EPLF had created in their previous zones of control. However, due to the popularity of the EPLF social programs which had been established, this harsh treatment simply continued the alienation of the Eritrean populace and allowed the EPLF guerrilla activities to continue almost unhindered behind Ethiopian lines.

The last major event of 1980 was the final destruction of the ELF. While its military forces had been essentially broken in the fighting and retreats of 1978-79, the last guerrilla vestiges still existed in the very Western reaches of Eritrea near the Sudan border. With their strength almost gone and yet still standing astride the vital lifeline to food relief shipments, the EPLF finally decided that the ELF was more of a hindrance than a help to their continued struggle. A brief conflict ensued where the EPLF, aided by their erstwhile allies in the TPLF, finally drove the remnants of the ELF into the Sudan where they would serve no further role in the conflict.³² As such, there now officially remained only one dominant Eritrean nationalist force carrying on the struggle, but it was one that had withstood years of civil and external war and had established itself as the

31 Ibid., 115.

32 David Pool, *From Guerrillas to Government: the Eritrean People's Liberation Front*. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001), 146-147.

more revolutionary and pragmatic of the two. By 1982 its strength would again be put to the test against the massive Ethiopian “Red Star” offensive.

The personnel gathered for the “Red Star” campaign (so named by Mengistu as a play off of the contemporary “Bright Star” US exercises in the Mid-East) were the largest seen so far in the conflict. The total military strength for Ethiopia at this point stood at 245,000, by far the largest army in Africa. The offensive itself saw 120,000 troops deployed against the Eritrean forces, although most of these were conscript troops with little training and who were mostly used for massive blunt assaults against the EPLF positions.³³ As such, although they outnumbered their Eritrean opponents by eight to one, the assaults often ended in bloody repulses and by the end of the campaign over 40,000 of these Ethiopian conscripts would be casualties. By May 1982 it had not even captured Nacfa and in June the Ethiopian armed forces ceased operations. Despite it being their largest campaign to date, the Ethiopians still could not dislodge the Eritreans. With the failure of the “Red Star” campaign and its small follow up “Stealth Offensive” of 1983, the strategic initiative returned to the battered Eritrean forces and they began to hesitatingly advance against the spent Ethiopian forces in 1984. Although the Ethiopian forces continued to expand (topping 340,000 men in total in 1983 alone) and launched several counter-offensives in 1984 and 1985, they would never come so close to winning the war again. The 1985 offensive was the largest yet and drove the Eritreans back from their recent gains with their largest losses to date (approximately 2,000-4,000 personnel killed and wounded) this was primarily due to their switch from guerrilla to mobile warfare (which will be covered later in this chapter). The Eritrean repulse of the 1984-

1985 offensives saw the EPLF consolidate their hold on their western liberated zones and grow their forces from approximately 12,000 formal fighters to 30,000 by 1987 when their major counter-offensives began.³⁴ Drawing strength from their liberated areas and transforming the villages and cities they captured, the EPLF drove the Ethiopian forces back step by step and used their extremely effective social and relief organizations to help mitigate the effects of the massive famine that had been underway since the early 1980s. The mobile warfare phase of the EPLF finally drew the Ethiopian forces into a decisive battle at Afabet on March 17th, 1988 and over the next two days proceeded to annihilate the Ethiopian Northern Command.³⁵ Over 15,000 Ethiopian soldiers were killed and massive amounts of small arms, artillery, tanks, and ammunition fell into the hands of the ever-stronger EPLF.³⁶ Although the Ethiopian forces still existed in strength throughout Eritrea and would continue to struggle against the Eritrea liberation, they would never pose an adequate threat against the Eritreans after Afabet and were, despite their size and equipment, a broken force. In February of 1990 Massawa fell to a rapid advance of the EPLF forces, who this time conquered the island bases with a small flotilla of rubber craft. By February and March of 1991 Asmara fell to EPLF siege and the remainders of the Ethiopian garrisons of Asmara and Keren attempted to retreat to the Sudan and the vast majority of the combined force was captured in route. The struggle in Eritrea was essentially over, but one last act remained.

33 DeWaal, *Evil Days*, 117. The Red Star Campaign remains arguably the largest military campaign waged on African soil by an African nation.

34 Ibid., 184.

35 Connell, *Against All Odds*, 228.

36 DeWaal, *Evil Days*, 237.

In January of 1989 the TPLF had joined with a number of other ethnic liberation fronts in Ethiopia to form the combined Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPDRF). As the most veteran of all the organizations, the TPLF took the lead in the organization and by February of 1989 had driven the Ethiopian army completely from Tigray. Although relations had ruptured between the EPLF and TPLF in 1985, they had been restored during the successes of 1988 and as such the EPLF had sent a detachment to aid in the final liberation of Tigray and beyond.³⁷ Working side by side with the EPDRF from 1989 on, the combined force held Tigray and built its strength until February 1991. From February on the EPDRF launched a series of offensives including “Operation Teodros,” “Operation Dula Billisuma Welkita” (Oromo for “Equality and Freedom Campaign”), and finally “Operation Wallelign” which finally brought an end to Mengistu’s Ethiopian regime when the dictator fled on May 21st, 1991.³⁸ This effectively ended Ethiopian resistance and brought the TPLF-led coalition to power in Ethiopia. One of its first acts was to keep its previous promise to the EPLF and sponsor a resolution in the United Nations for the recognition of Eritrea as its own sovereign state. The thirty year struggle for Eritrean liberation was over and following a 1993 referendum, Eritrea joined the world as the only successful secession on African soil.

37 For a quick and useful overview of the relations between the two fronts, John Young. “The Tigray and Eritrean Peoples Liberation Fronts: A History of Tensions and Pragmatism.” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* Vol. 34 No. 1 (1996): 105-120 is an excellent choice.

38 DeWaal, *Evil Days*, 272-273.

Chapter 2. Reasons for Success

Of course, the first major question that must spring to mind is why was this secession of all attempts successful? It did not have the foreign aid or international uncertainty that Katanga had in its attempt. It did not have the humanitarian outcry of Biafra. The same factors that doomed all previous attempts and have since hobbled all followed attempted secessions applied to Eritrea: a lack on international recognition, a limited supply of arms, a finite and tenuous resource base, and an international consensus against the feared 'Balkanization' of African states. So what was it about the Eritrean case that allowed its anomalous success? What factors has the Eritrean conflict (and the EPLF in particular) had that set it apart from all the others so far and since? The answer is a tight combination of four interwoven factors that allowed Eritrea to achieve its successes and that any other secession has so far failed to attain. These four factors are its unique historical development and the effects this had on the framing of the conflict, the brilliant and ultimately successful application of the Maoist concept of Protracted War, the simultaneous social revolution undertaken by the victorious party and its ultimate effect of forging a national identity, and lastly the pragmatic and decisive relations the EPLF constructed with the reform insurgencies going on in Ethiopia at the time of their revolt.

Chapter 2.1. Anomalous History

To deal with these factors in order, the first is the anomalous history of Eritrea in terms of its relations with Ethiopia. The historical basis of secessions has always been seen as a necessary factor within the conflicts to separate a body politic from its host state. Katanga argued for its independence from the Congo based on its previous

separate administration during the colonial era under the *Comite Special du Katanga*. Biafra pointed to the historically separate administrations for each Nigerian region as well as their political separation from the North prior to 1914 as both the grounds for a confederal solution and their own secession. For Eritrea their history with Ethiopia allowed for an even stronger and perhaps more effective argument. Although Ethiopia argued that Eritrea was their 14th province and was historically part of the Ethiopian empire, Eritrea could, would, and did maintain that their history not only placed them well outside the Ethiopian sphere of influence but that also their development during the colonial period culturally and socially severed whatever historical ties may originally have been extant.

To begin with the history of Eritrea, the earliest connections that can be made to Ethiopia were to the Axumite kingdoms of the inland plateaus. The Axumite expansion introduced Coptic Christianity to the highland plateaus that would form the heartland of both Ethiopia and Eritrea by the 4th century CE.³⁹ These kingdoms waxed powerful and even exerted a small amount of influence into the Muslim and animist nomadic herdsman that lived along the coastal plains by the Red Sea. However, these early links were severed permanently by the Muslim expansion of the 6th and 7th centuries BCE.⁴⁰ By approximately 750 the Muslim influence had driven the power of the Axumite kingdoms and their Coptic faith from the both the coastal lowlands and the Sudan. This spread of Islamic strength helped the nascent Beja kingdoms coalesce and they quickly expanded their own influence onto the central plateau region. This essentially severed the ancient “Ethiopian” control over whatever regions might now constitute Eritrea. In the 14th and

39 GKN Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 5.

15th century the Ethiopians themselves had become sufficiently centralized and strong to challenge the Muslim Kingdoms again and retook the Central highlands, a period which marked increased Christian influence and the transition in the region from pastoralist cultures into agricultural. However, control of the lowlands still eluded the Ethiopians and these plains would continue to serve as both an alien region and a staging ground for invaders for the next five centuries.⁴¹ Throughout the 16th century the various Islamic empires of the region, specifically the Turks, would give military aid to the Muslim coastal groups, leading to a contested existence for the fertile plateaus. By the end of the century a variety of sources referred to the region encompassing the coastal plains and the central plateau region as Medhi Bahri and viewed this nascent Eritrea as politically and culturally separate from Ethiopia.⁴² In fact, from Eritrea's growth as a regional power to its sublimation to the Egypt of Mohammed Ali and his successors from 1823 to its eventual fate as an Italian colony, Ethiopia could only claim partial control of the region for a period of 9 years between 1880 and 1889.

Even following this partial control, in 1889 the Italians claimed full sovereign rights to the territory as stipulated first in its recognition by the other European powers at the Berlin Conference of 1885 and later by Ethiopia itself in the treaty of Uccialli in 1889. Admittedly the treaty of Uccialli is and remains a controversial document. While the Amharic translation signed by Menelik II was written as saying that the Ethiopians “might” use Italy as intermediaries to the rest of Europe, the Italian version essentially

40 Ibid., 5.

41 Sherman, *Eritrea: The Unfinished Revolution*, 7.

42 For an example, see James Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* (Edinburgh: G&J and J Robinson, 1790).

suborned Ethiopian foreign policy to Italy.⁴³ However, despite this argument of interpretation, the treaty still clearly demarcated the boundaries of Eritrea and recognized the Italian sphere of influence over the Medri Bahri. Tellingly, even after the destruction of the Italian army at Adowa in 1896, Menelik did not conquer Eritrea as an Ethiopian possession. Instead the Treaty of Addis Ababa (signed October 23rd, 1896) reaffirmed Italian hegemony over an expanded Eritrea.⁴⁴ From this time until their defeat in 1941, the Italians occupation would serve to physically and culturally develop Eritrea as a separate and distinct entity far different than the feudal empire that Ethiopia remained.

Italian development played a decisive part in the creation of Eritrea. While admittedly the Eritreans themselves were seen as second class subjects, the development of the Eritrean colony would have far ranging changes to their culture and society. The displacement of previous notables in favor of Italian elites was perhaps the first major change, altering the traditional power structure of the region.⁴⁵ Mass plantation farming and wage labor was introduced, with large farms producing cotton, fruit, sisal, and coffee were set up and large numbers of Eritreans were recruited to work these fields to grow and harvest the produce for Italian consumption.⁴⁶ Mining was also introduced and continually expanded to produce the raw materials that the developing Italian state needed. Gold, iron, nickel, chromium, and other minerals were found and an effort was made to increase the exploitation of Eritrea's mineral wealth all the way into 1930s and 40s.⁴⁷ To help support this labor and develop other forms of it for their benefit, the

43 Sherman, *Eritrea: the Unfinished Revolution*, 12.

44 Sherman, *Eritrea: the Unfinished Revolution*, 13 and Connell, *Against All Odds*, 51.

45 Connell, *Against All Odds*, 52.

46 Sherman, *Eritrea: the Unfinished Revolution*, 15.

47 Ibid., 15.

Italians introduced improved medical and veterinary practices. In addition they instituted secular education for young men up to the fourth grade. The introduction of heavier industries and economic development also meant an expansion of infrastructure to take full advantage of the growing economy. A railway was built between Massawa, Asmara, and Agordat in 1922. An intricate network of all-weather roads was completed in 1935, primarily to aid in the military mobilization taking place in the colony. Telephone and telegram lines were laid and later in the colony's history airports were built to connect the burgeoning cities to the rest of the Italian Empire. Even the cities were expanded, as row houses were built to house the workers of over 300 small scale workshops and industries around the major urban centers of Massawa, Asmara, and Assab, where increasing numbers of young Eritreans moved to earn wages to pay the new taxes being levied on them.⁴⁸ By 1935, the year that thousands of Eritrean soldiers invaded Ethiopia along with their Italian colonists, Eritrea no longer resembled its highland neighbor socially, economically, or culturally.

From 1936 to 1941, Ethiopia and Eritrea were briefly linked, but this was under the domination of Benito Mussolini's fascist military forces following the driving of Haile Selassie from his kingdom. This five year period saw Eritrea continually used as a logistical base for the further expansion of the Italian Empire in East Africa, an Empire that would be contemptuously dismantled by the British East African forces in 1941. While Ethiopia was handed back to Haile Selassie, Eritrea remained under the rule of a British military commission, which continued to use it as a light industrial center for the war effort in the region. The United States used the former colony as a shipping depot

⁴⁸ Connell, *Against All Odds*, 53.

for its regional shipping and even constructed an airplane assembly plant at Gura. Britain leaned even more heavily upon the former colony, using its facilities to create trade goods for markets cut off by the closure of the Suez Canal. The Eritrean economy experienced a boom as they produced soap, matches, hand tools, beer, wine, and paper for regional trade. Simultaneously, Eritrean social structures were experiencing an “Eritreanization” under British auspices. Lesser administrative positions were opened to the Eritreans and the color bar was slowly lowered on a variety of social functions. Education was again revitalized and Arabic, Tigrinya, and English were taught in over 60 schools.⁴⁹ Public health services again became available and the colony continued its modernization.

Following the war the boom dried up, but the social and cultural changes remained. However, there remained the sticky question of what must be done with Eritrea. The outcome of this question has already been dealt with at the beginning of this narrative, but the import of it to both sides remains the key issue here. While Ethiopia can and did point towards the earnest desire of large swathes of Eritrean society that did indeed wish for Union with Ethiopia, those who dissented had a powerful argument against Union and one that they continued to use to support the cause of secession. That argument was a simple one: at no point could Ethiopia point towards a historic connection between the two nations, at least not one that was of recent enough vintage to truly matter. Even the brief periods of late 19th century influence were themselves either not indicative of any formal connection or, as in the terms of the Treaty of Ucciali, formally renounced under international law. Furthermore, the Eritreans could and did

49 Ibid., 54.

argue that their separate evolution both socially and culturally in the decades of colonialism certainly put themselves outside any Ethiopian state that existed throughout those decades. Whereas Ethiopia remained a largely feudal agricultural state that was run by a small aristocracy living off of masses of downtrodden peasants, Eritrea was a semi-industrialized state with light industry, cash crop plantations, wage labor, and a flourishing administrative system including a burgeoning political system made up of educated elites. As such, any claimed “Union” between the two, whether it was historical or present, was spurious at best.

As such, following the forced federation of the two states in 1952 and especially following the dissolution of the Eritrean federal assembly in 1962, the Eritrean opposition did not see themselves as a movement of a political body separating itself from a host nation. Instead they saw themselves as engaged in a decolonization struggle against an African colonizer. This can be seen in a variety of literature, press statements, and even within the language used by the fronts themselves. Every group to emerge was a liberation front with nationalist goals to free their nation from the control of an oppressive outside invader. The Eritreans would constantly make this argument throughout their struggle and made every effort to frame it as such. This was an important point for a very specific reason: as shown by the example of every secession struggle previous to that of Eritrea, the Organization of African Unity and the United Nations would brook no successful secession for fear of a domino effect and the balkanization of Africa.⁵⁰ Simply put, no international recognition could be expected and no international aid could be sought by a secessionist group. In fact, it would be far

⁵⁰ As seen in the UN reactions to Katanga and Biafra.

more likely to attract outright hostility and support for the host nation, in this case Ethiopia.⁵¹ However, with the Eritrean struggle cast as one of decolonization, a whole new world of possibilities opened up. In terms of the OAU, which dominated any discussions of international interest on the continent, Decolonization struggles were sacrosanct. Article II of the OAU charter proclaimed that one of the primary purposes of the organization was “to eradicate all forms of colonialism from Africa” and Article III, while serving as an insurmountable barrier to secession, declared “absolute dedication to the emancipation of the African territories which are still dependent” as one of the core principles of the Union.⁵² As such, by casting their struggle as one of decolonization, the Eritreans avoided one of the key hurdles to every previous and following Secession attempt on the continent of Africa. This is not to say that the OAU immediately recognized its struggle and threw its weight behind their efforts (having just read a brief history of the struggle, this must be obvious), but it did allow for legal wiggle room on what had been an airtight condemnation of any separation of African states, something that would have been doubly difficult in one of the most venerated states of the continent.

Chapter 2.2. Eritrea and Protracted War

Of course, the international legality of the secession/liberation would have been moot if the conflict waged to affect it had been crushed. Katanga and Biafra could argue their cases all they wished, but at the end of the day their states were overrun by enemy

⁵¹ The fact that Ethiopia was the host nation in fact made things more complex both for external political reasons, where Ethiopia remained a symbol to many Africans, as well as internal ones where the multi-ethnic composition of the state would cause problems in the philosophical relations between the Eritrean fronts and those housed in Ethiopia.

forces and their leadership was forced to declare an end to the separation. In comparison, the military campaign for the future of Eritrea was brilliantly successful. Eritrea stands out even among other secession and liberation attempts for being an exceptionally successful application of the military dictums of Mao's theory of protracted warfare, a theoretical construct which served the purposes of Eritrea extremely well with only slight modifications. In this, Eritrea's success resembled nothing so much as the previous anti-colonial struggles of both China (Against both the Koumintang government and the Japanese, 1929-1949) and Vietnam (Against both the Japanese and the French, 1941-1954). Their application of this theory cannot be especially surprising, given that contemporary African liberation fronts were taking advantage of it (most notably Amilcar Cabral's PAIGC against the Portuguese) and that many early figures in the EPLF leadership had received military training in China during their tenure in the ELF.⁵³ What is astonishing is the extremely clear application of these theories and their remarkable effectiveness on the Ethiopian enemy.

Mao laid out his military philosophy in a series of lectures presented over the period of the Chinese Civil War and the Sino-Japanese war of 1936-1945. Noting that the Communist Chinese forces were weak in comparison to both the Koumintang (KMT) of Chiang Kai-Shek and the Army of Imperial Japan, he laid out the strategic vision necessary to effectively prosecute the conflict against these enemies for the ultimate victory of his revolutionary forces. Perhaps central to the military canon of Mao is his work "On Protracted War," which lays out the three stages that a revolutionary army must pass through during its protracted struggle with a superior enemy. The first is the

52 OAU Charter, article II, section 1 and article III, section 6.

period of Strategic Defense.⁵⁴ It is a given that the revolutionary forces will be smaller, worse supplied, and unable to resist the counter-revolutionary forces in the early stages of a conflict. The ability of a centrally-organized and legitimate opponent to both generate its own support and gain outside aid will always outweigh that of a revolution in a semi-feudal nation to begin with. As such, this early stage must of necessity be one of defense and retreat. The primary course of action for the revolutionary front must be that of survival while extending the enemy further and depleting his strength. For Mao this was easy given the vast distances involved in China- for other combatants other methods would have to be applied as will be seen in the following analysis.⁵⁵ As the enemy reached the terminal edge of his operational distance and the threat of imminent annihilation passed, the revolutionaries could transition into the second phase.

The second phase as delineated by Mao was the Strategic Stalemate.⁵⁶ This occurred when the enemy had extended himself to his current limit but the revolutionaries were not yet strong enough to take the initiative. In this phase the revolutionaries then had two primary goals: the prosecution of guerrilla warfare and the mobilization of the populace. In terms of the prosecution of the guerrilla war, it was assumed that it would still be impossible to combat the counter-revolutionary forces directly, but yet it was necessary to continue to reduce his strength to both safeguard the revolution and create the factors necessary to transition to the third phase. As such, the countryside would become the home of guerrilla bands, sent to harass and damage the

53 Connell, *Against All Odds*, 80 and 144.

54 Mao Tse-Tung, "On Protracted War" in *Mao Tse-Tung on Revolution and War*, ed. M. Rejai (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1970), 275.

55 Strategically this difference would also be shown in the Cuban Revolution, where lacking distances the revolutionaries became dependent upon the difficult terrain of the Sierra Maestre Mountains.

56 Ibid., 276.

enemy's extended supply lines and communications. The counter-revolutionary's food and ammunition were to be hijacked or destroyed, his ability to transmit information disrupted, and his security outside of areas of concentrated strength was to be compromised as much as possible. A simultaneous objective was the mobilization of the populace, which was to take place in several safeguarded base areas. These areas, made secure by remote location, strong defenses, or secrecy, were to serve as centers of production, education, and social transformation. By offering a strong alternative to the current unpopular counterrevolutionary government, these base areas would grow the strength of the revolution by mobilizing the populace to either directly serve the revolution as fighters or indirectly serve it by producing the logistical necessities for the prosecution of the conflict. Thus, during the second phase a process of the simultaneous weakening of the enemy and strengthening of the revolutionaries would take place until such time that the balance of power had firmly tipped in the favor of the revolution, when the final stage of the protracted conflict would begin.

This final stage was that of the Strategic Offensive.⁵⁷ Having weakened the enemy, harassed his communications, taken the security of the countryside from him, and mobilized and organized their own strength in terms of both quality and quantity of forces, the revolution could now transition from its combination of guerrilla and defensive warfare to one of guerrilla and offensive mobile warfare. While the guerrillas could continue to exist and pursue their missions throughout the countryside, the main force of the revolution would now fight in mobile conventional formations, seeking to stalk, confront, and destroy the now inferior counter-revolutionary forces. The entire

57 Ibid., 278.

purpose of the transition to mobile warfare was to use the greater agility of the revolutionary forces (who were not hampered by the great distances of communication or a hostile countryside) to concentrate an insurmountable force against the isolated enemy formations and force a decisive confrontation that would see the destruction of the opponent. With this achieved, it was simply necessary to repeat the process in the strategic offensive until such time that all enemy formations were destroyed or driven from the revolutionary state. This would conclude hostilities and secure peace on the terms of the revolutionary front.

A key concept within this theory of Protracted Conflict (and one which we will see was decisive in terms of the Eritrean case), was Mao's enunciation and acceptance of the Strategic Retreat. While this was implicit in "On Protracted War," he more fully delineated the concept in his earlier lecture "Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War" where he began his exploration with the pronouncement "The objective of strategic retreat is to conserve military strength and prepare for the counteroffensive. Retreat is necessary because not to retreat a step before the onset of a strong enemy means to jeopardize the preservation of one's own forces."⁵⁸ This strategic retreat would follow a number of strategic precepts to ensure the maximum benefit was to be gained even as the forces pulled back from a superior enemy. The first precept was that the retreat should always take advantage of prepared interior lines to safely fall back on prepared base areas from which the revolutionary forces could derive strength. The second was that the retreat should always be undertaken unless at least two of the following conditions could be met if not more: the active support of the populace

for the revolutionaries, the terrain was favorable for operations, all of the main revolutionary forces were concentrated, the enemy's weak spots had been discovered, the enemy had been reduced to a tired and demoralized state, or the enemy had been induced to make mistakes. When two of these conditions had been met, it would signal the opportunity to switch from the strategic withdrawal to the offensive yet again.⁵⁹ However, it must always be remembered that Mao intended the strategic retreat to create these favorable advantages and as such it served to both preserve the revolutionary forces and create the advantages that would allow their future success.

Finally, underpinning all of these concepts was Mao's stated Principles of Operation as enunciated in his lecture "The Present Situation and Our Tasks."⁶⁰ These were a list of 10 operational concepts that would serve as the philosophical basis for the greater strategic thinking of the Protracted War. The first was to attack dispersed and isolated enemies first, leaving concentrated enemy strongpoints for later operations. The second instructed the revolutionaries to occupy large rural areas and small and medium cities first, leaving large urban areas for later. The third directed the combatants to focus their efforts on the reduction and demolition of their opponent's effective strength before all other things; when the enemy's strength had been broken, cities, towns, and other strategic areas would fall far easier. The fourth exhorted the revolutionary forces to only fight when absolute numerical superiority was on their side (at least double their opponent's strength) and then when fighting to seek to encircle and annihilate their foe-

58 Mao Tse-Tung, "Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War" in *Mao Tse-Tung on Revolution and War*, ed. M. Rejai (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1970), 279-280.

59 Ibid., 280.

60 Mao Tse-Tung, "The Present Situation and Our Tasks" in *Mao Tse-Tung on Revolution and War*, ed. M. Rejai (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1970), 285-286.

use their numbers and mobility to complete dismantle their enemy and avoid costly battles of attrition. The fifth instructs to fight no battle unprepared and without absolute surety of victory. The sixth instructs the combatants to be selfless in combat and ignore fear of sacrifice and fatigue and be accepting of the necessity of fighting several successive battles. The seventh dictates the advantage of using mobile warfare to overcome the enemy but not to neglect positional tactics when reducing the enemy's fixed points. The eighth commands the revolutionary front to resolutely seize all strong points if a city must be attacked, taking care to use timing and aggression to overcome fixed strong points and waiting for opportune moments if one must attack the defenses of a large city. The ninth addresses the material strength of the revolutionaries- they must "replenish our strength with all the arms and most of the personnel captured from the enemy. Our Army's main sources of manpower and material are at the front."⁶¹ And the final principle explains the necessity of using intervals between fighting to rest, train, and consolidate, but also to not let these intervals grow so long as to let the enemy relax. These ten main principles served as the basic tactical thinking in the greater scheme of the strategic thought of the Protracted War.

Now, if we examine these concepts in terms of the Eritrean struggle it is striking how often they align with the key events of the war itself and its eventual successful conclusion. The three stages of the Protracted War can be clearly seen, with the conflict actually repeating part of the evolution of the struggle to adapt to the changing situation. The strategic retreat was to prove a decisive factor in the determination of the dominant liberation front. The base areas which were to provide so much of the logistical strength

61 Ibid., 286.

are obviously in evidence, so much so that an entire section following this one will be devoted to them and the social revolution they housed. And lastly, although documented evidence for all of them is certainly not forthcoming and sometimes the principles were ignored (often to the detriment of the cause) a great many of Mao's principles of operation can be seen quite plainly in the Eritrean prosecution of their struggle.

In terms of the Protracted Struggle itself, the experience of the ELF and the EPLF (to a far greater degree) reflected the Maoist thought at work in African liberation struggles of time. The Strategic Defensive period can originally be seen in the early days of the struggle, specifically from 1961 to approximately 1968. During this time the ELF had fled from the urban centers that had originally been its political bases and fled to the Western Sahel region while its leadership existed in exile in Cairo. As pressure from the Ethiopian military pressed them further from their base areas, they often found themselves retreating to base areas across the border in the Sudan, where the new waves of university educated recruits found them in the slowly growing base areas across the border.⁶² It was during this period of limited guerrilla activity and cross-border withdrawals that the liberation front husbanded its strength until it was ready to begin formal expansion within Eritrea proper. While this is perhaps a borderline example, the conception of the strategic defensive and retreat is seen far more clearly in response to the Soviet backed offensives of 1978, where the EPLF found itself facing a massive resurgent Ethiopian army that had tipped the balance of power back in favor of Mengistu's state. The EPLF leadership determined that any attempt to hold onto their laborious gains against the steamrolling Ethiopian forces would endanger the survival of

the revolution itself. As such, the EPLF abandoned what they considered “secondary” objectives such as Massawa and Keren to consolidate their forces and attempt to bring about a future situation where the balance of power might be more equal. Their forces retreated in a series of holding actions all the way back to their base region around Nacfa, which had been prepared for a prolonged static positional defense. Tellingly, EPLF fighters even referred to this withdrawal as their “Long March” equating it with the 1934 long strategic retreat of Mao’s own forces to the vast spaces of Western China. Once ensconced in Nacfa, the EPLF forces were able to bring about far more advantageous conditions, including better terrain to fight, a consolidation of forces, and a completely loyal and enthusiastic general population that would serve as an excellent logistical base from which to fight the Ethiopians. With these alterations of conditions, by the time the Ethiopians had prepared their next offensives, the Eritrean forces had already created the conditions to transition to the strategic stalemate and to begin dismantling their pursuers. On the other hand, the fate of the ELF over the same period perhaps does even more to reflect the efficacy of the Maoist strategy. Although they faced a far greater concerted assault than the EPLF, the ELF leadership refused to enact a strategic retreat and instead chose to fight the Ethiopians from their newly liberated areas. Within weeks the ELF lines were broken and they were retreating in a panic.⁶³ In the aftermath of the Ethiopian offensives the ELF was spent as a military force and the vast majority of its fighters were absorbed into the now safely entrenched EPLF.

⁶² It was during the period that the future leadership figures of the EPLF encountered the liberation front, joined, and then were sent to China for training. See Connell, *Against All Odds*, 79-80.

⁶³ Connell, *Against All Odds*, 163-165.

As to the strategic stalemate, again several periods of the Eritrean conflict fit within the Maoist framework. From 1968 to 1974 both the ELF and the emerging EPLF were establishing those regions which would serve as their base areas and slowly expanding their guerrilla operations. During this time Haile Selassie's army was under constant harassment and could not effectively deal with the swarming raids that were taking their toll on communications and logistics. It was also during this period that both fronts established their social programs which defined the Eritrea they each hoped to bring about following the conflict. In spreading these ideals and social frameworks, they also established their base areas that served as centers from which further expansion of their forces could come. Frontline fighters and militia were recruited, workshops and medical services were established, and new political organizations were formed. It was this process of winning over the populace that again created the conditions for the transition to the next stage of combat.

The strategic stalemate was also illustrated in the Nacfa period following the strategic retreat of 1978 and lasting until approximately 1984. Much like the "Long March" of the EPLF better illustrated the conception of the strategic retreat, the Nacfa period better shows the idea of the strategic stalemate, reflecting the increasing maturity of the EPLF military command. As mentioned, the retreat to Nacfa accomplished a number of strategic objectives: it preserved the nationalist front's armed forces, it consolidated them in the face of overwhelming enemy forces, it established them closer to their own base of support in Nacfa and northern Eritrea, it established their forces in far more advantageous terrain, and it also forced the Ehtiopian forces to extend themselves and their lines of communication even further into rugged Eritrean territory.

With these factors established, the Eritreans needed to accomplish two simple military goals: grow their own strength while reducing that of the Ethiopians in preparation for a strategic counter offensive. To accomplish these goals, the Eritreans resorted to a combination of positional and guerrilla warfare.⁶⁴ The guerrillas wreaked havoc on the extended Ethiopian lines of communication while the fortified lines of the Eritreans withstood four separate offensives in 1979 alone. These offensives cost the Ethiopians massive amounts of men and material lost, while the Eritreans reaped a large amount of captured arms and ammunition.⁶⁵ The lines were again tested in 1982 by the “Red Star” campaign, which again did little more than waste massive amounts of men and armaments while increasing Eritrean morale and arms caches. With this the Eritreans felt they were ready to enter the counter-offensive stage by 1983, but a series of local counter-attacks by the still massive Ethiopian forces, including one of comparable size to the “Red Star” took place over the period of 1983-1985, delaying but not denying the inevitable shift in strategic initiative and strength which signaled the beginnings of the final strategic offensive stage of the war.⁶⁶

However, the strategic offensives of 1987-1991 were not the first of the struggle. Following the strategic stalemate period of 1974, the downfall of Haile Selassie and the

⁶⁴ Interestingly, positional warfare is almost always avoided under Maoist doctrine, as it removes the advantages of mobility and stealth from the usually weaker revolutionary forces. However, in the case of the EPLF as in the case of the Cuban Revolutionaries, there was not the territory to adequately pursue a mobile strategy. As such, strong positional warfare in mountainous terrain was used to bolster the military strength of the numerically inferior revolutionaries while guerrilla bands roamed behind the Ethiopian lines.

⁶⁵ A concrete application of Mao’s strategic principle number nine as enunciated earlier in this chapter.

⁶⁶ The losses incurred in repulsing the counterattacks of 1984-1985 serve as an excellent illustration of the principle that the difficulty of applying Maoist strategy is not in understanding the stages of the conflict, but of properly timing the transition between them. In this case (and as the TPLF would continue to maintain) the EPLF prematurely transitioned from a combination of positional defense and guerrilla operation to a conventional mobile offense, thus opening themselves up for losses to a still strong enemy.

confusion and excesses of the Derg led to a tipping of the scales in terms of power and strategic initiative. Both the ELF and EPLF, flush with recruits and captured weapons, went on the offensive and slowly but surely expanded to control the vast majority of Eritrea. This was the period during which Asmara was cut off from Massawa in the standard practice of isolating the cities and saving them for last. Local superiority allowed the EPLF to capture Keren in an astonishingly brief assault.⁶⁷ From 1974-1978 both liberation fronts did their best to liberate and educate the countryside and then slowly envelop the cities. This course was only reversed when the unexpected military intervention of the Soviets suddenly altered the balance of forces again and made the conditions supremely unfavorable to the strategic offensive of the Eritreans. This left 1978 as the high water mark of the struggle until the reopening of the strategic offensive in 1987 by the EPLF and its allied liberation fronts.

The final counter-offensives beginning in 1987 were due to a combination of factors that weakened the Ethiopians severely and at least kept the EPLF from suffering the same fate. The failed offensives of 1979-1985 drained the Ethiopian forces of men and weapons and emboldened the large number of guerrilla fronts now actively fighting within Ethiopia itself. Beyond military overreach, Ethiopia was in the midst of one of the most severe famines the world had ever seen. Although food aid was diverted to their military, Ethiopia was slowly starving and popular support of the Mengistu regime was almost nonexistent. In opposition to this the EPLF was as strong as it had ever been. It had absorbed what was left of the ELF's armed forces, it had captured a vast amount of military hardware from the Ethiopian forces over the course of their failed attacks in the

⁶⁷ Connell notes that it took the British two weeks to defeat the Italians at Keren while it took the

north, it had fostered several of the now mature guerrilla fronts that were tearing their enemy apart from the inside, and while not well stocked with food by any means, their base areas produced some amount of food and their efficient social programs such as the Eritrean Relief Association ensured that they were at least in not as bad of shape as the Ethiopians. The balance of power had shifted for the last time and the strategic offensive began in December 1987 as the EPLF forces overran the Ethiopian defenses outside of Nacfa. Their mobile conventional forces sought out local advantages against the weakening Ethiopian forces in an attempt to obtain a decisive victory and on March 17th, 1988 secured one. The Battle of Afabet raged for 3 days and saw the complete destruction of the Ethiopian northern command. There were over 15,000 Ethiopian casualties and the EPLF again captured vast stocks of arms and vehicles, including over 50 tanks. Whereas the Eritreans compared their earlier withdrawal with the famous “Long March,” now the world took notice and compared Afabet with Dien Bien Phu, the decisive Vietnamese victory over the French colonial forces in the first Indochina war.⁶⁸ From this point the offensive was essentially unbroken and the Eritrean forces could even feel the momentum on the ground level.⁶⁹ The countryside was overrun and in 1990 Massawa and Decamere were recaptured and by 1991 Asmara and Addis Ababa were taken in the final offensives of the liberation struggle.

As such, although some of the theoretical aspects would run into the altered circumstances of the Eritrean situation, by holding true to Mao’s conception of protracted

EPLF a mere four days. See Connell, *Against All Odds*, 95-96.

⁶⁸ This comparison was explicitly made by scholar Basil Davidson on the BBC news broadcast of March 21st, 1988. It has since been quoted or paraphrased in the majority of the literature on the Eritrean war.

warfare and not being afraid of adopting a defensive or even withdrawing pattern, the Eritrean Liberation movements endured the worst that an opponent alternatively armed by the two superpowers could throw at them. The idea of withdrawing from an enemy's strength until advantage was regained was internalized within the EPLF in particular and proved to be a decisive lesson. No matter the military strength of the Ethiopia, which at its height had the largest army in Africa, the Eritreans could never be pinned down for a decisive battle. By prioritizing the survival of the insurgency, the Eritreans continuously drained their opponents of men, material, and morale until the balance of forces had permanently shifted in their favor, allowing them to secure their ultimate victory on the battlefield.

Chapter 2.3. Eritrean and the Social Revolution

Without the outright defeat of the Ethiopian forces, no doubt the political separation of the two countries would have been an impossibility. However, Mao's lessons revolve around the idea of base areas and the loyalty and support of the people—the peasants and proletariat that provide the raw material for the struggle.⁷⁰ Without these men and women, the armed forces would never win their victories and the guerrillas would be fish attempting to swim in a hostile sea. As such, the military victory of the Eritreans, again the EPLF in particular, stem ultimately from the social revolution

69 Connell gives several excellent anecdotes of the EPLF's feelings of morale and momentum. The most telling of the shift of power is that of the EPLF's dismissal of the "Sparta" brigades and their gimmickry. See Connell, *Against All Odds*, 235.

70 These ideas are central to most other revolutionary war theorists of the time, with Vo Nguyen Giap's *People's War, People's Army* stressing the necessity of popular peasant and proletariat support. Even Che Guevara's *Guerrilla Warfare* put forth the idea of a people's war, although the Cuban Revolution at its heart was based in the bourgeoisie.

they affected in the countryside and cities which created an Eritrean identity and mobilized the populace. This mobilized populace in turn not only formed the base areas that offered succor and strength during the conflict, but also served as the strong foundation for the emergent Eritrean nation.

While both fronts stressed the social transformation of Eritrea as a component of the struggle, the ELF was not as radical as their brethren in the EPLF and consequently did not affect such a startling transformation. While they did establish medical and relief services under the Eritrean Red Cross-Red Crescent society, they did not expand the medical services well beyond this. In terms of their village restructuring, they tended to establish village committees but leave them in the hands of traditional powers of the village. While they did establish several mass organizations such as the General Union of Eritrean Workers, the General Union of Eritrean Students, the Eritrean Women's General Union, the General Union of Eritrean Peasants, and the Eritrean Democratic Youth Union, these and the subsequent contributions to the struggle itself were more of reactions to the more radical political transformations going on in the EPLF.⁷¹ This was a pattern that was all too familiar, as the ELF tended to view the struggle as paramount and the social revolution as a secondary objective that could be handled after the war had been won. As such, the ELF was forced to then react when the more developed and mature social programs of the EPLF began to draw in much greater support from the populace. To put it simply, the social programs of the ELF were generally shallow and reactive and consequently only generated shallow support for their cause. The effect of this policy can then be seen again in the aftermath of the 1978 reverses, where the ELF

71 Sherman, *Eritrea: the Unfinished Revolution*, 98.

was displaced and shattered by the Ethiopian advance whereas the EPLF had prepared loyal base regions to retreat through and to and which welcomed them again when they returned on the offensive.⁷²

Of course, to create those loyal base regions the EPLF created an entirely transformative program and ideal for the emergent Eritrean consciousness. By building off a basis of five major mass organizations (for workers, peasants, women, students, and youth, just like the reactive organizations of the ELF) which began to operate openly in 1977 after years of clandestine organizing, the EPLF enunciated a completely transformative program which would alter the very fabric of Eritrean society. This program's stated goals would completely rebuild Eritrea in terms of agricultural production, industrial production, education, health care, and even gender relations.

In terms of agricultural production and relations, the Eritrean general program for reform called for a socialized agricultural sector with control placed back in the hands of the producers. In theory the program claimed its goals as including the nationalization of the lands expropriated by the Ethiopians and their feudal collaborators and revising this into larger collective farms for the use of the masses. It also sought to introduce more modern farming methods, including the use of machinery and modern fertilizers to help increase the productivity of the peasant class. For the still existing pastoralists, veterinary and breeding aid would be provided as well as financial aid to help them become sedentary and successful animal breeders. Beyond all these (and several other small

⁷² This split in turn reflects the split within revolutionary theorists, where one camp (represented primarily in the ideas of Mao and Giap) argues that the education and organization of the populace must precede the launching of any armed struggle. This view is opposed by those theorists that feel that the armed struggle is paramount and any and all organization and changes are only truly possible after a military victory and as such the struggle is paramount. Guevara's idea of *foquismo*, where the struggle is sparked by military action first and transformation later, falls into this category.

provisions) it purported to allow for the amicable and fair resolution of land inequality and ownership disputes while providing for the organization and collectivization of peasants so they may look after their own affairs.⁷³ For the most part these goals were reached. Self-sustaining cells of peasant organizers set up village committees that represented all strata of agricultural life. In such model villages as Zagher they oversaw the redistribution of land that had been monopolized by richer farming families and settled disputes within the community.⁷⁴ While this was a long process, by the end of it large numbers of peasants that had never had land of their own to work had plots to produce with. Often surplus land could then be farmed collectively by the newly set up farmers association, the produce of which then went into a cooperative shop. The individual plots as well were allocated along the lines of the association membership, which organized them in such a way so as to allow the easier introduction of new farming techniques. The front even trained “barefoot veterinarians” along the lines of China’s famous barefoot doctors to offer free veterinary services to the pastoral and agricultural population’s animals.

Similar alterations were made to the structure of industrial production and relations. Much like the Ethiopian- and collaborator- owned land, the industries held by these proscribed groups would be nationalized along with the vital large industries of the nation itself, such as the ports, mines, public transport, and power. Meanwhile foreign owned industries of a small scale would be allowed as long as the owners were from

⁷³ For a full accounting of these concepts can be found in Article 2, Section A of the document “Objectives of the National Democratic Programme of the EPLF” which can be found in a number of publications, including Appendix B of Sherman, *Eritrea: the Unfinished Revolution*.

⁷⁴ The example of Zagher is a particularly famous one as it served as a model village for the EPLF and was reported on in both Connell, *Against All Odds*, 109-126 and Pool, *From Guerrillas to Government*, 111-114.

nations that had not opposed Eritrean independence.⁷⁵ To aid growth in the industrial sector, urban land would be made state property along with excess urban housing. The rent for this housing would then be set at a reasonable level for the standard of living in the region by the managing government. The citizens whose property was thus nationalized would be duly compensated for their losses.⁷⁶ In terms of the workers themselves, their rights were to be strictly safeguarded, partially by the organization and politicization of the workers themselves. These stated rights included an eight hour workday and at maximum a six day work week as well as social security nets for age and disability. The nationalized urban property would be made available to these organized workers to assure them decent living conditions. Most tellingly, the politicized workers would be given the right to “participate in the management and administration of enterprises and industries.”⁷⁷ By offering the workers organizations, security, and strong interest in the continuation of the national industries, the EPLF theoretically offered a complete revolution to the working class. Again, much like the agricultural reforms, the EPLF were able to implement the vast majority of these while the struggle was still going on. During their administration of Keren in 1977 they retained the status of the previously nationalized housing but slashed the price of the rents, particularly the lowest rents to further aid those distressed by the conflict.⁷⁸ They also changed the pay scale for workers, lowering those that were highest while dramatically increasing those that had been lowest.⁷⁹ As to the industries themselves, even as early as 1975-76 the EPLF

75 “Objectives of the National Democratic Programme of the EPLF”, Article 2, Section B.

76 “Objectives of the National Democratic Programme of the EPLF”, Article 2, Section E.

77 “Objectives of the National Democratic Programme of the EPLF”, Article 4, Section A, Part 8.

78 Pool, *From Guerrillas to Government*, 123-124.

79 Ibid., 124.

liberated zones had a plurality of small cottage industries sustained by and sustaining the revolution. Woodworking collectives altered weaponry while machine shops fabricated parts for everything from weaponry to generators and agricultural machinery. These small front-run workshops were acknowledged to be the future of the nation: “These small shops are going to be the base for the new Eritrea.”⁸⁰ The collective work, reform, and politicization of the industrial base of the revolution played a vital role in the conflict.

In every sector the greatest emphasis was placed on education. Free compulsory education, grants and scholarships, the establishment of more primary schools and institutes of higher education, and most importantly the pledge to “Combat illiteracy to free the Eritrean people from the darkness of ignorance”⁸¹ were central to the educational revolution that the EPLF insisted on for their nation. While it might be thought that most of these goals could only effectively be pursued in peacetime, perhaps more than any other sector of its Revolution the EPLF made education a ubiquitous part of their struggle. The EPLF demanded that all members serving in the front be literate in Arabic or Tingrinya and established this training for the both the older members and the ‘Vanguards,’ the youth that were inducted into the struggle initially in non-combatant roles until they reached of age. These new inductees were also given educations in history, political theory, first aid and public health, and other basic subjects. In the EPLF run refugee camps and liberated towns classes were given in political theory, the history of Eritrea, and most of all literacy. These same literacy courses were run out of the hospitals for those rehabilitating from injuries, as well as courses in geography, and

⁸⁰ Connell, *Against All Odds*, 40.

⁸¹ “Objectives of the National Democratic Programme of the EPLF”, Article 3, Section B, Part 1.

elementary math.⁸² Astonishingly these same sorts of courses were also provided to Ethiopian prisoners-of-war, the vast majority of which were illiterate conscripted peasants. Beyond the training in the field, the EPLF established and ran over 36 schools in 1976 alone.⁸³ While it cannot be said that the education was given for entirely selfless reasons, as a cynical observer can easily claim that such education is better labeled indoctrination, it cannot be denied that the mass teaching of literacy altered the entire philosophical base of the nation and helped spread the conception of Eritrea as more than a collection of nine separate nationalities.

Hand in hand with education was the complete overhaul of public health services. The EPLF sought to establish a system of free public health care that not only treated the populace at large, but served as a basis for locally manufactured medicines and as centers for the eradication of contagious diseases.⁸⁴ Public health was paramount. In this, as like in much else of their goals, they made remarkable headway. Two tiers of medical training (a basic and an intermediate) were established to produce a greater amount of qualified medical personnel to man the expanding programs as the movement gained maturity. As of 1977 alone the EPLF was operating 4 major hospitals with a combined capacity of nearly 1400 patients.⁸⁵ These facilities were equipped with basic medical necessities such as microscopes, refrigerators, and X-ray machines. Beyond these central hospitals, the front operated over 20 intermediate clinics established in liberated or semi-liberated areas to deal with regional patients and even had limited inpatient capabilities. To supplement these formal facilities, teams of doctors were trained to travel the largely

82 Connell, *Against All Odds*, 38-39.

83 Sherman, *Eritrea: The Unfinished Revolution*, 104.

84 "Objectives of the National Democratic Programme of the EPLF", Article 3, Section C.

rural areas in the mold of the “Barefoot Doctors” to inoculate the populace as well as offer free medical care to the villages. Over the course of their struggle the EPLF extended medical services to the populace at large where there had been essentially no formal health services previously.

Lastly, and perhaps the most radical step taken in their social revolutionary program, the EPLF obliterated the previous conceptions of gender roles in their liberated areas. Whereas Eritrea had long been an extremely conservative and patriarchal state regardless of region, the EPLF explicitly stated their goals for women’s rights. They were to be freed from domestic confinement, be assured full rights of equality in representation, pay, and participation, and progressive marriage and family laws were to be established.⁸⁶ Beyond this the EPLF promised to respect the right to maternity leave, to provide maternal services, and even to try and eradicate prostitution, which they viewed as a violent act against women. It would be right of a commentator to be skeptical though, as it is common for revolutionary movements to exalt women’s rights and yet do little to attain them.⁸⁷ However, like all other provisions within its programs, the EPLF did a remarkable job in attaining its goals under the pressures of wartime. First and foremost, women were organized as an important part of the front and were always given equal representation within the political structure of the EPLF itself. They were not barred from serving in any capacity within the front and women commonly took combatant roles, with women constituting 13% of the army by 1977.⁸⁸ The education

85 Sherman, *Eritrea: the Unfinished Revolution*, 102

86 “Objectives of the National Democratic Programme of the EPLF”, Article 4, Section B.

87 Notably the role of women in the aftermath of the success of the FLN has been cited as less than satisfactory.

88 Sherman, *Eritrea: the Unfinished Revolution*, 106.

programs offered by the front were perhaps even more revolutionary for the women involved, as literacy had been even rarer amongst women than men before the conflict. However, the alterations to women's rights did not stop within the boundaries of direct service to the front. In liberated areas the land reform was just as open to women as men and women were amongst those that claimed plots of land in Zagher and other model villages. As the EPLF's programs became more ingrained into the social fabric of communities, they often began taking on variations of their marriage law. This was a revolutionary step, as marriage was a defining characteristic in traditional Eritrean society, where it essentially relegated women to a servile role.⁸⁹ With the new laws being put into place, concepts of mutual consent for marriages became common as well as a woman's right to divorce. Beyond this ages of consent began being established, doing away with child-marriages which had the effect of opening up a whole new world of independent adolescence for young women, transforming their possibilities in education, employment, and even newer ideas of courtship. Although this is not to say that all communities accepted these changes quickly or easily, the balance of sexual power was altered by the social revolution of the EPLF and women were to a great degree liberated from their previous servitude.⁹⁰

The social revolution altered Eritrea irrevocably and even at the time was noted for its far reaching consequences. No less a scholar of revolutions than Gerard Chaliand wrote "the EPLF is by far the most impressive revolutionary movement produced in

⁸⁹ Connell does an excellent job explaining the extraordinary effects that these reforms had on women's lives in Eritrea. His chapter "Destroying Shyness" is an excellent window into the process (Connell, *Against All Odds*, 127-137).

⁹⁰ Connell also offers an interesting look into the interconnectedness of the revolutionary consciousness with the refusal of poor peasants to consent to the stripping of Eritrean women of their

Africa in the past two decades.” This complete social revolution would prove to be vital to the success of the Eritrean struggle for two primary reasons. The first was that the revolution and the acceptance of its precepts more than anything else helped the Eritrean cause overcome the regional, linguistic, and confessional barriers to national unity. While earlier attempts in Katanga and Biafra both faltered when ethnic differences helped fracture efforts of secession, following the adoption of the social revolution there never was a credible threat of ethnic or religious divisions within the Eritrean front. Even later attempts at secession constantly found (and still find) themselves hobbled by the disunity often flippantly referred to by the press as “tribalism.” The Sudanese efforts have been almost crippled by the fighting between Dinka and Nuer interests. Other following efforts such as the Azawad movement or the Casamance separatists are not so much hobbled by ethnic divisions as they are by their lack of an overarching ideology that can transcend their narrowly defined nationalisms and attract a wide enough base of support to succeed. By adopting a social revolution and using it to advance precepts that created a national ideology and identity which was accepted and proliferated by the populace, the EPLF created a nation in the process of liberating it.

The second major reason for the importance of the social revolution has already been discussed in a passing manner in the previous paragraphs: the creation of loyal and productive base areas are a necessity for the pursuit of a protracted conflict. By large scale agrarian reform, worker’s rights, women’s rights, education, and health care the EPLF created a popular front that earned the peoples’ loyalty and efforts. More than this, in the model villages and towns and amongst the workshops and hospitals in the remote

rights, rightly seeing the parallels between their own new-found freedoms and those of women. Connell,

regions, they created a popular society that then had a vested interest in seeing their revolution succeed in the only way that mattered: the military overthrow of the oppressive power. As such the EPLF's social revolution created areas that were loyal and productive for their efforts and which turned barren for their opponents.⁹¹ Put in Maoist terms, strategically they always had one of the necessary conditions for advantage and tactically the guerrillas always had a deep popular sea to swim in. Put simply, the implementation of the social revolution created the conditions necessary for their military triumph.

Chapter 2.4. Eritrea and Pragmatic Relations

Lastly of the decisive anomalous factors that allowed the heretofore only successful political separation in Africa was what has been termed the EPLF's pragmatic relations with other liberation fronts. Given long duration of Eritrea's conflict and Ethiopia's autocratic governmental structure from shortly after World War Two until 1991, it was inevitable that other resistance movements would have come into being. A particularly large number were constituted shortly after the coup against Haile Sellassie and the beginning of the Derg's oppressive Marxist turn in 1974. Although most of these were to prove small movements that would not play major roles in the conflict, one in particular would prove to play a deciding part in the success of the secession of Eritrea. The Tigrayan People's Liberation Front began their armed struggle against the Ethiopian government in 1975 and quickly established relations with the two working Eritrea

Against All Odds, 136.

⁹¹ Even after the return of Ethiopian troops in the 1978-1985 Offensives, the EPLF loyalist areas still resisted the Derg forces and clandestinely aided the EPLF, a decisive factor in the struggle.

fronts, the ELF and EPLF.⁹² Both fronts offered aid to the fledgling group, with which they shared linguistic and educational ties. Although ties were severed with the ELF in 1976 due to disputes over boundaries between Eritrea and Tigray, the TPLF established strong ties with the EPLF.⁹³ The two fronts shared a Marxist viewpoint of their struggle and a common goal of self-criticism to keep their movements ideologically pure. The EPLF even offered aid in material and training for the Tigrayans, with between three and four thousand Tigrayan fighters being sent to the Sahel for training with the Eritreans. These troops were to prove decisive in blunting the Ethiopian offensives in the early 1980s directed against the Eritreans.⁹⁴

This is not to say that the two fronts always saw eye to eye. There was widespread disagreement between the two as to the tactics to be employed for the struggle. In 1980 the EPLF had transitioned into a conventional and increasingly professional military structure in their strategic stalemate with Ethiopia, fighting battles from fixed positions and holding their liberated territory in open battle.⁹⁵ The Tigrayans felt that this distanced the fighters from the populace as well as increasing the losses inflicted on the front needlessly. The TPLF remained adamant that a guerrilla war from the countryside was the only method that would allow success against the Soviet backed Derg. Beyond this, there was a fundamental difference in their goals. While the EPLF

92 The current best work on the subject of the TPLF is John Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia: The Tigray People's Liberation Front, 1975-1991*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

93 During this same time period the ELF established closer ties with other Ethiopian dissident groups such as the Ethiopian Democratic Union and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party. These unfortunately did not prove as successful as the TPLF and during the second Eritrean Civil War the TPLF helped drive the ELF out of Eritrean and Tigrayan territory.

94 Pool, *From Guerrillas to Government*, 149 and Young, "The Tigray and Eritrean Peoples Liberation Fronts: A History of Tensions and Pragmatism," 107.

was a secession insurgency, looking to physically separate their nation from the state, the TPLF was a reform insurgency, intent on using the state apparatus to carry out a social revolution. As part of the TPLFs goals, they embraced the concept that each separate ethnic group of a state can and should form its own front and have the right to self-determination. This was a no-sell to the Eritrean Front, which fought for the centrality of a nation and denied the concept of ethnic self-determination.⁹⁶ This fundamental difference led to deep tensions, exacerbated by the Tigrayan's insistence of denouncing the Soviet Union due to its support of the Derg and the Eritrean's continued pursuit of an alliance.⁹⁷

In 1985 the two fronts formally severed diplomatic ties due to these continued tensions, with the TPLF going so far as to offer support to a minor rival opposition front in Eritrea.⁹⁸ However, the TPLF continued to support the concept of Eritrean independence, which left the door open for a rapprochement which was not long in coming. This new agreement was hastened by Ethiopia's settlement with Somalia over the Ogaden region in 1988,⁹⁹ which freed up massive numbers of troops to continue the conflicts against the regional insurgencies. From 1988 on the TPLF and EPLF formed a coordinated front with agreed upon goals and aims for their partnership. This united front between the Eritreans and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front

95 Young, "The Tigray and Eritrean People's Liberation Fronts: A History of Tensions and Pragmatism," 108. As mentioned in note 63, this is part of a larger debate as to the timing of the alterations of mode of warfare in the Maoist framework of conflict.

96 Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia*, 152-154.

97 Ibid., 154-155.

98 Ibid., 156-157. This splinter group, the Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Eritrea (DMLE), eventually fell by the wayside and by 1991 only existed abroad.

99 Despite the Ogaden War's conclusion in 1978, Ethiopia and Somali each maintained significant troop levels in the region and tensions remained high. After a small clash in 1988, the two countries agreed to withdraw their troops from the border region.

(the multiethnic coalition that the Tigrayans welded together and headed) launched a series of offensives that finally caused the Ethiopian regime to crumble in 1991. This was the deciding moment for both insurgencies.

One cannot overestimate the importance of the common goals and aims adopted between the Eritreans and the Tigrayans. Initially the two provided shared intelligence and logistics to pursue the protracted struggles that would bleed the Ethiopian regime dry. By broadening the base of the conflict, the two fronts working in combination crushed attempts by the Derg to put an end to the conflict for over a decade. The so called ‘Ethiopian Peasant Crusade’ was destroyed with little fanfare in 1976. The two fronts also worked together to stymie the efforts of the massive Ethiopian ‘Red Star’ campaign in 1982, the defeat of which essentially doomed any further efforts by the Derg to crush either front. Beyond this military coordination was the decisive nature of their relationship. By maintaining relations with the Tigrayans and aiding in the success of their reform insurgency,¹⁰⁰ the Eritreans ensured their own reward at the completion of the campaign. With a sympathetic government now in power over their previous colonial oppressor, the Eritreans claimed their share of the spoils- a declaration of recognition of their independence in 1991.

The importance of this declaration of recognition is especially important given the political difficulties that had been established in terms of secession in Africa. For the OAU to recognize a seceding region would require a motion to be brought before it by a member state. However, just any member would not do- as the case of Biafra amply

¹⁰⁰ Interestingly, the TPLF itself began as a separatist insurgency and only later became a reform insurgency by Clapham’s definition. The transition left them in an interesting form, as they advocated

shows. If an external power tried to bring forward a motion to recognize a separatist or secessionist movement, the 'host nation' could invoke article III and argue that it was their own internal business and their sovereignty in such matters must be respected. It was this dynamic which made the alliance with the TPLF and their greater organization the EPDRF so vital. Without the EPDRF driving out Mengistu's forces and achieving their own sovereign rule over the nation of Ethiopia, there would be no guarantee of recognition at all. It was only by their effective and pragmatic relations with the now-ruling party of Ethiopia that the EPLF was able to gain the sponsorship of their own host nation for their separation and the agreement to allow a referendum two years later to determine the future political status. With the ruling regime in Addis Ababa giving their blessing to the actions within their own territory, there was little that the international community could see wrong with the formal separation of the two states in 1993. Simply put, without the simultaneous reform insurgency, the secession of Eritrea would have been an impossibility.

nationalist separatism but in a federal form under a greater Ethiopian government. See Christopher Clapham. *African Guerrillas*. (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1998), 6-7.

Conclusion

The Eritrean struggle for independence could not have occurred without all four of the previous factors having interacted within the context of the greater Eritrean struggle. Simply declaring a historical separation had been tried in both Katanga and Biafra, but despite these histories and their claims to independent existence under international laws, both secessionist attempts were overwhelmed on the battlefield. This rendering all legal arguments moot when the secessionist enclaves ceased to exist. This left the successful military prosecution of the conflict as a priority despite the historical claims of the secessionist state. However, as a secessionist state was by nature an unrecognized fragment of its host state, there was no conventional way for a secessionist front to win a military solution; the host state naturally had a larger logistical base and could also access international aid. In this situation, asymmetric methods such as Mao's conception of protracted war were necessary. But, these methods of waging war relied on a popular front and mass participation. This meant that actions needed to be taken to engage the populace in the struggle. The Eritreans, among other protracted fronts throughout history, found the best way to accomplish this was fomenting a social revolution to mobilize the people. Finally, even these methods might have failed in the face of international law without the open sponsorship of their secession by the government of Ethiopia. The EPLF's pragmatic relations with their neighboring reform insurgencies insured international support for their separation at the end of the conflict. All four factors relied on each other to succeed and would most likely have failed in isolation.

Given the infrequency of these factors being found within a single conflict, it remains unlikely that other secessionist movements will ever replicate their success, with the lone possible exception of the South Sudan. However, if one looks at the current situation that has brought South Sudan to its own plebiscite, one sees a mirror image of these conditions: an anomalous history, given the South's separate colonial administration; a protracted war, with the Sudanese People's Liberation Army fighting a long and organized guerrilla war; a social revolution engendered by the SPLM throughout the struggle in the 1980s and 90s; and although the Northern government has not been completely overthrown by the SPLA and their allies, it has instead acceded to plebiscites to avoid their probable overthrow. However, their current and possible future success shows the continued difficulty of secession in Africa and the rarity of the so far unique solution Eritrea enacted to seize their independence.

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