

The Battle of Adwa, African Victory in the Age of Empire: A Reflection

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Introduction

The defeat of Italy by Ethiopia on March 1, 1896 at the Battle of Adwa, then the vibrant capital of Tigray, not only demonstrated the resilience and patriotism of Ethiopians but also made Ethiopia the steward of future hopes for the emancipation of the other nations that were subjugated under foreign rule. For example, Japan, used Ethiopia's experience as its model and developed a strategy to fight against Russia in 1904. However, for a number of the European colonialists, when they heard that Italy was defeated by the heroic Ethiopian army at the Battle of Adwa in 1896, they were surprised and humiliated that members of the white race had lost. They suddenly had to rethink their ideas and policies about Africa being predominantly inhabited by primitive people that needed colonial rule in order to advance into a modern world.

Now, as rightly described by Kinfu (January-March, 1996), the town of Adwa stands as an antiquated old town bearing the vivid stamp of decay. Because of policy neglect, the town of Adwa, except for its geographical location is continuing to deteriorate. For a student of African history, it is disturbing to see and feel the complete and total absence of a museum or a library or paved pathways to show visitors where the battle was fought. However, credit must be given to those who mounted posts at the base of Mount Soleda, with flags to commemorate the Battle of Adwa.

The battle of Adwa is historically significant not only for Ethiopia but for its fountain of pride and inspiration to millions who cherish the black heritage. To arouse his supporters against white racism in Jamaica and in the United States in 1914 and 1917, the well-known African nationalist, Marcus Garvey stressed heavily the Ethiopian victory against Italian aggression at the Battle of Adwa. Using phrases such as "Ethiopia thou land of our fathers," the legendary Garvey was able to inspire and marshal his followers to consume his "Back to Africa Movement" slogans. In addition, Benito Sylvain of Haiti, Joseph Vitalien of West Indies, Booker T. Washington, Ida B. Wells, and W.E. B. Du Bois, depicted Ethiopia as a beacon or "a kind of Zion" in order to rouse passion against colonial aggression and racism. For a number of Africans, the victory of Adwa symbolized the possibility of future emancipation and inspired known figures like Nnamdi Azikiwe in Nigeria, Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, Jomo Kenyatta in Kenya, George Padmore in Jamaica, etc. to articulate and motivate their followers to fight and stand in solidarity against foreign domination (for example, see Levine).

The sovereignty in the modern era which started at the Battle of Adwa, helped Ethiopia to secure an independent future. For Emperor Menelik II, victory at the Battle Adwa assured his legacy. The heroic national campaign of 1895-1896 which culminated at the Battle of Adwa gave a solid foundation for contemporary Ethiopia. If Ethiopia was defeated at the Battle of Adwa, Emperor Menelik and Empress Taytu would have been overthrown, by the Italians if not by their own people (Jonas, 320). Finally, to the Ethiopian clergy who carried the *tabot*—as well as a triumph of the united Ethiopian army, victory at the Battle of Adwa qualified it as a suitable subject for sacred art (Jonas, p. 130). The questions that need to be asked at this juncture are: 1) Does Jonas summarize the historical narrative of the battle of Adwa in order to arrive at these conclusions? 2) Does Jonas support effectively his argument with adequate historical evidence?

Purpose

The purpose of Jonas' book was to document historically why Ethiopia's victory over Italy at the Battle of Adwa on March 1, 1896 was decisive. In addition, Jonas' book documents how Ethiopia, situated in a predominantly colonized part of Africa was able to defend its independence during the period of European colonization. Finally, Jonas briefly attempts to shows how Ethiopia acted as a role model for the emancipation of Africa from European domination.

A brief Review of Jonas' Book

In his book, "*The Battle of Adwa: African Victory in the Age of Empire*," Raymond Jonas narrates in detail the causes and outcomes of the war between Italy and Ethiopia. Jonas suggests that it was Article 17 of the Treaty of Whicale signed in Italy between by Ras Makonnen on behalf King Menelik II of Ethiopia and the Italian government in 1889 that started the initial misunderstanding between the two governments. While the Amharic version of the Treaty of Whicale gave an option for Ethiopia to use the good offices of the kingdom of Italy to conduct its foreign affairs, the Italian language version of the Treaty obliged the Ethiopian government to act like a protectorate and also conduct its foreign affairs with other states through the offices of the Italian government.

As the contradictory terms in Article 17 of the Treaty of Whicale became irreconcilable, Antonio Baldissera , the commander of Italian forces in Africa led the Italian forces to occupy Asmara in August. On 1 January 1890, Italy announced the formation of the colony of Eritrea. The name Eritrea originated from the Greek word *erythos* (or *Red Sea*). After formally colonizing Eritrea, the Italian government forces in Eritrea started attacking pro-Ethiopian forces in Eritrea. For example, it initiated a military incursion against Bahta Hagos, the ruler of Akele

Guzay in December 1894. Then General Baratieri assembled about nine thousand men and marched southward and chased out Ras Mengesha , the ruler of Tigray from Adwa, which was then the capital of Tigray.

As the Italian army advanced deep into the Ethiopian central territory, Emperor Menelik II became fully convinced that all Italians needed to be expelled from Ethiopia. With the assistance of Empress Taytu Betu, and Ras Wele, brother of Empress Taytu, Ras Michael, viceroy of the land of Wollo, etc, MenelikII crafted an acute strategic design to counter- attack the Italian incursion. Ethiopia didn't have a national army, but with the mobilization of all able-bodied men and the existing militia, he formulated a national army. As stated by Jonas, "The stately northward march of Menelik and Taytu not only consolidated their rule but called upon the Ethiopian people –Tigrayans, Shoans, Oromo, Welayta and others –to set aside their differences and to recognize a common enemy, recognize a common nationhood (p.333)."

Despite the rumor that Menelik's support was insecure because Alula , Mangasha , Tekle Himont , and Makonnen would betray him, the united Ethiopian forces led by Ras Makonnen completely annihilated the invading Italian forces at the Battle of Amba Alage on December 1895. Thus, the Battle of Amba Alage set the stage that united Ethiopian soldiers from north and south, Tigray and Shoa would fight side by side to rout the enemy (pp. 130-131). Interestingly enough, it was a surprise to notice that radical students from the University of Rome who suspected Italy's adventure for militarism and colonialism - chanted "Viva Menelik" to the horror of patriotic commentators when they heard that Italy was defeated at the Amba Alage battle front.

For Ethiopia, the story of Amba Alage was a story of triumph and confidence that the Italians could be defeated. Menelik's forces marched north with the swagger of winners (p.133). They marched from Amba Alage north to pursue their war of independence. After receiving ample training at Gandapta (a village in Adwa), the strategy for the Battle of Adwa was set as follows: 1) Negus Tekle Haymanot Tessma of Gojjam (with 4-5,000 soldiers) was positioned to attack the enemy from the right Column and was assigned to take the right flank, while Ras Alula Engida was stationed to attack the incoming Italian army from the left wing. The central position was occupied by Rasses Makonnen Wodemikael and Ras Mikael of Wollo (with 15,000 soldiers) and Mengasha Yohannes and Dezazmatch Balach of Mech Oromo and Empress Taytu (with 5000 forces), Ras Wele (with 10,000 soldiers), who were rendered invaluable assistance by Ras Gobena and, Ras Wolde of the Yeju Oromo, Fetawrar Gebeyehu and Fetwrari Tekle of Wollega, Ras Abate of Shoa. Other Ethiopian patriots were assigned to attack the incoming Italian army from the center. Emperor Menelik was encamped with 35,000 forces covered in the area from the town of Adwa out to Abba Girma and north onto the slopes of Selloda (p. 184-85). On the other hand, General Oreste Baratieri, the commanding officer of the Italian army in Ethiopia and governor of Eritrea, planned an aggressive (provocative) advance -movement. The

army would advance in three columns, followed by Baratieri and his staff, and a fourth reserve column led by General Ellena. General Dabormida's column was assigned to take the right flank so that he would move to occupy the northern pass between Entecho and Raio. General Albertone's left column would move to occupy the southern pass between the peaks of Raio and Semayata. General Arimondi's brigade was stationed to occupy the army's center column. Thus 4076 soldiers squared against the Ethiopian army (p.186). The advance was designed to take place at night in order to minimize the risk of detection and ambush (p. 174). Though the Ethiopian force could imagine the Italians had sophisticated military training and technology (use of firearms), the strategic design undertaken by Menelik and his army lieutenants was focused on being engaged in conventional war - a fight of army against army in the open field. Though this strategy contributed to the heavy loss of human resources on both sides, it helped the Ethiopian army, at the Battle of Adwa to crush the Italian forces and score a decisive and spectacularly victory.

In this encounter it is estimated that nearly 43 percent of the original Italian fighting forces were either killed, missing or wounded (see Pankhurst, 1968, p. 23). Ras Alula) "dispatched a courier to Menelik with a message to send the Oromo cavalry to block the passes from the east, trapping the Italians by closing their line of retreat. For whatever reason, prudence or an unwillingness to repeat Dogali on a massive scale, Menelik demurred. It was a decision that saved thousands of lives and a few shreds of dignity for a defeated army" (p. 194). Furthermore, Jonas states that hundreds of Italian soldiers were taken prisoner, and were left at the mercy of the Ethiopian patriots.

After he was recalled to Rome, General Oreste Baratieri, who was previously regarded as an Italian patriot and accomplished soldier, was court-martialed and incarcerated. As a result of the unexpected humiliation that befell the Italian army at the battle of Adwa, the then Prime Minister of the Italian government, Prime Minister Francesco Crispi of Italy was forced to resign (pp. 4, 322). The Italian bourgeoisie ridiculed the vision of an Italian East African adventure and argued that "*African Italiana*" was a pathological projection of the ambitions of Italy's political leaders who spent millions in pursuit of imperial glory because they were seduced by the idea that empire was where both personal and national greatness could be found instead of investing at home (p.4) .

For Ethiopia, Adwa secured an independent future. Africa's sovereignty in the modern era started at Adwa (p. 320). For Menelik II, the battle of Adwa, restored his life. The heroic national campaign of 1895-1896 which culminated at the Battle of Adwa created a foundation for contemporary Ethiopia. "Menelik and Taytu staked everything on that campaign. In defeat, they certainly would have been overthrown, by the Italians if not by their own people (p. 320)." Because military victory was regarded as a sacred triumph –thanks to the presence of the clergy

and the *tabot* of both Mary and St. George (God intervened on the side of Ethiopia) —as well as a triumph of arms, it meant that Adwa qualified as a suitable subject for sacred art (p. 130).

Assessment

The 21 chapters of the book are well organized and the book chronicles the major historical actors - most of the author's discussion focused adequately on Emperor Menelik, Empress Taytu, Ras Makonnen, Ras Alula, Alfred Ilg from the Ethiopian side and Pietro Toselli, General Oreste Baratieri, General Vittorio Dabormida, etc. from Italy's side. The titles of the chapters were carefully chosen to supplement the title of the book. Though the historical sources of the book under review are mainly secondary, based on the list of references it is possible to say that the author has used different kinds of primary sources and new information to adequately substantiate the thesis of his book. That is, in any event, "*The Battle of Adwa: African Victory in the Age of Empire*" is full of extensive quotations from newspapers, documents, cartography and other valuable texts, and paintings that project a vivid picture of the battle ground. It is no wonder that the book has become very popular with readers. Thus, since I feel that the book is well documented and also that the author has related the contents of the book to other facts pertaining to world history, I highly recommend this book for its objectivity. Jonas' book is very instructive not only to historical readers and general readers alike but could also be used as a valuable textbook for both undergraduate and graduate students.

As said above, the author provides a sound and convincing argument. Nonetheless, it would have been fruitful if the author had undertaken well-grounded research to fully ascertain the importance of the following issues:

- 1) The book emphasizes the activities of the elites (Rases and Fetawriaris) as if they are the only ones who drove Italy's army from Ethiopia. Documenting and incorporating the role played by the ground fighters would add objectivity to book.
- 2) It is absolutely sound that the book focused on Article 17 of the Whicale Treaty as a base for analyzing the Battle of Adwa. Nonetheless, if the Treaty was not what it said in the Amharic version, why did Ras Makonnen knowingly or unknowingly address King Umberto of Italy on behalf of King Menelik II saying, "I Ask the Protection of Your Majesty, so that peace and tranquility reign in Ethiopia and in the neighboring Italian possessions (pp86-87)?" Why did the translator who accompanied Ras Makonnen , Joseph Negussie (p. 82), not notice the inaccuracy of the translation?
- 3) While documenting Alfred Ilg, the Swiss engineer, who was later promoted to Chancellor of State and Adviser for Foreign Affairs for the Ethiopian State, the author states that "the partnership established between Menelik and Ilg would be decisive for the future of

Ethiopia.” Has Ethiopia seen vital decisive outcomes as a result of having Engineer Ilg as Foreign Affairs Adviser to Emperor Menelik II or was Ilg a double agent?

- 4) Why did Menelik II decide to take the *tabot* of St. George and construct a monumental church in the saint’s honor in Addis Ababa instead of renovating the St. George Church at Mount Soleda, Adwa to retain the historical records?
- 5) The author states that Alula, “dispatched a courier to Menelik with a message to send the Oromo cavalry to block the passes from the east, trapping the Italians by closing their line of retreat (p.194).” My question for the author is: Was the real intention of Ras Alula to block the passage of the defeated Italians to Eritrea by using the Oromo cavalry or was Ras Alula’s desire thwarted by Emperor Menelik to completely wipe out the defeated Italians out of Ethiopia so that he could reclaim his former state of Eritrea?

Finally, as the author has said in one of his very instructive interviews on TV in the United States, when he went to Adwa it was very difficult for him to find and visualize that this great historical battle ever occurred in the now crumbling town called Adwa. If the author’s statement is true, I think the book could have been more rigorous in its historical documentation if the author had attempted to integrate his research of the Battle of Adwa with the context of the town of Adwa. In addition to various documents and archives he researched in various libraries such as those in Boston, Rome, London, Addis Ababa, etc., it would be interesting to know if he author found any historical artifacts pertaining to the Battle in the town of Adwa? If not, what could be done to commemorate and display in the town of Adwa the various historical artifacts that are now found scattered throughout the world?

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