

In the wake of the overthrow of the Haile-Selassie regime in Ethiopia in 1974 and the coming to power of the military, a number of opposition forces launched insurrections. But only one movement, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), triumphed, liberating Tigray in 1989, and in an ethnic-based coalition which it dominated, assuming state power in 1991. This is the first chronicle of the history of that struggle, and it is based largely on interviews with peasants who formed the core of the Tigrayan revolution and the TPLF leadership. It provides the necessary background to understanding post-1991 political developments in Ethiopia. It also offers an explanation of peasant-based revolution that contrasts with contemporary approaches by Marxists, Skocpol, and in particular the works of Wolf, Paige, Migdal, and Scott, all of whom largely ignore the political considerations and the role of the revolutionary party, which Dr Young identifies as a critical element in his study.



## Peasant revolution in Ethiopia

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# Peasant revolution in Ethiopia

The Tigray People's Liberation Front,  
1975–1991

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John Young

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To the peasants of Ethiopia





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## A note on names, transliteration and the Ethiopian calendar

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### *Names*

Ethiopians, whether Christian or Moslem, do not have family surnames and as a result the common practice, which is followed here, is to either write their names in full (that is the individual's name followed by his or her father's first name) or to use only their first names.

### *Transliteration*

While geographic names have common spellings, there is no consensus on the means to transcribe other Ethiopian words, including names of people, into the English language.

### *Ethiopian calendar*

The Ethiopian year consists of 365 days divided into twelve months of thirty days and a thirteenth month of five days (six in leap years). From 11 September, the beginning of the Ethiopian new year, to 31 December, the Ethiopian year runs seven years behind the Gregorian year; thereafter the difference is eight years. In this study Ethiopian dates and years have as closely as possible been translated into the Gregorian calendar.

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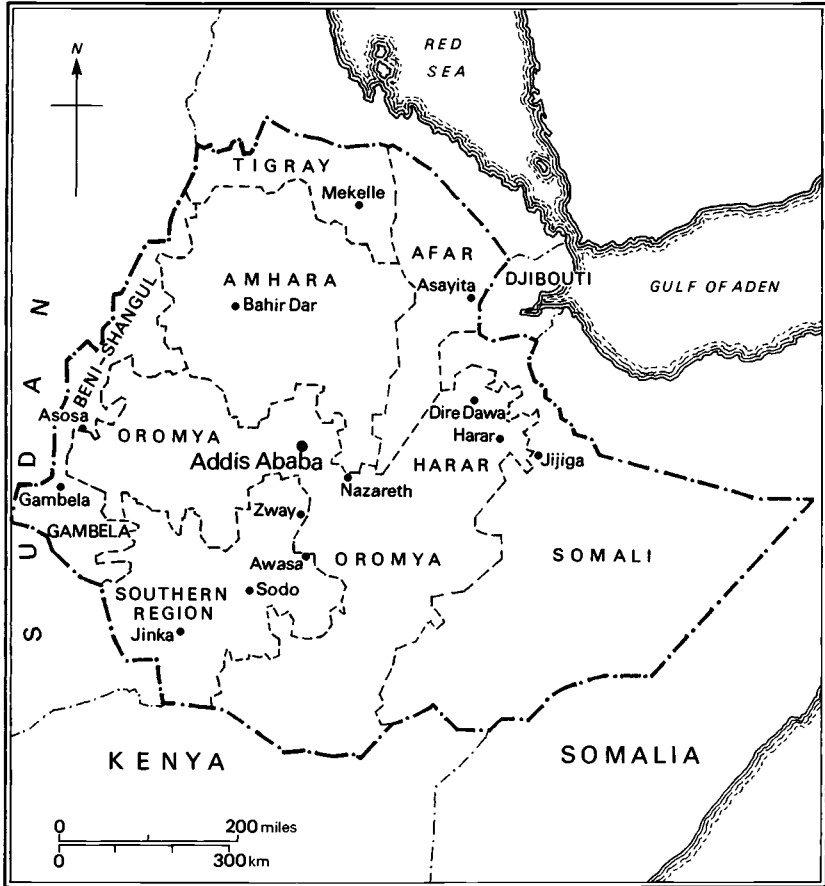
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Map 1 Ethiopia

Prepared by the Information Section of the UNDP Emergencies Unit for Ethiopia. Revised June 1996. The designations used above do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever of the UN regarding the legal status of any country, territory, or area of its authorities, or concerning the delimitations of its boundaries.





## Introduction

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My interest in Ethiopia, and specifically the northern province of Tigray, developed during the course of my tenure as a journalist for *The Sudan Times* between 1986 and 1989 in Khartoum, a city which hosted many thousands of Eritrean, Tigrayan, and other Ethiopian refugees and their political organisations. Unlike an earlier generation of Western scholars who were drawn to the study of Ethiopia because of the country's ancient history, fascinating cultures, absence of a colonial tradition, or the person of Emperor Haile-Selassie, I was attracted by the epochal scope of the struggles the Eritreans and Tigrayans were engaged in, and the determination and sophistication which they brought to them.

Editorially *The Sudan Times* had strong sympathies for the peoples of southern Sudan and I closely followed the revolt of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) which, like the revolts of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), was for national self-determination and opposed by a hegemonic state. However, while these movements shared conditions of national oppression and resistance, they were in many ways very different. The fact that the SPLM was a significant beneficiary of the government that the EPLF and TPLF were dedicated to overthrowing, while various Sudanese governments provided erratic support for the latter movements, was one such difference, but it was not critical. Far more important was the contrast between the political, administrative, and military skills, the level of commitment, and the close relationship between peasants and revolutionaries achieved by the EPLF and TPLF, and the confusion, division, and ethnic conflicts that plagued the SPLM.

My first introduction to Tigray in April 1988 provided ample evidence of the TPLF's skills, commitment, and ties to the peasants. The journey from the sweltering plains of Sudan to the cool highlands of Tigray was over a road built at the height of the 1984–5 famine through the mobilisation of some 100,000 peasants. Organisation and dedication to the revolution were evident everywhere I was to go during my two-week stay in the province – in the relief distributions, formation of local administrations of towns captured only a

month earlier, repairs to medical clinics, domestic water supplies and electrical generators destroyed by retreating government troops, and in the prisoner of war camps, recently enlarged by the capture of thousands of Derg soldiers.

But if this all too brief visit served to confirm TPLF claims as to the extent of their liberated territories, and their capacity to wage war against the Ethiopian government, and was at least suggestive of the Front's support among the peasants of Tigray, it none the less raised more questions than it answered. What conditions produced this revolutionary upheaval? How was the TPLF able to acquire and retain such peasant loyalty? What was the background to the Tigrayan demand for national self-determination? What was the relationship of the TPLF to the EPLF? And crucially, how were the largely youthful fighters of the TPLF and their young leaders who inhabited one of the most destitute lands in Africa able to challenge (and soon defeat) the most powerful army in black Africa?

In 1989 I was forced to leave the Sudan only weeks before the military coup that overthrew the government of Sadiq el Mahdi, but my interest in the Tigrayan revolution had taken firm hold and these questions were to serve as a starting point for this research. I would also leave Africa with the conviction that the TPLF and its recently established Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) would, as its adherents claimed, soon capture power in Addis Ababa. However, I would soon discover that while journalists had used much ink writing about Ethiopian famines, they had remarkably little of value to say about the Tigrayan revolution. Conversely, the by no means insignificant scholarly writing about Ethiopia was concerned almost exclusively with developments at the centre, or to a lesser extent with the Eritrean revolution.

The research for this study began in 1990 and the fieldwork took place over a nine-month period in 1992–3 and after revisions was extended and updated as a result of investigations carried out in Ethiopia over four months in 1995–6. Trying to develop an understanding of the Tigrayan revolution has proved more difficult than I first imagined and as a result the analyses developed and conclusions drawn from this study are not as unequivocal as I would have desired. However, if this study serves to stimulate debate and encourages further research into the Tigrayan revolution and the remarkable movement which led it, dominated efforts to overthrow the Derg, and was critical to the formation of the post-military government, then my efforts will be warranted.

### **Background to Research**

Ethiopia has a long history of literacy, but the documents and materials bequeathed contemporary researchers suffer from a number of drawbacks.

First, apart from the published memoirs of a handful of Western travellers,<sup>1</sup> the recorders of history until this century were almost exclusively officials of the Ethiopian court and the Church, and this is reflected in both their interests and biases. The history and struggles of the various peasantries who inhabited the Ethiopian highlands barely figure in such reports. Secondly, historical writing on Ethiopia concentrated on the central state, and according to Triulzi, '[m]ost Ethiopian history was political or diplomatic, and since this took place at the centre most Ethiopian history was the history of the political centre and of its institutions.'<sup>2</sup> Research of the periphery has been seriously under-represented, and as a result there are no comprehensive historical studies of Tigray.

This neglect was also encouraged by a number of widely held and erroneous beliefs: first, that Ethiopia had existed as a continuing political entity since the founding of the Axumite kingdom almost 2,000 years ago; secondly, that the vast expansion of the country in the final years of the nineteenth century did not so much represent imperial aggrandisement, but a return to historical boundaries of the past, and lastly, that although many nations and nationalities exist within Ethiopia, they were not bound to the state because of its power over them, but because they shared common elements in their culture. Such notions have long been part of the dominant ideology in the country, but they have been given their most sophisticated expression in the work of the anthropologist Donald Levine, in his book, *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society*.<sup>3</sup> Levine holds that as a result of generations of war, conquest, trade, and religious proselytisation, the various peoples of Ethiopia have evolved into a single societal system.

Although widely accepted, Levine's thesis has not been immune from criticism. Analysts have argued that a critical distinction must be made between Abyssinia, which is a geographical area that roughly embraced the northern highland provinces of Tigray, Gondar, Gojjam, Wag, Lasta, northern Shoa, and much of highland Eritrea, which generally shared a common polity, social structure, system of land tenure, culture, and religion, and the modern state of Ethiopia, which largely took form as a result of military conquest in the last quarter of the nineteenth century of mostly non-Semitic, non-Orthodox, and frequently, lowland peoples.<sup>4</sup> The historian Gebru Tareke has argued that Levine's desire to assert an Ethiopian nationhood within a unitary culture has only been accomplished by de-emphasising the ethnic, linguistic, and religious plurality of the society.<sup>5</sup> Another critic, Markakis, maintains that Ethiopian nation-building did not end with the hegemony achieved by the Amhara elite from Shoa at the end of the last century; rather this development merely set the stage for the nationalist and anti-feudal struggles that have characterised this century.<sup>6</sup>

However, the most serious challenge to Levine's thesis has not come from scholarly critics, but from the emergence of a host of national liberation movements that emerged in the wake of the 1974 insurrection. Ethiopia has a long history of revolts led by nobles from the periphery, and they were either overcome by the centre, produced long periods of turmoil, or led to the establishment of new regimes which maintained the old state. But the assumption of power by the EPLF and the birth of an independent Eritrea, and the establishment of the TPLF-led government in Addis Ababa, with its commitment to grant the country's ethnic communities the right to self-determination, encourages a rethinking of prevailing conceptions of Ethiopian history. It has also opened the door to new understanding of the central state and its relations with the nations and nationalities of the periphery.

Among the very few analysts who have examined the Tigrayan revolution are Firebrace and Smith,<sup>7</sup> Peberdy,<sup>8</sup> Solomon Inquai, historian and former chairman of the Relief Society of Tigray (REST),<sup>9</sup> and the German journalist, Dieter Beisel.<sup>10</sup> Jenny Hammond has produced a sympathetic study of women in the Tigrayan revolution.<sup>11</sup> Gebru Tareke has written a valuable article that contrasts the Tigrayan peasant rebellion of 1943 with the TPLF-led insurrection of 1975.<sup>12</sup> Former TPLF Chairman, Aregowie Berhe, produced an unpublished polemic<sup>13</sup> in opposition to the leadership of the Front after his defection in early 1988, and another past senior TPLF cadre, Kahsay Berhe, has written two useful tracts highly critical of his former colleagues.<sup>14</sup> Apart from these works, there are studies conducted by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and many reports on conditions in Tigray during the war prepared by journalists, that will be considered shortly. Although primarily concerned with human rights, Alex de Waal's *Evil Days: 30 Years of War and Famine in Ethiopia*, a study of conditions in the war zones of Ethiopia and Eritrea between 1961 and 1991, is the most authoritative work to date on military and relief matters.<sup>15</sup> Hopefully a harbinger of future academic work is Sarah Vaughan's MA study of the 1991 Addis Ababa conference which laid the basis of the post-Derg Ethiopian government.<sup>16</sup>

The best source of documents is the EPLF-established Research and Information Center on Eritrea (RICE) which is now in Asmara after being based in Rome for many years. Although primarily concerned with the Eritrean revolution, the Center has a good, if by no means complete, selection of Ethiopian political party publications, including those of the TPLF. Of particular interest are the TPLF's various English-language publications including *Woyene* (which means revolt), *Tigray*, a publication of the Union of Tigrayans of North America, and *People's Voice*, published by the Foreign Relations Bureau of the Front, the EPLF's *Adulis*, the Ethiopian

People's Revolutionary Party's *Abyot*, and the Eritrean Liberation Front's *Eritrean Review*. A further useful source for its collection of newspaper articles on the Eritrean and Ethiopian war, is the Research Center of Asmara University. There is also a considerable amount of material and documents in private hands. To date the TPLF has not released party and related documents for scholarly study. Front officials maintain that such materials have not been collected, or that they have not been organised, and thus are not available for examination.

### **Media and the war**

Ethiopia's wars and famines attracted considerable media attention, but the quality of the reporting has generally been poor and as a result has not been widely used in this study. Part of the problem lay in the centrist focus of journalists. With its pleasant climate, good facilities, and the opportunity to fly out to a site of interest and file a story the same day, Addis Ababa was the location of choice for correspondents. Since it was virtually impossible to cross battle lines to the north from government positions, the Eritrean and Tigrayan Fronts could only be reached by taking an arduous and lengthy journey that began in Sudan. As a result, reporting from behind the liberation movements' lines was largely neglected.

The difficulties involved in getting to Tigray, as I can confirm from my own visit to the province as a journalist, were considerable. First, approval had to be acquired through TPLF or REST offices in Europe or North America, after which visas needed to be obtained from Sudan, not always an easy task. Khartoum had few of the amenities of Addis Ababa, a trying climate, and even more bureaucratic obstacles, including the necessity of acquiring internal travel visas. When these difficulties were overcome the TPLF arranged the day-long transport to the TPLF-REST centre in Gederef in eastern Sudan. From there visitors hitched rides on relief convoys that spent a further night en route to the Ethiopian border. A difficult night journey (to avoid MiGs) took visitors from the Sudanese plains to the Ethiopian highlands and on to the western Tigray TPLF base of Dejene. It was only then, only at night, and only when vehicles were available, that visitors could be taken to various locations around Tigray. In these circumstances it was almost impossible for journalists to get in and out of Tigray in much less than ten days, and as a result few of them, particularly those from large media organisations, reported from the Tigrayan side of the combat zones. These same obstacles also hindered on-site scholarly studies in Tigray.

In spite of similar problems in Eritrea, that war was much more widely reported and analysed by academics than its counterpart in Tigray. Unlike

the EPLF, which moved quickly to conducting a largely conventional war with fixed positions and secure liberated territories that were more accessible to non-combatants, the TPLF emphasised mobility and remained pre-eminently a guerrilla movement until the final stages of the war. Furthermore, the Eritrean movements made a greater effort to encourage journalists to visit their liberated territories, and when they did so, they demonstrated greater skills in dealing with them. Contrary to the EPLF, few members of the TPLF leadership had lived or studied abroad before 1974 and, apart from the Sudan, they rarely left Tigray during the course of the revolution. As a result, the Front's leadership was very inward-looking, its international public relations poorly developed, and it tended to be wary of allowing journalists and other foreigners to visit territories under their control. While the Eritrean revolution has been called the 'unknown war', because of the limited media coverage given to it, this description is far more apt of the revolution in Tigray.

When journalists did visit the war zones in Eritrea and Tigray they were usually accompanied by liberation movement armed guards to ensure their personal safety, but this also identified them with these movements and therefore the information they obtained was less than ideally independent.<sup>17</sup> A further difficulty, particularly in the early years of the war, was that many of the correspondents were closely associated with either the TPLF or EPLF and their aid agencies, and thus open to charges of bias. None the less, according to de Waal, whether sympathetic or unsympathetic to the Front in question, none of the journalists who visited Eritrea or Tigray has complained of lack of access to the civilian population, or that those interviewed in the field were influenced by the presence of Front officials who usually selected them.<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, media reporting suffered from political bias and opportunist considerations. Beisel noted that articles which presented the TPLF's administration in a favourable light were difficult to publish in the mainstream German press when key reporters and editors were opposed to the Front.<sup>19</sup> It was also feared that publishing such articles might antagonise the Addis Ababa government and make future visits to the country difficult or impossible.<sup>20</sup> This kind of self-censorship, however, was not unique to Germany or the media; many scholars, aid officials, and foreign government representatives refused to speak publicly about their knowledge of conditions in the liberated territories, or of Derg atrocities, for fear that the government would refuse them visas, contracts, or other benefits.

The biggest problem with media reporting on Tigray, however, was the limited interest in the province and a focus almost exclusively devoted to the problem of famine and the role of Western governments and NGOs in

helping famine victims. This focus meant that there was virtually no analysis of the Ethiopian politics which fuelled the violent conflict and caused, or exacerbated, the famines that engulfed the region during the 1970s and 1980s.

### **Interview-based research**

The paucity of documents and records, the limitations of historical and political studies, together with the problems of media reports, means that the generation of data for a study such as this could only be provided by interviews. In particular, academic studies and journalist accounts provided little information on the role of peasants in the Tigrayan revolution. As Kriger has pointed out in her examination of the Zimbabwean revolution, the failure of most studies of revolution to consult peasants about their mobilisation 'creates the potential to misread evidence and to neglect or omit issues that are important to peasants'.<sup>21</sup> In this study some 200 interviews of about 500 people were conducted and recorded, and the majority of them were peasants. Peasant voices, the subtitle of Kriger's book, have thus been listened to, used to construct the history of the Tigrayan revolution, and speak to the theoretical concerns of this study.

None the less, research of this nature cannot focus exclusively on peasants. Peasants and local government officials were invariably available and co-operative, provided valuable information on the local economy, society, nature and extent of their contacts with the TPLF, the general form and course of the revolution at the local level, and also provided insight on what motivated them to revolt. They were, however, usually ill-equipped to answer questions on military and political objectives, strategies, tactics, national and international developments; nor were they party to the ideological issues that preoccupied the TPLF leadership. Moreover, posing broadly similar questions to peasants and local government officials and to TPLF leaders, provided a critical check on the accuracy of their answers, and a stimulus for further questions. Unlike the peasants, interviews of TPLF officials were almost always one-on-one affairs, conducted in English, and focused on the individual's particular areas of expertise. With few exceptions it was not possible to tape, fully record all the officials' answers at the time in writing or, in some cases because of their requests, attribute information directly to them.

There were, however, a number of subjects that TPLF officials at all levels of the administration were reticent to consider, both during my first research visit in 1992–3 and in my attempts to update my work in 1995–6. These included ideological struggles that went on in the TPLF, backgrounds of TPLF leaders, and the role of the Marxist-Leninist League of

Tigray (MLLT) in the TPLF. The TPLF has also been reluctant to reveal information on the number and organisation of its forces and equipment possessed. Information on these subjects can and was to some extent acquired from other sources, but this is not to deny that a more complete understanding of the Tigrayan revolution is dependent on the TPLF leadership being more forthcoming on these subjects. Opening up their archival materials for examination by academic and other investigators would be a valuable first step.

Consistent with the eclecticism of the methodology employed here, interviews were also carried out with former TPLF members, academics, former Derg officials, present and past representatives of REST, a host of former and present members of friendly and opposition movements, non-TPLF members of the TPLF-dominated Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), Afar nomads inhabiting the Tigrayan border areas, former officials in the Haile-Selassie government, representatives of the church and the mosque, foreign missionaries, Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) officials, NGO officials, and members of the diplomatic community. Because of the ready access to Tigrayan interviewees (who with few exceptions supported the TPLF), efforts were made to gather as many perspectives as were available, particularly those likely to be critical of the TPLF. Opponents of the TPLF were readily found, and it says much for the relatively liberal environment that existed in the country during the course of this research that they had little hesitation about speaking openly. Unfortunately, only a few of the critics were able to comment knowledgeably on the nature and course of the struggle within Tigray.

Under the present regime in Tigray the province has been divided into four *zobas*, or administrative zones, which in turn are divided into *woredas* or districts (of which there were eighty-one), and then further into *tabias*, the lowest level of government. *Zobas*, *woredas*, and *tabias*, together with the regional government, each have their own system of administration and elected assemblies called *baitos*. Permission to carry out field studies begins with a letter of authority signed by the Chairman of Tigray Region or his representative that is presented to the various chairmen of the *zobas* the researcher wishes to visit. This letter grants permission to carry out research at the *zoba* level, and the *zoba* administration in turn provides further letters of authority to *woredas* within its boundaries that the researcher wishes to visit. Interviewing at the *tabia* level requires a letter of authority from *woreda* officials.

Given the extent of nationalist and pro-TPLF sentiments among Tigrayans it was anticipated that finding a translator free of overt biases to conduct interviews with peasants would be a major problem. In the event it was not. The person ultimately selected, and who was employed during



my entire stay in Tigray, had no affiliations with the TPLF or REST, had resided outside Tigray during the revolution, and did not have strong political opinions.<sup>22</sup> While it was not usually possible to check the accuracy of specific translations, and thus individual misunderstandings almost certainly occurred, the sheer number of interviews carried out, together with their length and consistency, ensure the validity of the general conclusions reached.

The terrain of Tigray is very rugged with almost no paved roads and few all-weather roads. More than 85 per cent of the population live in rural woredas and many of them are very difficult to reach, and neither time, resources, nor energy, were in sufficient supply to even begin carrying out interviews in all, or even a substantial number of them. In the event interviews were conducted in about twenty woredas. In the first instance interviews were carried out in woredas that contained major towns because they were accessible along the main highway. The towns gave birth to political dissent, and because Tigrayan towns are principally administrative and marketing centres, they are good locations from which to carry out interviews of government leaders, merchants, teachers, religious leaders, and visiting peasants and local officials who live and work in adjacent rural areas.

The majority of peasant interviews, however, were carried out in a small number of woredas specifically identified by TPLF officials as being liberated early in the revolution. A common characteristic of these areas was their isolation which made them difficult to reach. It can readily, although mistakenly as will later be argued, be held that peasants from such woredas are not representative of Tigrayan opinion. But the principal objective in canvassing the opinion of their inhabitants was not to achieve representation. In the first place it was to evaluate whether there was something unique or characteristic about these woredas and their inhabitants that would explain their early support for the TPLF. Secondly, I wished to examine TPLF-peasant relations and TPLF-stimulated changes and institutions where they had the longest opportunity to develop. Moreover, it was from these 'liberated territories'<sup>23</sup> that the TPLF developed its political and military skills, carried out its first land reforms, and established its original local government institutions that were to serve as models for the rest of Tigray. Hence, the history of these early liberated territories is critical to understanding the course and outcome of the revolution.

Having chosen the woredas where interviews would be carried out, there then arose the question of which people to interview. The 1974 upheaval led to the political and economic emasculation of the traditionally dominant classes and the land reform of the following year produced largely egalitarian land-holdings among peasants resident in the same *tabia*.<sup>24</sup>

Significantly, capital goods such as buildings, cattle, and ploughing tools were not redistributed by either the Derg or the TPLF. However, with few investment opportunities, and a dearth of consumer goods, there is usually little to distinguish wealthier from poorer peasants in terms of culture, much less politics.<sup>25</sup> Hence, while economic differentiation is proceeding that may well foster class divisions, at the time these interviews were carried out the process had not crystallised. Therefore ascertaining these capital differences was considered to be of questionable value and was not attempted.

However, differentiating peasants in terms of gender, religion, occupation or position, and political office, is an important means to gather and evaluate experience and opinion, and to measure the impact of change on different sections of the community. In particular, efforts were made to seek out older people who could talk about conditions and change under the Haile-Selassie, Derg, and TPLF regimes. In a society where life expectancy is under fifty years, 'older' is a relative term. The transformation Tigray has undergone has led to the elevation of younger people to positions of power at the expense of elders who, it might be assumed, would be more critical of the changes and the new regime. Indeed, expressions of sympathy for the former hereditary governor of Tigray, Mengesha Seyoum, were occasionally voiced by elderly peasants, but these sentiments were clearly for the person and his ancestry, and not the regime he represented, and there was no indication that older people were any less likely than younger people to support the TPLF-led insurrection.

A recurring problem for investigators in the past has been the suspicion Ethiopian peasants had of them. Writing more than two decades ago, Pausewang reported that it was common for peasants to refuse to be interviewed or deliberately falsify information, and on many occasions interviewees showed open hostility to the interviewer.<sup>26</sup> He attributed this to the peasants' distrust of the government, apprehension at the imposition of new taxes, or fear they would lose their property through land reform. However, under the present regime in Tigray there can be little secrecy over an individual's land-holdings since they were acquired through public meetings and all peasants in a *tabia* have land of approximately the same value.

While peasant suspicion was by no means absent during the course of this study, it was never a serious problem; there was never any hostility, and on no occasion did any of those questioned terminate interviews before they were completed. There was little indication that Tigrayan peasants feared their government and they often complained about the lack of resources in the *woreda* and expressed their desire that the government provide them with food for their participation in conservation projects.

Peasants, however, sometimes saw me as an intermediary with the government and requested that political leaders be informed of their plight. Also common were peasant expressions of astonishment as to why a *ferenj*, or foreigner, was asking them questions they thought could be better answered by TPLF officials.

In most cases, after an initial period of scepticism, people in the rural areas warmed to the questions and seemed pleased that an outsider was taking an interest in their plight, and this on occasion led to the problem of political conditions being presented in an unduly favourable light. In one case this involved a Women's Association official reporting that women actively participated in the woreda Peasant Association (PA) when in fact during my three visits to a three-day-long meeting of the PA I never saw a woman in attendance. In another case a group of merchants were clearly upset at one of their younger members when he complained about shortages of coffee on the local market caused by the government's policy of maximising coffee exports.

Pausewang found the use of a group discussion for the collection of data on the peasants' attitudes 'most questionable' because peasants would not voice their grievances when confronted by village elders or their landlords.<sup>27</sup> However, in this study small groups were commonly utilised, and while the problems Pausewang referred to were sometimes evident, they were never overwhelming. In most cases two or three peasants were interviewed at one time and this was done for a number of reasons. First, those interviewed seemed more comfortable in a group. Second, greater numbers helped to stimulate memories of past events. Third, this approach sometimes led to discussion and disagreements that were revealing. And lastly, it provided an opportunity to observe social interaction between individuals. Tigray no longer has nobles and landlords, and while elders are clearly still figures of respect, they may well have lost some of their authority to the young TPLF political cadres. None the less, peasants sometimes deferred to the authority of priests, and on occasion interviewees used feudal titles to introduce themselves, and were referred to as such by their neighbours. Historically Ethiopia was renowned for its social hierarchy, and the extent to which elements of it have survived the revolution, even in the absence of the feudal conditions on which it was based, is a fascinating question which, unfortunately, cannot be taken up here.

It is significant that while in the Amhara-populated areas of Ethiopia visited in the course of this study virtually everyone used the honorific title *Ato* (or Mr) when referring to individual leaders of the TPLF-led government, even when they were not favourably disposed to the government, in Tigray the term *Ato* is only used in reference to old and respected members of the community, and not TPLF leaders who were commonly referred to

as *dekina* (our sons). This would appear to be because of the generally egalitarian relationship the TPLF had with the peasants, and the fact that the Front never attempted to establish a personality cult. Thus when peasants in Adwa, the home town of TPLF leader and Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, were asked who were the most important leaders of the revolution, they rated Meles ninth on their list of ten. On other occasions this same question elicited the frosty response from peasants and local government officials that all Tigrayans had fought in the revolution, not just the TPLF leadership.

A continuing problem in carrying out field interviews is the lack of privacy. As Pausewang has explained, insisting on privacy and the exclusion of others is extremely impolite in Ethiopia, and therefore the lack of seclusion for interviews must be tolerated. As a result, interviews were commonly carried out in woreda offices (which sometimes doubled as an official's bedroom), and not surprisingly these officials would sometimes have the need to use the office for some purpose, and although not a party to the interview, might interject their point of view. There was always the concern that those being interviewed would be intimidated by the presence of a TPLF official, although there were no overt signs of this. A less common problem was posed by people simply passing by who would sit and listen for a time and perhaps make a statement.

In retrospect one of the weaknesses of this part of the study was in not making a bigger effort to interview women not holding official positions. Only rarely would a request to zoba or woreda officials to interview a group of peasants produce women and, although there were notable exceptions, when women and men were in the same group the women would usually defer to the men. Moreover, peasants of both sexes did not find it strange that men would answer questions that were specifically addressed to women and related directly to their problems. Unlike some of the non-office-holding peasant women, senior TPLF female officials were invariably dynamic individuals, and local women officials, who were usually graduates of public administration schools for women, were generally assertive and articulate. But the more the female TPLF leaders were pushed to the fore, the more difficult it sometimes was to understand the conditions, and gauge the attitudes, of peasant women.

Contrary to the advice of some authorities, and the experience of Pausewang, who maintained that questions addressed to peasants must be clearly limited to those of a practical nature, or related directly to their experience, Tigrayan peasants answered abstract questions. Again there was sometimes the problem of priests or elders being deferred to by other participants in the interviews, but questions such as 'Why do you think Tigray is poor?' and 'Why do you think this woreda became an early

supporter of the TPLF?', were generally answered thoughtfully and often at considerable length. Moreover, it is clear that this type of questioning was better facilitated by in-depth interviewing utilised in this study (usually between two and a half and three and a half hours), than surveys that tend to avoid or trivialise the answers to questions that cannot be readily categorised.

The population of Tigray is largely homogeneous with less than 5 per cent of the people constituting ethnic minorities – principally Afar, Agaw, Amhara, Saho, and Kunama. Cross-cutting the ethnic divisions is a Christian–Moslem divide, although this has not historically been a source of conflict in Tigray. The large majority of Tigrayans are followers of Orthodox Christianity, and there are small numbers of Catholics and other Christians. The province thus forms an identifiable cultural and political unit within Ethiopia and its people generally responded in similar fashion to the policies and administration of the old and military regimes, and the TPLF. Therefore, with the exception of the Afar in the lowlands of eastern Tigray who played a significant role in the outcome of the revolution in that area, there was no pressing need to interview representatives of ethnic minorities. None the less, efforts were made to interview members of these various ethnic minorities, together with a significant number of Moslems.

### **Chapter outline**

Chapter 1 critically examines the work of a number of influential theorists who take up the issue of peasant-based revolutions in the contemporary era. Together these theorists are united in explaining revolution in structural terms, emphasising the development of commercial agriculture, largely ignoring the role of non-peasant forces in revolution, and discounting voluntarist or politically premised accounts. In contrast this study contends that the growth of market-based agriculture in Tigray did not provoke opposition, and that an explanation of revolution cannot be based solely on an examination of the political economy of the peasantry. Instead of exclusively focusing on the rural domain and examining economic variables, this study considers conditions and processes in both the rural and urban realms and argues the importance of political factors, notably the stimulus provided by the regime's policies, Tigrayan nationalism, and the role of the TPLF in mobilising peasants and directing the revolution.

Chapter 2 has the task of examining the historical background to revolution in Tigray. It provides a historical overview beginning with the founding of the Axumite kingdom in what is now Tigray in the first millennium BC, and continues through the province's decline as economic and political

power shifted south. In the last century this process corresponded with the rise of the Amhara-dominated province of Shoa. The establishment of the modern state of Ethiopia under the hegemony of Shoa's feudal class and its pursuit of policies of modernisation and state centralisation furthered Tigray's marginalisation, weakened the province's links to the state, and bred growing resentment. The chapter ends with a brief sketch of the collapse of the old regime which pays particular heed to the Ethiopian student movement, both because of its significance in undermining the authority of the old regime, and also because it gave birth to the TPLF.

Chapter 3 is mainly concerned with analysing social and political conditions in Tigray on the eve of the 1975 revolt. This examination will demonstrate that while the province's rural economy faced a crisis of rising population and declining access to land, there was little indication that peasants were prepared to mount a sustained revolt, or indeed could successfully challenge the state without outside leadership and support. Conversely, nationalist elements among the Tigrayan urban petit bourgeoisie, notably students and teachers, were becoming increasingly drawn to political dissent, and with the collapse of the old regime they began making plans to launch a rural-based insurrection. Significantly, at the time the revolt was officially launched on 18 February 1975 the TPLF had virtually no committed support from Tigrayan peasants.

The next three chapters examine the revolutionary struggles of the TPLF over the sixteen-year period from 1975 to 1991. Chapter 4 considers the period 1975 to 1978 and the central themes of the period, the TPLF's efforts to establish a presence in the province, resolution of conflicts over nationalism, and crucially, overcoming its nobility-led and Marxist rivals to achieve opposition ascendancy in Tigray. Chapter 5 covers the period 1978 to 1985 and focuses on the problems of mobilising peasants, developing a social and administrative infrastructure in the liberated territories, advancing the war against the government, and confronting the challenge posed by the famine of 1984. Chapter 6 examines internal leadership struggles, the capture of most of the province's towns in 1988, the expulsion of the military from Tigray in 1989, and briefly summarises the military and political developments in the lead-up to the Derg's final defeat in May 1991.

Chapter 7 is specifically concerned with the TPLF's relationship to the peasants of Tigray. The TPLF's principal objective during the sixteen-year period examined in this study was to steadily increase its capacity to wage war against the Derg, but this was always conditional upon gaining and keeping the support of the peasants. The principal means by which this was achieved was the TPLF's programme of reforms, but reforms also produce social tensions, and this chapter examines these reforms and demonstrates

the importance of the Front's skills in balancing peasant demands, mobilising the population, and ensuring the social solidarity necessary to conduct a revolutionary war.

The concluding chapter begins with an examination of some of the problems faced by Tigray in the transitional period, and then turns to a consideration of a few of the key issues that must be confronted by the TPLF and which will speak to the character of society Tigray will become. This is followed by an overview of political developments at the centre between the fall of the Derg in 1991 and the formation of the post-transitional EPRDF government in May 1995. In particular, it briefly examines the EPRDF's efforts to establish an ethnic-based federal system of administration in Ethiopia which, it is argued, follows directly from the Tigrayan struggle for national self-determination.

# 1 Peasants and revolutions: theoretical directions

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## Introduction

In 1974 a popular movement brought down the faltering old regime of Emperor Haile-Selassie, but it was a military cabal, the *Derg*<sup>1</sup> which assumed state power. Unwilling to share power with civilians or acknowledge the right of Ethiopia's nations to self-determination, the Derg was challenged on many fronts: from a reinvigorated secessionist movement in Eritrea, student radicals in the urban centres of Ethiopia, and a host of rural-based national insurgencies. In these chaotic conditions a small group of university students launched a national liberation struggle in early 1975 from the desperately poor province of Tigray. With approximately 3.1 million people, Tigray possesses about 5 per cent of Ethiopia's population,<sup>2</sup> has no industrial base or valuable exports, and its overwhelming population of peasants had the highest percentage of landholders in imperial Ethiopia.<sup>3</sup>

In spite of the TPLF's inauspicious and largely ignored entrance on to the revolutionary stage, with the overwhelming support of the province's peasants, the movement captured Tigray in 1989, and went on to lead a coalition of ethnic-based movements that assumed state power in 1991. With this turn of events it has become ever more pressing to develop an understanding of the basis and course of the Tigrayan revolution and the means by which the Front mobilised the peasantry of the province. These are the main objectives to which this study is directed, but to approach them there is a need for theoretical direction in approaching the problem of revolution.

The study of revolution began in ancient times, but the approach has changed from an interest in the normative aspects of revolution, to the conspiratorial approach popularised by Machiavelli in the Middle Ages, to present concerns with understanding the causes of revolutions.<sup>4</sup> Until recently non-structuralist accounts of revolution which assumed conditions of value consensus and state legitimacy, and largely ignored the fact that most post-1945 revolutions were rural-focused, dominated the



academic literature. The result was theories grounded in the examination of natural history, psychology, and politics.

In contrast a school of theorising that can be called the 'peasant revolt thesis' took form. Largely championed by American scholars in the 1970s, it was influenced by, and was a response to, the trauma of the Vietnam war. Common to followers of this school, which for the purposes of this study can be identified as Eric Wolf, Joel Migdal, Jeffrey Paige, and James Scott,<sup>5</sup> is first, a structural approach that assumes a conflictual model of society; secondly, an emphasis on the devastating impact of the incorporation of agrarian societies into the world economy; and lastly, a focus which gives central place to the role of the peasantry and criticises the classical Marxian contention that the urban proletariat spearheads revolutionary struggles. Exponents of the peasant revolt thesis have played a valuable role in bringing attention to the critical part performed by peasants in revolutions in the modern era. This contribution has been particularly estimable because it was pursued at a time when behaviouralists largely ignored peasants and Marxists saw them as at best assuming a supportive role to the proletariat in revolution.

While the peasant revolt thesis provides valuable insights into the understanding of the Tigrayan revolution, this study raised serious questions about key elements of its approach and thus serves as a basis from which to evaluate it critically. This evaluation will proceed by examining the approach taken by peasant revolt theorists in three areas: first, the relation drawn between peasant class and revolution; secondly, the linkage between agricultural commercialisation and revolution; and lastly, the significance attached to factors or forces outside the peasantry in explaining revolution. The chapter ends with an argument based on the experience of Tigray for widening the explanatory framework to include non-structural factors, notably, regime stimulus to revolt, nationalism, and the political leadership of the revolutionary party.

### **Peasant classes and revolution**

The theorists examined here vary considerably in their approach to the significance of peasant class relations to revolutionary potential, with Wolf and Paige holding class relations to be critical, Migdal denying their significance, and Scott concluding that attempts to link class to proclivity to revolution only produce ambiguous conclusions. When peasant classes are identified as assuming dominant roles in the revolution, categorically different conclusions are reached with Wolf pointing to middle peasants, Paige to sharecroppers, and Scott to subsistence peasants.

Wolf finds that the middle peasant, or peasantries on the periphery, constitute the major force behind rebellions.<sup>6</sup> While poor peasants or landless

labourers who go to the city usually break their tie to the land, middle peasants stay on the land, but typically send their children to the towns to find work or go to school. In the process they are the 'most exposed to influences from the developing proletariat'<sup>7</sup> and become transmitters of urban unrest and political ideas to fellow villagers. Wolf's analysis of the revolutionary potential of the middle or peripheral peasantry is largely based on their 'tactical mobility', by which he means their degree of freedom from the constraints of either the landlord, market, or state. This is because revolutions largely arise in situations where peasants have a measure of control over their lives through organisation into self-administering communes. The paradox is that it is through the efforts of middle and free peasants to maintain their traditional way of life that they become revolutionary.

Unlike Wolf, Migdal does not find a linkage between peasant class and revolutionary potential. Instead, he focuses on peasant-landlord relationships and makes a distinction between communities where lords governed the activities of peasants, usually feudal states or patrimonial domains, and those communities where there were no lords or their power was limited, typically freeholding villages in bureaucratic states or marginal lands beyond the lord's control.<sup>8</sup> In the first case the lord restricted peasant orientation outwards because it posed a threat to his monopoly of power, while in the second case peasants developed institutions and prohibitions to minimise their outside contacts and market participation to protect their way of life. Migdal then places the outward-oriented peasant between the powerful lord on the one hand and the restrictions of the corporate community on the other, 'where there is somewhat unequal distribution of powers'.<sup>9</sup> This finding follows Wolf who focuses on tactically mobile peasants, and Migdal's later hypothesis that revolutionary situations are more likely to emerge in areas of poor administration, communication, and transportation, is also similar to that made by Wolf.

Paige in turn bases his analysis of peasant revolution on class and holds that revolutions are shaped by the relationship between upper and lower classes in rural areas undergoing agricultural commercialisation. From this perspective he proposes a series of hypotheses predictive of rural class conflict that broadly follow Marx's premise that immiseration provided the stimulus for working-class revolution and applied it to the agricultural worker.<sup>10</sup> Paige's hypotheses can be summarised as follows. First, a combination of both non-cultivators and cultivators dependent upon land as their principal sources of income leads to agrarian revolt directed at the redistribution of landed property and usually lacks broader political objectives. Second, a combination of non-cultivators dependent upon income from commercial capital and cultivators dependent upon their land will

result in a reform commodity movement. Paige's third hypothesis is that a combination of non-cultivators dependent on income from capital and cultivators dependent on income from wages leads to a reform labour movement concerned with limited economic demands. Fourth, Paige holds that a combination of non-cultivators dependent upon income from land, and cultivators dependent on income from wages leads to revolution. In this latter case wage-dependent and land-poor peasants are pitted against landlords tied to traditional means of labour exploitation who cannot give up more of the agricultural product without reducing their own share of the surplus, and with reformist solutions impossible, revolution results.

Paige's analysis is at odds with that of Wolf as can be seen in their respective approaches to the social basis of the Vietnamese revolution. Wolf finds revolutionary potential among the middle peasantry and ethnic minorities in the northern and central regions of the country who had some access to land and who maintained a strong sense of village solidarity. The revolt of these peasants, he maintains, was largely a defensive response to the impact of commercialisation and they were able to revolt because of their tactical mobility. Peasants thus become revolutionary to prevent proletarianisation. Conversely Paige locates the core of the Vietnamese revolution among the export-oriented Mekong delta rice sharecroppers who, unlike the traditional smallholder peasants, had little prospect of social mobility, were not motivated by individualism, and hence were more receptive to radical political and social doctrines.<sup>11</sup> Wolf's revolutionary land-owning middle peasantry are, for Paige, traditional, conservative, and non-revolutionary. Peasants in Paige's schemata become revolutionary because of proletarianisation.

For Scott subsistence peasants are more likely to be revolutionary because they are the most vulnerable to the landlord. However, he finds that the answer to the problem of relating revolution to peasant social structure to be 'ambiguous'<sup>12</sup> because in comparing peasantries with strong communal traditions and few sharp internal class divisions, with peasantries with weak communal traditions and sharper class divisions, diametrically opposite conclusions can be drawn. The reasoning is two-fold. First, a more undifferentiated peasantry will experience economic shocks in a uniform manner, but in a more variegated class structure the different strata will experience and respond to them differently. Second, communitarian structures foster traditional solidarity and hence a greater capacity for collective action.<sup>13</sup> Scott finds that very different conclusions could logically be drawn from the same case. Differentiated communities are likely where commercial forces are strongest, and while their responses to these disturbances may be more problematic, their greater exposure may make them more explosive. Moreover, while communal structures facilitate

collective action, at the same time they are better arranged to 'redistribute pain' and thus avoid or postpone subsistence crises.

The fundamental difficulty of the peasant revolt theorists' approach to peasant classes is that it is largely inapplicable to the agrarian social structure in Tigray. Highland Tigray on the eve of the overthrow of the old regime had very little genuine capitalist farming. Moreover, those who assumed the role of landlords were often poor peasants who did not have the necessary oxen to plough their land and were forced to rent it to rich peasants who had oxen. As a result, wealth was normally defined in terms of possession of capital, largely in the form of oxen and other animals, and not land.<sup>14</sup> In addition, Scott's identification of subsistence tenant farmers and Paige's singling out of sharecroppers can have little explanatory relevance in the Tigrayan context. While there are indications that in the final years of the old regime severe land shortages were developing, it had not progressed far in large part because the traditional system of tenure made the alienation of land and its accumulation by the state, landlords, and capitalists extremely difficult.

For a number of reasons defining class in Tigray is problematic. First, although ruling families became a feature of the society, titles were generally not inheritable and therefore class consolidation through inheritance was discouraged. Secondly, peasant-held land was never completely secure, and as land shortages developed in the second half of this century peasants increasingly resorted to the courts to sort out claims and this led to plots of land frequently changing hands. Thirdly, defining peasant class in the Tigrayan context is made difficult by the need to account for considerable regional differences in wealth and climatic conditions which could produce significant changes in household income from one year to the next. And lastly, and perhaps most significantly, social structural flux was caused by the dislocation Tigrayans have experienced in the past 100 years as a result of war, drought, environmental decline, and pestilence.

Of relevance, but in need of revision, are Wolf's understanding of the importance of peasants on the periphery in revolutions, and Migdal's finding that revolutionary situations commonly emerge in areas of poor administration, communication, and transportation. As a result of state centralisation by Amhara elites from the central Ethiopian province of Shoa between the late nineteenth century and the 1974 collapse of the old regime, Tigray had become a peripheralised underdeveloped region. Thus the province was well placed to challenge state hegemony and its weakly administered lowlands in the west and south-central part of the province became early centres of the TPLF-led revolt. However, the evidence from Tigray does not support Wolf's finding that middle or peripheral peasantries play a dominant role in revolution because of their tactical mobility. Indeed, Wolf

misses the point: it is the revolutionaries' interaction with such peasants that their location permits that is of importance, not isolation *per se*. Peasant support for the insurrection was by no means restricted to peripheral parts of Tigray, but relative inaccessibility from the organs of the state attracted revolutionaries and it was this characteristic which linked the otherwise disparate woredas that became early TPLF strongholds.

TPLF officials reported that most rich peasants were, or became, strong supporters of the struggle and there is some indication that the reasons why this was the case are similar to those Wolf gave for middle-peasant support for rebellion: that is, they were less subject to societal constraints and had stronger links with the towns, the source of the revolutionary stimulus. Rich peasants in Tigray were also more likely than middle or poor peasants to have children employed as teachers or in attendance at high school or university, the breeding ground of early TPLF revolutionaries. As a result it is not possible to relate peasant wealth to proclivity to revolt in Tigray.

### **Agricultural commercialisation**

Peasant revolt theorists contend that peasants revolt to maintain old ways when traditional institutions and relationships are upended or made ineffective by agricultural commercialisation. Wolf holds that peasant rebellion unfolds in the context of a large-scale cultural encounter between capitalist and pre-capitalist societies which results in the breakdown of custom, the ending of social obligations between rulers and ruled, and the creation of wage labour and a market in land.<sup>15</sup> Paige does not analyse in detail the impact of imperialism on pre-capitalist societies, but his studies take place in the context of the commercialisation of agriculture and he places particular emphasis on the social formations and class conflicts that commercialisation gives rise to. Migdal also points to the impact of imperialist penetration of traditional economies which unleashes such forces as population growth, patron withdrawal, new and increased taxes, and loss of income, all of which served to undermine the inward orientation of the peasantry and re-focus their material existence.<sup>16</sup> Scott follows Migdal in analysing the impact of imperialism on pre-capitalist peasant societies which transforms land and labour into commodities, brings about income differentiation, destroys subsidiary occupations, brings about demands for more rent by landowners and more taxes by the state, and causes the erosion of risk-sharing values of villages and kin-groups.<sup>17</sup> According to Scott, this process promotes tensions to a point where peasants have little alternative but to resist.<sup>18</sup>

Such an explanation, however, has limited application for Tigray. Apart from lowland areas on the periphery of Tigray, there was virtually no

large-scale production of cash crops for export in the province, and at the time of the collapse of the old regime a market in the peasants' land was only beginning to emerge. While peasants were increasingly taking up seasonal wage labour on farms, usually outside Tigray, few of them were landless and thus did not constitute a rural proletariat. Patron–client relations were not dissolved as a result of agricultural commercialisation because the dominant elements in this process were from the nobility who served as patrons. Agricultural commercialisation alternatively refers to imperialism or capitalism, neither of which figured prominently in Tigray. Foreign capital, largely in the form of aid, but also as investment, was beginning to have a marked impact in parts of Ethiopia at the time of the overthrow of the old regime,<sup>19</sup> but in the small landholder-dominated economy of Tigray, there was little investment of a commercial nature.

This pattern of agricultural commercialisation is also at odds with Marx's contention that the interests of industrial and commercial capitalists were incompatible with those of feudal landowners. Instead, Tigrayan experience supports the views of Moore who recognised that agrarian capitalism could emerge from within the traditional landowning classes.<sup>20</sup> The expansion of commercial agriculture in the highlands where most Tigrayan peasants lived was also limited by traditional systems of land tenure, which made land alienation extremely difficult, and by the poor quality of the soils, which precluded the production of plantation cash crops. Indeed, both the ecological insecurity of the Ethiopian highlands and the relative security of peasant land-holdings under the traditional tenure system proved to be hindrances to the development of commercial agriculture, and at the same time serve to distinguish conditions in Tigray from those in Southeast Asia which served as the basis for the conclusions of the peasant revolt theorists.

Agricultural commercialisation thus did not have a markedly disruptive impact on indigenous systems of land tenure or on the rural economy in highland Tigray and therefore cannot explain peasant support for revolution. There is no indication that Tigrayan peasants opposed agricultural commercialisation and good reason to suspect that taking up seasonal farm labour and selling small surpluses had become critical to their survival. This is the view of the TPLF leadership who held that the peasants' poverty was due to the lack of modern development in the province. In the face of rising population, declining plot size, failing soil fertility, and the increasing frequency of drought and famine in the twentieth century, growing numbers of peasants looked to seasonal employment on commercial farms as a survival strategy. Unfortunately the agricultural commercialisation that was taking place in Tigray on the eve of the overthrow of the old regime was on too small a scale to produce the economic growth needed to reduce

poverty or to meet the expanding demand for wage labour that the crisis in the rural economy was producing.

The breakdown in patron–client relations came about as a result of government decree ending feudal obligations and to a lesser extent under the impact of the TPLF's rural political mobilisation. It was not a product of agricultural commercialisation. Economic relations in Tigray had not become 'bureaucratic and impersonal', which Wolf held was a necessary precondition to peasant revolt. Moreover, the conception of the break-up of the self-sufficient pre-capitalist village with its associated stable social relations and way of life under the onslaught of agricultural commercialisation propounded by exponents of the peasant revolt thesis is both unduly romantic and untrue in the Tigrayan context. The TPLF was not taken with such fanciful conceptions of pre-capitalist agrarian life and, after initially pursuing restrictive economic policies in the areas under its administration, responded to peasant opposition and allowed the employment of labour, encouraged markets, did not interfere with trade, and at no time threatened the possession of agricultural capital.

Far from peasants revolting because of the impact of agricultural commercialisation and the growth of capitalism, they revolted against structures imposed by both feudal and state socialist regimes which interfered with the commercial economy. Indeed, the Derg's introduction of agricultural marketing corporations and prohibition against hiring wage labour helped drive peasants into the arms of the TPLF. The Tigrayan experience reinforces the conclusions of Popkin who found in his study of the Vietnamese revolution that peasants do not rebel because of their desire to reinstate traditional institutions threatened by capitalism, but instead because of their opposition to feudalism.<sup>21</sup> Popkin found that contrary to the views of those who held that patron–client relations resting on mutual obligations were the linchpin of the village, these ties were instead related to power and strategic interaction among individuals and typically resented by peasants who found them restrictive.<sup>22</sup> What this study adds to his finding is that peasant rebellion can also be fostered by the policies of state socialist regimes, such as that of the Derg, which attempt to restrict peasant involvement in the commercial economy.

### **Factors outside the peasantry**

For Wolf the breakdown of the peasant economy produces a crisis of power. Traditional power holders either have their power curtailed or enter the exchange economy, while the new power holders' focus on economic transformation leaves little scope for concerns of social order. Although a product of this transformation, a new stratum emerges that is neither part

of the old order, nor involved in the transmission or sale of goods, namely petty officials of the state bureaucracy, professionals, and school teachers. This stratum of intellectuals suffer directly from the crisis of power and authority, but without a constituency to lead they are powerless to confront the economic and political power holders. Their followers are found among the industrial working class and the disaffected peasantry whom the market created, but for whom no adequate social provision has been made.

Rebellion for Wolf takes place in the context of a peasantry whose way of life has been shattered by capitalism being linked to an aroused 'intelligentsia-in-arms' ready to benefit from the prevailing disorder by imposing a new order of its own. He does not, however, analyse the process by which directionless peasant rebellions are organised by the revolutionary intelligentsia, other than to note that where the intelligentsia does not assume this role, as was the case during the Mexican revolution where peasants provided their own leadership, the rebellion will not move beyond the countryside and engage the centres of power in the city.

Migdal holds that peasant participation in institutionalised revolutionary movements is an attempt to solve individual and local problems brought about by the decline of the inward-oriented village and is, at least initially, a political response to difficulties caused by increased outside participation.<sup>23</sup> The probability of such peasant participation, according to Migdal, is dependent upon increased market involvement stemming from economic crisis, including the inauspicious market activity because of corruption, monopoly, and structural incompleteness.

Thus Migdal, like Wolf, acknowledges the necessity of disaffected members of the middle class structuring the peasants' revolt. However, while revolutionaries must demonstrate that they can meet the villagers' particular needs, their primary objective is not ameliorating conditions, but replacing the existing system of administration with autonomous structures.<sup>24</sup> To understand the peasant-revolutionary relationship Migdal draws on organisation theory and the notion of 'social exchange' which stresses the discharging of obligations in return for the furnishing of benefits. According to Migdal, 'revolutionaries create power through a painstaking, step-by-step process of social exchange, a process which routinises behavior, rather than trying to foment unpredictable and uninstitutional action'.<sup>25</sup> It is not cataclysmic uprisings that are organised, but instead institutions that are more powerful than those of their opponents.

In contrast, Paige's analysis is built on a class conflict model within export enclaves, and stresses the impact of imperialism and the strains it causes within peasant society, but he devotes almost no attention to ideology, revolutionary struggle, or the peasant-revolutionary party relationship. He further holds that revolutionary socialist movements are most



likely to emerge within the worker community of sharecropping systems, although he provides no evidence to substantiate this extreme assertion. Only in exceptional cases does Paige acknowledge that cultural constraints operating within traditional society may necessitate 'political organisation from outside the workers' community.'<sup>26</sup>

Scott's approach stresses the limited extent to which the institutions of the ruling elites penetrate the rural sector. Putting Marx on his head, he argues that it is the limited involvement of peasants in organised political activity that best explains why they, and not the proletariat, have constituted the decisive social base of most successful twentieth-century revolutions. State hegemony for Scott is dependent upon the courts and civil bureaucracy, schools, media, and the church, and these institutions are less pervasive among the peasantry than among the proletariat. Moreover, as a pre-capitalist class the peasantry have their own traditions, values, and culture distinct and often opposed to the dominant culture. Much peasant violence can thus be understood as a collective effort to preserve pre-capitalist communal rights against the incursions of the state and capitalism.<sup>27</sup> The proletariat, however, is subject to the values and institutions of the bourgeoisie and capitalism and hence far less free of hegemonic entanglement and less likely to revolt.

Scott also rejects the 'prevailing myth' which holds that it is the task of the political party to break the hold of a hegemonic value system and organise the opposition classes in the revolutionary struggle. In the first instance he argues that the peasantry does not have a hegemonic value system to break, and secondly, the function of the political party in organising the peasantry is based upon the view that it is made up of nearly autonomous communities with few, if any, integrating bonds. While Scott acknowledges the peasants' need for co-ordination and the tactical vision that must come from outside the peasantry, he equates the outside organisation of the peasantry with Lenin's critique of trade unionism, which holds that unions become tied to a highly institutionalised struggle over the division of the surplus, and as a consequence abandon the struggle for socialism.<sup>28</sup> Organisations of peasants are also likely to be predisposed to conduct an orderly non-violent contest for power within existing structures. Scott thus concludes that it is the relative absence of peasant organisation, together with the peasantry's pre-capitalist moral economy and religious traditions, that gives it a critical revolutionary advantage.

The failure in the peasant revolt theorists' vision has been in not fully recognising that the impact of the forces unleashed during the transitional period may serve as the revolutionary stimulus for non-peasant social classes.<sup>29</sup> The work of Paige and Scott must be singled out for criticism in this regard. Paige's contention that revolutionary parties emerge from

within the peasantry is demonstrably false in the case of Tigray. Scott in turn argues that the isolation of the peasantry from the cultural and institutional life of the ruling elites makes this social formation, rather than the proletariat which is enmeshed in that world, uniquely placed to be bearers of revolution. However, the Tigrayan peasants' strong attachment to the values of the Orthodox Church which was a major component of the feudal state which the Derg and the TPLF opposed provides strong evidence that they did not maintain a set of values different from those of the traditional ruling nobility.<sup>30</sup>

Scott's attempt to overturn Marx misses his important insight: in feudal states capitalism has a revolutionary impact and the nascent working class is among the first to be affected by the new forms of social organisation and values it generates. Through its participation in the modern economy, Ethiopia's urban working class was influenced by the values of individual liberty, representative democracy, secularism, and free markets in land and labour, but peasants only heard a faint echo of these values in the 1960s and 1970s through the small minority who had educated children resident in the towns. As a result, the tiny working class did play a not insignificant part in the overthrow of the old regime, while peasants were largely passive.

Scott argues that the peasants' lack of political organisation gives them a revolutionary advantage. In fact this constitutes their major weakness and necessitates alliances with forces which are organised, notably the petit bourgeoisie and working class. The weakness of the working class in turn is due to their small numbers in non-industrial societies and their presence in urban areas that are easier to control by the state than the rural areas of the peasantry. Scott only grudgingly acknowledges that the peasants' lack of vision calls for revolutionaries from the urban areas to assume positions of leadership, but he does not appreciate that their radical vision is a product of the urban society that he contends suffocates the revolutionary impulse.

Capitalism has taken form in the late developing countries in a context where it has been subject to the social critique of socialism, which in Ethiopia was largely provided by the urban petit bourgeois youth. Ethiopia on the eve of the 1974 revolution was a ramshackle empire on the periphery of the international economic and state systems, but its educated youth were products of what Skocpol calls 'world historical time'.<sup>31</sup> As a result they were able to appropriate the knowledge and ideas of world history, particularly socialism and social revolution, and attempt to employ them in the transformation of Ethiopia.

Led by students, it was the petit bourgeoisie with the support of workers and soldiers that brought down the Haile-Selassie government, and the peasants only became revolutionary later as a result of mobilisation by

outside forces. And it was primarily students and teachers from the towns who not only led the Tigrayan revolution, but also numerically dominated it in the early years. Moreover, while the collapse of the old regime and the initial weakness of the Derg encouraged many revolutionary bands to go to the countryside and attempt to gain the support of the peasantry, the failure of most of them makes it clear that more than a favourable structural context is necessary to forge a bond between the revolutionary party and the peasants that will culminate in the capture of state power.

The peasant revolt theorists have not always recognised that for peasant rebellion to assume a national character the peasantry's insular perspective must be subdued and that can only come about by linking through political organisation and action their grievances to those of other classes, notably the urban working class and the intelligentsia. Without this linkage peasant rebellions cannot rise above local concerns and will be defeated. Where the linkage is made societal-wide restructuring is on the agenda, but the leadership and direction passes to non-peasant groups. In bringing a necessary revision to a Marxism which could only see revolutionary potential arising in the rural areas after capitalism had produced a class of landless agriculturist workers, peasant revolt theorists have gone too far in their emphasis and come close to positing revolution as being solely dependent upon the peasantry.

Based on the experience in Tigray the major deficiencies of the peasant revolt theory lie in three areas. First, the structural perspective leads these theorists to pay insufficient attention to the part played by the regime in fostering revolt and influencing the form it takes. Second, in giving prominence to the economy they do not acknowledge the part played by non-economic factors, notably nationalism, in motivating the peasantry and petit bourgeoisie to revolt. Third, the emphasis on the agrarian crisis led these theorists to neglect the study of the urban petit bourgeoisie and to fail to appreciate the importance of the leadership it provided in the revolution.

### **Regime stimulus for revolt**

Moore concluded that it was the actions of the upper classes that in large measure both provoke peasant rebellions and define their outcome,<sup>32</sup> and that was also the case in Ethiopia. Under the old regime political dissent was restricted, but the feudal state did not have the capacity to eliminate it entirely; as a result in the post-Second World War era opposition to the regime emerged in the towns. The Derg's prohibition against dissent and the capacity of the state to carry out its proscription in the urban areas forced opposition leaders to move to the countryside and attempt to launch peasant-based insurrections. The Derg's policies in turn did much to

alienate Tigrayans from the regime, swell the ranks of the opposition, and define the political and military context of the rebellion.

Until 1960, when Haile-Selassie's palace guard attempted a coup, struggles for power at the centre had largely taken the form of intra-feudal and dynastic rivalries within, or on the margins of, the state. The Eritrean struggle for independence and that of various Ethiopian liberation movements, including the TPLF, were of an altogether different character. While earlier rebellions were led by members of the nobility, the latter were led by the petit bourgeoisie. And while the nobility pursued their goals through conspiracies, intrigue, and armies held together by patron-client relations, the revolutionary petit bourgeoisie concentrated on mass political mobilisation. Lastly, the nobility did not challenge the existence of the state, but the petit bourgeoisie aspired to overthrow it.

The young military officers who formed the government after the collapse of the old regime in 1974 used political mobilisation, bureaucratic measures, terror, and the ideological appeals of socialism and nationalism to establish its rule and attack the largely student-based opposition which pressed for democratic civilian rule. The military government's use of violence against their opponents forced revolutionary students to leave the towns and launch a series of rural insurrections, one of which was led by the TPLF.

However, the Derg's initial disorganisation, together with its preoccupation with the more serious problems posed by the Somali invasion and the Eritrean insurrection, provided the fledgling TPLF with an important opportunity to establish itself. That opportunity was not lost. In this period from 1975 until 1978 when the Derg was able to make its power felt in Tigray the TPLF was able to develop its political programme, make its first contacts with the peasants, establish relations with the Eritrean revolutionary fronts, carry out its first model reforms, and distinguish itself from other anti-Derg movements. Although this period also witnessed the growing disenchantment of Tigray's peasants with the military regime, by 1978 the majority of the TPLF fighters were still drawn from the province's petit bourgeoisie, notably teachers and students.<sup>33</sup>

Peasant discontent had its roots in the growing crisis of the rural economy that developed in the period prior to the collapse of the old regime, but it took the form of armed opposition in response to the policies of the Derg and the means it used to implement them. Tigrayan peasants looked upon Haile-Selassie and those who dominated the old regime as usurpers of state power that rightfully belonged to their hereditary rulers, a belief not lost on the late emperor who always maintained members of the Tigrayan nobility in power in the provincial administration. Although the Derg was aware of the Tigrayans' loyalty to their native leaders, the new

regime's credibility depended on fulfilling its revolutionary goals and this meant destroying the elements and personnel of the feudal regime. Moreover, to achieve state hegemony the Derg needed to destroy the patron-client relations on which the authority of the old regime rested. In doing so, it undermined the Tigrayan peasants' most fundamental link to the central state. With their traditional leadership eliminated, Tigrayan peasants feared they would have no one to protect them from the new Amhara elite which they were convinced had taken over the government. Into this void stepped a number of movements, many of them bearing nationalist banners and promising to defend the province from an Amhara government committed to state centralisation and the elimination of Tigray's last vestiges of autonomy.

In this political context the Derg's announced agrarian reforms were treated with suspicion by peasants who feared that the elimination of their traditional system of land tenure would allow the government to gain control over their land. Moreover, unlike southern Ethiopia where land reform was welcomed by the indigenous population who saw it as a means of acquiring land lost to outside interlopers, in Tigray landlordism was limited, there were virtually no non-indigenous landholders, and in the highlands there were few large concentrations of land.

None the less, the Derg's land reforms might still have served as a valuable means to gain peasant support had it not been for the authoritarian means by which they were implemented. Because of the political threat the Derg faced its land reforms were carried out very quickly and became the source of many grievances. Domination of its peasant associations by government allies also caused bitterness and undermined peasant support. Peasant disaffection increased further when the Derg began forcibly procuring agricultural surpluses at less than market prices and restricting the employment of seasonal farm labour which many peasants depended upon for survival. The introduction of state and co-operative farms, forced resettlement, and villagisation caused further anger. As the rural insurrection spread, the Derg introduced compulsory conscription, convoys, ever higher levels of taxation to finance the war, and resorted increasingly to terror attacks on civilians and religious leaders. The Derg's policies alienated Tigrayan peasants and by the early 1980s most of them were supporting the TPLF, but what sustained and gave focus to the rebellion was Tigrayan nationalism and the political leadership of the TPLF.

### **Nationalist basis of revolution**

Nationalism, or ethnonationalism, since the Tigrayan rebellion was for ethnic autonomy within a single Ethiopian state, figured prominently in the

mobilisation of both the *petit bourgeoisie* and the peasants. Exponents of the peasant revolt thesis hold that peasants rebel when major changes in the economy undermine their way of life; they thus recognise peasants to be economic beings, but not political beings capable of giving nationalist interpretations to changes in their economy and way of life. However, prior to the modern era both the nobility and peasants of Tigray regularly voiced national grievances. Until the advent of the TPLF-led revolution these protests took place within the context of struggles for state power between various regional and ethnic-based nobilities. Efforts began in the Middle Ages and continued through Haile-Selassie and the Derg to centralise state powers by weakening political and cultural influences in the periphery. However, it speaks of the prevalence of national sentiments in Tigray that, in spite of its increasing marginalisation in an empire dominated by Amharas from Shoa, it was the only province able to maintain a measure of political autonomy and be ruled by members of its own nobility prior to the revolution of 1974.<sup>34</sup>

As a movement nationalism was not able to acquire a mass basis of support until recently because the Ethiopian state was poorly integrated and ethnic minorities had little contact with one another or the state government.<sup>35</sup> Nationalism is thus a phenomenon identified with modernisation: it begins with advances in communication, transportation, and the media which progressively curtail cultural isolation and break down former identities. An unintegrated state is not a threat to the existence of ethnic communities, but improvements to communications and transportation increase cultural awareness of minorities and their relationship to others, particularly the dominant ethnic group in the state.<sup>36</sup>

These same facets of modernisation serve to undermine primordial identities. According to Brass, 'ethnic identity and modern nationalism arise out of specific types of interactions between the leaderships of centralising states and elites from non-dominant ethnic groups, especially but not exclusively on the peripheries of those states'.<sup>37</sup> In Tigray these processes can largely be dated from the brief period of Italian colonialism that began in 1935, but they only produced a nationalist movement with a province-wide basis of support after the overthrow of the old regime in 1974 and emergence of the TPLF in 1975. The construction of roads in particular fostered the growth of markets for the peasants' produce, as well as providing employment opportunities, thus linking traditionally isolated villages to the wider world. Schools served a similar function and most importantly fostered a unifying Tigray-wide nationalism. The development of infrastructure served to weaken or break down primordial loyalties which had long divided Tigrayans.

At the same time modernisation involved incorporation and centralisation which resulted in a more intrusive role for the state in the lives of

peasants, which in turn made the state a focus for anger that transcended region, class, religion, and other divisions. These processes were already well developed when the Derg came to power and broke the peasants' most significant links to the state by its elimination of Ras Mengesha's administration, while the Land Proclamation of 1975 served to complete the task of destroying the basis of patron–client relations. Thus when the TPLF launched its rebellion the Tigrayan peasantry were less divided than at any time in the past and were also only weakly linked to the state.

As a group the Tigrayan petit bourgeoisie shared with other ethnic and regional counterparts in Ethiopia an opposition to the feudal regime. But as members of a marginalised ethnic community they fought for position, status, and employment in a multiethnic state dominated by Shoan Amharas in a struggle that was both a continuation of a centuries-old rivalry, and also involved interests in the acquisition and articulation of various rights for their community. Unlike the petit bourgeoisie, Tigrayan peasants did not interact on a regular basis with other ethnic communities in the past, and this did not dramatically change within Tigray even under the impact of modernisation and state centralisation. None the less, Amhara supremacy in the state was felt by peasants through contact with police, court officials, tax collectors, church dignitaries, and governors, few of whom were Amhara, but most of whom spoke the official language of the state, Amharigna, in their dealings with them. The privileged position of Amharas in Ethiopia was also experienced directly by peasants who travelled outside the province, either in pursuit of employment and trade, or to settle land disputes in Addis Ababa courts.

This may not have given form to a nationalist movement, were it not that Tigrayans had a deep pride in their heritage and had long been ruled by people from their own ethnic community. Tigrayan peasants assume their cultural heritage to include being Semitic descendants of the union of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, heirs to the ancient Axumite empire, early bearers of Christianity, and the source of many traditions and values subsequently absorbed by the Amhara elite. Thus for a people aptly described as the 'cultural aristocrats' of Ethiopia,<sup>38</sup> Tigray's decline, and in this century its poverty, fuelled a sense of national grievance which readily found expression in hostility to the Amhara elite who dominated the central state.

It is thus not surprising that the TPLF appeal was largely based on the perception that Tigrayans suffered discrimination at the hands of the Shoan Amhara elite, and while there is evidence to support this view, other ethnic communities and regions suffered similar or worse forms of discrimination without posing a serious challenge to the state. In contrast to theories which attempt to explain the development of ethnic nationalism in

terms of inequality,<sup>39</sup> this study reinforces the conclusions of Moore<sup>40</sup> and Brass,<sup>41</sup> who both argue that the mere existence of inequality is not sufficient to produce nationalist movements, and anti-state movements may even arise among dominant groups. Indeed, it was not until the final days of the Derg regime that revolutionaries in the southern highlands of Ethiopia, most of whose peoples had long suffered exploitation at the hands of northerners, were able to mount a sustained rebellion. Instead, opposition to the regime was overwhelmingly dominated by Eritreans and Tigrayans who have been associated with the Ethiopian state for centuries.<sup>42</sup>

Although nationalists, Tigrayans have not been prepared to relinquish their links to Ethiopian civilisation and the state their ancestors created. Moreover, while the peasants' local and culturally based nationalism underpinned the Tigrayan revolution, it did not determine the TPLF's national objectives. The Tigrayan youth who formed the TPLF developed their ideology in the Ethiopian student movement of the 1960s and 1970s which fought the old regime and the military dictatorship on a pan-Ethiopian basis. Meles Zenawi, current Prime Minister of Ethiopia, and the other Tigrayan students were leaders of that movement and their establishment of the TPLF did not mark a retreat into ethnic parochialism, but instead proved to be an accurate assessment of the revolutionary possibilities in the country at that time. However, while nationalism was critical to the success of the TPLF, it was equally important for the movement to address the social concerns and needs of the peasants and this brought to the fore the role of political leadership.

### **Political leadership**

Peasant revolt theorists' failure to appreciate the role of political leadership in the course and outcome of revolutions flows from their inability to distinguish between the structurally necessary conditions for revolutions to occur, and the processes involved in carrying out revolutions. Concentration on the context in which revolutions emerge has meant ignoring the equally critical process pursued by revolutionaries to replace the existing order and state with their alternative. This mistaken emphasis produces one-sided explanations that attempt to explain revolutions solely by the existence of particular structural conditions.<sup>43</sup> Such explanations are invariably easier to make after the event than before. And even the most thought-out structurally premised explanations are unlikely to cast much light on the course of the revolution, which group will eventually take power, and the character of the new regime. In reviewing the revolutions in Lusophone Africa, Chabal concluded that structural factors alone could



not account for their outbreak, process, and result.<sup>44</sup> Instead, he attributed the subsequent form and outcome of the struggle to the interplay between structure and revolutionary leadership.

The Derg in Tigray was in many ways the author of its own destruction. But only if it is appreciated that the Derg's policies and the way they were implemented alienated the Tigrayan people. To assume that hatred of the regime in and of itself produces revolution denies the critical role that the revolutionary party, the TPLF, played in mobilising and giving expression to that resentment. The importance of leadership provided by the revolutionary party in shaping the peasant uprising is largely ignored by exponents of the peasant revolt thesis in favour of peasant spontaneity. However, it is clear that in Tigray party-directed organisation and mobilisation in the pursuit of war, rather than peasant initiative, better explains the course of the revolution. And in this light Marxism, and particularly its Leninist and Maoist variants, proved of considerable value in terms of organising the administration and propaganda in the liberated territories, systematising party life, and developing the military structures needed to conduct increasingly sophisticated warfare.

The TPLF's approach to the peasants shows a debt to Mao's axiom that in order to make a revolution the Communist Party has to build an army, and given the conditions in post-1927 China – and in underdeveloped Tigray – that army could only be based on peasants. Indeed, early TPLF publications repeatedly highlight Mao, and the Front's strategy closely follows what Johnson has identified as the three most influential components of his work: the mass line, the stress on self-reliance, and protracted war.<sup>45</sup> The mass line emphasised taking up the social and political problems of the masses and interpreting them in terms that advanced revolutionary consciousness, but at the same time spurned ideological dogmatism. By following this approach the TPLF was able to address the concrete problems of Tigrayan peasants, be ideologically open to changing circumstances, and avoid the political sterility that characterised most of the Ethiopian revolutionary movements during the period under investigation. Mao's belief in self-reliance was readily accepted by the TPLF which had no foreign bases, external sources of arms, or international champions. But perhaps most influential was Mao's notion of protracted war which was based on, and mirrored the Tigrayan situation, where external assistance was limited and the revolutionaries faced armed forces which were vastly superior. From these conditions it followed that the achievement of a military balance would involve a long war of attrition.<sup>46</sup>

The TPLF's commitment to the peasants' well-being thus flowed from an appreciation that the revolution's success depended upon its ability to militarily challenge the Derg and for this it needed the unreserved support of

the peasants. Contrary to assumed notions of the peasants' collective ethos and voluntarism, the revolutionary context in Tigray province is best informed by Migdal's notion of the need for a 'social exchange' between peasants and revolutionaries,<sup>47</sup> or by Popkin's conception of the 'rational peasant'.<sup>48</sup> Such a peasant, Popkin found, is only prepared to join the revolution after a careful consideration of its prospects for victory and the benefits that would be gained by joining the revolution versus what would be lost by not joining.<sup>49</sup> In such a relationship the revolutionary assumes the role of a 'political entrepreneur' whose appeal is evaluated by the assessment peasants make of the revolutionary's personal credibility and capability.<sup>50</sup> These notions are well expressed by a TPLF official who said that:

Often a peasant meeting would not end until there was a resolution and an agreement to carry out some reform. In many parts of Tigray this commitment was to land reform and only after *baitos* were set up and land reform carried out were peasants prepared to defend their institutions and join the TPLF as fighters.<sup>51</sup>

Peasant support for the TPLF only began to develop after cadres successfully demonstrated their commitment to the peasants' welfare by living with them and sharing their deprivations. The cadres' exemplary behaviour, particularly when compared to that of members of other revolutionary parties, served to build confidence among the peasantry. In addition, the high standards of personal behaviour and commitment displayed by the TPLF leadership reinforced the loyalty of the largely youthful membership of the movement. Older Tigrayan peasants who had contact with the various revolutionary movements that competed for their support in the 1970s can usually distinguish their main ideological differences but, significantly, it is the personal characteristics of the fighters they emphasise, thus confirming the validity of the TPLF's approach. It also bears out both Cabral's finding that revolutionaries have to identify with the deepest aspirations of the people,<sup>52</sup> and the conclusion of Popkin that peasants measure revolutionaries by their personal credibility.<sup>53</sup>

According to Popkin, 'a leader must, first of all, be able to use terms and symbols his targets understand'<sup>54</sup> if he is to successfully link the revolution's goals to the lives of the peasants. The TPLF did this by using traditional and modern cultural forms to connect their revolution to past Tigrayan battles, particularly those which were held to defend or advance the national interest. But it was not, as Popkin seems to believe, simply a matter of the revolutionaries manipulating, or being seen to subscribe to, peasant values. In the case of Tigray these same peasant values placed limits on, and gave shape to, the course of the TPLF's military campaign and its programme to transform agrarian society. While the TPLF's commitment to social transformation cannot be doubted, it is also true that in areas such as religion, gender relations, and economic institutions, an accord of sorts

was struck that balanced the peasants' more conservative values against the TPLF's programme.<sup>55</sup>

The image of the Tigrayan peasant that emerges is thus not a creature that takes precipitous or spontaneous actions as suggested by some theorists. Nor can such peasants be readily manipulated by revolutionaries as was argued by would-be leaders of the peasants in the many Ethiopian revolutionary movements that failed. Although driven to destitution by the crisis in the rural economy, most Tigrayan peasants did not rush to the revolutionary banner, but instead stood back and evaluated the ideals and programmes of the movements contesting for their support, considered the personal credibility of the revolutionaries, and judged their prospects of defeating the Derg, before pledging themselves. While peasants were not in a position to set the political agenda of the revolution, they did have a real influence over the course and conduct of it.

Working within the peasants' cultural milieu to gain their support meant that the TPLF had to accept the constraints that environment imposed. It also meant constantly evaluating the impact of TPLF reforms on the community on the one hand, against the Front's ability to wage war against the Derg, on the other. Implementing the TPLF's programme of reforms served as both an instrument with which to transform rural society and a means to mobilise popular support for the war. However, these are not always complementary goals since the social tensions caused by transformation may open up divisions that undermine the widest possible consensus needed to carry on a revolutionary war. A study of Tigrayan experience thus makes clear that a crucial function of the political leadership of revolutionary parties is to construct an appropriate balance between the need for reform and that for social peace. And as a result of its sensitivity in dealing with the peasants the TPLF was able to command great loyalty, oversee a major programme of social change, and in the process give form to the most powerful political and military movement in post-imperial Ethiopia.

Ultimately, as Kimmel has noted, structural conditions do not dictate what people do, but merely place limits on human action or define a certain range of possibilities.<sup>56</sup> Critical to the success of revolutionaries is their need to understand the constraints and realise the possibilities of the circumstances in which they are operating. Nor can it be forgotten that while skilful political leadership of the revolutionary party will not produce revolutions in the absence of suitable structural conditions, even the most fitting structural conditions for revolution will not lead to revolution without competent political leadership. The success of the TPLF, when seen against the failure of a host of revolutionary groups, provides ample evidence of the importance of political leadership.

### Conclusion

Exponents of the peasant revolt thesis explain revolution as arising in the context of modernising societies undergoing rapid and destabilising change brought about by the introduction of commercial agriculture. Such change destroys traditional systems of agriculture, undermines patron–client relations, and serves as the stimulus for peasants to revolt. Like Marxist-premised explanations, they are concerned with structural change and its implications, but discount the proletariat and argue that most revolutions in the modern era are based on the peasantry. Although peasant revolt theorists usually recognise that successful revolutions are not led by peasants, and thus they do not leave a strong imprint on the character of the regimes that come to power through such struggles, they pay little attention to the role of groups other than peasants in revolution.

Instead, this research follows Skocpol in concluding that too narrow a focus on the agrarian economy obscures understanding of peasant-based revolutions; it is also in agreement with her emphasis on the importance of capitalist development in changing relations between states and classes, rather than commercialisation and market penetration.<sup>57</sup> Thus both military backwardness and political dependency have affected the occurrence and course of social revolutions in a number of countries, including Ethiopia. And consistent with her analysis, the Ethiopian upheaval of 1974 led to further state centralisation.

However, Skocpol's focus is not helpful when attempting to understand the peasant-based revolution which took place in Tigray after the overthrow of the old regime. There was little in the structural conditions or international configuration that favoured a successful outcome for revolution in Tigray, and even less to explain why the TPLF, of a number of contending forces, would dominate that revolution. As opposed to Skocpol, who has emphasised international factors in explaining revolution, this study argues the importance of indigenous factors.

While these theorists concentrate on structural crisis and do not seriously consider political factors, this study contends that the actions and policies of the Derg were crucial in developing opposition among both the petit bourgeoisie and the peasants of Tigray. Moreover, it also holds that Derg control of the urban centres forced the Tigrayan opposition into the countryside where revolution could only be successful if it gained the support of the peasantry. Derg hegemony, which denied a role for the civilian petit bourgeoisie and for the ethnic communities in the state, in turn gave a nationalist character to the Tigrayan revolt. Indeed, nationalist sentiments served to politically motivate and link in struggle the petit bourgeoisie and peasants. The petit bourgeoisie's resentment at political marginalisation,

peasant concern over declining living standards, and their joint fear that Derg hegemony in the state represented a new and more powerful form of domination by a non-indigenous ethnic elite, gave rise to an even more forceful nationalism which became the central focus of the revolution.

Peasant revolt theorists (and Skocpol) reject or de-emphasise the role of political parties in either stimulating or leading revolutions because they consider such approaches to be voluntarist. However, the contention here is that structures only frame the parameters of revolutionary possibilities; they cannot govern process or determine consequences. As Hawes has noted, 'extant theory is inadequate for explaining what transforms (endemic) peasant grievances into a willingness to take the risky step of joining (as opposed to quietly supporting) a revolutionary movement'.<sup>58</sup> In this light the role of the TPLF was critical to the success of the Tigrayan revolution. However, this research does not endorse party-centric analyses which ignore the critical part played by peasants in influencing the nature, course, and objectives of the revolution. At every stage of the revolution – from the TPLF's formulation of its nationalist agenda, to the kind and extent of reforms carried out, through to the decision to carry the war beyond Tigray – peasants had a marked, and at times determining, influence.

## 2 Historical and social background

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### **Introduction**

The primary objective of this chapter is to examine the historical and social development of Tigray from its origins in ancient Axum through its marginalisation which began in Abyssinia and continued in the Amhara-dominated modern empire-state of Ethiopia. Historically as part of the Abyssinian core Tigrayans have held a privileged position in society. However, from the tenth century state power generally shifted southward from Tigray, briefly to the Agaw, and then to the Amhara lands, culminating in Shoa in the late nineteenth century. Tigrayan power within the nexus of Abyssinia varied according to, first, the importance of external trade, for which access to Tigray was essential, and secondly, the progressive ecological degradation of the territory's land, both of which fostered emigration south.

However, political and economic marginalisation, exacerbated in this century by modernisation, cannot alone provide an explanatory framework for peasant revolt since similar processes were being experienced throughout the non-core areas of the Ethiopian empire without producing such a dramatic response as that which took place in Tigray. An explanation of revolution in Tigray must thus draw the linkage between historically rooted structural factors, the focus here, and a range of political factors which will be examined in the following chapters.

### **Tigray: emergence and decline**

The known history of Tigray began with the establishment of the Axumite empire, but these origins remain obscure. What is known is that the original inhabitants of the northern highlands of what is now Ethiopia and Eritrea were Nilotic people who mixed with Hamites and migrated to the area some time before the first millennium BC. In the early years of the first millennium BC waves of Semitic peoples from what is now Yemen crossed the Red Sea, conquered the local inhabitants, and settled at Yeha near the present site of Axum. One group of Semites, the Sabaeans, intermarried with

the Hamites, and their offspring subdued their neighbours and established the Axumite kingdom.

By the third century AD Axumite armies are known to have reached Nubia, in what is now northern Sudan, and south Arabia where they remained, although not without interruptions, for the next 300 years. Through the Red Sea port of Adulis the Axumites exported incense, ivory, and animal skins to the Graeco-Roman world, Persia, Egypt, and the Far East, and imported a variety of luxury goods for their slave-owning rulers. Trade in turn brought Axum under the cultural influence of Hellenism. The Greek language was widely used and Christianity became the official religion of the empire in AD 330, after which the Coptic Church of Egypt began appointing Axum's bishops or *abuna*. *Geez*, a language first introduced by one of the Semitic tribes, became the written and liturgical language of the Church and also formed the basis of the present-day languages Tigrigna and Amharigna. Indeed, it was the Christian Church and its doctrine and institutional apparatus that were the key links between ancient Axum and the modern state of Ethiopia, and not the imperial throne.<sup>1</sup>

From their core in present-day Tigray the Axumites crossed the Tekezzé river and moved south into the Amhara lands. The fourth to fifth centuries probably saw the height of the Axumite civilisation and from the sixth to the tenth centuries it declined as a result of both external and internal pressures. The spread of Islam, the loss of southern Arabia, and the destruction of the port of Adulis at the beginning of the eighth century, served to virtually close the Axumites' Red Sea door to the outside world and shift the centre of political gravity southwards, a process that continued until the end of the nineteenth century. As the Axumites moved southwards they occupied the land over which their descendants were to claim usufructuary rights.

As Markakis has noted, the social structure of Amhara-Tigray society represents the 'classic trinity of noble, priest, and peasant' and what fundamentally distinguishes it is the 'relationship to the only means of production, that is land'.<sup>2</sup> From the seventh century until the introduction of the Derg's rural land nationalisation in 1975 the vast majority of the peasantry held land under the *risti* tenure system which ensured that every free-born Christian Abyssinian was entitled to claim land through descent from an *Akni Abat*, or founding father, who was held to have once owned the land.<sup>3</sup> Land claims and disputes could go back twenty generations and were originally arbitrated locally by elders, and in this century as land shortages developed, increasingly through reference to the courts.

Hereditary rights to *risti* land prior to 1974 could not be lost, and unlike Western practice where land is predominantly an economic factor, in Amhara-Tigray society it also crucially involves membership and social

status in the community.<sup>4</sup> Slaves, Moslems, traders, and ethnic and religious minorities were not socially respectable and were generally denied access to productive land. A later modification of the *risti* system that was to develop in a few small areas of Tigray and throughout most of Eritrea was the *desa*, or communal land pattern. Under this pattern land was held by the entire community and divided up equally by elders every few years as a means of ensuring equality and avoiding absentee land-holdings.

Although *risti* holders could not vary inheritance patterns, they could plant what was desired, commit land in agrarian contracts, lease it for farming by a tenant, give it as security for a loan, or exchange it temporarily for the use of another parcel. In addition, holders could bar access to their children, or favour one child over another. Markakis found *risti* rights to be 'quasi-absolute'<sup>5</sup> and John Bruce concluded that it is valued intensely and the *risti* holder's 'mental set is that of an owner rather than a "mere usufructuary".<sup>6</sup> While the *risti* system promoted land fragmentation and the prevalence of small holdings, apart from religious minorities it prevented land alienation and the emergence of a significant landless class until its demise with the 1974 revolution.

At the apex of this land-holding system rested the state with its two arms, the Church and the secular nobility dominated by the emperor, for whom land and peasants to work the land were necessary for their survival. The state extracted surpluses through *asrat*, a tithe on land, that varied between one-fifth and one-third of production, and also by the application of taxes on livestock and trade. Cultivators were also required to provide compulsory military service, billets and provisions for soldiers, unpaid labour on the nobles' lands, and gifts to the nobility on special occasions. In addition, the emperor had the power to grant *gulti* rights over land to favoured individuals who could retain part of the taxes collected and pass the balance on to the monarch.

*Gulti* rights were not generally inherited in the secular sphere and reverted to the crown with the death of the holder. In turn, rank and titles were bestowed by the emperor based on services rendered and were also not usually inherited. As a result the nobility was not self-perpetuating and even commoners could join its ranks. None the less, until the middle of the twentieth century the nobility monopolised control of the administrative and military structure of the state.<sup>7</sup> As well as deriving authority through appointment by the emperor, regional administrators also acquired legitimacy through the loyalty and support of the peasantry, and it was often recognition of such local power that compelled the emperor to make appointments.<sup>8</sup>

The Church represented the third pillar of traditional Ethiopian society. Church and state were virtually fused, commonly through blood relationships, always through mutual interests, and at the local level often through



awardja and woreda governors engaging Church officials as father confessors/advisors.<sup>9</sup> The Church was also a rigidly divided institution, and while those at the top of the hierarchy were usually wealthy pillars of the dominant society, at the other extreme its monks and parish priests were often poor and had far more in common with underprivileged peasants. Although not a centralised body, through local monasteries, churches, and the clergy it possessed vast lands; the Church's leaders were also granted *gulti* privileges and the central treasury in this century began receiving contributions collected in the provinces.<sup>10</sup>

In deeply religious Ethiopia the Church was at the centre of the peasants' cultural life and as a result the clergy was a class which 'enjoyed social prestige, economic advantage, and influence second only to that of the political authority',<sup>11</sup> which it did its utmost to uphold. Although there have always been disputes between the secular and church nobility over the distribution of the peasants' surplus, they have generally been resolved amicably and the Church has been a crucial institution in supporting Ethiopian unity and maintaining an institutional link between the frequently warring provinces. At the same time, like the nobility and peasants, the local-level clergy is parochial and perpetuates local identities.

The inequitable distribution of land favoured Abyssinia's social hierarchy and rituals of deference, but none the less there were strong bonds between superior and inferior based on ties of blood and what Hobbes has called a 'relatively low degree of differentiation in life-style – i.e. forms of social organisation, ideas and ideals'.<sup>12</sup> The myth of a common ancestry, the fluidity of land-holdings from one generation to the next which made social mobility both upwards and downwards common, the low level of technology, and the limited cultural distinctions between gentry and peasant, all encouraged the blurring of class distinctions and inhibited the emergence of class consciousness. According to Crumme, Ethiopia had classes in themselves, but not classes for themselves.<sup>13</sup>

In a society where the vast majority of people have always been devoted to agriculture, the basic social unit of Tigray is the rural household made up of a nuclear family which usually includes other relatives.<sup>14</sup> Farming is carried out by individual peasant households and only in rare instances is collective farming practised. Like all highland Ethiopian peasants, male Tigrayans prepare their land with a pair of oxen and a wooden plough. Average temperatures on the 3,000 to 3,400 metre high plateau on which most peasant farmers live range from sixteen to eighteen degrees centigrade, but it is rainfall that largely determines the season and agricultural cycle. The plateau receives between 550 and 700 millimetres of rain annually, but there are large yearly and regional disparities. The main rainy season, known as *Kempt*, corresponds with the summer months and

reaches its height in July and August, but continues until late September.<sup>15</sup> It is followed by a dry season which may be broken by 'little rains' called *Belg*, that begin in late February and continue until early April. Typically there is a single crop season and in the case of grains it begins with ploughing in early March, sowing in late June or early July, and harvest in late October or November.

The social structure, the system of land on which it was based, and the Orthodox Church were the most enduring legacy of Axum. Axum's empire came to an end in the first half of the tenth century with the rise of the Zagwe dynasty of the non-Semitic Agaw people in what became the province of Wollo. The dynasty lasted until 1270 when Amharas and Tigrayans joined together to overthrow it. Power then passed to a succession of Amhara kings who condemned the former dynasty as usurpers and claimed in the fourteenth century classic, the *Kebre Negest*, their own uninterrupted line of kings descending from Menelik I, heir to King Solomon and Queen of Sheba. The Solomonic myth was not only used to sanctify the rulers<sup>16</sup> but also to deify the Ethiopian peoples.<sup>17</sup> It also marked the beginning of a competition for dominance between Amhara and Tigrayan elites that continued until the present day.

### **Amhara dominated empire**

Between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries armies from the Amhara lands reached as far as Lake Abbaya in the south, Enarea in the southwest, and to the port of Zeila on the northern Somali coast.<sup>18</sup> It was these conquered territories, and those ascribed to have been held much earlier by the Axumites, that constituted the basis of the empire Menelik II was to 'reclaim' in the final days of the nineteenth century. Unlike Abyssinia, in the south traditional beliefs and Islam were the most common faiths; pastoralism and communal farming the principal means of production, and the people were not of Semitic origins. Most importantly, the Abyssinian-centred state of the north was mobile throughout this period and it did not have the capacity to exert complete hegemony over the contesting principalities in the north, let alone those of the south.

In response to the population movement of the nomadic Afar and Somali, in 1527 Ahmad the Gragn led a Moslem army from the south-east, and with firearms acquired through access to ports on the Red Sea and the support of co-religionists in Arabia and Turkey, quickly spread north overcoming the more poorly armed soldiers of Abyssinia, destroying churches, and causing massive dislocation.<sup>19</sup> Although Ahmad was eventually defeated with the timely assistance of the Portuguese in 1541, the peoples of the northern and central highlands were then confronted

with a massive influx of Cushitic Oromo pastoralists from the south, as part of the same population migration. Shoa in particular was subject to Oromo influence and as a result of these developments the political centre of the very loosely held empire briefly shifted to Gondar where, for the first time since Axum, Abyssinia acquired a settled capital. However, the power of the monarchy continued to decline as a result of challenges by regional warring blocs.

While Shoan rulers paid nominal fealty to the Gondar-based emperors in the north, they expanded their territorial base among the adjacent Oromo lands to the south and west. At the same time they retained an Oromo belt to the north in Wollo as a line of security against the northern emperors and the constant civil and foreign wars that beset the region. The period from 1769 when a Tigrayan prince, Ras Mikael Sehul, overthrew the Gondar-based emperor and replaced him with his own favourite until 1855 is known as the *Zamana Masafent*, or 'era of princes'. In this interlude Ethiopia became in the view of Hess, 'a mere geographical expression'<sup>20</sup> and led Tigray to become 'virtually independent', its rulers 'wield[ing] power comparable to that exercised by emperors of former times'.<sup>21</sup>

State decay also fostered *shifita*, or bandit, activity in the north, and this was further encouraged by the wide availability of firearms in the first half of the nineteenth century. As a result 'it was easier for the armed rulers of Shoa and Begemdir to keep an unarmed population in subjugation than it was for the rulers of Tigray to dominate a population as well armed as themselves'.<sup>22</sup> While access to firearms and the most important trading routes allowed powerful lords like Ras Mikael to play an important role in Abyssinian political life, Tigray's poverty and lawlessness were contrasted with Shoa's order and prosperity by many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travellers who attributed this difference to the latter's isolation.<sup>23</sup> As Clapham has noted:

While the old centres in present-day Tigray and Eritrea were conveniently placed for trade with the Red Sea basin and the Nile valley, they were correspondingly vulnerable to Moslem (and eventually colonial) attack, and Ethiopia's rulers retreated to the safety of the mountains.<sup>24</sup>

Peace and prosperity encouraged Shoan expansion, although by the beginning of the nineteenth century the territory was far from united and still paid nominal allegiance to emperors of an even more disunited empire.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, while cultural influences were doubtlessly felt further afield, until 1880 Shoan expansion, as measured by occupation, had probably not reached more than 100 miles south of what was to be Menelik's capital of Addis Ababa.<sup>26</sup>

### **Emergence of modern Ethiopia**

Three emperors, Tewodros, Yohannis, and Menelik, laid the foundation for the modern state of Ethiopia. Kassa, an Amhara shifta leader was crowned Emperor Tewodros in 1855 and brought the Era of Princes to a close by bringing the divided territories of the north under one rule. He also attempted to bring the Church under his control and reduce the power of regional leaders by establishing local administrations responsible to him. But in the end Tewodros failed in all his objectives. His self-inflicted death in 1868 created a struggle for power that was won by Dejazmach Kajsai from Tigray who took the name Emperor Yohannis IV.

Yohannis pursued the goal of unity initiated by Tewodros, but his means were decidedly different. Unity was not to be achieved by overthrowing regional opponents, eliminating Islam, or taming the Church, but instead by accepting a measure of cultural diversity and the existence of other centres of power, something which has been called 'controlled regionalism'.<sup>27</sup> The regional rivalry between the Tigrayan and Shoan monarchs was contained by the latter's public renunciation of any claims to be emperor and Yohannis's corresponding recognition of Menelik as King of Shoa. The ascent of Yohannis, however, did not end the cultural dominance of the Amhara. Amharigna remained the language of his court, and Plowden, a contemporary European observer noted, 'Teegray is now almost universally acquainted with the Amharic language, and their customs, food and dress have become so assimilated to those of the Amharas, as not to require separate description, though their hatred of that people is undiminished.'<sup>28</sup>

While Yohannis fought invading Egyptians, Italians, and Mahdists on his northern borders, Menelik directed his energies at acquiring modern armaments and continuing Shoan expansion to the south. The southern expansion brought some of the most important caravan routes and markets within Shoa's boundaries and they provided Menelik with the financial resources to purchase firearms. Armaments could also be acquired through diplomacy. Shortly after the Italians were defeated in 1887 at Dogali in what is now Eritrea by Yohannis's general, Ras Alula, the Italians agreed in a secret treaty to supply Menelik with 5,000 Remington rifles and money, and also to recognise him as a sovereign power, in return for his promise to assist Italy's colonial expansion.<sup>29</sup> According to one Italian estimate, a total of 189,000 weapons were imported into Shoa from Italian Red Sea ports alone between 1885 and 1895,<sup>30</sup> and most of them were acquired by Menelik.

In the event, there was no ultimate battle between the contending monarchs as Yohannis was killed fighting the Mahdists in 1889 and Menelik

was quickly proclaimed emperor. The Italians gained Menelik's recognition of their sovereignty over Eritrea through the Treaty of Wichale signed on 2 May 1889, two months after Yohannis's death. Having furthered the colonial interests of the Italians, Menelik then attempted to contain their advance south, and in 1896 his armies defeated them at Adwa. However, by accepting the Treaty of Wichale and not taking advantage of the Adwa victory to force the Italians out of their Red Sea colony (or, according to his defenders, not having the resources to do so<sup>31</sup>), Menelik provided a future generation of Eritrean nationalists with evidence of Ethiopia's rejection of claims to the territory. The loss of Eritrea with its Tigrigna-speaking population was also the cause of lasting resentment in Tigray. Many Tigrayans today contend that Menelik did not take advantage of his Adwa victory and force the Italians out of their occupied lands because that would serve to strengthen his chief competitors for state dominance, the descendants of Yohannis.

But the immediate impact of the victory at Adwa was a *modus operandi* with the Italians in the north that allowed Menelik's armies to march into the Ogaden and spread further into the resource-rich Oromo lands of the south. In the ten years following the Adwa victory the armies of Menelik, together with his diplomatic successes with the adjacent colonial authorities, produced the Ethiopian boundaries that are largely in existence today. Ethiopia's expansion thus coincided with that of Europe's expansion in Africa and, like the European-created empires, it too was maintained by force over alien peoples. Unlike the imperial powers, however, Menelik and his successors have always attempted to legitimise this expansion by reference to Ethiopia's supposed historic borders.

The brief assumption of power by Menelik's grandson, Lij Yasu, with his Moslem sympathies, followed by a council of the nobility who overthrew him,<sup>32</sup> through to Haile-Selassie, did not change the basis of Shoan Amhara domination. In the south captured lands were given to court and Church favourites and to settlers from the north who were encouraged to migrate to the region. Unlike the north, southern lands were fertile, suitable for valuable export crops like coffee, and their holders could be dispossessed. However, domination of the Abyssinians distorted the position of the northern peasant masses because they only belonged to this group in cultural and psychological terms.<sup>33</sup> Thus, Tigray's increasingly destitute peasants derived few advantages from the southern expansion and their smallholding subsistence-based agricultural economy had few attractions when measured against the opportunities available in the south. The Abyssinian nobility, and particularly the Shoan branch which dominated the state and held lands adjacent to the south, were the primary beneficiaries of the southern expansion.<sup>34</sup> In the north the decentralised governmental structure, together with

the paucity of instruments available, and what Markakis has called the 'fanatical provincialism of the peasants', generally allowed the provincial nobility to successfully defend their autonomy.<sup>35</sup>

Tigray did not have Shoa's geo-cultural advantages, nor the benefit of a stable dynasty until the advent of Emperor Yohannis. And in the view of most Tigrayans today, his descendants were denied their legitimate political inheritance by the Shoan nobility who had Menelik crowned on the basis of a disputed agreement. Instead, Tigray has suffered from the rivalries of its ruling factions and its location in the northern highlands that has been the site of repeated invasions by Egyptians, Mahdists, and Italians. According to Erlich, some twenty major battles were fought on Tigrayan soil between the Battle of Adwa and the Italian invasion of 1935.<sup>36</sup> The armies that fought these invaders and various rival Tigrayan factions were primarily made up of peasants who were forced to feed the armies and suffered the depredations of the wars they brought to their lands. With no salaries (until the formation of a professional army in 1941) or even regular food supplies, it was common practice for soldiers to feed themselves at the expense of the peasants on whose lands they traversed. Indeed, pillaging from the peasants and collecting war booty were the soldiers' chief incentives for joining the army.<sup>37</sup>

The Amhara and Tigrayans are closely related peoples ethnically, linguistically, and culturally. However, according to Markakis, Tigray alone represented purity and continuity in Ethiopian culture<sup>38</sup> and this purity was in part a function of Tigray's inability to grow through assimilating neighbouring peoples. Tigrigna speakers were typically highland sedentary Christian peasant farmers and their neighbours were either Moslem herders inhabiting uninviting lowlands or members of the much larger Amhara people. Conversely, the Shoan branch of the Amhara shared the central plateau with stateless Oromos whom they found easier to either assimilate or dominate.

Assimilation was facilitated by what Clapham calls the 'plasticity of Amhara ethnicity' and a kinship system which placed almost equal emphasis on maternal and paternal ties of descent. It was furthered by the practice of non-Amharas (primarily Oromos) taking Amhara personal names which for the next generation became their last names. Amharisation was virtually complete if the individual in question also spoke Amharigna, accepted the Orthodox Church, and assumed Amhara manners. On this basis and through political marriages and alliances Oromo nobles started becoming important political leaders and generals in Shoa, and in time many commoners were also assimilated. The result is that there are few Amharas, particularly among those from Shoa who lived on the border lands of the Oromos, that do not

have some Oromo blood in them, a process which has not occurred among Tigrayans.

On this basis Clapham has argued that the Ethiopian system of political leadership cannot be considered ethnically exclusive. He does, however, acknowledge that hierarchical structured Ethiopian governments (whether imperial or Derg) have been weak at accepting groups that wish to maintain their own distinctiveness, and further, that there has been a greater problem in incorporating Eritreans and Tigrayans because of 'practical considerations of political reliability'.<sup>39</sup> While Clapham's explanation, in conjunction with other factors, helps to understand the limited appeal until recently of Oromo nationalism, it allows him, as Adhana Haile has noted, to 'dispense with the "ethnic cleavage" as something transient'.<sup>40</sup> What Clapham fails to acknowledge is that subject peoples under the Shoan monarchies could only gain acceptance within the dominant culture by committing what Keller has called 'cultural suicide'.<sup>41</sup>

Like his predecessors, Haile-Selassie concentrated on the centralisation of the empire and this allowed little scope for any policy of integration of the nationalities beyond the selective incorporation of ethnic elites through Amharisation. Instead, through personal patronage, land tenure, and land tax reforms the emperor sought to modernise his regime by undermining the traditional power of the northern autocrats. To the extent that these measures were effective they reformed the administrative links between centre and periphery, and hence increased the power of the emperor, without, however, fundamentally altering the character of Shoan rule.

In Shoan-dominated Abyssinia all regions opposed state centralisation, but it is significant that by the time of the reign of Haile-Selassie only in Tigray did hereditary leaders still rule.<sup>42</sup> The Shoan emperors reduced Tigray to a semi-autonomous buffer region, but they were never able to fully control it or deprive its leading families of their centuries-old supremacy. As a result Amhara emperors had to depend on local leaders and continue the ancient practice of building political loyalty through dynastic marriages in the province. Under Haile-Selassie this largely took the form of marriages between his family and those of the descendants of Yohannis.<sup>43</sup> Nobility is primarily a function of titles which are conferred by the emperor and are not inheritable, but some families, such as that of Yohannis, have retained titles for generations.

Although the Tigrayan nobility could unite to defend the province against the Shoans, they were often divided among themselves. Gebru Tareke has speculated that the regional nobilities of Shoa and Gojjam were not as disunited as those of Tigray because they did not have as many segments and their political history was shorter and thus not as well established as that of the Tigrayans.<sup>44</sup> The Tigrayan nobles' internal divisions

were also encouraged by the Shoans so they could achieve an internal balance and prevent any of Yohannis's descendants from becoming the negus, or king of Tigray.<sup>45</sup> On the eve of the Second World War Emperor Haile-Selassie continued Menelik's attempts to undermine Tigrayan autonomy by dividing authority in the provinces between two rival descendants of Yohannis: Dejazmach Haile-Selassie Gugsa, who administered eastern Tigray, and Ras Seyoum Mengesha who administered western Tigray.

The system, however, was open to manipulation by the Italian administration in neighbouring Eritrea who had harboured designs on Ethiopia since their defeat at Adwa, and with the rise of Mussolini they pursued a more aggressive Ethiopian policy. In exchange for ensuring an unopposed route for their invading army through his territory, Italian officials promised Haile-Selassie Gugsa that they would appoint him sole leader of Tigray after their takeover of the province. The dejazmach's treachery strengthened the Italians' resolve to invade Ethiopia, while the historical pattern of core-region power struggles convinced the British and other foreign observers that Ethiopia's disintegration was inevitable. As a result, the British concluded that it would be mistaken to support Ethiopia's integrity and therefore agreed to an Italian protectorate over the country.<sup>46</sup>

Environmental stress, famine, and the inability of the province's political leaders and traditional institutions to cope with the problem, also figured in Tigray's decline. It had not always been this way. Northern Ethiopia was once rich in agricultural resources and provided a well-balanced diet for its inhabitants. The Scottish explorer James Bruce who visited the country in the late eighteenth century wrote that peasants in the region of the Tigrayan town of Adwa grew three crops a year without the benefit of manure, and they 'presented a rich appearance to the visitor'.<sup>47</sup> In the 1820s Nathaniel Pearce reported seeing 'a great many elephants in the depth of the forest' near Adwa.<sup>48</sup> However, less than four decades later, during the construction of a telegraph line for the army of General Napier, it was reported that in parts of Tigray it was virtually impossible to find trees that could be used as poles and peasants were selling the British timbers from their own houses.<sup>49</sup>

Ethiopian peasants endured the largest number of recorded famines in Africa and there were few famines which did not include Tigray. The most destructive famine to afflict Ethiopia in recorded history was that of 1888-92 which began with a rinderpest plague caused by the importation of infected cattle to Massawa, but it soon affected all of Ethiopia and sub-Saharan Africa. Its impact was more severe and longer in the north according to Catholic missionaries who witnessed continuing near-famine conditions in Tigray as late as 1905.<sup>50</sup> In the period between the death of



Yohannis in 1889 and the present day an estimated seventeen famines have struck Tigray, the biggest being in 1958–9, 1965–6, 1972–4, and 1983–4.

In spite of the impact of the famine of 1888, there appeared to be a steady increase in population in northern Ethiopia and this served to intensify land use in older settled areas, encourage settlement in lower altitude zones which sometimes led to conflict with the peoples inhabiting those areas, and caused the destruction of some of the most accessible pasturage and forests.<sup>51</sup> Although there is no disagreement that deforestation and environmental degradation are major problems in Ethiopia, particularly in the northern highlands, there is a difference of opinion on when these problems arose.<sup>52</sup>

Appreciating the intimate connection between government and famine, James Bruce noted the impact of vermin in precipitating famine, but concluded that, 'to these plagues may be added still one, the greatest of them all, bad government, which speedily destroys all the advantages they reap from nature, climate, and situation'.<sup>53</sup> Although the peasants were instructed by the Church that famine was a manifestation of divine retribution, in Tigray there was a national dimension to the people's suffering since the rulers were from another nation. The loss of power by the descendants of Yohannis to the Amhara nobility served to heighten the people's sense of national grievance and to link 'the misfortune of their homeland to its political emasculation, and to blame Amhara domination for their misery'.<sup>54</sup>

### **Tigray's entry into the modern world**

With the 1935 Italian invasion of Ethiopia, forces were set in motion that not only led directly to the 1943 anti-state revolt of the Tigrayan peasants, but also initiated the process of modernisation. Connor has aptly described modernisation as 'that amalgam of sub-processes including industrialisation, urbanisation, increasing literacy, intensified communication and transportation networks, and the like'.<sup>55</sup> Modernisation also leaves in its wake economic dislocation, new patterns and ways of life, the questioning of old identities as new ones take form, and increasing challenges to political institutions.

As a result of the invasion, Ethiopia, together with Italian Somaliland and Eritrea, became part of the *African Orientale Italiana*. Under Italian rule the country was divided into four governorships, Amhara, Harar, Oromo-Sidamo, and Shoa, while Tigray was attached to Eritrea. Prior to the invasion the Italians had made much for propaganda purposes of Ethiopia's backwardness, oppression of the non-Amhara peoples, and Haile-Selassie's failure to eliminate slavery. The Italians did eliminate

slavery; the privileged status of the *neftgenas*, or northern settlers in the southern lands, was reduced, and schools were built that provided instruction in the indigenous tongues of the area, and not exclusively in Amharigna as was the practice under the imperial regime.

The Italians' administrative restructuring served to undermine, but not do away with, the role of nobles in local government. The new rulers also attempted to dissolve the land-holdings of the clergy, letting these lands return to the people, while the priests were sometimes put on monthly salaries.<sup>56</sup> Such reforms were generally welcomed by Ethiopia's heavily taxed peasants. A Tigrayan elder described the Italian occupation as a period when the people were 'getting rest, peace, and freedom from the [imperial] government'.<sup>57</sup>

Italian-stimulated modernisation served to lay the basis of modern economic infrastructure in Ethiopia. This included the spread of wage labour as Italian settlers established commercial farms, and the creation of 40 agricultural enterprises, 1,436 commercial companies, and 1,225 industrial firms.<sup>58</sup> During their brief rule the Italians built 4,000 miles of road and with their defeat left behind machinery, lorries, factories, public buildings, and many settlers. In Tigray the town of Adwa in particular benefited from Italian rule as it was made an administrative capital and townspeople reported 'they were busy night and day making and providing things to sell to the Italians'.<sup>59</sup> But modernisation of the economy also brought about the decline of the town's traditional industries, such as the centuries-old mule caravan trade. Moreover, with the defeat of the Italians Adwa lost its favoured status.

The return of Haile-Selassie in 1941 from exile in the company of British imperial troops set the stage for a major revolt in eastern Tigray. Tigrayan loyalties had been tested by the war when a number of local nobles actively supported the Italians. The occupiers gained the acquiescence, if not always the support, of sections of the population by reducing the number and amount of taxes, and by building badly needed schools, hospitals, and roads. Tigrayan acceptance of the Italian invaders and hostility to the incoming imperial regime was also facilitated by Haile-Selassie's defensive strategy of abandoning the province to the invaders during the retreat of 1935.

Aware of his insecure position, Haile-Selassie was anxious to reassert control in the province, but his officials were challenged when they attempted to collect taxes. Although the emperor abolished many of the pre-war taxes and services, peasants complained that the taxes were still far higher than those imposed by the Italian administration.<sup>60</sup> What particularly angered the peasants, however, was that in contrast to earlier practice, Haile-Selassie insisted that taxes be paid in cash and not in kind, a severe

imposition given the subsistence character of most Tigrayan agriculture. Moreover, taxes were collected by corrupt assessors accompanied by irregular troops known as Territorials who became notorious for robbery and violence.<sup>61</sup>

Angered by Haile-Selassie's new administration of Amhara officials, Tigrayan nobles encouraged peasant resistance and gave it a populist anti-Shoan character. In the unsettled conditions prevailing in the wake of the Italian administration's collapse these factors alone would have caused public disorder. The situation was further aggravated by the occupying British army's goal after 1941 of removing Tigray from the emperor's control and attaching the province to Eritrea. In pursuit of their efforts, and as a means to contain the spreading anarchy, they encouraged Tigrayan sectarianism and built up the authority of Tigray's hereditary leaders, notably Ras Seyoum Mengesha, who they pressed the emperor to appoint governor of the province.<sup>62</sup> Haile-Selassie eventually agreed to the appointment, but kept Seyoum under observation in Addis Ababa until 1947. The emperor faced a dilemma: the appointment of Tigrayan nobles to positions of leadership might encourage stability in the province, but as a Shoan Amhara ruler he was anxious about raising the status of his historical competitors, and at the same time he had reason to be suspicious of British intentions.

Haile-Selassie was also confronted by a number of rebellious minority communities in southeastern Tigray who attempted to escape state encroachment at a time when the imperial regime was weak. Foremost were the Raya and Azebo people who were originally Oromo and constituted a Moslem minority community in the heartland of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity. Moreover, they had fiercely resisted Abyssinian incorporation and struggled to retain their semi-nomadic clan-based egalitarian culture. On the eve of the 1935 invasion the Italians provided the Raya and Azebo with several thousand rifles which they used very effectively against the retreating imperial army.<sup>63</sup> Haile-Selassie considered their actions traitorous, and the stage was set for post-war conflict.

A neighbouring people, the Wejerat, also had a long history of militantly opposing state efforts to impose local administrators and the *risti* system of land tenure. The Wejerat were mostly Christian peasant farmers, spoke a Tigrigna dialect, and practised a system of tenure in which land belonged to the entire community and land rights flowed from permanent residence, unlike the lineage-based system practised by most Tigrayans. Feudal incorporation threatened to impose outside authority in local affairs and bring about the destruction of their land tenure system and decentralised forms of government. In 1942 the state did impose a *chika shum*, or local administrator, over them and this served as one of the precipitating causes for their conflict with the central government.<sup>64</sup>

Minorities' resistance to incorporation, inter- and intra-feudal jockeying for power, dislocation involved in the transitional period, and the violence of the Territorials, all fostered an upsurge in *shifta* activity. *Shifta* were not homogeneous: some were basically criminals engaged in looting both peasants and nobles alike, but others were peasants deeply angered at their conditions and 'their discontent was in essence the peasants' discontent'.<sup>65</sup> Most of the latter group joined the rebellion or *Woyene* and one of them, an aggrieved local official turned *shifta*, Blatta Haile Mariam Redda, became its principal leader. Public disobedience, whether of a criminal or political nature, was expedited by the wide availability of weaponry in a region that had only recently witnessed anti-government skirmishes and had been the site of many battles over the previous sixty-five years.

After a series of battles beginning 22 May 1943 that left the *Woyene* rebels in control of the provincial capital Mekelle and most of eastern Tigray, they focused their efforts on the government stronghold of Amba Alage. However, after three weeks of increasingly bitter attacks, the army, with the assistance of British officers and aerial bombardment, was victorious in October. Government retribution was quick and severe. The Territorials spread violence throughout Tigray, fines were levied, homesteads destroyed, and cattle confiscated. Of more long-term significance, the Raya and Azebo, who had been in the forefront of the rebellion, had their land taken away and were made tenants on it. Tigray's boundaries were also redrawn and the area they inhabited was assigned to Wollo.

Haile-Selassie did, however, make some concessions to Tigrayan sensitivities, notably in his more overt attempts to have Amhara officialdom administer Tigray. Although the Amhara Ras Abebe Aregai was temporarily retained as governor, the occupying troops were withdrawn, *woreda* administrators thereafter were Tigrayan and, after Seyoum's return in 1947, were appointed by him. However, Seyoum's deputy, Fitawarari Yemane Hassen, a Shoan Amhara, became the real power in the territory.<sup>66</sup> The land tax which had caused so much resentment was eliminated and in its place a tribute system was introduced in which Tigrayans themselves decided who paid and how much they paid as long as they met the overall demands of the central government. A measure of provincial autonomy was thus retained, but the trend toward state centralisation continued.

The TPLF and some academics contend that the revolt represented the collective response of an oppressed nation to Shoan Amhara oppression.<sup>67</sup> However, both the principal historian of the *Woyene*, Gebru Tareke, and the foremost historian of Tigray from the period of Yohannis to the overthrow of the imperial regime in 1974, Haggai Erlich, contend that the revolt was not fundamentally an expression of Tigrayan nationalism. According to Gebru 'the peasants rebelled against the state not particularly because it

was controlled and dominated by the Shewan Amhara but primarily because it was oppressive'.<sup>68</sup> He further points out that the Raya and Azebo repeatedly rose up against the state regardless of whether the Tigrayan Emperor Yohannis or the Shoan Amhara Emperors Menelik and Haile-Selassie, were in control. Erlich in turn acknowledges the importance of Tigrayanism as a rallying cry in the revolt, but argues that it was a slogan rather than a programme to fulfil, and that Tigrayan self-awareness was inseparable from Ethiopianism.<sup>69</sup>

The Tigrayan peasants' sense of national identity and anti-Amhara sentiments were recorded by eighteenth-century foreign visitors, but until the TPLF-led insurrection the peasants' devotion to maintaining their autonomy in the face of state attempts at incorporation and demands on their produce has been more important than any desire to fight for nationalist goals. And this appears to be the case with respect to the Woyene. Demands were of a local character; few peasants outside of eastern Tigray participated in the struggle, and the calculated involvement of a small minority of Tigrayan nobles suggests that they were more concerned with individual, rather than national, interests. Ethnonationalism is a product of modernisation which breaks down primordial loyalties and links otherwise geographically isolated peoples. This process was set in motion by the Italian occupation, but was only weakly felt at the time of the Woyene. On the one hand peasants were still deeply divided, and on the other the Tigrayan nobility did not have the incentive to lead a revolt which might ultimately undermine their own fading powers.

The problem of characterising the Woyene cannot be satisfactorily resolved here, and the small number of interviews of Raya and Azebo Woyene veterans that were carried out in the course of this research are not a sufficient basis for drawing convincing conclusions. These interviews would not, however, support the contention that peasant participants in the revolt were solely or even overwhelmingly motivated by nationalist considerations. Too many currents can be identified in the Woyene, such as incomplete national integration, national oppression, uneven economic development, peasant deprivation, and inter- and intra-feudal struggles, to convincingly single out one of them as being dominant.

The Woyene can probably be best classified as 'primary resistance'<sup>70</sup> or traditional military challenges that start in the hinterland and are, or may be, precursors of later and more developed organisational protest that are based in urban centres and follow the norms of Western political movements. It is thus in this sense that the Woyene can be considered as the heir to the TPLF-led struggle of thirty years later. None the less, the TPLF's interpretation of the Woyene, the use to which the movement put this inheritance of anti-state struggle, and the tactical lessons drawn from it are

important in their own right. It is thus noteworthy that one of the early names the TPLF was to take was *Hisbawi Woyene Harnet Tigray* (People's Revolution for the Liberation of Tigray), which was designed to link the movement's struggle with that of 1943.<sup>71</sup>

The Woyene was an expression of resistance to the growing role of the state in people's lives, but its failure to engage the mass of Tigrayans in the revolt indicated the insular character of the society in the 1940s. Already, however, this insularity was breaking down before the combined assault of the central state devoted to eliminating the authority of regional powers and the autonomy of peasant minorities such as the Raya and the Wejerat on the one hand, and the expansion of communications and trade, on the other. State centralisation and modernisation over the following twenty years further reduced the powers of the regional nobility, broke down some of the divisions between the peasantry, and, crucially, gave birth to a petit bourgeoisie. The central state's efforts to replace personal means of control with bureaucratic institutions spurred dissension because it gave the petit-bourgeois functionaries of those institutions a critical role in the development and security of the state, but at the same time it denied them a share in power.

Defeat of the Italians left the British in a commanding position in the Horn of Africa, but they were increasingly stretched financially and militarily, opposed by the United States, and as a result were unable to take on the role of master of the region. In the rapidly changing international configurations the United States became Haile-Selassie's new patron, and one far less demanding than the British since their interest was the global containment of the Soviet Union and this was seen as being best pursued by fostering close relations with trustworthy local allies. Haile-Selassie's regime was considered to be such an ally and in return for his support of their anti-Communist agenda and the establishment of an important communications base at Kagnaw outside Asmara, the United States provided crucial support for his objectives of acquiring possession of Eritrea and modernising the army.<sup>72</sup> As a result, until his overthrow in 1974 the emperor ruled in conditions of 'untrammelled autocracy'.<sup>73</sup> Throughout this period Haile-Selassie worked to reduce or eliminate regional bases of power by taking greater control over appointments, ensuring that tax payments went to the Ministry of Finance instead of to the nobility, monetising the collection of taxes and tithes, creating and maintaining a central armed force and police, and developing a system of state-supported education.

Political reform, however, did not parallel administrative reform. In 1955 the emperor did revise the 1931 constitution, but this was largely 'an exercise in public relations',<sup>74</sup> and far from granting rights to citizens, it confirmed their status as subjects before the all-powerful monarch. Nor did his

reforms allow much scope for the integration of nationalities beyond the selective incorporation of ethnic elites through Amharisation, marriage, and patronage, policies that pre-dated Menelik. To the extent these measures were effective, they reformed the administrative links between centre and periphery and increased the power of the emperor. However, they did not fundamentally alter the character of Shoan Amhara domination, and nor, ultimately, did they strengthen the regime. Moreover, as Clapham has noted, Haile-Selassie's efforts at state centralisation seriously undermined the autonomy of the nobility, and this in turn served to weaken the connection between the central government and political authority in the countryside.<sup>75</sup>

The move to reliance on bureaucratic impersonal forms of administration also served to produce, and give increasing importance to, the petit bourgeoisie, the class that was to prove the emperor's undoing. This changing class configuration is illustrated by the attempted coup of the emperor's palace guard in 1960 even though it was led by two members of the Shoan aristocracy, General Mengistu Neway and his American-educated brother, Garmame. The plotters demanded political reforms, although not the abolition of the monarchy, which they proposed to give a constitutional status. The coup attempt was too brief and disorganised to mobilise national support, but following a personal appeal by Mengistu, virtually all the students at the university marched through the capital in sympathy.<sup>76</sup> Although the coup was defeated, it began the process of undermining the imperial mystique, and also served to bring students into the political arena.

Opposition to the regime was not restricted to the elite and urban population in the post-war period. Ethnic and rural dissatisfaction also came to the fore. Mention has been made of the Woyene. In addition, in the southeastern province of Bale the introduction of Christian settlers from the north among largely Moslem Somali peasants and nomads fostered rebellion in the latter half of the 1960s. Higher taxes and reclassification of land triggered a revolt in the northern province of Gojjam in 1968, but peasants were also unhappy at being administered by Shoan governors.

The most significant rebellion, however, was in Eritrea because it increasingly gained the support of non-traditional elements within the territory and served to challenge the legitimacy of the imperial regime. Under European colonialism Eritrea not only developed a wider industrial base than Ethiopia, but its people were also permitted (at least under the British) a far greater role in the political sphere. There was no place for popular political expression or Eritrean identity under the autocratic regime of Haile-Selassie, and in 1961 a rebellion broke out, one year before the emperor dissolved the federal union and united Eritrea with Ethiopia.

Initially the rebellion was dominated by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), but its dependence on support from Moslems and traditional rulers, and its foreign assistance from the Arab Middle East, meant that it was ill-adapted to gain the allegiance of the Christian half of the population. In the 1970s the ELF was eclipsed by the Marxist-Leninist Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) which quickly gained a wider basis of indigenous support, as well as the growing sympathy of Ethiopia's radical intelligentsia.

The growing revolt in Eritrea and the spread of urban dissent throughout the empire undermined the regime. So did the continuing decline of the peasant economy. Drought precipitated famine in northern Ethiopia in 1972, but the underlying causes were uneven patterns of economic growth, inappropriate development plans, and a complete lack of concern on the part of the government for the welfare of the country's peasants. Indeed, the famine occurred at a time when the country had food supplies that remained undistributed, causing people to starve to death in the midst of plenty.<sup>77</sup> The famine was symptomatic of the failures of the old regime that were becoming apparent to ever wider sections of the largely urban, and increasingly politically conscious, population of the country in the 1970s.

Moreover, unlike many earlier Ethiopian famines, this one was to have a marked effect on the unfolding politics of the country. Shortages produced rapidly rising grain prices in the towns that had a severe impact on workers, soldiers, and urban poor, and gave rise to comparisons with the French Revolution which had also been preceded by famine.<sup>78</sup> British television's Jonathan Dimbleby's exposure of a famine that the government was assiduously trying to ignore did much to undermine the international legitimacy of Haile-Selassie's regime and also provided further and graphic evidence that radical elements in the towns used to assail the regime.

### **The overthrow of the old regime**

A key component of the developing opposition was the Ethiopian student movement which Markakis has called 'the imperial regime's political nemesis'.<sup>79</sup> The student movement took form at Haile-Selassie I University (HSIU) which, after the overthrow of the old regime in 1974, was renamed Addis Ababa University (AAU). As in many other countries, Western education proved a stimulus to question and challenge prevailing institutions. The university experienced its first political stirrings during the 1960 coup attempt, although its failure punctured the students' self-confidence and it was not until 1965 that they again entered the political arena with a march on Haile-Selassie's Parliament demanding land reform. It is from



this period that the emergence of what became the strongest student movement in Africa can be dated. By this time most university students rejected royal blood and religious sanctions as legitimate sources of political authority, viewed the regime as corrupt, and held that a highly inequitable proportion of the nation's resources was going to landed interests.<sup>80</sup>

In the absence of political parties or forms of education different from those in other developing countries, early radicalism at the university has been attributed to the presence of politically conscious foreign students in the country, together with declining employment prospects for the educated minority.<sup>81</sup> In the first instance Ethiopian students, who frequently perceived themselves and their country as superior to the visiting scholarship students from 'black' colonised Africa, were shocked to find that these students typically came from countries with higher standards of living, development, and political organisation than Ethiopia. Unfavourable comparisons between conditions in Ethiopia and the rest of Africa were also facilitated by the presence of large numbers of African diplomats in Addis Ababa which served as the headquarters for both the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and for the UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA).

Secondly, declining employment opportunities in the 1960s and 1970s for the educated minority meant that there was less scope for the government to co-opt disaffected intellectuals into the bureaucracy. Because most students came from non-aristocratic backgrounds it has been argued that their radicalism sprang from a perceived future of landlessness and the obstacles posed by an aristocracy which monopolised investment in commercial land enterprises.<sup>82</sup> The same author holds that students raised their leading slogan of 'land to the tiller' as a means to draw the southern peasantry into a political coalition against the landlords.<sup>83</sup>

While these sociological and political factors must figure in any explanation of the direction taken by the Ethiopian student movement, probably more significant were the few opportunities the intelligentsia had in the modern private sector which was largely foreign-owned and barred many Ethiopians from advancement, or in the state bureaucracy where it occupied a well-paid but subordinate position. As Kiflu Tadesse has noted, 'the only escape from this petit bourgeois destiny lay through the exercise of political power, a fact that eventually turned the intelligentsia into a disident group'.<sup>84</sup>

In the first instance the struggles of the Ethiopian students must be understood in the context of anti-colonial and nationalist movements that took form across the developing world in this period. It would thus be a mistake to deny the importance of youthful idealism and the influence of

revolutionary experiences of the past (notably China and Cuba) and the contemporary period (particularly Vietnam) in inspiring students. The commitment and selflessness of large numbers of students who risked their lives during the Derg's Red Terror and through their participation in the various liberation movements cannot be reduced to simple careerism or political opportunism. Moreover, it is probably not coincidental that student demands for land reform were popularised one year after the initiation of a government programme in 1964 to send university students to the countryside. This brought students into direct contact with the people whose lives they wanted to change at a time when conditions generally for the country's peasants, and particularly those in the north, were deteriorating.<sup>85</sup>

In a country where literacy rates in the 1960s were below 10 per cent the small number of students who gained entry into Ethiopia's only university constituted a privileged minority. It has been estimated that no more than 8,000 Ethiopians held higher degrees, including university graduates in 1970,<sup>86</sup> and Ottaway reckoned that Ethiopia had one of the smallest educated classes as a percentage of its population of any country in Africa.<sup>87</sup> Only a minority of the students, however, were actually from the ruling nobility because relatively speaking this was a small grouping, and further, their children either had no need to take up higher education or it was pursued in North America and Europe. Indeed, by the late 1960s there were almost 2,000 students abroad, one-third of them in the United States.<sup>88</sup> By the mid-1960s Ottaway contends that most university students at HSIU 'came from urban families of traders, clerks, policemen, lower-level government employees – in other words, the Ethiopian petit bourgeoisie.'<sup>89</sup>

This must be qualified with respect to Tigray. The majority of students at HSIU came from Shoa and Eritrea, the most economically developed provinces of the country with the largest petit bourgeoisies. However, with the exception of poor scholarship students, in far less developed Tigray students were more likely to come from backgrounds in the rich peasantry and lower nobility. In any case, as Balsvik points out, students from privileged families did not appear less opposed to the regime than their colleagues with lower status, instead it probably gave them more self-assurance.<sup>90</sup> Tilahun Gizaw, a prominent student leader and Tigrayan, for example, was the son of a wealthy landowner and the brother of one of Haile-Selassie's daughters-in-law.<sup>91</sup>

Oromos, who constituted the largest ethnic community in Ethiopia, comprised less than 10 per cent of the university student population at the end of the 1960s.<sup>92</sup> Although the Moslem population equalled that of Christians in Ethiopia, because of discrimination they experienced, and their fears that state education was a means to assimilate them into the

Christian culture of the dominate Abyssinians, they represented only a small minority at the university.<sup>93</sup> Females were also a negligible force at the university, amounting to only 9 per cent of the student body.<sup>94</sup>

While the student movement led the assault on the regime and gave it ideological fervour and political direction, it was only one of a number of largely urban forces that became increasingly disaffected with the old regime in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Workers and the lower middle class protested against declining living standards. Teachers opposed government-proposed reforms that would adversely affect the children of poor parents. Professionals were angered by their exclusion from political power. Eritreans demanded self-determination and their own state. In the face of the refusal of the old regime to allow democratic participation through the formation of political parties, the growing popular disenchantment was expressed in the streets and took the form of direct opposition to the regime. However, it was the students alone among the organised collectivities in Addis Ababa who consistently engaged in overt anti-system acts.<sup>95</sup>

This opposition forced the government to rely increasingly on the army to maintain order. However, the army, and particularly its junior officers from non-aristocratic backgrounds, was not immune to demands for political reform and higher wages. Revolt spread to the army and a faction within the army that was to be known as the Derg. It was this group of about 120 non-commissioned officers, enlisted soldiers, and radical junior officers with ties to the intelligentsia<sup>96</sup> which overthrew the imperial regime in February 1974 and formed the de facto government, the Provisional Military Administration Council (PMAC).

The overthrow of the old regime was widely applauded in urban Ethiopia, particularly by the students, but they were soon engaged in a struggle for control of the state with the Derg, which was receptive to the students' socialist programme because of its popular appeal, but unwilling to share power with them. Student opposition and continuing strikes by workers led the PMAC to declare a state of emergency in Addis Ababa and suspend all civil rights. These events caused ideological confusion and organisational restructuring in both the army and among the students.

The student movement found itself divided on how to confront the military government. The leading element was the Marxist-Leninist-oriented Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), which demanded a quick end to military rule and the formation of a 'people's government'. Sharing a similar philosophy, but different tactics, was the smaller All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (MEISON) which also saw itself as Marxist-Leninist, but attempted to work with the Derg to gain the support of progressive elements among the army. These two movements were also united in giving

primacy to class over nation in the evolving debate. A myriad of other groupings from the student movement took varying positions on this issue, but the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), TPLF, and Ogadenis distinguished themselves by emphasising national self-determination in their programmes.

The monarchy, the Orthodox Church, the land tenure system, together with the myths, values, and symbols of Abyssinia, were all part of the inheritance of the imperial regime and provided the legitimacy for its rule. In trying to confront this past the military had to acquire a new basis of legitimacy, as well as institutional structures through which it could govern. Socialism was to provide the ideological underpinnings of the state and this was most forcefully expressed through the Land Proclamation of 4 March 1975 which nationalised land and brought about the dissolution of the centuries-old rural power structure. The agrarian transformation, however, had as much to do with the regime's survival than any commitment to scientific socialism.<sup>97</sup> None the less, these measures had the effect of undermining 'the radical agenda and outdated economic content' of the government's major opposition, the EPRP.<sup>98</sup>

As part of its effort to carry out its programme in the countryside, as well as rid itself of student critics in the towns, the Derg organised the *zemacha*, or campaign, that sent some 30–50,000 university and secondary school students to the rural areas. To institutionalise its rule, as well as to decentralise authority, the Derg created Peasant Associations (PAs) in the rural areas and *kebelles*, or urban associations, in the towns, infrastructure which was essential in implementing local-level development projects.<sup>99</sup> However, by 1977 the role of the PAs and kebelles had largely been reduced to that of mobilising support for the Derg.

The land reform had the effect of not only undermining the largely student-based opposition's demands for addressing the economic problems of the people, but also the economic elements of the national question, particularly in the south.<sup>100</sup> As a result it drove a wedge in the student movement between those who opted to support the military and those who had to refocus their opposition based on the demand for democracy. This question increasingly came to the fore and tensions between the government and its radical urban critics became violent as the EPRP started a White Terror campaign in 1976 against the government, which in turn responded with its far more lethal Red Terror campaign. Initiated in Addis Ababa through the kebelles, the government spread the urban terror throughout the country. After the EPRP was largely exterminated in the towns the Derg then turned on its ally, MEISON, which it eliminated by the end of 1977.<sup>101</sup> By early 1978 the Derg's position was secure and much of the country's intelligentsia were either dead, imprisoned, exiled, or engaged in rural insurrections.

Taking advantage of Ethiopia's disorder, Somalia invaded the long contested and Somali-inhabited Ogaden region and this set the stage for the Soviets and the Cubans to end their alliance with Somalia and come to the defence of Ethiopia. The Derg's leftward turn led the United States to break with its long-term regional ally. Meanwhile, disarray within the Ethiopian state served to embolden the Eritrean liberation movements, which by 1977 were in control of most of the province and appeared close to overrunning Asmara and Ethiopia's main port of Massawa. However, the defeat of Somalia in the summer of 1977 freed up Soviet equipment and supplies, and with a vastly expanded army the Derg was able to end the sieges of Eritrea's towns and force the dominant liberation movement, the EPLF, back to its base area at Nakfa in the isolated Sahel region of northern Eritrea.

While the Derg repeatedly acknowledged the past oppression of Ethiopia's subject peoples, including Eritreans, and asserted its intention to overcome this discrimination, it followed its Soviet benefactors' interpretation of the rights of subject peoples. This included the view that, first, these peoples constituted 'nationalities' which only had the right to limited regional autonomy, and not 'nations' which, at least in theory, had the right to secede, and secondly, ethnic tensions were only a reflection of class contradictions which were being overcome by Derg policies such as land reform. But the large numbers of highland Christian youth that joined the EPLF in the late 1970s and the almost unnoticed founding of the TPLF in 1975 testified to the failure of the Derg's attempt to achieve an ethnic reconciliation in the Ethiopian state.

Under Soviet and Eastern European influence the Derg established the Commission to Organise the Party of the Working People of Ethiopia (COPWE) in 1979, but it was to be five more years before the Workers Party of Ethiopia (WPE) was formed. These changes, however, largely left the Derg intact and of 198 Central Committee members of the WPE, 116 were military officers, and only twenty-five members represented trade unions, peasant associations, women's associations, and youth organisations.<sup>102</sup> Mengistu's position as general secretary and commander-in-chief of the armed forces gave him total dominance despite official adherence to the notion of collective leadership. The establishment of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (PDRE) in 1987 'completed the formal creation of a new set of Marxist-Leninist institutions',<sup>103</sup> but it represented a ceremonial rather than a real transfer of power from the military. Moreover, although modelled after the Soviet Union, the state was defined as unitary rather than federal and no formal right of secession was granted.<sup>104</sup> The end result of the process, as Harbeson has put it, was the 'equation of the regime with the new Ethiopian state for which it was once to be but the midwife'.<sup>105</sup>

The refusal of the Derg to entertain political solutions to the Eritrean problem led to a recurring cycle of ever bigger military campaigns against the insurgents. By 1982 there were an estimated 245,000 soldiers in the Ethiopian army, almost two-thirds of whom were stationed in Eritrea. From these ranks 120,000 were used to attack EPLF positions in the Sahel in the largest series of battles to date in the war, the Red Star Campaign.<sup>106</sup> This campaign and those that followed produced enormous destruction, loss of life, and the creation of a large refugee population in neighbouring Sudan, but they did not lead to the defeat of the EPLF.

If the Red Star Campaign demonstrated that the Derg could not overpower the EPLF, the latter's capture of the army's northern command at Afabet in March 1988 set the stage for the Derg's eventual defeat. The TPLF, by then of comparable size to the EPLF,<sup>107</sup> responded quickly and overran most of the army's bases in Tigray. Although the Derg was able to recapture these centres a few months later, the TPLF was left in a commanding position in the province, and between February and March 1989 it forced the Derg to make a final retreat from Tigray. In the concluding period of the war the TPLF established the multinational Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front and with the support of the EPLF, and to a lesser extent the OLF, this new TPLF-dominated movement defeated the Derg's armies and forced Mengistu to flee to Zimbabwe in May 1991. The EPRDF then established itself as the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) and the EPLF emerged first as the Provisional Government of Eritrea and after the UN-supervised independence referendum of April 1993, as the Government of Eritrea.

### Conclusion

The objective of Ethiopia's rulers since the time of Menelik has been economic modernisation and state centralisation, and this involved the import of military, organisational, and educational technologies, that could only be paid for by expanding agricultural exports.<sup>108</sup> Tigray, however, had little commercial agricultural potential, received few benefits from modernisation, and increasingly its inhabitants felt the impact of state centralisation in the declining authority of their traditional regional rulers. As patrimonial structures were replaced by bureaucratic ones, state functionaries increasingly became aware of the contradiction between their importance to the system, but their lack of power within it.

Tensions between those with a monopoly of state power and a politically ambitious petit bourgeoisie have been the cause of conflict everywhere in Africa, but in Ethiopia the clash of interests was compounded by the fact that power was not held by a transplanted colonial class who could be

pushed to relinquish its power and return to Europe. Rather, it was held by an indigenous nobility whose survival as a class depended on its retention of state power. Moreover, the inability of the Haile-Selassie regime to respond to the key demands for popular participation in government, land reform, and an end to Amhara hegemony, left it with a dwindling base of support in the 1960s and 1970s.

The efforts of the student movement, which included many Tigrayans who became founders of the TPLF, did much to undermine the legitimacy of the old regime, but the students did not have the power to overthrow Haile-Selassie, a task that fell to the military. Indeed, the military was the only force in Ethiopia at the time sufficiently organised to assume the reins of power, a situation repeatedly witnessed in post-colonial Africa. The overthrow of the imperial regime, however, was less a coup than a popular-based movement which represented many social forces that eventually attracted the military to its side, a situation not unlike the civilian uprisings that took the military to power in neighbouring Sudan in 1964 and 1985. In both countries ethnic and regional tensions weakened the regimes, but rebels in the periphery were not directly responsible for the collapse of their respective governments. Unlike Sudan, however, the contradictions in Ethiopian society were so unmanageable and the demands for far-reaching change so great that the military could only retain power by initiating a radical transformation of society. The methods used drew their inspiration from the Marxism-Leninism popularised by the students.

However, the Ethiopian military, no less than other elites that assumed power in the decolonisation period, had no intention of opening the state to mass participation. Instead, the state was the means through which the vestiges of the old regime would be removed and development forced. This was not a democratic project, but a modernisation project. As was the case elsewhere in Africa, the Ethiopian military attempted to establish new and more powerful bureaucratic institutions from the centre in an effort to increase its power to intervene directly in the lives and livelihoods of peasants. Popular participation in decision-making which would necessarily bring to the fore alternative leaderships and raise centrifugal forces that would challenge the military's monopoly of power and the legitimacy of the historical Ethiopia state were precluded almost from the beginning. Soviet-style Marxism-Leninism met the military's needs in a variety of ways: it was revolutionary, socialist, modernist, and would attract the support of the Eastern bloc. Not stated, but equally appealing, it was statist and allowed little scope for popular participation.

But Marxism-Leninism proved inadequate in the Somali war and the Derg appealed to an Amhara-inspired Ethiopian nationalism and rearmed the neftegnas of eastern Ethiopia whose power had been liquidated and

lands taken with the enactment of the 1975 land proclamation. As the Derg's rule increasingly took on an Amhara cast the multinational character of the movement that had taken form in the struggle to overthrow the old regime largely withered. Much of the disposition, if not the form and method of rule, of the old regime became embodied in the new as the Derg fought to maintain a strong central state and refused to share power with either the politically conscious and aroused middle classes or the emerging regional and ethnic elites.

The regime's inability to overcome the spreading insurgency in the country, combined with its disastrous economic policies and refusal to countenance democratic expression, led to growing disillusionment. Although in the final stages of the war the Derg was able to mobilise an army of over half a million, devote 50 per cent of the government's budget to defence, and rely on the unfailing assistance of the Soviet Union, its troops increasingly demonstrated little willingness to fight against the committed combatants of the TPLF, EPLF, and other liberation movements. As a result the final collapse of the Derg in 1991 was almost anti-climactic.



### 3 Tigray on the eve of insurrection

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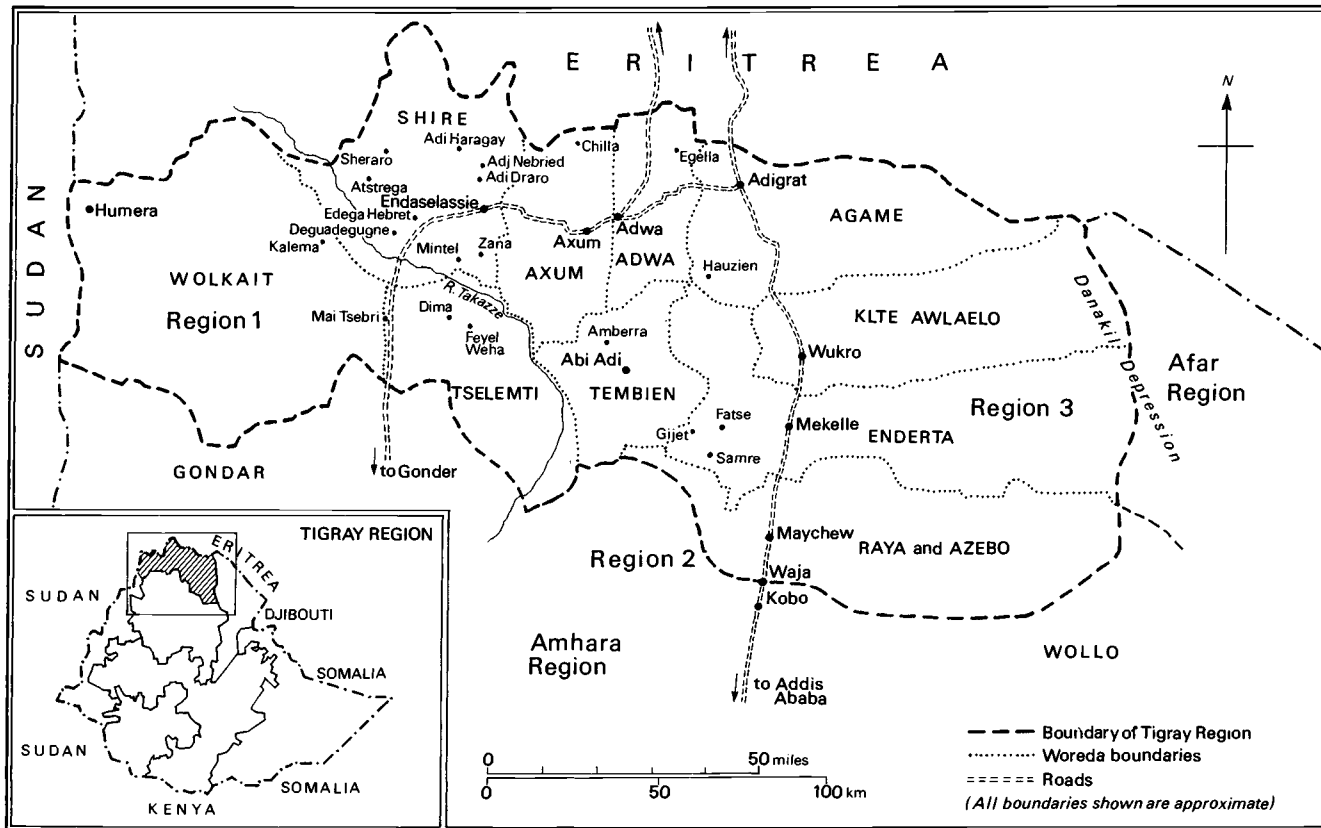
#### **Introduction**

In this chapter conditions in both rural and urban Tigray in the period immediately prior to the launch of the TPLF's insurrection in 1975 will be examined. In addition, the Ethiopian student movement will be revisited to consider the origins of the TPLF. The lead-up to this tumultuous period can be characterised in Tigray as one of modernisation with little development, and of economic change that produced declining standards of living for most peasants. The forces at work included agricultural commercialisation, the breakdown of primordial loyalties and village isolation, a weakening of patron–client relations before the demands of state centralisation, and a far more intrusive part played by the central state in the lives of the peasants. Although these forces caused dislocation and growing rural poverty, they did not produce peasant rebellion. Even with the collapse of the old regime peasant civil disobedience was largely restricted to western Tigray and took the form of opposition to the new regime and support for the province's traditional nobility and way of life.

It is among the Tigrayan petit bourgeoisie in Addis Ababa and the towns of the province that dissent, largely of a nationalist character, first took form under the old regime, and then found political expression with the establishment of the TPLF after the Derg's rise to power. In spite of their destitution under the old regime and distrust of the incoming Derg, peasants took much longer than the urban petit bourgeoisie to be drawn into the revolutionary struggle. Although peasants would in time form the backbone of the revolution and thus their condition must be carefully considered, an important objective of this chapter is thus to demonstrate the importance of the towns as the environment in which Tigrayan nationalism developed, the revolution was conceived, took form, and was then forced to move to the countryside in the face of the Derg's repression.

#### **Rural crisis**

The lack of reliable statistical or other analyses of Tigray leaves us largely dependent upon two imperial government studies carried out in the late



Map 2 Tigray national regional state

1960s<sup>1</sup> to develop a socioeconomic profile of the province on the eve of the 1974 revolution. Both studies put the population of Tigray at slightly more than 1.5 million in the late 1960s, although several sources, including Africa Watch and the TPLF, argue that the Ethiopian government deliberately underestimated Tigray's population.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, these figures do not include the territories of Wolkait and Tselemti which the TPLF claims to be part of Tigray,<sup>3</sup> and parts of south-eastern Tigray which were attached to Wollo in 1957. In addition, the Central Statistical Office (CSO) study acknowledged that no attempt was made to estimate the province's nomadic population.<sup>4</sup> A later CSO study estimated the 1989–90 Tigrayan population, again not including Wolkait and Tselemti and parts of south-eastern Tigray, at 2.7 million, which in view of the 1994 official census of 3.1 million, including these areas, appears accurate.<sup>5</sup>

The same exclusion of the western and south-eastern districts gave Tigray an area of 65,920 square kilometres, approximately  $\frac{1}{17}$  of the total area of Ethiopia.<sup>6</sup> Ninety-three per cent of the population lived in the rural areas and 91 per cent of the economically active population were engaged in agriculture. More than three-quarters of the land-holdings in Tigray were privately held, a figure considerably higher than elsewhere in Ethiopia.<sup>7</sup> Within Tigray the awardja with the highest percentage of owned land was Agame with 94 per cent.<sup>8</sup> Only 7 per cent of land was rented, the highest areas being that of the Raya and Azebo,<sup>9</sup> who had their communal land system destroyed and lands confiscated by Haile-Selassie in the wake of the Woyene.

Although Tigray's literacy rates were among the highest in Ethiopia, only 6.4 per cent of the population were literate, and this broke down to 12.1 per cent of males and 5 per cent of females.<sup>10</sup> Within Tigray the figures ranged from a high of 12.1 per cent literacy in Adwa to less than 2 per cent in the awardja of Tembien.<sup>11</sup> The average Tigrayan household was made up of 4.53 individuals and the average age for marriage was fifteen, with 90 per cent of Tigrayans marrying between the ages of ten and nineteen.<sup>12</sup> No figures were provided for either inter- or intra-provincial migration, but a higher ratio of men to women in the countryside points to the greater number of women who moved to the towns to find employment.

The major crops common throughout Tigray are sorghum, sesame, finger millet, sunflower, lentils, maize, and *teff*, a grain staple grown at higher elevations and used in the making of injera, a spongy flat bread. The average cultivated area of land per household in Tigray was only 1.02 hectares, but again there was considerable regional variation: two-thirds of holdings were less than one-half hectare in Adwa, Agame, and Kilde Awlaelo, while in the province as a whole two-thirds of holdings were less

than one hectare.<sup>13</sup> The average size of household land-holdings was highest in the lowlands of Shire and Tembien, while Agame had the smallest average cultivated areas with a figure of 1,800 square metres per household.<sup>14</sup>

In spite of the lowland's agricultural potential and the availability of land, until recently there have been few migrants from conditions of high taxation, feudal oppression, soil infertility, and declining size of farm plots, in the highlands.<sup>15</sup> The Ethiopians, or at least the Christian Amhara-Tigrayan component, built their ancient civilisation in the highlands, and the lowlands not only represent the heat of the plains, diseases like malaria and typhoid, limited infrastructure, and lawlessness, but also an alien land largely inhabited by historic foes, such as Moslems, Turks, Mahdists, Arabs, and nomadic peoples.

None the less, the lowlands of western Tigray, and to a lesser extent Tembien and the plains of the south-east, have in this century become the major surplus food growing and cash crops areas in the province and they also provide seasonal employment for many thousands of peasants. Rich peasants produced small surpluses and hired such seasonal labour, but in some areas, notably the sesame-growing area of Humera on the Sudanese border, members of the nobility employed large numbers and exported their products to Sudan, Asmara, and Addis Ababa. As elsewhere in Tigray, possession of capital, largely in the form of cattle, goats, and sheep, distinguished rich and poor farmers, although in the low and middle land areas a far greater percentage of peasants owned cattle than elsewhere in the province, thus testifying to generally higher standards of living. However, the vagaries of the climate in these areas leads to a boom-bust economic pattern. A tabia chairman in the lowlands of the south-east explained: 'when rains come people are rich, but with no rains they are poor and will sell their labour as far away as Sudan'.<sup>16</sup>

The availability of land, larger peasant plots, and the smaller population in the low and middle elevated lands, served to reduce the power of the secular and Church nobility which depended upon peasants to work its lands. The nobility was also less dependent on *gulti* land in these areas, but there is no evidence that they were any less grasping than elsewhere in the province. A large land-owning noble on the eve of the 1974 revolution might easily possess 75 hectares and still arbitrarily absorb the much smaller plots of his non-noble neighbours. The intimate connection between large landholders and government officials facilitated this land grabbing. As in other regions of Tigray, peasants complained of the inequity of land distribution, but for the most part they were not driven to desperation by land shortages or declining soil fertility.

The worst problems of land shortages were in the north-east awardja of

Agame. As was the case throughout Tigray, Agame suffered from farm plot fragmentation, deforestation, soil infertility, overpopulation, and a lack of basic infrastructure such as schools, hospitals, roads, and other amenities. Thus while the problems of the awardja were not different from elsewhere, the scale of the problems were, and this led to a number of different survival responses. First, were efforts to increase production on family plots that were often no more than 0.25 hectares: by drawing ground-water and carrying it on their backs to the fields, peasants could sometimes produce as many as three tiny crops. Secondly, more than elsewhere in Tigray, peasants took up off-farm work in Addis Ababa and Asmara and indeed the term 'Agame' became one of abuse equated with coolie or unskilled labourer.<sup>17</sup> Lastly, the most creative response to land shortages is seen in the large numbers of people from Agame who become merchants and traders. Taking advantage of their strategic position on the Addis Ababa–Asmara road, Agame merchants dominated the transport of raw materials, chiefly grain and cattle, to the main metropolises of the country in exchange for consumer and manufactured goods.

Land shortages were not the only problem faced by Tigrayan peasants. The *risti* land tenure system, which permitted claims to go back many generations and be made on both the male and female sides, encouraged land subdivisions and fragmentation. As a result Tigrayan households on average held 3.5 parcels of land. None the less, three-quarters of the peasants surveyed were opposed to land consolidation for a number of reasons. First, they had a sentimental attachment to land inherited from their forefathers. Secondly, separate plots provided protection against crop failure and uncertain weather. Thirdly, the plots had different soils and this favoured production of different crops, a means to spread risk. Lastly, consolidation was not deemed consistent with the *risti* system of land-holding.<sup>18</sup> Further evidence of the individualism of Tigrayan peasants is seen in the fact that, despite their poverty, three-quarters of those surveyed indicated that they would not be prepared to take up group farming or agree to resettlement, even within Tigray.<sup>19</sup>

Because land claims could be activated at any time, land insecurity was a feature of the system and this served to discourage capital formation and conservation of soil, trees, and water. As population grew and land shortages developed in the post-Second World War period traditional means of resolving problems of land tenure within the community by reference to elders increasingly gave way to peasants resorting to the courts. On the eve of the revolution 60 per cent of civil cases and 18 per cent of criminal cases in Tigray were recorded as being related to land.<sup>20</sup> Although the *risti* system of land tenure strongly discouraged the privatisation of land since there could be no guarantees against ancestral-based claims being made even on

land that had been sold, the Ministry of Land Reform study found increasing evidence of sales and mortgages of land. These, it concluded, provided evidence of the process of 'individualisation of the land tenure system in Tigre'.<sup>21</sup>

Contrary to the imperial government's studies, land shortages and claim disputes were not the only factors causing land insecurity. First, it was rarely easy for peasants to establish ancestral rights to land if powerful nobles contested them. Secondly, even where claims could be established aristocrats might still deny peasants access to their land, make them pay rent on it, or pay bribes to hold it.<sup>22</sup> Those who worked *gulti* land paid as much as one-half of their produce to the landowners, as well as 100 birr for the following year's rental and a goat or other bribe to secure the land. In addition there were any number of other taxes, land, health, school, and church, that a virtually unchallenged local class of nobles was able to impose on an economically and politically weak peasantry, and even, so my respondents claim, 'a pretty woman' tax.<sup>23</sup>

Only in the Axum area, where the Orthodox Church had large land-holdings, were landlord-tenant relations singled out as being the cause of conflict. Very few of the Church's tenants had tenancy agreements and with no security they could be evicted at any time. Lack of security in turn discouraged tenant capital formation and only 13 per cent of tenants were reported to have made improvements to their land.<sup>24</sup> A mere 5 per cent of rental payments were in cash which gives some indication of the low level of agricultural commercialisation in Tigray at the time, a figure that was the lowest in Ethiopia. Unlike elsewhere in the country, a land tax was applied to Tigray as a whole, divided among *awardjas*, then among *woredas*, and so down to *goths*, or parishes, where it was fixed by local elders. The total tax payable by the *goth* did not change from one year to the next, but individual rates varied because they were dependent upon the number of persons holding land in the *goth*. The Orthodox Church collected 28 per cent of the taxes and one-third of its taxes were spent on the schools it operated.<sup>25</sup>

There is reason to believe, however, that landlord-tenant relations were more stressful than the Ministry's report acknowledged. Although the obligation of the tenant to pay the tithe was legally abolished in 1967, the Ministry of Land Reform study found that it was still being paid at the time of the study, and Gilkes found that peasants were still paying it throughout Ethiopia when the 1974 revolution broke out.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, although post-war legislation ended tenant services to landlords, Church lands were largely omitted from this provision. While it would be assumed that the landlord as owner of the land would pay the land tax, and the ministry's study makes no mention of it, in one district in Sidamo it was found that

89 per cent of the tenants actually paid the land tax for their landlords, and there is no reason to think that this was a unique example.<sup>27</sup>

Although ignored by the Ministry's study, there are numerous examples of individual peasants objecting to Church taxes, and Tigray's *shifta* tradition meant that there was at least the possibility of 'going to the forest' to escape the demands of officialdom. However, there are only a few cases of collective opposition to the demands of the Church. One such 'revolt' against Church-levied *gulti* taxes by peasants took place in the Axum area in 1962 under the slogan, 'you have to eat what is yours', but details are obscure.<sup>28</sup> Apparently peasants refused to pay taxes and forced the tax agent to retreat, after which the government sent in police from Mekelle who crushed the revolt. In the following year in Kuzat Awi *kushette* of neighbouring Adet woreda there was another dispute in which peasants distributed land among themselves. Kashi Gebre Medhin, a priest and in 1993 an Adet woreda executive member, was jailed in Axum and fined thirty Birr for his involvement in the protests.<sup>29</sup> Peasants attributed the failure of these struggles to their disorganisation and lack of leaders and arms.

Economic modernisation produced little genuine development in Tigray. In the early years the state had been maintained by the surplus extracted from ox-plough agriculture, long-distance trade, and the exploitation of tributary peoples. Under Haile-Selassie the system became increasingly dependent on resources drawn from commercial and plantation agriculture in the south, but this system largely by-passed the smallholding, subsistence, backward, and difficult to commercialise, rural economy of Tigray. By the mid-years of the twentieth century the Tigrayan peasantry were experiencing serious dislocation caused by a history of war, population pressures, loss of arable land through environmental degradation, and a lack of state-supported productive and infrastructural development.

Collectively these processes produced declining plot sizes, growing migration, both within and outside the province, increasing disputes over land possession, the expansion of tenancy, and the growth in rural poverty. However, the separation of the peasantry from their means of production and the establishment of a market in land that were necessary precursors to the development of commercial agricultural were only in their infancy in the province at the outbreak of the 1974 revolution. Moreover, the growing land scarcity in Tigray meant that land alienation for commercial production would have caused mass displacement which was certain to be resisted by the *risti*-holding highland peasants.<sup>30</sup>

In 1972 Tigray (along with Wollo) experienced its second famine in less than fifteen years, both of which were studiously ignored by the imperial government of Haile-Selassie.<sup>31</sup> Even before the outbreak of the famine the crisis in the countryside was precipitating a movement of peasants to

Eritrea and the Sudan. And when the rains failed in 1972 in eastern Tigray and Wollo it was the most vulnerable who were hardest hit: the Afar pastoral nomads who were being displaced from their historical grazing lands by commercial cotton plantations, and the Raya and Azebo tenants still suffering from the effects of the loss of their land in the wake of the Woyene.<sup>32</sup> For most of this century Tigrayan peasants had trekked north to Eritrea when in need of supplementary income but by 1973 factory employment for displaced Tigrayans had become scarce as the growing Eritrean insurrection reduced the supply of raw materials and factories were operating at diminished production levels.<sup>33</sup>

### **Urban Tigray**

Pre-1974 Tigray possessed virtually no industry, highland commercial farms, mines, or post-secondary educational institutions, and trade was largely limited to the export of grains and cattle and the import of basic manufactured items. Tigray possesses no cities, and its largest town and capital, Mekelle, has presently less than 100,000 residents; the other major towns in the province are considerably smaller. The biggest towns served as administrative and commercial centres for their awardja, and Mekelle for the region, while the smaller towns and villages served as *woreda* centres and held widely attended weekly markets. Apart from those people employed in administration, many in the smaller towns and villages were (and are today) either farmers with land nearby, or small traders and merchants dependent upon a rural clientele.

Thus with few exceptions the towns of Tigray have long been dependent upon the rural economy and peasants for their existence. It was people in the towns who ruled over the peasantry, taxed them, and forcibly conscripted them to fight the wars. In turn the towns have provided few services, an underdeveloped infrastructure, and little security. However, even the cash-starved peasants of Tigray had needs for some town-supplied commodities in exchange for small sales of their agricultural produce, and they also availed themselves of the limited employment opportunities provided by the towns. The need for adjudication of land and tax disputes brought peasants to the towns. And the towns were also centres for the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, an institution that was at the core of peasant oppression, but was none the less held in high esteem by Tigrayan peasants.

The cultural and religious nexus of Tigray since ancient times has been the Axum–Adwa area and it continues to be home to more than half of the province's inhabitants. Axum was for centuries a political and religious centre but, as the fortunes of Tigray declined and the political core of the



northern highlands progressively moved south to the Amhara lands of Shoa, the town went into a decline from which it has never recovered.<sup>34</sup> Adwa has long been the major commercial centre of Tigray, traditionally linking the trade routes from Gondar and Shoa through Hausien in Eritrea and on to the Red Sea coast. However, except during the Italian occupation when the town was made an administrative capital and the economy boomed, Adwa's economic and political importance has been in decline during this century. Apart from being the centre for the adjacent largely subsistence peasant economy, small, and for the most part, Moslem traders have travelled from Adwa to Endaselasie in the west to gather oil seeds, finger millet, and other grains, or to Mekelle to acquire salt and grains. Some of these grains supplied the local market and the rest were taken to Addis Ababa and Asmara by bigger merchants, who then returned with building materials and consumer goods.<sup>35</sup>

Haile-Selassie's post-war programme of modernisation involved a major expansion of the state, but few benefits accrued to areas beyond the Shoon Amhara heartland and Asmara, while economic growth was largely restricted to areas of commercial potential, which precluded Abyssinia's highland peasants. Possessing less than one-third of 1 per cent of Ethiopia's industrial employment against 87 per cent for Shoa and Eritrea in 1970, Tigray was a victim of the central government's policy of creating an industrial structure built around import substitution, financed by foreign capital, and largely centred in Addis Ababa and Asmara.

However, compared to Haile-Selassie's government, the Mekelle-based administration of Ras Mengesha Seyoum, who became governor-general of Tigray in 1961 upon the death of his father the previous year, was nothing if not energetic in its attempt to overcome the province's underdevelopment and dependence on peasant agriculture. Mengesha challenged Tigray's peripheral status by carrying out a number of infrastructural projects and establishing Tigray Agricultural and Industrial Development Ltd. (TAIDL) through public subscription. However, at the end of the day, there was only a marginal increase in industrial employment, and the few jobs created were paid for by Mengesha's taxation of peasants living very close to the margins, something that older peasants noted with anger even in 1993.<sup>36</sup>

While Tigray did not significantly benefit from the post-war expansion or Mengesha's development projects, it was none the less undergoing dramatic social change, particularly among its dominant groups. Based on four years' residence in Adwa prior to the 1974 revolution, the anthropologist Charles Rosen found that the town's traditional elite, made up of the descendants of past leaders, generals, and prominent traders, was being replaced by a moneyed class of rich merchants and traders without

pedigrees.<sup>37</sup> Unlike the traditional elite who had used their wealth to provide feasts, the townspeople complained that members of this rising class only used their money to accumulate land and offer bribes to government officials.<sup>38</sup>

A strong local culture and a tradition that valued education made the people of Adwa strong exponents of Tigrayan nationalism and opponents of the Amhara elite. In a fascinating, but all too brief, study Rosen found that the inhabitants' perception of themselves was typified in the notion of *hobbo*, which refers to Tigrayans' determination, integrity, and desire for revenge in the face of injustice, characteristics the Amharas were held not to possess.<sup>39</sup> The Shoan Amhara rulers were blamed for the deaths of at least six members of the royal house of Tigray and also for the economic neglect of the province. None the less, while the Woyene served as 'a reminder of the constant desire for some form of protest and possible future rebellion',<sup>40</sup> Rosen mistakenly predicted that the Tigrayans' struggle with the ruling Amharas would not be violent, but take the form of 'warring with words', the title of his doctoral dissertation.

While a moneyed class was gaining increasing power in Tigray, the teachers, government employees, and students were becoming increasingly politically active. Across Ethiopia this state-created petit bourgeoisie held the old regime responsible for the slow pace of modernisation, corruption, and constraints to its own participation in government. The Tigrayan petit bourgeoisie shared these sentiments, but it was also motivated by its opposition to Amharisation. As a teacher graphically put it, 'starting from Menelik, who was blamed for the death of Yohannis, the people have hated Amhara oppression and the upper class'.<sup>41</sup> While Ras Mengesha appointed the district and sub-district officials in the awardjas, the pattern throughout Tigray was one of nepotism with, in the view of the critics, the pyramid stretching irrevocably upwards to the Amhara royalty who dominated the system.

Much of the bitterness of the Tigrayan petit bourgeoisie revolved around the denial of educational opportunities. They recalled that prior to the Italian occupation there were almost no schools in Tigray. During the Italian occupation of 1935–41 some thirty-nine mission schools were opened and students taught in Tigrigna, but after Haile-Selassie resumed power all but four of these schools were closed, supposedly because there was not enough money in the national treasury. By 1974 new schools were built in the towns, largely with grants from abroad, often from Sweden, but these only served 8 per cent of the school-age population.<sup>42</sup> These conditions led Tigrayan parents who had the means to send their children outside the province to board with relatives and attend school. Educated Tigrayans also resented the quotas imposed on them (and Eritreans) entering HSIU,

and many believed that the central government deliberately manipulated the entrance exams to reduce the intake of Tigrayans into university. Tigray's lack of any colleges, and the possession of only two high schools until the eve of the revolution, were contrasted with the perceived favouritism for Shoan Amharan students.

Upon leaving school Tigrayans again felt they did not have equal access to the employment market with the Amhara. Tigrayans had fewer opportunities than Shoan Amharas to rise to the top positions in the public service and the military. These obstacles led many educated Tigrayans to become teachers. However, even in teaching the national government often placed native-tongued Amharigna speakers in Tigrayan schools because, so it was reasoned, unlike native Tigrayans they could not resort to answering students' questions in Tigrigna.<sup>43</sup>

Much as these concerns with education and employment equity embittered the Tigrayan nationalist petit bourgeoisie, issues of cultural symbolism proved the most effective in mobilising their nationalist ire. When the Amhara manufacturers of Pepsi-Cola publicly announced in the mid-1960s its intention to operate a new plant without hiring Tigrayans, there was an uproar among Tigrayans throughout Ethiopia that led to boycotts of the product and eventually a climb-down by the company.<sup>44</sup> A further focus of national resentment was caused when the authorities ruled that placards with 'Tigray' carried by athletes from the province during a sports competition at the Addis Ababa Stadium in 1972 be changed to read 'Tigre', a term considered derogatory by Tigrayans.<sup>45</sup> The Tigrayans refused and boycotted the affair. This heightened interest in Tigrayan culture also led to a proliferation of cultural groups in the 1960s that performed to enthusiastic Tigrayan audiences. The fact that these groups operated in an environment of official harassment brought home the political challenge they represented to Shoan Amhara hegemony in the central state.

The process of Amharisation was most advanced in the towns of Tigray because Amharigna was the language of government, the courts, church officialdom and, crucially, the schools, institutions which were predominantly located in the towns. Significantly for upwardly mobile Tigrayans, proficiency in Amharigna was a requirement for admittance into HSIU. Moreover, a knowledge of the language was essential to living and working outside Tigray. And because of the poverty and limited opportunities available in the province, a considerable number of Tigrayans were forced to move outside their home province and seek employment as farm labourers, factory workers, and traders. As a result, the public language spoken by many non-farmbound Tigrayans, and virtually all educated Tigrayans, was Amharigna. Over time and in a cultural environment where Amharigna dominated, Tigrigna became not only a parochial language,

but increasingly a language not used, and frequently not understood (at least in terms of reading and writing), by educated Tigrayans.

Significantly, Amharigna was the language of the Church, among its urban-centred higher echelons,<sup>46</sup> and in the operation of its schools throughout Tigray, most of which were in the rural areas. These schools taught religious poetry, singing, dancing, Bible interpretation, and reading.<sup>47</sup> There were no grades, classes did not go beyond the elementary level, and Geez and Amharigna were the languages of instruction.<sup>48</sup> Anyone could attend these schools, but students 'mostly came from the poor as they had no alternative'.<sup>49</sup> The long and close association between religion and state in Ethiopia has given rise to an affiliation between religion and Amharigna that approaches that between Islam and Arabic. Although Geez is the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and Tigrigna, as the first working language of the Church, was linguistically closer to Geez than was Amharigna, the dominant language of the state also became the dominant language of the Church.

While the influence of the Church is not to be denied, rural priests and teachers in Church schools were rarely fluent in Amharigna and did not use it outside their official functions, and as a result the situation in the countryside was different than in the urban centres. Thus in spite of fleeting and unsuccessful government attempts to introduce Amharigna to the peasantry, Tigrigna was always the language of the majority and Amharigna was seen as the language of outsiders, people from the towns, and officialdom. Amharigna was the language peasants were confronted with in the courts; it was the language the police spoke when attempting to collect defaulted taxes; it was the language of government officials including their governor, Ras Mengesha, and it was the language of the town-dwelling intelligentsia. However, while the question of language did not have the same resonance in rural areas as it did in the towns, rural Tigrayans were deeply attached to their language and retained a vibrant oral tradition, and the TPLF was to put to good use this tradition as a means of introducing their political appeals to the village.

### **Revolt in the schools**

Economically and politically marginalised in an Amhara-dominated empire-state, it was Tigrayan teachers and students who first began raising the nationalist banner in its modern post-Woyene form in the 1960s. Cultural oppression prompted the concern of teachers who focused on the decline of Tigrigna and of Tigrayan culture in the face of a bureaucratic state devoted to centralisation and homogenisation of the empire around a Shoan Amhara base. It was thus at that moment historically when regional

and ethnic particularities, at least in the urban centres, were on the verge of being overwhelmed, that the state proved to be most vulnerable. And opposition to cultural marginalisation was led by the state-produced petit bourgeoisie.

Teachers' concern with cultural oppression derived from their unique position in Tigrayan society. Formal education, at least beyond the elementary level, was largely the prerogative of an urban minority, and this group was the focus of state efforts at breaking down regional and ethnic loyalties and identities and forming an Amhara-overlaid culture. Teachers were critical to the implementation of this objective, and more than any other group they were conscious of both the fragility of Tigrayan culture, at least in its urban form, and of the state's efforts to weaken it even further. Teachers' effectiveness in making nationalism a political issue derived from the fact that unlike other provincial professionals, such as those employed in local administration, they had few loyalties to their department, were locally focused, and because they were not hierarchically organised, they had fewer structural divisions to achieving unity of purpose.

Tigrayan teachers were organised in the national body, the Ethiopian Teachers' Association (ETA), but its linkage to the state made subversion a hazardous pursuit under the Haile-Selassie regime and later, under the Derg, a potentially fatal one. Nor in the conditions existing at the time was it easy to form official alternative organisations, even those of a cultural nature. However, teachers were well positioned with a captive audience of students to covertly raise their objections to state policy and attempt to give a political form to Tigrayan nationalism. Teachers arranged cultural events that stressed the value of Tigrigna songs, music, art, and dance. Ridiculing those who took Amharigna names was also a means of raising Tigrayan cultural consciousness, and this mocking went as far as Ras Mengesha who was accused of not being a true Tigrayan because in public he only spoke Amharigna.

Thus in a variety of ways teachers helped make Tigrayan culture a political issue by the late 1960s and in the process their critique was inculcated by the generation of Tigrayan students who would join the TPLF. Across Tigray schools became centres of dissent. Beginning in the early 1960s students took part in strikes, fought with the police, were arrested and imprisoned, dismissed from school, and in some cases killed. Their demands generally were for, first, development, which meant better and more educational and health facilities, together with roads and factories, and secondly, democracy, which directly challenged the aristocracy's monopoly of power, and the local representative of that power, Ras Mengesha. As the student movement at HSIU developed numerically and in political sophistication even smaller centres gained access to publications by Marx, Lenin, and Mao.<sup>50</sup>

Nowhere were these developments more significant than in Adwa. Not only was the town Tigray's premier trade nexus, as a result of its long connection with Jesuit and Swedish missionaries, it also became an educational centre and an early focus for nationalist dissent. Indicative of its role is the fact that all three of the leaders of the TPLF over a 22-year period from 1975 to 1997, Aregowie Berhe, Sebhat Nega, and Meles Zenawi, all came from Adwa and attended the town's government school.<sup>51</sup> A 1962 visit to Adwa by Haile-Selassie had to be re-routed because of the opposition of an underground movement of teachers. Later, in 1971 and 1972 local teachers, together with high school and elementary students, supported peasant demonstrations held to protest land in the area being given to relatives of Ras Mengesha.<sup>52</sup> By this time local university students were spreading radical ideas among students and teachers. When the 1974 revolution broke out local residents were prepared. A committee was formed of teachers and villagers who set about arresting former government officials to ensure they did not escape before the Derg was able to exert its control over the town.<sup>53</sup>

Opposition in neighbouring Axum to the Haile-Selassie regime was initially dominated by university students who were active in the town during their vacations. However, by 1970 a local movement led by high school students had been formed, and in 1973 students and teachers tried to destroy a quarry owned by Ras Mengesha that shipped marble through Massawa to Italy.<sup>54</sup> Slogans including 'Down with the regime', 'Down with Amhara domination' and 'Tigrayan self-determination' were raised in this protest. In another demonstration outside Axum's Zion Mariam Church, police shot at students and in the confusion wounded an old woman who later died.<sup>55</sup>

Adigrat possessed the only high school east of Adwa and north of Mekelle, Agassey Comprehensive High School, and that institution, together with the town's Catholic junior high school, became centres for anti-regime dissent. This dissent was strongly supported and influenced by local students in attendance at the university in Addis Ababa. The presence outside Adigrat of a large military base served as a focus for protesting students and also the source of their hopes for a military coup. Mekelle was an intellectual centre and along with Adwa had the largest and best high school in Tigray, the province's major hospital, and it served as an economic nucleus for the province. As a result, the town became a place where people met and talked about social and political issues and this produced anti-regime movements.

While Ras Mengesha was opposed by the urban-based intellectuals for his identification with the Amhara-dominated regime, in the southern town of Maichew the governor was resented for his perceived negligence of the area. Mengesha was seen as being opposed to development of the south

because of an inter-feudal quarrel that he had inherited from his father, Ras Seyoum, who fought the local awardja governor, Dejazmach Aberra Tedla. Mengesha drew his legitimacy from the fact that he was a great-grandson of Yohannis IV and married to Emperor Haile-Selassie's granddaughter, Ayda, while Aberra had imperial links through his granddaughter, Sara Gizew, who was married to Haile-Selassie's second son, Makonnen.

Against this background local people attributed the area's lack of civic amenities, particularly a high school and good clinic, to Mengesha's fight with Aberra. Opposition to the regime in the 1960s and early 1970s thus had a distinctive local character, with students and their parents demanding a high school and protesting against the lack of development in the awardja. Maichew also had a direct link to the student struggles in the national capital in the person of Tilahun Yigzaw, the well-known HSIU student activist, who returned to his home town to enlist the support of local students. Mobilising around local grievances thus went hand-in-hand with endorsing Tigrayan and Ethiopian-wide demands such as 'land to the tiller'.

Although lacking in many urban attributes, including a high school, the western town of Endaselasie was not immune from the intellectual ferment of the 1960s and 1970s. While party identifications were largely absent, student and teacher-led demonstrations calling for equality, land to the tiller, and opposition to the Amhara nobility, were held in the town.<sup>56</sup> There were only a handful of Amhara in western Tigray, but townspeople held the Shoan Amhara nobility responsible for the lack of development, prevalence of crime, corrupt administration, and poor condition of the roads, upon which the area's commercial economy depended. And in another small town, Abi Adi in Tembien awardja, the 1972 famine encouraged local representatives to call a public meeting which was attended by local students from HSIU who argued that it was the corrupt feudal regime of Haile-Selassie that was responsible for the famine.<sup>57</sup>

The student and teacher protesters of the 1960s and early 1970s formed the backbone of the early TPLF. However, a key figure was Sebhat Nega, a school director in Adwa, and a generation older than the university students he was to lead in the TPLF. Sebhat had been trained as an agricultural economist and his decision to leave the Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) and become a teacher (where he was subsequently elected school director by his colleagues) was a reflection of the career limitations for Tigrayans in the MOA and his recognition that teachers were well placed to pursue political activities. He was not alone: when the TPLF went to the countryside in 1975 it was quickly joined by many teachers and students and this retreat from the towns intensified when the Derg imposed the Red Terror which targeted the urban youth. Leaders of the Tigrayan Teachers

Association estimate that more than one-half of Tigrayan teachers left their employment and went to the countryside in the period between 1975 and the height of the Red Terror in 1978,<sup>58</sup> and sources within the TPLF confirm the accuracy of this estimate. As a result, urban elements made up largely of students and teachers numerically dominated the Front during its first years in the field.

### **Student movement and Tigrayan nationalism**

Parallel to the growth of nationalism among the petit bourgeoisie in the towns of Tigray was its development among the Tigrayan political activists at HSIU. While 'land to the tiller' early on became, and remained, a rallying cry for all students, the emergence of the Eritrean nationalist struggle in 1961, together with a preoccupation with Marxist and particularly Leninist literature, began to encourage a growing debate over Ethiopia's national character that was to foreshadow the emergence of the post-1974 national liberation movements. Recognition of the importance of the national question, however, did not come easily to the students. Most student activists rejected notions of national divisions in Ethiopia as designed to promote tribalism and were comfortable with the regime's policy of avoiding references to ethnicity in any context.<sup>59</sup> Instead, they extolled Ethiopian nationalism which was perceived as transcending all other identities and loyalties.

However, in what was to prove a ground-breaking article published in the HSIU student newspaper *Struggle* in November 1969, Walleigne Makonnen argued that Ethiopia was not yet a nation, but an Amhara-ruled collection of a dozen nationalities. The author went on to support secessionist movements as long as they were committed to socialism.<sup>60</sup> He thus implicitly supported national self-determination and challenged 'Ethiopianism' at a time when the government was engaged in a war with Eritrean 'secessionists'.

As well as leading to the closure of the student newspaper, Walleigne's article was to be the first of many on the subject over the next two years as students moved from a position of outright condemnation of secession to one of recognising the right of all Ethiopia's peoples, including Eritreans, to self-determination. The theoretical difficulty students had was in reconciling their commitment to class struggle with the far from clear expositions of Lenin, Stalin, and Mao on the rights of nations. At a practical level the difficulty was also a function of their experience in an Ethiopia where, as Walleigne put it paraphrasing Fanon, 'to be an Ethiopian you will have to wear an Amhara mask'.<sup>61</sup> In spite of these problems, Balsvik, the leading historian of the Ethiopian student movement, has concluded that by 1970



the national question had become the central issue in the debates of Ethiopian students, both in the country and among their highly organised compatriots abroad.<sup>62</sup>

It is therefore significant that in a study carried out by Klineberg and Zavalloni in the late 1960s of social identity among university students in six African countries including Ethiopia, they found Ethiopians to be less likely than other students to mention tribal and regional affiliation as identity attributes,<sup>63</sup> and also less likely to express concern for inter-tribal tensions.<sup>64</sup> In general the authors of the study concluded that, 'Ethiopian students are highly conscious of their student status, emphasise personal attributes, are highly achievement-oriented, often conscious of their nationality and involved with the problems of their country. In contrast, tribal and African identity have low saliency.'<sup>65</sup> Not surprisingly, foreign professors teaching at HSIU at this time often noted the low level of ethnic consciousness of their students.

There is reason, however, to think that this conception may have been somewhat idealised, or that ethnonationalism was rapidly taking form among students at this time as a product of their critical re-evaluation of Ethiopian history, itself stimulated by the Eritrean insurrection. Not commonly noted by foreign observers was the fact that about half of the students at HSIU were Amhara and, as befitted the dominant ethnic community, they typically looked upon themselves as 'Ethiopians', rather than as 'Amharas'. A further 20 to 25 per cent of the students were Tigrigna speakers, and given the higher level of social and economic development in the former Italian colony, the majority of them would be Eritreans.

Most non-Amhara students resented the cultural and employment advantages of the Amhara students and the national status given to Amharigna while their own languages were considered 'tribal'. This was a particular source of ire for Tigrigna speakers whose language was suppressed as an official language by the government after Eritrea was forcibly made an Ethiopian province in 1962. Tigrayan and Eritrean students also resented the fact that they needed a higher grade point average on their matriculation than students from elsewhere in the country to enter university, although this requirement was in part a response to the higher percentage of students qualifying for university admittance from these areas.

Ethnic consciousness of the students was reflected in a number of ways. Almost half of the university dormitory rooms were occupied by students on the basis of ethnic connections, and after 1970 an increasing number of Oromo students began replacing their Amharigna adopted names with Oromigna names.<sup>66</sup> Also indicative of rising ethnic consciousness was a riot at the prestigious General Wingate Secondary School by Oromos

angered at the loss of prefect positions to students of other ethnic communities.<sup>67</sup>

The most ethnically conscious students, however, were invariably the Tigrigna speakers. In 1967 there was a riot at the Faculty of Education that pitted Tigrigna speakers against Amhara students that went on for several days. And again at Wingate a few years later the Tigrayan students led by the current prime minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi, engaged in a fight with Oromo students after a disagreement during a basketball game. Meles was later to cause further controversy by arguing in a history paper at HSIU that Menelik's army at Adwa was largely Tigrayan and that Tigrayan soldiers and civilians paid the highest cost in lives for Menelik's victory.<sup>68</sup> In another incident the student activist, Tilahun Gizaw, claimed he was forced to leave the university when his political enemies charged him with tribalism and involvement in secessionist movements. By the late 1960s an unofficial association of Tigrayan students at the university agreed that their province was condemned to stagnation because of its exclusion from power in an Amhara-dominated state bureaucracy.<sup>69</sup>

These indications of the growing importance of Tigrayan ethnic consciousness are backed up by the findings of Klineberg and Zavalloni's research. They found Tigrayans (a category in their study that included Eritreans) to be far more 'ethnocentric' (which they defined as a preference for one's own 'tribe') than the other two groups compared, the Amhara and Oromo.<sup>70</sup> In turn, hostility to Tigrayans was based on the perception of their 'feelings of superiority' and 'ethnocentrism and tribalism'.<sup>71</sup> Equally revealing was the finding that the Amhara were the group most likely to identify their group with the identity of the nation as a whole.<sup>72</sup> The study found distrust between the Tigrayans and Amhara was more strongly felt than that between other Ethiopian communities. Balsvik held that this antagonism was 'rooted in the fact that the Amharas had won the historical struggle for political supremacy',<sup>73</sup> and while there is some truth to this view, it needs to be placed in historical and social context.

In spite of these indicators of rising ethnic consciousness, it would be a mistake to overemphasise ethnic antagonisms at the university. The Tigrayan student, Tilahun, referred to above, was subsequently elected to the student union presidency, and when he was later murdered, presumably by government agents, there were country-wide protests that resulted in the deaths of twenty students in Addis Ababa. Neither he, nor Meles Teckle, another prominent student leader who was Tigrayan, gave any indication to their colleagues, many of whom are presently faculty members at AAU, that they were proponents of Tigrayan nationalism. Indeed, although by the late 1960s the concept of Ethiopia as a 'prison of nationalities' was widely accepted among student activists, and this acceptance coincided

with something of a renaissance of non-Amhara cultures, the Ethiopian student movement did not splinter along national lines.

At the centre of the student militants' debate was the question that was to bedevil Ethiopian politics for many years to come: whether the revolution should focus on class or national contradictions. Generally students followed Lenin and accepted the right of Ethiopia's nations to self-determination, up to and including secession, but held it to be a tactical concession, and with the replacement of the old regime by a Communist Party committed to ending exploitation and respecting the rights of nations and nationalities, there would be no need for secession.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, many of the student Marxists held that the narrow chauvinist policies of the Shoan Amhara old regime stimulated dissident nationalism in the periphery and by overthrowing the regime and carrying out a social revolution they would ensure the unity of Ethiopia. Like the later Lenin and Stalin, most students granted the theoretical right of Ethiopia's nations to secede, but posed a number of obstacles that largely restricted them realising this right.

For most non-Eritreans, national self-determination did not assume engaging in struggles for independence, and class emancipation remained the primary objective. However, increasingly Tigrigna-speaking students embraced the view that in a situation where a Shoan Amhara feudal class dominated Ethiopia, the best approach would be to engage in a national liberation struggle. They maintained that the resolution of these contradictions was a prerequisite to class emancipation and thus each oppressed nationality should fight for its own national liberation.<sup>75</sup> In this light, and with the old regime in a state of crisis in 1974, the Tigrayan militants published pamphlets in Amharigna listing the 'Grievances of the Tigray People',<sup>76</sup> perhaps the first real indicator of the political direction they would take. This group, however, derives its origins from the Tigrean University Students' Association which was established in 1971 and was active in mobilising Tigrayans, especially the students during the summer months when the university closed.<sup>77</sup> This group was thus crucial in raising Tigrayan political consciousness and forms a connection to the Tigray National Organisation (TNO), the precursor of the TPLF.

The TNO was established shortly after the Derg took power and only operated for six months serving as a link between the militants in the university and their supporters in the towns until the TPLF took form. These supporters were largely high school students and those from the university concentrated their efforts during the summer holiday period or when the university was closed because of strikes. TNO activists focused on their native awardjas and built up a basis of support they could turn to when they went to the field, although the structure and leadership of the organisation were not widely known.

Marxism and nationalism were the dominant ideologies among students and Maoism was also very influential, but their form and interrelationship had not solidified by the time the TPLF launched its insurrection as is evident in the ideological disputes that afflicted the movement in its first years. Nor can any individuals be singled out for their theoretical authority in this period. Probably most Tigrayan activists at the time the TPLF went to the countryside were members or supporters of the Marxist EPRP, the largest revolutionary organisation in the country, and it had a decidedly centrist perspective, emphasised the primacy of the class struggle, and had little sympathy for national or peasant-based movements of liberation of the type favoured by the TPLF.

In their ideological struggle with the EPRP the TPLF followed the Maoist line of 'protracted struggles that march from rural to urban areas'.<sup>78</sup> Their reasons for following this course included, first, the fact that the vast majority of the Third World's population lived in the countryside; secondly, peaceful political struggle was almost impossible in the Third World; and lastly, because of the revolutionaries' military weakness they needed time to develop and 'this is more convenient in the countryside rather than in the fascist stronghold towns. Thus the rural population is the backbone of a revolution in the Third World.'<sup>79</sup> The EPRP cadres had more prestige and a better knowledge of Marxism than their TPLF counterparts, as the latter have acknowledged. However, the EPRP's decision to make the urban working class the focus of their political programme proved to be a fatal mistake.

The TNO was important in organising the Tigrayan militants and preparing for the armed struggle to be launched in the countryside, although only an outline of these events is known. A key figure in the organisation, and a person whose house was frequently used for meetings prior to the move to the TPLF's first base, was Ayele Gessesse. Ayele was a former *shifta*, dissident member of the lower nobility, one-time mayor of the Tigrayan town of Endaselasie, a senator under the Haile-Selassie regime, and, because of his popular following in Tigray, a person whom the Derg tried to co-opt by appointing him to their Council of Regions. But Ayele (whose history will be taken up at greater length in a subsequent chapter) was also a Tigrayan nationalist of long standing, a strong critic of the Ethiopian monarchical system, and he viewed the Derg as the inheritor of Amhara hegemony, and not a government committed to its banishment. As a result he gave up his position on the council and joined the TPLF in the countryside.

Although not enough data has been collected to speak conclusively, it none the less appears that the leadership of the TNO/TPLF was drawn disproportionately from the educated sons of the rich peasantry and the lower-middle local nobility. However, there is room for confusion since members

of these classes did not usually have the resources to live a style of life that set them apart from that of lower classes with whom they were more likely to be aligned than with the ruling families of Tigray. Thus apart from Ayele, the three men who were to become the most prominent leaders of the TPLF were: Meles Zenawi, grandson of a dejazmach; Sebhat Nega, the school inspector from Adwa and son of a fitwari; and Aregowie Berhe, son of a powerful judge. Although the early TPLF did not have a developed hierarchical structure and did not pay heed to the traditional basis of status in Tigrayan society, a hierarchy developed within the movement based on academic standing at university. Moreover, since acceptance in university was at least in part a function of the financial standing of students' parents, the emerging TPLF leadership to some extent reflected the social inequities of Tigrayan society.<sup>80</sup>

Student militants looked north to the Eritrean national movements as part of their strategy to free themselves from the central state. Before going to the countryside, Ayele made a number of visits to Eritrea to establish relations with them and gain their support. Tigrayans living in Eritrea, particularly students at the University of Asmara, also endeavoured to obtain promises of assistance for the proposed Tigrayan movement from the Fronts, and their efforts were successful with the EPLF, but not initially with the ELF. The EPLF leadership was frequently Tigrigna-speaking and some of its members were, like those of the TNO, former members of the university student movement. After the TNO accepted the EPLF's view that Eritrea was a colony and therefore had a right to secede from Ethiopia, they were promised support.

The decision to go to the field followed from the TNO's conclusion, like the rest of the student movement, that the Derg was 'fascist'. Markakis concluded that:

Despite the inappropriateness of the label, they assessed correctly the military regime's relationship to the state and its implications for the aspirations of national minorities and backward regions. It was obvious that Addis Ababa's grip was not going to be loosened, nor Amhara power significantly curtailed.<sup>81</sup>

While Ayele investigated the best location from which the Tigrayan insurrection might be launched, other elements within the TNO set about organising support cells in the towns of Tigray. Many members of these cells were later captured and killed after their identities were made known by another dissident Tigrayan group, the Tigray Liberation Front (TLF). Most cell members were teachers and former university students and their task was to carry the party banner in the towns, identify supporters who would be sent to the countryside for training at a later date, and serve as intelligence gathering units. In addition, the TNO made arrangements to send a squad of men to the TPLF's first base of operations at Dedebit, an

area some sixty-five kilometres from the town of Sheraro in Tigray's far western region. It also dispatched a further squad to the EPLF for training and developed links with supporters, usually Tigrayan teachers, stationed in other parts of Ethiopia.

The question of the timing of the TNO's move to the countryside (after which it was known as the TPLF) is important because it speaks to both the changing political conditions in the country and the TNO's thinking at that time. Unfortunately there is no agreement among TPLF officials interviewed on this question. What is clear is that the TPLF launched its rural insurrection well before the Derg officially unleashed its Red Terror. However, the Derg's execution of the Tigrayan student leader Meles Teckle in late 1974 makes clear that state repression had begun before the Red Terror started.

Given Meles Teckle's high status at the university, and the fact that the current prime minister of Ethiopia took Meles's name for his 'field name', it is noteworthy that the original Meles was not a member of TNO nor a known Tigrayan nationalist. According to Ghidey Zera Tsion, Meles was subsequently asked to join the TPLF, but turned down the invitation.<sup>82</sup> None the less, it is revealing that Meles Teckle successfully challenged the nomination of Dawit Yohannis (presently a leading figure in the EPRDF government, but then a member of a small Communist party) for the position of representative of the law faculty on the grounds that the latter mistakenly put the Ethiopian class struggle before the rights of Ethiopia's oppressed nations.<sup>83</sup>

It was not Tigrayan nationalism, but Meles's influence and appeal to students not to participate in the government's *zemecha* campaign in the countryside, that led the Derg to falsely accuse and then execute him for the bombing of the Addis Ababa Municipal Buildings and the Wabe Shebelle Hotel.<sup>84</sup> In spite of Meles's death, many other students, some known as *crocodiles* because of their powerful underground involvement in the student movement, were able to continue their activities throughout this period simply because the Derg was too involved with internal problems to devote itself to liquidating its student opponents. Thus state repression alone does not seem sufficient cause for the TNO's decision to go to the countryside at this time.

It is probable that the timing of the TNO leadership's decision to begin the armed struggle was also influenced by fear that other would-be revolutionary organisations would pre-empt them. Writing after the move to the countryside, a TPLF essayist explained that, 'unless galvanised into the path of class struggle, the present national feelings of the Tigrayan people could be exploited and used by reactionary forces led by ex-feudal lords of Tigray for their own ends'.<sup>85</sup> Ras Mengesha,

undoubtedly the 'ex-feudal lord' in question, did attempt to raise a nationalist and conservative Tigrayan rebellion, which will be examined later. While the view of the mainstream student movement had been premised on the need to carry out a Marxist-Leninist guided revolution to ensure the unity of Ethiopia, the TNO militants argued the necessity of leading their own national liberation struggle to ensure that the Tigrayan insurrection was not dominated by feudal elements. It is also entirely plausible that the TPLF's decision to launch the armed struggle when it did was a result of fears of being pre-empted by anti-feudalist groups, such as the more powerful EPRP.

The other consideration behind the TNO's timing to launch an armed struggle was its conclusion that the military government in late 1974 was weak, divided, and internally focused. To the extent that it looked beyond Addis Ababa, the Derg was more concerned with the rapidly declining security situation in Eritrea, or the first indications of trouble on Ethiopia's border with Somalia, than with a handful of student revolutionaries in Tigray. Indeed, the TNO's view that this was an opportune time for initiating a challenge to the Ethiopian government was also shared by the government of Somalia which invaded the Ogaden during this period, by the rapid military successes of the Eritrean Fronts, and the OLF and the EPRP, both of which started rural insurrections at this time.

The TPLF was officially established on 18 February 1975 at Dedebit, an isolated lowland and shifta-infested area. Ayele (who took the code name 'Suhul' when he went to the field and by which he is now better known) led a group over the next seven months which included his brother Berhane, two peasants who were former members of the imperial army, Sebhat, and seven university and high school students. Suhul and Berhane taught the students bush skills; the former soldiers provided basic military instruction, and collectively they worked at formalising the Front's political programme.

Meanwhile, another contingent of seventeen went to Eritrea for military training with the EPLF. Nineteen fighters returned to Tigray three months later, including two EPLF veterans, the Eritrean (but of Tigrayan ancestry) Mahari Haile (field name 'Mussie') who was to become the TPLF's first military commander, and Yemane Kidane (field name 'Jamaica'), of mixed Eritrean and Tigrayan parentage, but raised in Eritrea, and Siye Abraha, a future EPRDF defence minister. The expertise of the Eritreans was crucial to the TPLF's evolving military capacity, although the EPLF then largely ignored the Tigrayans until after the latter's military successes over the EPRP. A further small group, which included Meles Zenawi and the present Chairman of Tigray, Gebru Asrat, was sent to the towns of Tigray. The armed struggle commenced.

### Conclusion

The defeat of the Woyene rebels and the changing international configuration in the post-war period facilitated Haile-Selassie's programme of state centralisation and modernisation. To the extent that state centralising measures were effective they reformed the administrative links between centre and periphery and increased the power of the emperor, but they also served to emphasise the Shoan character of the Ethiopian state. In Tigray weakening the local administration undermined the peasants' bond with their traditional rulers and reduced their identification with the state. The only significant Tigrayan leaders who retained power after the reforms were enacted were those like Ras Mengesha who had a familial link to Haile-Selassie, and this was clearly a mixed blessing. However, in spite of the declining legitimacy of traditional leaders, there were no signs prior to 1974 that Tigrayan peasants were prepared to collectively oppose, much less challenge, their rulers' monopoly of state power.

With few employment opportunities on the farms and in the towns of highland Tigray, peasants were increasingly forced to find seasonal employment, frequently on plantations and commercial farms that were starting in this period. But with few exceptions these farms were outside Tigray or in pockets of the province's inhospitable lowlands. Peasants were not drawn to wage labour by market-created needs of an expanding commercial economy, but instead for their very survival in the face of declining living standards. However, there is no indication that Tigrayan peasants were averse to participating in the commercial economy; indeed, all indications are that even when operating at the margin peasants sent small amounts of their produce, principally grains, to local markets.

These conditions do not at all conform to those sketched by peasant revolt theorists who attribute peasant impoverishment, increasing inequities in wealth, the growth of a class of landless labourers, and resentment leading to rebellion, as a result of agricultural commercialisation. Indeed, the growing crisis afflicting rural Tigray derived in part from an irreconcilable dilemma: on the one hand commercial agriculture could not advance in highland Tigray because it would cause land alienation which would be resisted by peasants who could see no alternative means of survival than production on their minuscule plots, while, on the other hand, the existing rural economy could not support the population as their poverty and the cycle of famines made clear.

Most Tigrayans attribute their province's lack of development to the country's Shoan Amhara rulers and argue that development in the Third World during the modern era has been furthered by state investment in the economy, physical infrastructure, and human resources, and in these terms



Tigray presented the starkest evidence of neglect. On the eve of the revolution and with a population of nearly four million, Tigray had no mines, virtually no manufacturing industry, no post-secondary educational institutions, and only five secondary schools, four hospitals, five doctors, and one paved road.<sup>86</sup> The transfer of some of the province's most productive lands by Haile-Selassie both weakened the regional economy and confirmed the prevailing view among Tigrayans that they were victimised by Shoan Amharas.

If anything explains the ferocity with which Tigrayan peasants clung to their land in the face of overwhelming poverty, it is the evidence cited here of how few opportunities they had available to them elsewhere. This destitution in large part explains the large-scale migration from Tigray, prevalence of *shiftas* in the province, and extent of efforts made by Tigrayans with the necessary resources to gain an education. But can the malevolence of the Shoan Amhara ruling class alone be held responsible for Tigray's underdevelopment? The view here is that Tigray was not singled out for discrimination, and Shoan Amhara state hegemony is only part of the explanation for the province's lack of development. While the perception of inequality is an indispensable justification for the existence of nationalist movements, it cannot provide an explanation for them,<sup>87</sup> and that is affirmed by Tigrayan experience.

It is true that lack of state investment in Tigray limited development, but there is little evidence that Tigray suffered disproportionately from other parts of non-Shoan Ethiopia in this respect. A 1982 study found that the Ethiopian economy was 'directed towards supporting the Amhara elite concentrated in the central highlands and, in particular, in Addis Ababa' and this 'orientation determined the selection of the economic activities receiving central government support, directed the development of the road and transport systems and allowed the unrestricted development of regional inequalities'.<sup>88</sup> Tigray's marginalisation was thus not unique under this system. Indeed, historically Tigrayans never suffered the loss of their land like many peoples of southern Ethiopia, nor were they ever made slaves like other unfortunate non-Abyssinian peoples.

Moreover, since development policy under the Haile-Selassie regime was based on encouraging the import of foreign capital and promoting commercial agriculture, and virtually no capital was invested in peasant agriculture, it is difficult to see how a near-destitute Tigrayan peasantry would have benefited if the state had pursued its development policies in the province.<sup>89</sup> Commercial agriculture, as has been noted, had little potential in highland Tigray and, if it had been encouraged, would have largely benefited the existing dominant classes who had access to capital.

In the absence of opportunities within Tigray, investment in human

resources, such as schools, would have encouraged migration to Addis Ababa, because of the prospect of employment in the state, or to other more productive parts of Ethiopia. The benefits of post-elementary schools would have fallen, and did fall, disproportionately to the children of the privileged. With declining opportunities for social advancement or a place in the government of the country, it was these children who launched the Tigrayan revolution. Indeed, while there is some truth in claims that Tigrayans were discriminated against in the field of education, it must be noted that other provinces also suffered from a lack of schools. Moreover, Tigrayans had among the highest literacy rates in the country and made up a significant proportion of those accepted into university in spite of discriminatory admission policies.

Peasant revolt explanations of revolution emphasise that in under-developed societies dominated by feudal or colonial bureaucracies the petit bourgeoisie's limited numbers means that their political frustrations can only be overcome by aligning with the peasantry. However, the petit bourgeoisie's role is not limited to organising and leading a revolution which is already simmering in the countryside. At the time when students and teachers launched their revolution in Tigray there were few signs of peasant political initiative. The link drawn between rural economic crisis and revolution is thus altogether too weighted in favour of peasants.

What needs to be explained is why most members of the Tigrayan petit bourgeoisie chose to link their political fate with the TPLF. In the first instance the decision to oppose the Derg for those Tigrayans who joined the TPLF in the early phase of the struggle was little different than the choice made by many other young educated Ethiopians to join revolutionary organisations in opposition to the Derg. The Derg's monopolisation of political power, and the vast expansion of the state into traditionally civil spheres of society, meant that a politically aroused and ambitious stratum which claimed credit for the collapse of the imperial regime was being ignominiously shut out from the levers of power. Moreover, it was refused a role in the state by another section of the petit bourgeoisie, the military, that the teachers and students considered their intellectual and political inferiors. Revolution, under the banners of Marxism-Leninism, civilian leadership of the revolution, nationalism or democracy, provided the stimulus for attempting urban or rural, national or multinational, insurrections.

That most of Tigray's urban petit bourgeoisie would opt for rural and national insurrection under the leadership of the Marxist-Leninist TPLF rather than urban and multinationalist revolt under the leadership of the Marxist-Leninist EPRP (the two most congenial options for most members of this class) speaks in the first place to a legacy of national self-consciousness

built on the widely held perception of Tigray's destitution and underdevelopment within an Ethiopia dominated by Shoan Amharas. Haile-Selassie's regime was not able to overcome these nationalist sentiments and neither the Derg, nor the EPRP, who both shared a class-focused, statist, anti-national perspective, fully recognised the need to confront Tigrayan nationalism positively. Tigray's political and economic marginalisation fostered nationalism and that banner was there to be raised by any opposition movement.

## 4 Struggle for opposition ascendancy: 1975–1978

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### **Introduction**

For operational purposes the TPLF divided Tigray into three sections: region one, which encompassed the western portion of the province; region two in the centre; and region three in the east.<sup>1</sup> In western Tigray the TPLF first began its struggle and competed with rebel elements of the old regime who also selected this area in which to launch their insurrection. Both movements were attracted by the western region's isolation and weak links to established authority. After beginning their operations in the west, the TPLF quickly moved to Agame awardja in the northern part of the eastern region. The Front's immediate objectives in this region were two-fold: first, to challenge the EPRP which had established a base in the area, and secondly, to meet demands from land-hungry peasants for land reform.<sup>2</sup> From there the TPLF pursued operations in the central region, which is the historical heartland of Tigray, possesses more than half of the province's population, and was a stronghold of the aristocracy and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

This chapter begins with the launch of the TPLF's insurrection in 1975 and ends in 1978 with the Front's victory over its major competitors for leadership of the anti-Derg opposition in Tigray. Before the TPLF was to have much impact in Tigray the Derg's reforms, and the means by which they were introduced, had largely alienated peasants and left them receptive to the appeal of opposition groups. With the Derg weak, internally divided, and facing an invasion from Somalia, movements ranging from noble- to petit bourgeois-led, and espousing nationalist, multinational, separatist, Marxist, and right-wing political philosophies emerged in Tigray, and fought for peasant support and military dominance over the others. In this environment the fledgling TPLF had, first, to establish a base of operations, secondly, to resolve its political agenda, particularly over the vexing problem of national self-determination, and lastly, to distinguish itself from competing movements and defeat them. Only then could the TPLF devote its energies to mobilising the peasants and confronting the Derg in line with the precepts of protracted war.

### **Derg policies and peasant disaffection**

In spite of the Derg's negligible presence in Tigray before 1978, the Land Proclamation of 1975 had an enormous political impact, even in the west where land shortages were not as severe as elsewhere in the province. Payment of gulti taxes was stopped as soon as peasants heard of the proclamation, but land distributions were much slower to take place because of the government's weak presence in the area. Land reforms were carried out near towns garrisoned by the army, but beyond these towns they were less common and, where they were carried out, were usually reversed by the TPLF. The Derg's need to solidify its vulnerable position in the country meant that its land reforms were hurried and completed without soil studies, censuses, or popular involvement. Consequently the Derg did not always reap the political benefits of the land reforms, even when the reforms improved the condition of peasants.

The peasants' opportunities to acquire income, which was often vital to their survival, was seriously jeopardised by Derg measures which threatened their rights to land if they left for extended periods to take up employment in the towns. Of even greater concern was the Derg's prohibition against hiring farm labour. Meles Zenawi has argued that the prohibition against hired labour affected 200,000 Tigrayans and was a major stimulus of peasant discontent in the province.<sup>3</sup> According to Meles 'there was no part of Ethiopia where money earned in this way was more important to the people. The Derg was stupid to forbid this, for it forced our people into poverty and hopelessness and it gave our movement important support from the very beginning.'<sup>4</sup> In a futile attempt to bring down the regime, the large Humera landowners in the far west killed their cattle, destroyed buildings, burned down the Bank of Humera, and either took their farm equipment and harvested grains to the Sudan or destroyed it.<sup>5</sup> Significantly the landlords gained considerable support from peasants who depended on employment as farm labourers. This destruction not only hurt the economy of the local area, but led to the financial ruin of Endaselasie-based merchants who depended on the Humera trade.

Peasants were particularly shocked at the brutality of the Derg's murder of leading members of the old regime and were generally sympathetic to the plight of Ras Mengesha who fled to the Sudan. Referring to the emperor's murder a peasant said, 'they (the peasants) thought, "What kind of devil is the Derg to kill the old man?"' They were opposed to the system, not the person; a court should have decided his fate.'<sup>6</sup> And in the poor woreda of Adet where Mengesha held large gulti tracts, a local priest said, 'he (Mengesha) is from Tigray and because of this people were loyal until he escaped; they were loyal to their governor, his name is "son of our cow". He

was a Tigrayan leader.<sup>7</sup> However, Mengesha's Tigrayan origins did not always win sympathy: in Adi Ahferom woreda a peasant reported that the people 'didn't mind if he was killed as he was a feudal, an exploiter and a criminal, whether or not he was a Tigrayan'.<sup>8</sup> Generally, however, older peasants at the time looked favourably upon Mengesha because he was Tigrayan and a descendent of Yohannis.

The Derg also alienated large sections of the small but significant class of traders and merchants by its controls on trade and movement. Apprehension at TPLF influence in the countryside resulted in convoys being introduced in 1976. In the west this virtually ended trade with Humera and Gondar; trade with Asmara was largely restricted to the military convoys, and within the province commerce was severely reduced. By 1977 the Derg required that all vehicle traffic travelling north from Maichew or south to the Wollo border be restricted to convoys. Trade links between western and eastern Tigray declined and most convoy traffic was directed to Asmara where, because it was for military purposes, was targeted by all the Fronts operating in the area.<sup>9</sup> In 1978 there were four or five checkpoints on the forty-kilometre road from Adwa to Axum alone. By 1980 convoys were deemed necessary to move from Maichew to Mahoni, a distance of only twenty kilometres, and shortly thereafter residents of Mahoni were required to get government permission to attend weddings two kilometres outside the town.<sup>10</sup>

In the late 1970s private traders could only engage in business if they paid large bribes to the Derg and the only way for private citizens to move between towns with Derg permission was to fly or, more commonly, go on foot. Movement between the towns and the countryside was fraught with danger as the traveller could be suspected of being a TPLF agent and imprisoned or shot. Adigrat's dependence on merchandising and trade meant that the Derg's imposition of commercial and transport restrictions were strongly felt and resented.<sup>11</sup> Under the Derg business licenses became progressively more difficult to get, and traders' trucks were requisitioned for the transport of war-related materials to army bases in Eritrea. Permits to travel were required; convoys were introduced by 1976; and the road links to Asmara were virtually broken, largely by the ELF, by the late 1970s.

Derg established distribution centres and the state Agricultural Marketing Corporation, which purchased virtually all marketed agricultural products at fixed prices, also seriously interfered with the activities of the trading community. Denied their livelihood, large merchants left Tigray in increasing numbers. Those who remained were often forced to supplement their incomes by participating in illegal trade, of which the most important was with Saudi Arabia across the Red Sea. The Derg's economic programmes reflected its opposition to private trade and suspicion of the

merchant class, and as a result this important sector of the local economy was soon estranged from the new regime.

Faced with growing urban opposition, in 1976 the Derg began a counter-insurgency campaign known as the Red Terror which de Waal has called 'one of the most systematic uses of mass murder ever witnessed in Africa.'<sup>12</sup> Initially focused on the opposition intelligentsia of Addis Ababa, by 1977 it was being implemented in the towns of Tigray. Under the Derg's regional representative, Sileshi Mengesha, any expression of regional identity or dissent was interpreted as being counter-revolutionary. The politically suspect, usually teachers and students, were arrested and pressed to become double agents; if they refused they would be imprisoned or shot, their bodies left outside their schools to intimidate others. Mere possession of an opposition pamphlet led to arrest and possible torture and death. By the late 1970s this had effectively led to the destruction of most of the TPLF's underground cells in the towns of Tigray, but ultimately the Red Terror proved to be one of the Derg's most serious mistakes because in addition to producing fear, it generated hatred and disaffection with the regime. A former member of the Commission for Organising the Party of the Workers of Ethiopia (COPWE), concluded that people 'who were not political thought [wrongly that] the terror was the responsibility of lower officials and not the Derg government. The choice for the people was to survive tactically, join the Front, or leave the area for Sudan.'<sup>13</sup>

The Derg was quick to make its presence felt in Mekelle because it was the provincial capital. Before the formal introduction of the Red Terror, some twenty-one teachers were arrested at the Ethiopian Teachers Association offices in the town, accused of supporting the TPLF, and taken from the province, after which they were never heard of again.<sup>14</sup> However, the example of Axum is typical of how the Red Terror was introduced into the towns of Tigray. In May 1978 Derg cadres ordered the town's teachers and students to assemble in the high school playing field, where they were surrounded by troops and told by a senior officer that the army had an envelope containing all the names of TPLF and EPRP supporters, and that if they failed to identify themselves in half an hour there would be a bullet waiting for them. About 500–600 students (including elementary students) and 150 teachers identified themselves as rebel supporters and were taken to a concentration camp outside the town. They were held for a month and only released after two teachers and three students were killed. As one of the survivors put it, 'it was done to terrorise the people, to make them come to the Derg camp, to show their power'.<sup>15</sup>

Similar stories are told by the townspeople of Maichew, Mekelle, Adigrat, Adwa, and Endaselasie. The Red Terror took a particularly brutal form in the town of Abi Adi in Tembien awardja, undoubtedly because of

the TPLF's support in this area. During a market day in July 1977 the Derg executed some 178 people in the town square on the spurious grounds that they were thieves. Eyewitnesses report that most of the victims were peasants, many of whom had travelled from the neighbouring woreda of Adet to buy salt because of shortages in their home woreda.

### **Insurrection launched**

The origins of the TPLF lay in the urban centres, but the movement took form in rural western Tigray in the context of a battle for survival with the nobility-led anti-Derg forces. Important to the success of that battle for the TPLF was the person of Suhul. Suhul's father was a *grazmach*, a title of the lower nobility that he earned for opposing the Italians during the invasion of 1935,<sup>16</sup> and Suhul was employed as secretary in the Ethiopian mission to Asmara during the British occupation of Eritrea before being elected as a reform mayor of Endaseselie. Constantly in battle against authority, he gained fame while mayor for his opposition to the policy of Ras Mengesha's Gum Arabic Corporation (a state development company) of not hiring locally.<sup>17</sup>

Suhul was a populist and a Tigrayan nationalist and his fame won him election as one of two Tigrayans in Haile-Selassie's Senate. His personal appeal and involvement in struggles against feudal power led the Derg in 1974 to appoint him to its Council of the Regions, but by this time Suhul was deeply involved in the activities of the TNO in Addis Ababa. As one peasant woman put it, 'Suhul was from our community, a leader and a really good man and people respected him and therefore people also supported the TPLF.'<sup>18</sup> Many older peasants in western Tigray still maintain that Suhul was the leader of the TPLF (Aregowie Berhe and Sebbat Nega in fact alternated as Chairman of the TPLF during this period), and among some his life has taken on folkloric proportions, something that has not been noted in other TPLF leaders.

Initially the small group of students who first made up the TPLF were at the bottom of a learning curve on the practicalities of fighting a revolutionary war. A veteran of this period acknowledged that because of his urban and privileged background he knew little about the peasants' lives that the TPLF was committed to transforming. Another student-fighter who was to become a leading figure in the TPLF reported that many of the early cadres had a 'Che Guevara complex and saw themselves as heroes who wanted to fight and win the war quickly'.

With little interference from the Derg, small bands of TPLF fighters could move across Tigray in about five days, killing members of the old regime, exhorting peasants, and 'showing their power'.<sup>19</sup> The Front was highly mobile, both to ensure its security and to make the Derg and the



peasants think the organisation was far bigger than it actually was. To create the impression they were armed, many of its early weaponless members carried sticks covered in plastic sheeting.<sup>20</sup> At this stage the movement was organised at platoon levels within regions, and because of the lack of effective radio communications, command and control were difficult.<sup>21</sup> With the exception of Yemane Kidane and Mahari Haile who were originally from the EPLF, a former corporal in Haile-Selassie's army, and two peasants who had experience in the imperial army, few of the early TPLF members knew anything about fighting. Even TPLF publications of this period implicitly acknowledge their military weakness.<sup>22</sup>

In spite of their weakness, the Derg's presence in Tigray was limited and as a result the TPLF and other opposition movements were able to carry out their political activities. In 1975, with the arrival of zemacha students, residents of the towns of Tigray began finding pamphlets in offices and classrooms, written in both Tigrigna and Amharigna, that dealt with the history of the Tigrayan people and the regimes of Menelik, Haile-Selassie, and the Derg. The TPLF was not alone: the EPRP quickly developed an apparatus among teachers, students, and civil servants; the TLF, which had been established even before the 1974 revolution, was present in the eastern towns, and Ras Mengesha had his supporters. EPRP cadres advocated 'people's government', while the smaller TPLF identified themselves as Tigrayan nationalists and emphasised the need to first free the province from the Derg. Political competition between the EPRP and the TPLF was fierce, sometimes giving way to fisticuffs.

Although receptive to anti-Derg propaganda, initially the townspeople of Tigray were not able to distinguish the different movements. This changed in Axum in July 1975 when the TPLF carried out a daring raid on the local police station, telecommunication offices, and bank which led to the deaths of three or four policemen, including the chief of police, and netted the Front some 170,000 Birr (\$US 82,000.)<sup>23</sup> As the Derg presence in the towns grew, however, such actions became more difficult, and with the advent of the Red Terror the opposition movements were forced underground or out of the towns entirely.

The TPLF held its inaugural 'Fighters Congress' on its first anniversary, 18 February 1976, at Agame and it was attended by its entire membership of about 170 people.<sup>24</sup> Aregowie Berhe was elected chairman of the organisation and the first Central Committee consisted of seven members: apart from Aregowie, there was Sebhat Nega, Abbay Tsehaye (from Axum and in charge of organisation), Seyoum Mesfin (from Agame and responsible for Foreign Affairs and presently holding that portfolio in the government), Ghidey Zera Tsion, Mussie, and Suhul.<sup>25</sup> Suhul was appointed the overall military commander and Mussie the first chief of operations.

The TPLF's organisational structure is similar to other Marxist-oriented movements. The highest body is the Congress which is composed of elected fighters and representatives of the mass associations.<sup>26</sup> It elects a Central Committee which is the highest organ between congresses and which in turn elects members of the Political Bureau which manages the day-to-day activities of the Front. The chairman of the Central Committee also serves as the chairman of the Political Bureau. Members of the Central Committee are divided into major committees which are chaired by members of the Political Bureau.

TPLF weakness in numbers, resources, and skills encouraged efforts to establish 'tactical' relations with virtually any non-feudal organisation openly challenging the Derg. Thus, in spite of the initial support of the EPLF, the TPLF developed close military relations with both Eritrean Fronts and jointly conducted cross-border raids on Derg bases in Tigray which provided the TPLF with the opportunity of gaining valuable combat experience. These military attacks were primarily against Derg positions at Zalambessa (a Tigrayan town on the Eritrean border), Mugulat (an important Derg communications centre outside Adigrat linking Addis Ababa to Asmara), and the Agame capital of Adigrat.<sup>27</sup> The ELF also conducted operations in the Rama area, immediately south of the Mareb river, and in the Badima area of north-west Tigray.<sup>28</sup> Although the EPLF did not as often attack targets in Tigray as did the ELF, the TPLF house organ *Revolt* reported in mid-1976 that a series of joint TPLF-EPLF attacks stretching from Zalambessa to Enticho were carried out simultaneously.<sup>29</sup> In the following year the EPLF joined the TPLF in attacks against Derg forces at Nebe Ibal and on a convoy at Bizet.<sup>30</sup>

Military co-operation between the three liberation movements reached a high point in 1976 when the Derg organised a peasant army in its biggest attempt to date to crush the Eritrean insurrection. Most of Ethiopia's border with Eritrea is in Tigray and the main Addis Ababa-Asmara road runs through the heavily populated highlands of eastern Tigray which continue into Eritrea, making this the favoured route historically for invading armies. At a time when Derg forces were reckoned to number only 45,000, the EPLF reported that the regime tried to raise a peasant army of 235,000 from Gojjam, Gondar, Tigray, Wollo, and northern Shoa.<sup>31</sup> However, according to a former Derg colonel who was serving as an operational officer in Eritrea at the time, only 60,000 peasants were finally recruited, a considerable number of whom inhabited the Tigrayan border area of Agame and were related to the neighbouring Eritreans.<sup>32</sup> Even if the military campaign failed the Derg hoped that it would serve to create lasting distrust and hatred between these civilian populations which could be used to the regime's advantage.

Armed with antiquated weapons and little training this Ethiopian peasant 'army' was encouraged to believe that they were defending 'Mother Ethiopia' against the forces of a Moslem *jihad* and that they would overwhelm the Eritrean rebels with sheer numbers.<sup>33</sup> In line with ancient Abyssinian practices the peasants were promised free rein to plunder, loot, and settle in the conquered lands if they so wished. What ensued, however, was a massacre on the Tigrayan border and the few peasant soldiers who entered Eritrea in June 1976 were quickly killed or captured.

### **Manifesto controversy**

In 1976 the TPLF released the 'Manifesto of the TPLF' which argued that 'the first task of this national struggle will be the establishment of an Independent democratic republic of Tigray'.<sup>34</sup> Opponents of the TPLF charge that such statements demonstrate its goal is to dismantle Ethiopia along ethnic lines. This is not the case, but the demand for an independent Tigray, or Tigrayans' right to independent statehood, raised divisions within the TPLF and were a source of conflict with the EPLF. Although the Manifesto was produced by elements within the leadership, no names accompany the document, and discovering which cadres produced it, or how it spoke to ideological currents within the Front, is almost impossible for an outsider.<sup>35</sup> In spite of TPLF claims to the contrary, it is likely that the document did represent the thinking of important elements within the leadership at the time it was written, and that it continued to reflect significant political currents in the leadership.

The Manifesto claimed that 'Tigray lost its autonomy and independence' after the death of Yohannis IV,<sup>36</sup> but it did not develop a reasoned historically based claim for Tigrayan independence. Nor did it adopt the TLF argument that Tigray constituted a colony of the Amhara, even though it was held that the main force propelling the demand for Tigrayan independence was hostility towards Amhara domination. The Manifesto argued that demands for 'secession and democracy are but transitory ones to socialism and communism rather than being demands or ends of the struggle'.<sup>37</sup> However, it made Tigrayan independence the primary objective of the TPLF and relegated Ethiopian unity to a secondary objective. In the event, shortly after the Manifesto was published it was repudiated in a TPLF Congress, but it was not publicly disowned for some time later and as a result has been an enduring source of embarrassment. The TPLF now acknowledges the mistaken emphasis in the Manifesto and its failure to immediately and publicly repudiate it.<sup>38</sup> None the less, the Front never rejected the principle that all nationalities have the right to self-determination up to and including the right to independence, in the words of the Ethiopian student movement.

Increasingly, the national question was considered ‘the *best tactic* [my emphasis] to rally the oppressed peoples of Ethiopia in general and that of Tigray in particular’.<sup>39</sup> The nationalist basis of the opposition to the state was further justified in terms of the divisions within the country’s ethnic communities, a product of Amhara domination of the Ethiopian state. According to the TPLF:

Even though it is undeniable that the oppressed masses of the Amhara nationality itself do not play a major role in the oppression of the Tigrayan masses the two peoples have developed bitter hatred towards each other. They are deeply suspicious of each other. In short they cannot wage a joint struggle for a joint cause.<sup>40</sup>

Whether a transitional strategy, a tactical consideration, or a genuine principle, the notion of Ethiopian nations, including Tigray, having the right to independence remained a key element in the TPLF’s lexicon. At the end of 1981 the TPLF concluded that:

if there is a democratic atmosphere then it [i.e. self-determination] means the creation of VOLUNTARILY integrated nations and nationalities whose relations are based on equality and mutual advantages. However, if the present oppression and exploitation continues or intensifies it means the creation of an independent and People’s democratic republic of Tigray.<sup>41</sup>

In 1988 TPLF General Secretary Sebhat Nega used more temperate language, but still affirmed, ‘the nationality question is a primary issue’ and ‘we don’t believe that the unity of Ethiopia should be pursued at all costs’.<sup>42</sup> Although the TPLF maintained its convictions they did, as will be seen shortly, undergo some revision in emphasis.

### **War against the nobles**

The TPLF could not rely on the Eritrean movements for support in the contest with the aristocratic-led forces in the west and those of the EPRP in the east for opposition ascendancy in Tigray. In the confused environment created by the collapse of the old regime, the Derg’s dismissal of the Tigrayan governor Ras Mengesha appeared to herald a new era of even more harsh Amhara rule. In such a climate appeals to Tigrayan national sentiments were essential for any political group wanting peasant support. The first significant organisation in the field was *Teranafit* which brought together infamous local shifta leaders like Alem Shett and members of the Tigrayan nobility. Organised on traditional lines with nobles leading squads of men from their home woredas, Teranafit combined common crime with an allegiance to Ras Mengesha. It opposed the ‘land to the tiller’ promises of the Derg which it argued constituted nationalisation, supported Christianity that was assumed to be threatened by the Derg and the

TPLF, and promised *risti* land for all peasants. Along with assurances of food and security at a time when both were threatened, Teranafit was initially highly successful and brought thousands of poor western Tigrayan peasants into its ranks.

With perhaps 100 largely untrained and poorly equipped fighters, the early TPLF confronted an estimated 10,000 men from Teranafit. Like the TPLF, Teranafit began its insurrection in western Tigray, but it had smaller bases of support in the central region, Tembien, and beyond to Gondar. Because of its limited military capacity, TPLF efforts initially were directed at emphasising Teranafit's origins in the old regime and to lay before the peasants a programme of land reform and democratic rights, both anathema to the noble-led movement.

Trying to distinguish peasant support drawn to Teranafit and its successor organisation, the Ethiopian Democratic Union, from those later drawn to the TPLF, is not easy. However, it is clear that Teranafit/EDU disproportionately drew support from the commercial farming areas of Humera and Wolkait in the far west, Metemma in the extreme west of neighbouring Gondar province, labourers on plantations and commercial farms in the Sudan, and among refugees who went to the Sudan because of the war-related disruptions to their lives. Metemma, like Humera, was an area of surplus production and served as a centre for hired labour from a vast hinterland, including Tigray. Big farmers from aristocratic families in such areas resented the Derg because it oversaw the demise of the imperial regime to which they were intimately linked, but even more for its Land Proclamation of 1975 which brought about their economic collapse. As a result, they and their largely poor workers joined Teranafit/EDU *en masse*.

Some among the TPLF leadership have explained the high number of farm workers in these noble-led opposition groups as the result of their lower level of political consciousness and lack of integration into local communities.<sup>43</sup> Such critics further point to the fact that farm labourers were only mobilised and kept active with promises of loot, and this largely explains the violence and crime with which Teranafit and EDU were associated. None the less, many poor and middle land-owning peasants in what were soon to be the TPLF strongholds of Shire and Sheraro were also quick to join these movements. Indeed, one former Teranafit/EDU member said, 'political ignorance of the members led some to flip back and forth in their allegiance to EDU and TPLF; when one is strong they will go to it'.<sup>44</sup> Conversely, few educated youth were drawn to Teranafit because it did not readily accommodate intellectuals.

None the less, the EDU was established in part to appeal to a broader ethnic and class base than Teranafit. The EDU stressed that its membership came from all regions of Ethiopia and it tried to project a

liberal, anti-monarchist image by espousing a Western democratic form of government, in spite of the fact that its leadership came from the former aristocracy.<sup>45</sup> As Ethiopian nationalists the EDU could not support Eritrean separatism, but it did co-operate with the Eritrean opposition movements and through its strong presence in western Tigray and Gondar seriously disrupted army traffic to Eritrea.<sup>46</sup>

The EDU gained the support of the conservative anti-Communist Sudanese and Saudi regimes which grew increasingly alarmed at the Derg's radical policies and the revolutionary tilt they were giving to the region. In response the Sudanese supplied the EDU with territory from which to operate a radio station and a base for their fighters and political cadres, and the Saudis and CIA provided them with funding. With such backing the EDU should have been well positioned to capitalise on the growing discontent among the urban middle and upper classes. But in Tigray the EDU was too closely associated with the former nobility and the crimes of Teranafit. Moreover, Ras Mengesha's authority must have declined when he took refuge in Sudan since political authority in highland Ethiopia normally depends on both a leader's ability to protect his followers and on a high level of face-to-face contact<sup>47</sup> – points not lost on the TPLF leadership. Lastly, as it bid for support across Ethiopia it necessarily played down Teranafit's strengths, its Tigrayan character and opposition to Amhara domination.

Although the EDU did acquire a small basis of support in urban Tigray, it never gained the allegiance of many of the politically dynamic students and teachers who quickly gravitated to the TPLF and EPRP. Based in western Tigray's two major towns of Endaselasie and Sheraro, the development project TAIDL became a centre of urban dissent after the collapse of the old regime. A number of TAIDL's professional staff, such as Aregesh Adane, who was to become a senior figure in the TPLF, had been sent to the project at the behest of the TNO with the objective of mobilising peasants in anticipation of the emergence of the Front.<sup>48</sup> The EPRP was also well represented in TAIDL, and the two groups competed for support of the unaffiliated staff. After learning of an EDU plan to rob the project's offices, TPLF employees turned the finances over to the Front, thus bringing about the demise of TAIDL, after which they fled to the countryside.<sup>49</sup>

However, in spite of the deep antipathy between the TPLF and Teranafit, peasants continued to believe that members of both movements were 'sons of Tigray' and they should set aside their differences and build a united opposition to the 'Amhara' Derg. This created a dilemma for the leadership of the TPLF who were opposed to Teranafit, but did not feel comfortable at openly opposing the peasants. However, Teranafit's opposition to the Derg and its considerable peasant following to which the TPLF wanted to

gain access, did convince the Front of the need to conduct negotiations and Suhul and Ghidey were assigned that task.<sup>50</sup> How sincere the TPLF was in this quest, and how much of the negotiations were mere posturing for the benefit of the mediating peasant elders, remains unclear. At any rate Teranafit's killing of Suhul in June 1976<sup>51</sup> ended any possibility of an alliance at that time.<sup>52</sup>

The peasants' initial failure to recognise the differences between Teranafit and the TPLF speaks to the confusion that existed in Ethiopia after the overthrow of the old regime and the fact that both movements espoused Tigrayan nationalism. Under the slogan 'lunch at Endaselasie and dinner at Mekelle', EDU leaders told peasants that Mengesha was their leader and they would give *risti* land to everyone. In time, however, Teranafit and EDU armies became renowned for their lack of discipline, drunkenness, raping, and pillaging, to the point where many peasants today insist that they were not political organisations at all, but simply gangs of marauders. One former Teranafit member said as much:

Teranafit didn't have any politics until Ras Mengesha. If you are a *shifta*, or you kill or do something bad that necessitates going to the forest, you go and join Teranafit. There were no intellectuals in Teranafit: they [the peasants] didn't know its aims and distrusted it until EDU formed under Mengesha.<sup>53</sup>

The TPLF was quick to appreciate the limitations of trying to gain the support of peasants by relying solely on appeals to party programmes and class interest. Instead, the Front attempted to gain the confidence and ultimately the support of peasants by their highly disciplined behaviour, displays of self-sacrifice, and commitment to the peasants' interest. In this early period peasants report, for example, how TPLF cadres arranged a doctor's visit for a sick man, or helped a widow with her ploughing. Such activities have led some TPLF members to refer to this as their 'social work' stage of political mobilisation and is consistent with Mao's notion of a mass line whereby revolutionaries attempt to confront the practical problems of the peasantry and draw the appropriate revolutionary interpretation. In particular, this approach places a high premium on the cadres' character. Where pillaging was considered a virtual right of Teranafit membership, such activities resulted in summary executions for TPLF members. There were also very strict proscriptions against consuming alcohol and sometimes against using tobacco. According to some reports cadres could be executed for consensual sex while others report thirty-six-month prison sentences were imposed. One senior cadre said that such measures were necessary because the TPLF wanted women to completely trust the fighters and for peasants to leave their wives or daughters in the care of cadres and have the same confidence as if they were with a priest.<sup>54</sup>

Having virtually nothing in the early days, TPLF cadres made a virtue of

their poverty. A priest in Adet woreda reported how cadres at first refused to accept food from the peasants because they said the people were too poor themselves.<sup>55</sup> Another peasant explained, 'one day we were sitting outside and a fighter came by and I said, "My son come and join us for some food". He had a wild mushroom in his pocket; that is what they were eating. They suffered so much.'<sup>56</sup> The fact that many of the early TPLF cadres were from relatively wealthy families did not undermine their appeal. According to a peasant:

even if they were the sons of the rich and well-to-do they would come and say 'I am rich and I could have land and live anywhere, but instead I am a fighter'. In practice we have seen that they lived with the poor, fought for the poor, and died for them . . . Their background didn't matter, we followed them for their aims.<sup>57</sup>

As soon as the Front was able to establish itself in an area it organised mass associations. Membership in the associations was voluntary and based on interest groups such as peasants, women, youth, merchants, and workers. The task of the associations was largely restricted to raising consciousness and not implementing policies. Administration at the local level was carried out first by provisional administrative committees which grouped about eleven villages and usually operated for two or three years to give the people the necessary experience and confidence, after which *baitos* were established. *Baitos* were organisationally separate from the TPLF<sup>58</sup> and were typically established after the mass associations; as a result few of them were operational in the early years of the revolution. None the less, this level of organisation and popular mobilisation was in stark contrast to Teranaft and EDU.

The TPLF also gained in the contrast between the poverty of their members and the EDU's wealth and display of sophisticated weaponry. With its origins in the nobility and reverence for heritage, the EDU tried to demean the TPLF before the peasants by accusing it of being against Christianity and calling its leaders '*wade butana*' (sons of whores), but instead the TPLF proudly wore the label as indicative of their closeness to the people.<sup>59</sup>

Mengesha's fighters were initially superior marksmen, better equipped, and vastly outnumbered the TPLF, the last two factors being critical according to Ghidey who was initially the military commander in the battles with the EDU.<sup>60</sup> But in spite of these advantages, Teranaft/EDU fighters had many liabilities: they were led by the nobility and their loyalties were to the leader and not the cause; and second, they were poorly motivated and ill-disciplined. None the less, until the TPLF developed its military and political skills, it was more often the loser than the victor in the many contests with them. And while most of these engagements could better be described as skirmishes than as battles given the few lives lost, the



numbers none the less constituted a significant proportion of the TPLF membership. The TPLF was badly defeated in its first three major military encounters with the EDU. After each battle the fighters analysed their failings and tried to supplement their growing practical experience with readings and videos on military strategy and tactics.<sup>61</sup> In defeat the TPLF fighters retreated to safe havens to recuperate, receive inspirational speeches, and prepare for their next encounters.

Between 1976 and 1978 the TPLF fought Teranafit/EDU over a wide territory ranging from Badima on the Eritrean border, south to Metemma in Gondar on the Sudanese border, although most of the clashes were centred in the Shire-Sheraro area. As their military skills and numbers increased the TPLF typically sent out squads of 60–100 fighters who travelled at night and slept during the day while in search of the EDU. Upon finding an enemy encampment, a reconnaissance team would observe them and decide where to attack. Ambushes were usually at night and the TPLF attempted to surround the enemy, enter into their midst, and, in the fashion of their forefathers, concentrate on attacking the core of the enemy camp where the leaders were most likely located.

The constant movement across Tigray exposed the TPLF to large numbers of peasants who they tried to win over. Although most peasants remained unwilling to commit themselves to armed struggle, they slowly moved from positions of neutrality to passive support for the TPLF. In isolated cases the TPLF was able to distribute the EDU leaders' land among peasants, thus providing them with direct benefits, and at the same time making clear the class differences in the approaches of the two movements.

No one battle can be identified as conclusive in the TPLF–EDU contest, but the last major engagement took place on 4 November 1979, and is known as 'War No. 4' as it took place on the fourth day of the fourth month of the Ethiopian calendar and lasted four days.<sup>62</sup> Although the EDU was never completely destroyed, by the end of 1979 it had been reduced to a rump largely operating in small pockets outside Tigray in Gondar and Sudan, where it remained until the total collapse of the Derg in 1991. In spite of its efforts to develop modern organisational techniques and a political vision appropriate to the post-imperial period, the EDU remained a creature of the past incapable of responding to the changed conditions. Having dispensed with EDU in western Tigray, the TPLF now faced the forces of the EPRP in the east.

### **War against the EPRP**

The TPLF's stated reason for rapidly moving from its western base area to Agame in the north-east was to introduce its land reform programme in an

area notorious for land shortages. However, as one peasant noted, 'the TPLF started to investigate the problems of farmers in the area, but had come because of the EPRP's presence'.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, the core of the EPRP contingent of about twenty-five combatants arrived in Agame in December 1974 in the company of EPLF forces after spending over a year in Eritrea.<sup>64</sup> As noted earlier, the EPRP was pre-eminently an urban-based multinational student organisation that had hoped to assume state power with the collapse of the Haile-Selassie regime, but increasingly the party began to appreciate that the struggle for state power would be both longer and more difficult than had been thought earlier and that it would involve struggle in the rural areas.

The EPRP held that the road to power lay in an alliance between the working class and the radical intelligentsia who formed a vanguard Marxist-Leninist party, which the EPRP assumed itself to be. While a marginal role for the peasantry in this alliance was also acknowledged, it did not recognise the peasantry as a revolutionary force in its own right, unlike the TPLF. A further incentive for the EPRP to begin operations in the countryside was caused by the urban-centred Red Terror. Indeed, the EPRP considered the rapid deterioration of civil life in urban Ethiopia as promoting the conditions that would herald its coming to power. Going to the countryside was a means of increasing pressure on the Derg, and of providing the EPRP with rural bases of operation that could be used to support the urban insurrection that remained at the core of its strategy.

Three operational fields were chosen by the EPRP (Agame in Tigray, Wollo, and Gondar) and armed units took up positions in each of these areas in 1975. Agame, and specifically the Asimba mountain area of Erob woreda in the north-east of the awardja, was chosen for a number of reasons, some of which bear a marked similarity to those which led the TPLF to establish its initial base at Dedebeit. First, Asimba was isolated and the EPRP was unlikely to be disturbed by Derg forces whose nearest military camp was at Zalambessa on the main Adigrat to Asmara road, some forty kilometres away over a very rugged track. Secondly, the base was a mere four hours' walk from the Eritrean border, and a part of Eritrea in which their EPLF allies operated. To the east lay the even more remote and inaccessible Danikal lowlands. Thirdly, the leader of the EPRP, Dr Tesfai Dubessie, was a member of the minority Saho people who inhabited the Asimba area, and this gave the party an added measure of security. Despite this apparent recognition of the importance of ethnicity in revolutionary struggle, the other sixteen members of the initial force included many who were not Tigrayans.

The first group of EPRP fighters was trained in the Sahel by the EPLF and equipped by the Palestine Liberation Organisation in the Middle East,

and then returned to Ethiopia by way of Eritrea.<sup>65</sup> Although the EPRP's position was to change, at this time the leadership supported Eritrea's right to independence, a precondition to gaining EPLF support. Indeed, while the EPLF initially supported both the TPLF and EPRP, the latter's stronger basis in the towns led the Eritreans increasingly to direct most of their support to the EPRP.

Shortly after its dispatch, virtually the entire EPRP Wollo force was destroyed by the Derg, which led the leadership to order the forces in Tigray and Gondar to not engage in military operations without explicit permission from headquarters in Addis Ababa.<sup>66</sup> As this disaster took place at approximately the same time the Agame contingent was taking up positions, it had a negative effect on the EPRP's ability to acquire the necessary military skills and achieve the battle victories necessary to gain prestige in the eyes of the peasants.

Even before the EPRP contingent reached Tigray growing divisions were reported between Berhane Meskel, the commander, and some of its members over both his high-handedness and over concerns that the Derg would soon undermine the EPRP's programme by carrying out a land reform.<sup>67</sup> In the event the Derg's Land Proclamation was shortly thereafter enacted and as a result eight of the original cadres deserted taking with them almost half of the armaments and ammunition of the organisation.<sup>68</sup> In the view of the deserters the Derg's commitment to far-reaching land reform demonstrated the revolutionary credentials of the military government, and at the same time eliminated the peasants' hunger for land, the one issue that might have brought them into revolutionary struggle.

Contrary to the EPRP, the TPLF was convinced that in the circumstances the Derg did not have the means to carry out its announced land reform, and that even after the Derg was able to acquire a presence in the rural areas its authoritarian structure ensured that the reforms would not have a democratic character. The TPLF also contended that an Amhara-dominated regime could not be responsive to the national sensitivities of the Tigrayan peasantry.

The TPLF was probably too small and weak for its leadership to seriously militarily challenge the larger, better financed, and superior armed EPRP at this early stage. However, it was not prepared to leave the field open to the EPRP, and it did want to compete with, and distinguish itself politically from, the EPRP, as well as establish an anti-Derg alliance. And at least in the first year and a half after their respective arrivals in Agame there was serious and non-violent political competition. A joint TPLF-EPRP consultation committee was established and two early members of the committee, Twedros Hagos of the TPLF, and Gebru Mersha of the EPRP both testify that initially there was a genuine

effort to resolve outstanding differences and refrain from military confrontations.<sup>69</sup> There was also a rough division of territory between the two groups for the purposes of their political work, with the EPRP centred in Erob woreda, and the TPLF in the adjacent woreda of Sobia.

The initial EPRP contingent in Agame was minuscule, but by 1978 Bereket Simon estimated they had between 3,000 and 4,000 fighters,<sup>70</sup> although some TPLF sources consider this estimate too high. The EPRP was also well financed, having funds taken from a bank robbery in Addis Ababa that netted over one million Birr (\$US 480,000), as well as money supplied by affiliates of the Ethiopian student movement in Europe and North America.<sup>71</sup>

This demonstration of military and financial strength, however, did not win them peasant support. The peasants contrasted the wealth of the EPRP with the TPLF fighters who had unsophisticated single-shot guns and typically begged for grain which they cooked and carried around in their pockets.<sup>72</sup> While the peasants held TPLF poverty to be a virtue, they argued that if the EPRP had come as liberators, they should not have to pay for their food and accommodation, but should be provided by those in whose name the struggle was being fought, that is, the peasantry. Moreover, the willingness of the EPRP to pay even higher than market prices for food items to gain peasant support may have deprived the poor of grains in a food deficit area, and thus undermined its support among this section of the peasantry.

The EPRP's description of themselves as 'Black Bolsheviks' is illustrative of their authoritarian approach to the peasantry and doctrinaire understanding of revolution. Peasants repeatedly referred to the EPRP's use of violence when they or their leaders refused to co-operate with the party. In addition, peasants reported that the EPRP interfered with their sales of cattle and other livestock because they thought that people going to the town markets might betray them to the Derg.<sup>73</sup> But ultimately the EPRP's violence against the peasants demonstrated the political weakness of their programme which advocated urban insurrection, but involved living and working with peasants to whom the party was not committed.

In addition, the rights of Ethiopia's nationalities never figured highly in the EPRP's programme, which emphasised a multinational approach to revolution, and considered nationalist sentiments to be 'bourgeois'. EPRP propaganda accused the TPLF of 'narrow nationalism' and held that unlike the TPLF, the EPRP was fighting for all of Ethiopia. EPRP cadres in Tigray were drawn from a number of Ethiopian nationalities and as a result peasants concluded that 'the Derg had Oromo and Amhara soldiers in Tigray and so did the EPRP, so there was no difference'.<sup>74</sup>

While the EPRP never questioned its belief in multinational-based

revolutionary struggle, the land crisis in Agame and peasant pressure forced it to reverse its weak commitment to land reform. The party attempted two land redistributions in Adi Aduka and Embeto tabias of Sobia woreda, apparently because it had members in those tabias.<sup>75</sup> After a politicisation campaign that concentrated on the youth and the establishment of local militias, the EPRP divided up the land. However, the peasants were not directly involved in the process, censuses were not taken, and land fertility studies were not carried out. Land was simply demarcated, after which a lottery took place to distribute the land plots. As a result, accusations were subsequently made that the EPRP's friends got the best land.<sup>76</sup>

The TPLF was quick to advocate land reform, but in no hurry to actually carry it out. The Front's first land reform in Tigray took place in Sobia and resulted in each family, irrespective of size, receiving one hectare of land comprised of a number of separate plots to account for differences in soil fertility, availability of water, and other considerations. The Sobia land reform served as a model for subsequent TPLF reforms in Tigray, but even some of the core principles, such as each family getting an equal portion of land rather than individuals in the family, were later discarded.

Political competition between the TPLF and EPRP increasingly created tension, particularly as the peasants moved to the TPLF camp. As in western Tigray, peasants were not in favour of two groups opposed to the Derg fighting one another. They were of the view that 'one wife can't have two husbands',<sup>77</sup> and the upshot was a peasant initiative to decide formally at a woreda-wide meeting which organisation to support. The meeting was convened at Galat tabia in the centre of Sobia woreda in late 1978. Three to five representatives were selected from each tabia depending on its size, and for four to six hours each day for eight consecutive days peasants debated whether to support the TPLF or the EPRP. A local peasant, Assesse Nsgabe, chaired the meeting in which both organisations, together with the ELF, had observers, but none of the political movements actively participated in the debate. The end result of the process was a clear statement of support for the TPLF.

Mabrato Adhana, a peasant spectator at the meetings, said, 'people supported the TPLF because they felt that two political organisations in one area were not desirable and there should only be one; also the Tigrayan people have the same culture and problems, and the EPRP should go to its homeland and fight for their poor and oppressed'.<sup>78</sup> The resolution passed and presented in written form to the two organisations concluded that 'the EPRP was fighting for all of Ethiopia, but needed to organise each nationality first to get its own freedom, and therefore each nationality should fight in its own area'.<sup>79</sup> The EPRP was then asked to leave the woreda, but it did

not accept the resolution. Instead it returned the next day and captured the chairman of the meeting, Assesse, and took him away, whereupon the peasants followed and demanded his release, which they subsequently achieved.<sup>80</sup> Other peasant leaders were also captured, held, and fined before being released. One peasant, Abraha Tecklehaimonot, was tied up and thrown off a cliff to his death by EPRP fighters.<sup>81</sup>

The peasants' rejection of the EPRP in Sobia and the party's heavy-handedness served to precipitate the ensuing war between the two movements, but at least one TPLF leader has argued that the Front must accept some of the blame because it did 'not resolve differences in a democratic and non-confrontational manner' and that the start of the war 'was only a matter of time'.<sup>82</sup> At any rate, after its rejection, the EPRP's local network virtually collapsed and the party was able only to maintain its position in the woreda by resorting to violent measures. While subsequent events are confused, it can be said authoritatively that the EPRP initiated the conflict by killing three or four TPLF cadres at a Front medical clinic (although the clinic was apparently in the EPRP operational area) and then leaving their corpses on the road, an action which infuriated local peasants. In the face of this aggression, TPLF fighters in the woreda and their local militia supporters retreated to central Tigray. The rupture in relations in late 1978 could not have been more ill-timed for the TPLF which was in the final stages of a victorious, but very costly, war with the EDU in western Tigray. The TPLF strongly suspects that the timing of the outbreak of fighting between it and the EPRP was based on the latter's collusion with the EDU. However, the timing of the conflict also reflected attempts by the leadership to defuse growing internal party criticism by waging war against external forces.<sup>83</sup>

While TPLF forces had indeed been markedly depleted, they were none the less steeled in battle and confident of their skills. With its greater numbers the EPRP was initially successful in forcing the TPLF out of Agame. But at this point the TPLF was able to bring its battle-hardened forces from the west into the fray, and in an engagement north of Inticho in central Tigray in late March 1978, the EPRP was roundly defeated.

A similar set of events unfolded at almost the same time in the woreda of Adi Ahferom to the south-west of Sobia where both movements began operations. However, with eighteen mobile cadres who regularly returned to bases outside the woreda every few months, the EPRP dominated the woreda for about ten months in the period 1976-7. None the less, peasants from the area sent four representatives to a TPLF base near the Eritrean border to take militia training and invite the Front to begin operations in the woreda and carry out a land reform.

The two movements fought for political supremacy in Adi Ahferom with the EPRP arguing that the peasants should not support the TPLF because

it was poor and concentrated its efforts in the rural areas when it should be in the towns where the enemy was. According to local peasants, they also accused the TPLF of only fighting for the liberation of Tigray and not for all Ethiopia like the EPRP. But the people opposed the EPRP because they 'were not interested in staying in the rural areas to help the people struggle', unlike the TPLF which fought the people's enemies, the shiftas and nobles.<sup>84</sup> In addition, peasants were attracted to the TPLF precisely because of its members' poverty, which to them demonstrated the TPLF's selflessness.

The event which replaced political competition with military competition between the two opposition groups and at the same time served to sever the EPRP's ties with the peasants was their killing of a TPLF cadre, Haile Mariam, and the subsequent torture of three student Front supporters in early 1977. Although details of the events are not easily discerned, peasants in Adi Ahferom claim it was they, and not the TPLF, that forced the EPRP to leave the area. After Haile Mariam's death four regional woredas passed a resolution asking the EPRP to leave peacefully, and although there was some 'gun play', the EPRP did leave without anyone else being killed. With the departure of the EPRP, the TPLF achieved a dominant position in the woreda.

In the wake of the events in Sobia and Adi Ahferom the TPLF forced the EPRP to retreat to its base in Asimba and after five days of fighting the party split into three groups. One retreated north into Eritrea, where its members were taken into custody by the EPLF and later released into the Sudan. A second group went to the isolated Wolkait district on the Sudanese border in Gondar province, where it was still in existence when the Derg collapsed in 1991. A third group retreated to Wollo where it eventually reformulated itself with TPLF support as the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM).

The EPRP had been seriously weakened, both politically and militarily, by the experience of the previous two years. It was the primary victim of the Red Terror and by March 1978 the Derg was claiming, only a little prematurely, that the party had been completely wiped out.<sup>85</sup> The EPRP's superior numbers and armament compared to the TPLF did not overcome its demoralisation, political divisions, poor relations with the peasantry, and, despite almost three years in the field, lack of military experience. It also ran foul of the two Eritrean liberation movements. Relations with the EPLF were broken completely when the EPRP, in a change of policy, declared that it no longer supported Eritrean independence, and relations with the ELF were seriously jeopardised when the EPRP apparently referred to the ELF as one of its mass organisations.<sup>86</sup>

This victory left the TPLF in a dominant position in opposition to the

Derg in the north-east at the same time that it had achieved a commanding position in the west. Politically the peasants favoured the nationalist appeals of the TPLF to the pan-Ethiopian approach of the EPRP. And the poverty and selflessness of the TPLF cadres contrasted favourably with displays of wealth and arrogance by some EPRP cadres. Lastly, the TPLF's defeat of the larger and more prestigious EPRP, as was the case with the EDU, went far to undermining peasant scepticism about the Front's military capabilities.

### Competing nationalisms

With the exception of Teranafit/EDU, almost all of the Ethiopian opposition forces derived their origins and inspiration from the student movement, and a central premise of that movement was that Ethiopia constituted a prison of nationalities. Thus the TPLF's commitment to nationalist-based struggle is entirely consistent with the thinking of the generation of students of which the Front's leaders had been members. However, while the students affirmed the right of Ethiopia's nations and of Eritrea to self-determination, what self-determination meant, to whom it applied, and how it would be realised, were matters of considerable dispute and these disputes became bound up with the various movements jockeying for power in the countryside.

Very quickly after launching their armed struggle the TPLF found themselves at odds with the TLF and then the ELF. In the period 1972–3 a group of Tigrayans founded the clandestine Tigray Political Organisation and, with the support of the ELF, began operations in 1975 under the name of the Tigray Liberation Front.<sup>87</sup> Led by Yohannis Tecle Haimanot, a teacher, and Gebre Kidane, a pharmacist, its programme was devoted to achieving an independent Tigray.<sup>88</sup> The movement largely drew its support from the intelligentsia of north-eastern Tigray, particularly around the town of Adigrat, and in the isolated Asimba area where it attempted to gain the support of local peasants. However, peasants from the area report that the TLF did little political work and did not organise a militia or distribute arms.<sup>89</sup> Little is known about this small and short-lived organisation except that it held that Tigray was a colony of Ethiopia and hence the focus of the movement's struggle was anti-colonialism and independence. In its attempt to achieve a united front the TLF developed relations with the noble-led EDU, an action which gained the ire of the TPLF which accused it of being 'a die-hard, narrow nationalist organisation'.<sup>90</sup>

In spite of these differences and divergent Eritrean attachments,<sup>91</sup> their shared commitment to Tigrayan nationalism and fear of falling prey to the violent conflicts that divided the Eritrean movements led the TLF and



TPLF to begin negotiations which resulted in an agreement in November 1975 to unite the two organisations and dissolve the TLF. In spite of this agreement, however, a number of TLF cadres, including two Central Committee members, Yohannis Tecele Haimanot and Tadesse Tilahun, were subsequently killed by the TPLF. The TPLF claims that these individuals were arrested after it was found that they had killed six or seven of their colleagues. They were subsequently put on trial in the presence of EPLF and ELF observers, found guilty, and executed.<sup>92</sup> Conversely, Kahsay Berhe considered the cause of the killings to be a power struggle within the TPLF.<sup>93</sup>

The TPLF relationship with the ELF also foundered over different nationalist visions. Although the TPLF launched its armed struggle with the support of the EPLF, it soon developed closer relations with the ELF because it carried out more attacks on Derg targets in Tigray, thus giving the fledgling TPLF valuable combat experience. Indeed, the ELF's wide field of operations in Tigray was to be part of the reason behind the complete break in relations between the TPLF and the ELF in the late 1970s. This is because, unlike the EPLF, the ELF's interpretation of Eritrea's boundaries went beyond the Italian-defined colonial borders and included parts of north-western Tigray, a conception the TPLF could not accept. A further source of tension was the ELF's relationships with other movements, notably the EDU which at the time was challenging the TPLF in western Tigray, and with the EPRP, against which it was competing in eastern Tigray.<sup>94</sup>

The ELF also endeavoured to get the TPLF to accept its political positions over those of its rival, the EPLF, something the TPLF was reluctant to do. Furthermore, the ELF leadership stressed pan-Arabism and Islam as a means to build ties with lowland sheikhs and ethnic leaders, an approach that led to accusations that it was sectarian and feudal. It was not an approach that was effective in mobilising the highland Christian population of Eritrea or in winning the support of the Ethiopian student movement. The EPLF in contrast was strongly anti-feudal and secular. Its Marxism found favour among many Ethiopian radicals and the fact that its leadership was largely made up of Tigrigna-speakers facilitated relations with the TPLF. The TPLF was also impressed by the EPLF's 'democratic centralism' which encouraged debate, but demanded absolute loyalty to the decisions reached.

The TPLF also had, and continues to have, difficult relations with the Oromo Liberation Front, the premier exponent of Oromo nationalism in Ethiopia. Established shortly before the collapse of the Haile-Selassie regime, the OLF's formation was the culmination of more than a decade of Oromo cultural and political agitation. However, because of its focus in

eastern Ethiopia, it was not until the defeat of the Somali army in the Ogaden that the OLF shifted its interest to the west and opened an office in Khartoum which brought it into direct contact with the TPLF and EPLF. From the beginning the OLF's relations were more cordial with the EPLF which provided training for its fighters in 1979 and was not, like the TPLF, opposed to its premise that Oromia constituted a colony within Ethiopia.<sup>95</sup> Although the TPLF was also to provide military training for the OLF in the mid-1980s, differences over the colonial categorisation and various military matters led the TPLF in 1986 to denounce the organisation and withdraw its training unit.<sup>96</sup> Relations were further exacerbated in the late 1980s when the TPLF began recruiting captured Oromos from the Derg's army who were then to join the TPLF-created Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO).

### Conclusion

In the critical interim between 1975 and 1978 as disenchantment grew, and before the army arrived in sufficient numbers to contain dissent, Teranafit/EDU, EPRP, and the TPLF propagated their programmes and struggled for opposition ascendancy in Tigray. Although possessing more fighters, better armaments, and more external backers, Teranafit/EDU and the EPRP estranged the Tigrayan peasantry. The much smaller and poorly equipped TPLF, with its programme of nationalism, popular government, and land redistribution, and its involvement of the peasants in implementing these reforms, contrasted favourably with the noble-led rebels and the 'Black Bolsheviks' of the EPRP.

In its battles with Teranafit/EDU the TPLF leadership concluded that nationalist appeals were not enough and that if the Front was to win the support of the peasants it had to address their social problems and needs, notably their desire for just and effective administration and land reform. Conversely, the EPRP emphasised the social problem, but did little to confront it in Agame, Adi Ahferom, or other places in which it attempted to establish itself. Moreover, it was authoritarian, and completely insensitive to the nationalist aspirations of the peasants. The extreme vulnerability of the TPLF in the early years may have been one of its greatest assets, because unlike Teranafit/EDU and the EPRP, the Front had to rely on the goodwill of the peasants if it was to survive and this forced the movement to closely study their condition and attempt to address their problems. By the time the Derg was able to exert its power in the province the TPLF had survived its perilous birthing period and had eliminated the EDU and EPRP and become the main opponent to the regime in western Tigray.

As various theorists have noted, revolutions take form in areas with the

weakest links to the state. The EDU, EPRP, and TPLF all established their first bases in outlying areas of Tigray to avoid the security apparatus of the state and thus be positioned to carry out peasant mobilisations, near their Eritrean supporters and, in the case of the EDU and TPLF, close to Sudan where they maintained political offices and attempted to mobilise refugees. This did not, however, mean that the TPLF's supporters were restricted to peasants in the rural areas because among the earliest followers of the TPLF were inhabitants of the small towns and villages on the road between the western Tigray administrative centre of Endaselasie and the region's second town of Sheraro, communities readily accessible to the Derg's army. Part of the explanation for their support of the TPLF lies in the fact that apart from the Adwa–Axum nexus, a considerable proportion of the Front's early leadership came from this area and this would attract local support. The second point to note is that Dedebeit, like the EPRP's base at Asimba in the east, became a magnet for Tigrayan youth terrorised by the Derg, and the nearest inhabitants to the TPLF base at Dedebeit were those living in the villages along the Endaselasie–Sheraro road.

A more fitting explanation of isolation from authority must recognise that it cannot be simply measured in terms of physical distance. In western Tigray the limited infrastructure, weak administration, and prevalence of *shifita* and frontier-like conditions, led to the state being perceived by local inhabitants as distant and ineffectual. Moreover, the Derg was slow to gain effective control over the organs of the state because of its internal weaknesses and the chaotic conditions prevailing in the wake of the collapse of the old regime. Thus for a time the state was largely absent, particularly in the peripheral areas of the country. It was in the context of this political vacuum that the opposition movements began their operations. This transitional period continued until about 1977–8 and the inauguration of the Red Terror campaign, by which time the Derg was in the process of establishing a far more effective, centralised, and militarised state than existed (or could have existed) under the old regime. It was this Soviet-supplied and increasingly monolithic state that confronted the rebels and their supporters.

Although by 1978 the TPLF was victorious over the other opposition movements, its naiveté and inexperience had frequently led to death, disillusionment, or defection. Colonel Kalechristos Abbay, a Tigrayan whose father had been an aristocrat and a patriot in the Italian war, and who held the position of governor of Tigray from 1976 to 1978, estimated that the number of TPLF fighters fell from 1,200 to 450 in that period.<sup>97</sup> He was appointed governor in part because of his military background and opposition to the imperial regime (he had been jailed for his involvement in the 1960 coup attempt), but also because unlike most Derg officers he had deep roots in Tigray and this gave him a basis for understanding the turmoil that

the province had been thrown into after the collapse of the old regime. Until 1978 Kalechristos could only rely on a single artillery battalion and a police force in the province and therefore he was largely restricted to confronting the rebel groups politically. In any event, the Derg largely discounted the TPLF's potential and considered it best to simply sit back and reap the rewards of the internecine warfare between the various opposition groups.

However, in meeting with Tigrayan elders Kalechristos learned that in spite of Ras Mengesha's superior forces, neither they, nor the forces of the EPRP, were considered a significant political threat. Conversely, the TPLF was treated seriously because it articulated genuine grievances in the community. These grievances included the demand for Tigrayan equality, ending discrimination in government employment and education, more schools, hospitals and other infrastructure, and an end to the imposition of Amharigna. The new governor quickly concluded that the Maoist rhetoric of the TPLF was unlikely on its own to have much impact on the religiously devout peasants, but the Front's effectiveness at articulating popular grievances did threaten the government in Tigray.<sup>98</sup>

The TPLF maintains that the number of fighters was much lower than Kalechristos's 1976 estimate, but accepts that in the following two years there was a significant loss of membership. Both sources agree that most of the decline was due to the high number of fatalities in the fight against the forces of Teranafit and EDU. The TPLF holds that the large number of defections was because of the arduous living conditions, the high number of battle fatalities, and the belief among some that the movement was collapsing. Fighters were also angry that the TPLF leadership was not successful in acquiring arms from either the EPLF, which largely supported the EPRP, or from the ELF, which supported the EDU during this period. In this climate when confronted by some 10,000 troops of the EDU in the Shire-Adiabo district of western Tigray in March 1977, the forced retreat led a number of cadres to abandon the organisation. Although the TPLF accused the defectors of being opportunists and failing to understand the nature of a protracted people's war, they argue that they helped to convince the Derg that the Front was close to collapse and thus deluded it as to the movement's real strength.

In spite of the Derg's weak military position, promises of genuine development and good government in the province, together with the appeal of elders who did not want to see their sons die fighting the government, and the difficult living conditions of TPLF members, led to hundreds of them deserting in this period. Kalechristos is convinced that had the Derg not instituted its repressive policies, and instead responded positively to the grievances of the Tigrayan and Eritrean peoples, both rebellions could have been contained and the TPLF and EPLF marginalised.<sup>99</sup>

The lowlands of western Tigray closely fit the profile drawn by Wolf and Migdal of where peasant revolts are likely to break out, but these theorists appear wide of the mark in their emphasis on agricultural commercialisation as precipitating the revolt. While agricultural commercialisation was more developed in this region than anywhere else in Tigray, because of land surpluses it did not produce either a class of landless labourers or private capitalist farmers. Commercial farming was largely undertaken by members of the aristocracy who acquired land without threatening that in the possession of peasant cultivators.

Opposition to commercial agriculture was thus not an impetus for revolt in western Tigray. Instead, opposition sprang from the threat posed to the livelihoods of many thousands of peasants dependent on seasonal employment from commercial farming by the Derg's land reform policies. It is significant that the aristocratic leaders of Teranafit/EDU appealed to the peasantry for support by promising both protection of the risti land tenure system on which the rural economy was based, and the right to employ labour on which commercial farming was premised.

Although many people from Agame also participated in the commercial economy, either as seasonal hired workers, traders, or sellers of agricultural produce on the market, there is no evidence that this produced a stronger impetus to revolt on the part of the people. The Agame peasants' participation in the market was not a response to modernisation and capitalist-created consumer demands, but an entirely predictable response in an environment where most of the population did not have enough land on which to survive. Moreover, there is little evidence that familial and commercial ties with neighbouring Eritrea in revolt heightened political consciousness in Agame. A peasant thought that the Eritrean war only had a significant influence on the thinking of Tigrayan intellectuals.<sup>100</sup>

While agricultural commercialisation cannot be shown to precipitate revolt, nationalism did prove to be an effective instrument in mobilising peasants. Indeed, both Teranafit/EDU and the TPLF couched their appeals to peasants in terms of Tigrayan nationalism and played on fears that the Derg represented a new and more powerful form of Amhara domination. While there are many reasons for the failure of the EPRP in Agame, a key one was its failure to espouse Tigrayan nationalism. In the wake of the collapse of the imperial regime, and well before the Derg was able to alienate much of the peasantry through its brutality and incompetence, Tigrayan peasants were dislocated and confused, but virtually united in opposition to the new government. They feared a new form of Amhara domination being imposed and were convinced, as one peasant put it that, 'only Tigrayans could solve Tigrayan problems'.

## 5 Challenges and advances: 1978–1985

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### **Introduction**

From 1974 until the defeat of the Somali invasion in 1978, the regime's problems allowed the TPLF and other opposition groups a measure of freedom in which to launch their insurrections. With victory in the Ogaden and massive Soviet support the government's priority turned to crushing the Eritrean Fronts which it was convinced would bring an end to insurrections in Tigray and other parts of the country.<sup>1</sup> The TPLF reported that there were 30,000 Derg troops in Tigray by the end of May 1978, three times the number of two months previously.<sup>2</sup> None the less, although possessing a much depleted fighting force and still only having the committed support of a small number of peasants, victories over the EDU and EPRP gave the TPLF considerable confidence.

Derg repression against the civilian population led to growing disenchantment among peasants and produced increasing numbers of urban youth fleeing the towns who joined the TPLF. Together with the regime's failure to defeat the EPLF, by the mid-1980s there was a marked change in the balance of forces. But before the strategic initiative could pass to the opposition movements, northern Ethiopia and Eritrea were afflicted with famine. The period thus ends with the famine being contained and the TPLF going through internal adjustments in preparation for the march to victory.

### **Life under the Derg**

While the Red Terror was primarily an urban phenomenon, peasants who went to the towns to participate in markets, meet officials, or visit their children who attended schools, could not escape the impact of the violence, which was widely interpreted as an attack on the entire Tigrayan community. In an effort to undermine TPLF support in the late 1970s the Derg began restricting the sale of agricultural implements to peasants in an effort to cut food production.<sup>3</sup> However, the government was forced to abandon the policy in 1982 when its urban-based army found itself desperate for food while surpluses existed in the rural areas.

Peasants coming from areas of TPLF strength ran the risk of imprisonment for being suspected Front supporters and they responded by largely avoiding the towns. For those who remained in the Derg-garrisoned towns life was difficult, particularly for women who were frequently the victims of assault and rape.<sup>4</sup> Explaining conditions under the regime, a Maichew resident said:

People had to be clever or tactical. It was a soldier's government and you had to give soldiers food, *tej* [a meade], whatever they wanted. Parents gave their children to marry Derg soldiers to get security. Rape was common, even of priests' wives. The belongings of the wealthy were taken. If parents were rich enough they would send their children out of the area, but if the children were young they had to put up with it. You couldn't even sit outside with two or three people, even with one's family as they might be employed by Derg security. You could only talk about sex, food, and *tej*.<sup>5</sup>

In the face of such persecution many evacuated their homes and left for Sudan, while others, primarily youth, fled to the base areas of the EPRP and TPLF. After an individual's disappearance the Derg would commonly arrest the person's parents and this often led to the other children leaving and joining the opposition.

Furthermore, after the initial euphoria brought about by the collapse of the old regime, many of the Derg's reforms were either being rolled back or seriously questioned. New taxes were imposed because the government badly needed finances to pay for the war in Eritrea and a host of smaller conflicts throughout the country, including that in Tigray. Derg-sponsored 'Motherland Festivals' were held to coerce townspeople into contributing money to the state through auctions of consumer items at prices up to ten thousand times their market value.<sup>6</sup> Peasants were unhappy at the Derg's closure of most rural schools on the pretext that the teachers were TPLF sympathisers. They were angered at being forced to provide quotas of produce at fixed below-market prices for the state-run Agricultural Marketing Corporation, an obligation peasants considered a feudal levy.

The Derg attempted to organise rural administrations, but its methods were harsh and allowed little room for democratic participation. Moreover, peasants discovered that the corruption-ridden local administrations of the imperial era had been replaced by only slightly less corrupt, and far more harsh, Derg-imposed administrations. Peasant Associations which had started out as bodies representative of local opinion were reduced to the status of organs responsible to the Derg. In interviews across Tigray peasants reported that PA officials were invariably friends or cohorts of the Derg and these same people became the prime beneficiaries of land distributions.

The TPLF claimed that the Derg issued secret circulars instructing PA officials to only give land to those who had the means to plough it, which would have the effect of ensuring that the benefits of the reforms would have gone to higher-income peasants who dominated the associations.<sup>7</sup> In its political appeals to the peasants the TPLF focused on the inequities of the Derg's land reforms and contrasted them with its own and by the late 1970s there were enough examples of Front-initiated land reforms that the peasants could make comparisons.

Conditions were particularly difficult under the Derg for traders and merchants. The Derg 'nationalised' illegally acquired goods found in the possession of traders, but they would also on occasion take legally acquired merchandise in the name of development or resettlement. Sometimes the extortion was more direct with Derg soldiers ordering merchants to set artificially high prices for goods and then taking the extra money from the sales. Generally the issuing of licences, establishment of government trading corporations, and the demand for bribes, led to the decline of trade and only older merchants and those close to Derg officials remained in the towns.<sup>8</sup> Younger merchants sometimes went to the liberated territories, or with the approval of the TPLF, operated as mobile traders in the rural areas, often engaging in trade with *Asibi* (Afar) traders who brought goods from the Red Sea port of Djibouti.

It was not until 1983 that the TPLF began a concerted programme of promoting the development of commercial enterprise, particularly grain, in the areas under its control.<sup>9</sup> However, the limited purchasing power of the peasants and the insecurity of daytime travel discouraged professional traders and encouraged a hardier breed of part-time traders who were able to undercut their larger counterparts. Often starting as day labourers employed by rich farmers, they had slowly built up capital and after the collapse of the old regime began transporting basic consumer items from Derg-occupied towns to the liberated territories and TPLF-controlled towns. This was a highly dangerous occupation and many such merchants were captured and summarily shot.<sup>10</sup> The TPLF also turned to the merchants for consumer items, such as rubber sandals, sugar, canned milk, and grain.<sup>11</sup> Sometimes the Front would commission merchants to bring them essential goods in the possession of the Derg, a dangerous task which entailed indirectly trading with the Derg. On occasion soldiers in Derg-garrisoned Mahoni reportedly sold their rations and even bullets to traders, knowing they were destined for the TPLF. The TPLF also made small raids on Derg supply depots in the towns to acquire badly needed items like bullets and petrol.<sup>12</sup> However, until the Derg was removed from Tigray and the urban and rural areas reintegrated, the trading economy could not be fully revived.



### **Military and political struggles 1978–1984**

In 1978 REST was established as a humanitarian organisation with a mandate to co-ordinate relief programmes, rehabilitation, and development both in Tigray and among Tigrayan refugees in neighbouring Sudan. The founding of REST reflected the TPLF's need for a specialised body to handle relief and development, and also to respond to the Derg's efforts to restrict the flow of humanitarian and economic assistance to areas of Tigray that were coming under the control of the Front.<sup>13</sup> Following in the footsteps of the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA) of the EPLF, the establishment of REST also reflected the growing recognition by the TPLF leadership of the importance of international assistance and the fact that NGOs and foreign governments found it politically more acceptable to deal with a designated relief agency than with a liberation movement. REST is largely funded by NGOs (which may in turn receive finances from governments) in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Europe, and also by REST Support Committees which publicise the plight of Tigray's peoples and solicit assistance on their behalf. In spite of this outside involvement, REST has always been little more than an arm of the TPLF; its membership moved freely between the two organisations, and REST's policies and practices have been largely determined by the Front. Internally, REST operates through the auspices of various social welfare committees of the *baitos*.

In 1979 the TPLF held a leadership review at its First Organisational Congress in western Tigray, three years after its first Fighters Congress. Eighteen more members were added to the seven-person Central Committee, while Sebat Nega was elected Chairman of the TPLF and the former chairman, Aregowie Berhe, became head of the powerful Military Committee.<sup>14</sup> The first Politburo came into existence and its membership included the original five Central Committee members as well as Meles Zenawi, Siye Abraha, Tewelde Wolde Mariam, Gebru Asrat, and Awalew Woldu.<sup>15</sup> Apart from the elections, the major item on the agenda was drafting and passing the programme of the National Democratic Revolution, which as one not unsympathetic observer has noted, was virtually the same as that of nearly all the contending groups in Ethiopia, the Derg included.<sup>16</sup>

In the early years the TPLF gained a reputation for kidnapping to draw international attention to their struggle. A British family, the Taylors, were captured in the Tigrayan awardja of Tembien, and John Swain of the *Sunday Times* was briefly held captive.<sup>17</sup> In July 1980 a TPLF raid on Axum led to the seizure of two Russian doctors employed in Tigray.<sup>18</sup> And in 1984 the TPLF briefly held ten foreigners captured at the tourist centre of Lalibela in Wollo province.<sup>19</sup> Selected assassinations of Derg officials were

also carried out by 'Fedayean/Suicide squads', such as that on 4 February 1978 against Lieutenant Tefera, chief of the Red Terror campaign in Tigray.<sup>20</sup> The TPLF was a product of its times and worked at linking its struggle with various popular movements. Typical was its exhortation to 'all revolutionary, Democratic and peace loving Forces of the World to extend their helping hand to the Tigray people in the just struggle against Imperialism, Zionism, Feudalism, national oppression and Fascism.'<sup>21</sup>

In 1978 the TPLF attacked Adwa and in the following year attempted to repeat its success in Axum by robbing the town's bank, but it was unsuccessful. Apart from those incidents, Adwa did not become the site of any major military confrontation until it was captured by the TPLF in 1988. In July 1980 the TPLF launched a second attack on Axum, this time with the covert support of Yemane, the district governor, who had ordered the local militia to stay in their houses. A number of Derg soldiers were killed and St Mary's Hospital was robbed of medicines and an X-ray machine. However, the story does not end there: six months later a leading TPLF cadre, Grimay Mouse, killed two TPLF fighters before defecting to the Derg where he exposed a number of TPLF supporters in Axum including Yemane, who was imprisoned and killed some years later in Addis Ababa.

Generally, after the onset of the Red Terror the province's towns receded in military and political importance, but there were two notable exceptions: Abi Adi in Tembien awardja and the villages on the road between Endaselasie and Sheraro in western Tigray, both isolated, lowland areas. The EPRP moved through Tembien in transit to its two base areas in Gondar and Asimba, while the EDU attempted to strike roots based on its leader Ras Mengesha's ancestral ties to the area. But it was the TPLF that quickly achieved a secure position in the awardja. With only minimal forces the Front was able to take over lightly defended Abi Adi in 1976 and control the town for almost a year before being routed by superior Derg forces. The struggle for control of Tembien and Abi Adi was crucial to the TPLF's Tigray-wide military strategy. In the early period of the war Tembien's isolation and strong national sentiments made it a prime area in which to develop and train guerrilla forces. For the same reason it was a difficult area for the Derg administration to defend. Control of the town passed in and out of Derg hands until 1988 when it irrevocably fell to the TPLF, although not without terrible cost to the town's inhabitants.<sup>22</sup>

From its first base in nearby Dedebeit, after the defeat of the EDU the TPLF quickly gained support from the villagers on the difficult to defend road between the Derg stronghold of Endaselasie and western Tigray's second town of Sheraro. During the entire course of the war the Derg was never able to exert more than temporary control over these villages in spite of their relative accessibility. The army's impending arrival in a village

would bring about a rapid move to the countryside for all but the old and sick, and the army's departure would signal their return. The Derg never had sufficient troops to support garrisons in all the villages, so instead advance troops were sent out to ensure the security of passing convoys which were then removed when the convoy had passed. The movement of convoys along this road to Eritrea and Asmara was essential if the army's supply lines were to be kept open, but holding Sheraro in an area almost completely hostile to the Derg proved too difficult and the town was eventually abandoned.

TPLF assaults often left the army with few troops to challenge the insurrection in rural Tigray. The Front established semi-secure base areas in Shire, central Tigray, and Agame for training, treating the wounded, keeping prisoners of war, and as places of refuge. Meanwhile, the bulk of its forces ranged widely across the province, carrying out small ambushes and then moving on quickly. With a premium on mobility the TPLF frequently rejected recruits because it did not have the capacity to absorb them. The objective at this stage of the conflict was to show the Front's power to the peasants and limit government troop movements to large, centrally controlled operations. Only rarely, when TPLF forces were superior in number, was the army directly engaged. Although unable to seriously challenge the army, the TPLF caused increasing disillusionment and psychological stress as the Derg forces found they were unable to protect all their positions.

Much of the TPLF's military efforts throughout the entire war were directed at attacking the Derg's supply lines, particularly those connecting the relatively secure lands to the south of Tigray with the besieged territory of Eritrea to the north. Writing in mid-1980 from field observations, the journalist Rebecca Moore concluded that the most important factor in reducing Derg morale was the growth of the TPLF and its effectiveness in harassing overland supply routes. She concluded that 'this has forced the Derg to rely almost totally on air and sea transport to supply its battle lines, and constitutes an expensive addition to the already intolerable financial burden on the economy of the war'.<sup>23</sup>

TPLF attacks on Derg lines of communication to Eritrea also encouraged EPLF support for the Tigrayans. This support was largely of a technical nature, responding to the TPLF's shortages of technical skills and advanced weaponry, most of which was made up of Russian arms captured by the EPLF.<sup>24</sup> However, in 1981 the TPLF was unable to cope with the large numbers of recruits attracted to the movement and it turned to the EPLF to provide military training for its fighters in Eritrea.<sup>25</sup> The EPLF in turn requested the use of these fighters in its desperate defence of its Sahel base during the Derg's 1982 Red Star Campaign.<sup>26</sup> Co-operation grew

between the leadership of the TPLF and EPLF, and in the early 1980s they were in daily radio contact to co-ordinate their military and political activities.<sup>27</sup>

From the early days of the revolution developing, maintaining, and securing communications links were crucial to the TPLF's success. For a brief period between the founding of the TPLF and the introduction of the Red Terror the Front was able to hold clandestine meetings and distribute pamphlets in the towns. But the Derg's urban terror campaign brought this to an end, after which security concerns meant that inter-movement communications and the dissemination of propaganda were tightly controlled by the leadership. As one cadre noted, in poverty-stricken Tigray peasants could become informers upon payment of ten to twenty birr. Indicative of the TPLF's fear of spies and saboteurs were the 'field names' or aliases used by all fighters and the identifying numbers used by the leadership.<sup>28</sup> Numbers and codes were widely used in the TPLF to identify everything from geographical locations to prison camps. Although not formalised this language was widely employed.

For many years Dejene in western Tigray served as a centre for both the production and distribution of the TPLF's political materials and for instructions to fighters and supporters in the outlying regions. This relatively secure area also became the site of the TPLF's radio station, *Dimitsi Woyane* (Voice of the Liberation), in 1985 after the Front's break with the EPLF ended its access to the EPLF's radio station in northern Eritrea.

Although in the early years TPLF membership was small and most fighters came from the towns, in the period 1980–82 recruitment increased by a TPLF-estimated factor of four or five, with most new recruits coming from the peasantry.<sup>29</sup> This increase cannot be accounted for by any single event, but was the culmination of a number of processes. First, the TPLF had to convince a sceptical peasantry that they had the military capacity to challenge their enemies. Defeat of the EDU and EPRP and survival in the face of superior Derg forces began that process. Secondly, with growing numbers of experienced cadres the TPLF developed the capacity to move from political appeals and displays of commitment to the peasants' welfare, to responding to the peasants' needs for land reforms and democratic institutions. These TPLF-stimulated processes paralleled the rapidly declining political and economic situation in Tigray under the Derg's administration. TPLF cadres who worked in the rural areas during this period report that by 1980 peasant heads of families who had previously only offered passive support to the Front would now typically keep two of their sons on the farm and send the others to the TPLF.

Growing rural support gave the TPLF the capacity to range further

afield and carry out attacks behind enemy lines and even beyond Tigray to Gondar and Wollo. Local support also allowed the Front to rapidly build up its militias. In addition, local support provided the kind of accurate intelligence and knowledge of the area so that the Front could engage much larger Derg forces and attack from all sides. By 1982 Derg control in most cases did not reach beyond five to ten kilometres from the main roads.<sup>30</sup>

While the struggle was rapidly escalating in Tigray, in 1982 the Derg launched the Red Star Campaign which had the objective of completing destroying the EPLF. Such was the campaign's scale, however, that it was widely known, and contingency plans were being prepared long in advance by its proposed victim. Part of the EPLF's defence involved the use of TPLF recruits referred to above. As with the case of the Raza Project, the TPLF's viability was held to be contingent on the survival of the EPLF. Some 3,000 TPLF fighters spent nine months in the Sahel region that served as the base area for the EPLF. It is always difficult to ascertain TPLF strength, but these fighters may have constituted one-half of its non-militia forces at the time, so their commitment to the EPLF speaks strongly to the importance the outcome of the defence held for the TPLF leadership.<sup>31</sup> Although the EPLF was pushed far to the north and lost large numbers of fighters, the failure of the Derg to defeat the Eritrean rebels irrevocably shifted the strategic initiative away from the regime.

This key campaign also helped to define the emerging military differences between the TPLF and EPLF. While the TPLF recognised the need to advance from guerrilla to conventional warfare if the Derg was to be defeated, it argued that the EPLF had opted for conventional warfare too early and at too great a cost. Contrary to the EPLF, the TPLF was not committed to holding territory until the expulsion of the Derg from Tigray in 1989. The TPLF's base area was generally held to be in the Sheraro area of western Tigray, but this area was in fact evacuated on three or four occasions when it was attacked by superior forces. Even after the TPLF's 1988 capture of all the Tigrayan towns north of Mekelle, it evacuated them a few months later when the Derg went on the offensive. In none of these cases was the TPLF prepared to accept the loss of large numbers of fighters and civilians to defend areas that it was confident could be retaken at a time of its own choosing without loss of life on such a scale.

Beisel was told by a group of TPLF fighters that in the EPLF's 1982-3 defence of its liberated territories that the EPLF had made the mistake of letting itself be drawn into fighting a war of heavy armaments from fixed positions with the result that it had been pushed back to the Sahel and had little support in other areas of Eritrea.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, the TPLF fighters contended that:

We don't want to distance ourselves from the general population for whom we are fighting. We aren't an army but a liberation movement and our people have to be convinced that we are operating on their behalf. The mutual trust and confidence that we now enjoy would be lost if we turned Tigray into a site to carry out large scale heavy armament fighting.<sup>33</sup>

With its greater complement of skilled fighters, the larger and more technologically dependent Derg army it faced and from which it acquired most of its weapons, and the greater professionalism of its military leadership, the EPLF was far quicker than the TPLF to move from guerrilla warfare to conventional warfare. Although the EPLF on occasion conducted non-conventional warfare, by 1980 its military leaders had largely directed an army that increasingly fought a conventional war from secure bases against the Derg for the duration of the conflict. For the EPLF this demonstrated their military superiority over the TPLF. The TPLF in turn saw the EPLF's devotion to conventional warfare as indicative of the ascendancy of a professional military establishment within the EPLF, a development which threatened to weaken the democratic character of the war.

From 1985 to 1988 the TPLF army was extensively reorganised, its capacity extended, and the notion of a protracted people's war deepened. With increasingly strong forces and the augmentation of armoured units, the TPLF moved away from reliance on the small guerrilla engagements of the past to destroying much larger forces, both within Tigray and beyond. None the less, the EPLF's conviction that the Derg could be defeated in the Sahel was decisively rejected. This approach was condemned as being 'militarist' and of relegating the people to mere 'spectators', while the TPLF doctrine recognised the initiative of the people.<sup>34</sup> Were such a policy carried out in Tigray, the TPLF leadership reasoned that the movement would be unduly focused on military endeavours and would be restricted to only mobilising the people of its base in western Tigray and not people throughout the province and country.

From the early 1960s ELF guerrilla leaders were trained in Syria, China, and by Cubans in South Yemen.<sup>35</sup> After the collapse of the old regime in 1974 a number of Eritrean officers from the imperial army joined the EPLF. The EPLF thus inherited a tradition of professionalism among its military leaders. As a result, there was an increasing division of authority between the military and political leadership. Moreover, the professional military leadership emphasised technique and relied on technology, an approach expedited by the EPLF's access to more skilled and educated recruits than those of the TPLF. While the TPLF attracted many urban educated youth during its early years, the EPLF attracted even greater numbers of educated recruits from the more established secondary schools of the Tigrigna-speaking highlands in the late 1970s, providing it with a relatively skilled

force capable of being quickly trained in the use of advanced weaponry and military techniques.

In contrast, military strategy and techniques were acquired by the TPLF through personal study and practical experience in the countryside. Training methods may not always have been sophisticated, but they were consistent with the TPLF's emphasis on self-sufficiency. While those with military skills assumed leading positions in the army, there was never the military professionalism and hierarchy in the TPLF that was evident in the EPLF. It is thus significant that among the top three TPLF military leaders, Siye Abraha, Mohammed Yanous (Samora), and Hadish Araya (Hayloum),<sup>36</sup> only the first was university educated, and none of them went abroad for military training.

The TPLF also placed more emphasis on locally organised militias than did the EPLF. While TPLF fighters moved widely and frequently throughout Tigray and beyond to link up with local militias and attack Derg positions, the EPLF depended more on carefully planned 'push' movements that advanced from fixed defended positions to attack the Derg and then retreat. A former Derg officer with extensive experience fighting both Fronts attributed these differences in tactics as being due to the closer relations the TPLF developed with its peasant supporters.<sup>37</sup> Thus the TPLF could move widely and attack the Derg from its rear and then, with the support of the local peasantry and militia, withdraw to safe positions. With its dependence on a largely conventional army, the EPLF did not have the mobility to carry out similar operations.

Differences were also apparent in the two Fronts' approach to recruitment. While the large majority of EPLF fighters were clearly drawn to the movement on a voluntary basis, forced conscription of peasant youth was also used. Villages in Eritrea would sometimes be surrounded by EPLF fighters and youth selected and taken away at gunpoint for military training. I can confirm on the basis of my 1986–89 residence in Sudan, temporary home to half a million Eritrean refugees, that Eritrean youth did occasionally report that as well as fleeing the Derg, they also left their homes to avoid being forcibly conscripted into the EPLF. Indeed, the TPLF reportedly warned the EPLF that its preoccupation with the defence of the Sahel would lead to forced conscription.<sup>38</sup> The TPLF leadership for their part claim they never resorted to such means of recruitment, and my research provides no evidence with which to challenge them.

There were also marked differences between the TPLF and EPLF in their treatment of prisoners of war (POWs). EPLF policy was to have POWs participate in productive activities such as construction and agriculture.<sup>39</sup> Although prisoners were sometimes released as a goodwill gesture or when the EPLF was unable to provide for their sustenance or safety, most

prisoners were kept in captivity for many years. The EPLF's rationale for this practice was two-fold. First, it wanted to turn over the prisoners to the Derg through the auspices of the International Commission of the Red Cross, a process which would provide some protection to the POWs and would also force the Derg to officially and publicly acknowledge the capture of its soldiers. Such public recognition would also benefit the EPLF politically. Secondly, the EPLF held that since the prisoners were regularly moved in the liberated territories, their knowledge posed a security risk.<sup>40</sup>

Although in the early period of the war POWs held by the TPLF were sent to EPLF camps in Eritrea, later the Tigrayans took control of their prisoners and developed very different policies to the EPLF. POWs held by the TPLF were not used as conscripted labourers. Like prisoners held by the EPLF, they were sometimes moved about the liberated territories, but this was because the Derg was known to target such prisoners in bombing raids, and the TPLF never suggested these movements posed a security risk that necessitated keeping prisoners for long periods. Indeed, the practice was to keep prisoners from four to eight months during which time they were exposed to TPLF propaganda and then released. The TPLF did not resort to public posturing over the POWs' official status, and the prisoners were given the choice of going to Sudan as refugees, returning to their home villages, or increasingly in the final phase of the war, joining the TPLF or one of the EPRDF components. Derg officers were treated in the same fashion as conscripts and only Workers Party of Ethiopia officials were segregated in the prison camps and held for longer periods.<sup>41</sup>

The TPLF practice of early release of POWs was more humane, but foremost it was a response to the scarce human and material resources consumed in keeping POWs for extended periods. Secondly, the TPLF saw clear political and military advantages in quickly releasing prisoners. Prisoners who returned home would report to their fellow villagers that they had been well treated, thus undermining Derg propaganda that portrayed the TPLF as a *shifita* or bandit organisation, and that would also make the Front's eventual move south into non-Tigrayan lands more acceptable to the local population. Moreover, were such prisoners to be conscripted again, the Derg could not be assured of their loyalty or reliability since, and I have personally witnessed examples of this, they might well throw down their weapons and surrender at the first opportunity when next confronting the TPLF on the battlefield.

The success of the TPLF's approach is indicated by the EPLF's adoption of it in the final stages of the war. But there is almost certainly another factor that must figure in any explanation of the differing TPLF and EPLF approaches to POWs. The EPLF was engaged in an independence struggle and took the view that Derg soldiers were illegal and foreign occupiers of



Eritrean sovereign territory. In contrast the TPLF looked upon Derg soldiers as forcibly conscripted peasants and fellow Ethiopians. This would have made a more humane approach to the captives easier to carry out than the situation in Eritrea where nationalism coloured all contacts with Ethiopians. In spite of these differing approaches, de Waal's conclusion that prisoners of both the EPLF and the TPLF were well treated<sup>42</sup> appears correct.

In any case the rapid mobilisation and commitment of the Tigrayan peasantry to the struggle in the period 1980–82 gave the TPLF an increasing capacity to attack much larger Derg forces. By this time the TPLF claimed to have gained control of 80 per cent of Tigray where 90 per cent of the people lived.<sup>43</sup> Although the Derg leadership may have thought otherwise, by the mid-1980s most of its operational officers in the field had concluded that neither the wars in Eritrea, nor in Tigray, were winnable militarily, and that efforts should be made to resolve the disputes through political means.<sup>44</sup> However, with the TPLF and the EPLF poised to take the military initiative, famine threatened to undo their progress.

### **Politics of refugees and famine**

From the early days of the revolution the TPLF recognised the importance of gaining the support of Tigrayans living abroad. TPLF efforts to organise expatriate Tigrayans went on among those employed in the Gulf states and the primarily student population of Europe and North America. Such expatriates played a vital role in the war by bringing the struggle to the attention of the international media, lobbying governments, gaining support for refugee relief, providing materials and finances for the Front, and as a basis from which to recruit fighters. While the devotion of expatriate Tigrayans to the revolution was near universal by the 1980s, the TPLF could and did use the threat of obstructing expatriates' communication with Tigray-resident relatives and the denial of travel permits to visit family, to compel support.

The TPLF took an active interest in all Tigrayan expatriates, but the refugees in Sudan were of particular concern because of their significant numbers, proximity to Tigray, as a source of funding, and of fighters. The TPLF did not operate armed camps in Sudan, and despite suspicions there is no evidence that the Sudanese regimes of Nimeiri or Sadiq el Mahdi supplied the Front with weapons or let them carry weapons, but both governments did allow the various Ethiopian and Eritrean rebel organisations to operate in the country. As a result TPLF cadres moved freely across the Ethiopian–Sudanese border, had a virtual embassy in Khartoum, carried on a multitude of political and service activities among the largely

refugee population, and through REST conducted its relief operations in Tigray. The politics of refugees thus played an important role in the course and outcome of the struggle to liberate Tigray.

Fighting between the Derg, EDU, and TPLF in the late 1970s resulted in some 30,000 Tigrayans leaving Ethiopia and settling as refugees in two communities outside Gederef in eastern Sudan.<sup>45</sup> Tens of thousands more Tigrayans entered Sudan in the coming years, and all were the object of efforts by dissident Ethiopian groups to organise them and gain their support. Early refugee settlements were largely centres of EDU loyalism, and attempts by the TPLF to organise them frequently led to violence and injury to the Front's cadres. The TPLF first organised a kindergarten and then later weavers' and other unions which helped to win over the refugees and also gain legitimacy among the NGOs.<sup>46</sup> However, it was only after years of community development and propaganda that the large majority of refugees were won over to the TPLF.

Over the years the TPLF developed an impressive number of garages, workshops, a wide variety of refugee organisations, and the means to care for seriously injured fighters who were evacuated to Sudan. The Front was generally able to maintain amicable relations with successive Sudanese governments for a number of reasons. First, it kept no armed soldiers in the country. Secondly, the Sudanese feared that a break in relations could lead to the country being overwhelmed by refugees. Thirdly, the limited support given to the Ethiopian and Eritrean opposition was a response to the much more substantive support the Derg provided the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). And lastly, the Sudanese government did not have the capacity to close its borders to the rebels.<sup>47</sup> These generally smooth relations were also facilitated by regularly resorting to bribery and plying various Sudanese generals and security officials with entertainment and alcohol, and this included those affiliated with the Islamic fundamentalist regime that assumed power in Khartoum after 1989.

The failure of the Derg's Red Star Campaign provided both the TPLF and EPLF with a major opportunity to go on the offensive, but before that was possible northern Ethiopia and Eritrea were beset from 1983 through to 1985 with famine. Until 1984, the eastern and southern regions of Tigray, together with the central highlands, were the major drought-afflicted areas, but the failure of the late 1984 rains in the traditional surplus production areas of the western lowlands, reduced crop yields by as much as 60 per cent.<sup>48</sup> Compounding the problem was an army worm infestation in much of the southern and central regions of the province.

With a greatly increased capacity to predict and respond to famine than was the case under the Haile-Selassie regime, the Derg was well aware of the growing threat to the peasant population of northern Ethiopia and

Eritrea, and while it did alert Western agencies, its own priorities were directed at making arrangements for the celebration of its ten years in power in 1984. It was only after these festivities were completed at enormous cost that the government took up the problem of the famine in earnest. In the event, three years of limited harvests brought on by drought and a massive Derg ground offensive led to over 800,000 Tigrayans being internally displaced and a further 200,000 crossing the border to the Sudan.<sup>49</sup> As a result, much of the resources of the TPLF and REST were devoted to ameliorating starvation and moving large numbers of refugees to UNHCR relief camps in the Sudan.

The TPLF was quick to appreciate the political implications of the famine. When famine conditions began to emerge in Tigray, Abadi Zemo of REST and Yemane Kidane of the TPLF, both stationed in Khartoum, demanded that the Nimeiri regime appeal to the international community to provide support for REST's efforts to stabilise conditions in the highlands. Moreover, they said that if the regime failed to do this a flood of refugees would be unleashed on the Sudan, a threat which the Sudanese Commissioner of Refugees at the time, Ahmed Karadowie, called 'political brinkmanship'.<sup>50</sup> REST representatives in turn hold that they had no choice but to lead the refugees out of Tigray and had they not done so they would have been accused of irresponsibility.<sup>51</sup> When refugees did start arriving in large numbers, Sudan was facing its own drought and was ill-equipped to deal with the additional burden; as a result, death rates in the refugee camps were initially very high until REST and other NGOs were allowed in the camps.

Relief aid did not supply all that was needed, but the famine and the efforts of those involved in the cross-border operation did save many lives and also for the first time brought the struggle in Tigray to the attention of a large international audience. The Front also convinced a number of small British NGOs, notably War on Want and Oxfam, of the value of stopping the flow of refugees by stabilising conditions in the highlands. At the same time the TPLF began to appreciate that it needed a settled population to successfully pursue the war. 'No peasants meant no support for fighters' is how one REST official put it, who also noted that, 'support for the villages meant the preservation of the military instruments of the villages, the militias'.<sup>52</sup> It was a case of relearning old lessons because from its early days the TPLF had attempted to improve the living conditions of the peasantry as a means of discouraging them from fleeing to the Sudan. Moreover, the TPLF had long recognised that it could not expect to survive exclusively on the peasants' meagre produce and had established its own farms in western Tigray.

Although drought precipitated major crop failures, the severity of the

famine was due to the Derg's counter-insurgency strategy. A survey conducted by an Oxfam-UK team in October and November 1983 in western and central Tigray reported that, 'government attacks were concentrated on the western region with the intention of disrupting the economic base of the TPLF and causing widespread damage to crops and property'.<sup>53</sup> The Oxfam study also found that a greatly expanded military conscription campaign encouraged large numbers of young men to flee government-held towns for the countryside and Sudan. Hendrie found that the Derg's 6th and 7th Offensives in 1981 and 1983 that were concentrated in the west had the following results: first, a depletion of grain reserves; secondly, local residents were not able as they had been in the past to assist migrating drought victims; thirdly, more civilians were made dependent on REST for food; and lastly, REST's relief operation was disrupted by military activity.<sup>54</sup> As well as western Tigray, the army also directed its attacks against Tembien which, like the west, usually produced harvest surpluses and offered destitute peasants farm labour, and also carried out large numbers of aerial bombardments of the towns. Cutting employment levels, interfering with trade flows, disrupting agricultural activity, burning crops, and undermining cross-border relief efforts were all elements in the Derg's strategy of subduing the TPLF by weakening the peasantry upon which it depended for survival.

As well as fostering famine conditions, the Derg interfered with international relief efforts by not allowing food aid to be transported across military lines, and threatening to evict aid agencies if they delivered relief into rebel-held areas from the Sudan, a threat that generally proved effective. It was thus left to a handful of NGOs operating from the Sudan with minuscule resources to try, with the assistance of REST, to meet the needs of the majority of famine victims who were in the liberated territories of Tigray and Eritrea.<sup>55</sup> Western governments and the United Nations, knowing that most famine victims were behind rebel lines, chose instead to direct most of their foodstuffs through the Derg's Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC).

They did this in spite of widespread reports that their food contributions were being consumed by the army, sold to merchants, and used to entice peasants to food distribution centres where they were forcibly sent off to resettlement camps in western and southern Ethiopia, or – if young men – conscripted into the army. As a result, according to REST less than 5 per cent of famine-affected Tigrayans travelled to government-held towns for food.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, growing international concern at the Ethiopian government's human rights abuses led the United States government in 1985 to threaten to concentrate its aid efforts on the cross-border operations, but in the event conservatives in the administration were able to stop such a change in policy. These conservatives considered the EPLF and TPLF to

be Marxists and alternatively urged concentrating efforts on influencing the Derg or supporting the Ethiopian People's Democratic Alliance, a fledgling rightist organisation that was being funded by the CIA, but was a negligible force with no field presence in Ethiopia.<sup>57</sup> In turn multilateral institutions and NGOs feared gaining the wrath of the government which refused to deliver relief assistance inside and across military zones and falsely claimed control of areas held by the TPLF. As a result one-third of the famine-stricken population received only about one-twentieth of the food relief made available.<sup>58</sup>

But the Derg's military objectives and the international community's response to the famine were not the only problems faced by the TPLF. At the height of the famine in 1985 the EPLF broke relations with the TPLF as a result of a long simmering dispute (which will be examined in the following chapter) and they were not resumed until 1988. The consequences included the ending of military collaboration, termination of political contacts, and the closing of the TPLF's radio station in Eritrea. Crucially the EPLF also refused the TPLF and REST passage over Tigray's main supply link through Eritrea to Kassala in Sudan, thus causing a crisis in Tigray.

TPLF/REST and some 100,000 peasants were quickly mobilised to construct a direct road link from western Tigray to Gederef in Sudan. Following a road line previously surveyed as a means to reduce dependency on the EPLF, the TPLF and its army of peasants, in spite of virtually no heavy equipment or outside support, were able to construct a rough track in less than a week, although upgrading went on for another two years. As a result, aid convoys quickly resumed the transport of grain, and refugees were provided with a more direct route to the UNHCR camps in the Sudan. Because of this quick response probably few lives were actually lost as a result of the EPLF's actions. However, the TPLF/REST-constructed road had to repeatedly cross the perennial Tekezze river and therefore could only be used when water flows were low.

The famine not only resulted in large numbers of deaths, massive dislocation, and economic turmoil, it also disrupted the TPLF's military strategy and led some observers to argue that the Front's decision to evacuate massive numbers of peasants to Sudan was based on the fear that they would fall under Derg control and thus the Front's action was comparable to the Derg's resettlement programme. De Waal disputes this interpretation and holds that, first, there is no evidence that the evacuation was anything but voluntary; second, it was temporary and was followed by a programme of assisted return; and lastly, that in late 1984 the TPLF was led to believe that there would be generous humanitarian aid in the Sudan for the refugees.<sup>59</sup> In any event TPLF/REST's leading of the peasants back to Tigray was monitored at the Ethiopian border by the UNHCR.

None the less, as de Waal acknowledges, the TPLF never attempted such an evacuation again and after 1985 TPLF/REST policy emphasised keeping the peasants in their home area. According to Clapham, the EPLF strongly opposed the TPLF's evacuation of peasants to the Sudan.<sup>60</sup> It is also known that many TPLF cadres, often from the overseas organisations, left the movement at this time in dismay at the enormous loss of lives they observed through media reports. Some of them were to explain their departure as being due to objections over manipulation of the peasants during this period, although the details of this internal debate are obscure.<sup>61</sup> In military terms the famine, and the Derg and TPLF's respective response to it, led the Ethiopian army to gain a greater degree of control in Tigray than at any time since 1977.<sup>62</sup> In at least one area TPLF/REST made political gains as a result of the famine: as a result of its demonstrated capacity to organise large numbers of peasants, the Sudanese government no longer harassed the movement, and support for EDU was dropped.<sup>63</sup> REST also gained much legitimacy in the eyes of the international NGOs.

### **Internal struggles**

As is common among revolutionary movements that operate under stressful conditions and in narrow ideological environments, differences over leadership or direction always threaten their viability and even survival. The TPLF may stand out for the degree of unity it achieved, but it was by no means immune from such destructive controversies. Mention has been made of the debate over the TPLF Manifesto and the divisions it exposed among the leadership over the problem of national self-determination. Here further internal struggles are examined, although again with the proviso that in the absence of sufficient material, conclusions can only be tentatively drawn. None the less, these controversies need to be examined because of what they convey about, first, the ideological orientation of the TPLF, secondly, the acceptance of dissent within the movement, and thirdly, the marginalisation of key figures and the rise to dominance of those associated with the Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray (MLLT).

The takeover of the TLF, referred to above, stimulated dissent on two grounds. In the first instance the absorption of the largely eastern Tigray-based movement's membership into the TPLF encouraged accusations that the TPLF was dominated by members from Shire, Axum, and particularly Adwa (the 'SAA group' as it was called by its critics). There is little doubt that from its beginning in the TNO, the TPLF drew a disproportionate amount of its membership, and certainly its leadership, from these areas.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, the TPLF leadership was aware of this problem and practised positive discrimination towards those regions, recruiting as many fighters as it

could absorb at that time.<sup>65</sup> None the less, a number of former TLF members and others did go over to the Derg, join the EDU, or leave the country, convinced that the TPLF leadership discriminated against them because their homes were outside the SAA nexus. The TPLF in turn argues that the so-called SAA bias was largely a product of the great pressures endured during the battles with the EDU and was used as a means to challenge the existing leadership and gain power.<sup>66</sup>

Secondly, the actions of the leadership in this case, and in particular the killing of the two TLF leaders, meshed with other concerns raised over the accountability of the TPLF's leadership. As might be expected, the TPLF is largely silent about this dissent, but it has acknowledged that 'right opportunists' (who tried to exploit the decadent feudal tendencies existing in the society) that reigned in the field in 1977 spread to the foreign-based mass organisations in 1978.<sup>67</sup> According to the ex-cadre Kahsay Berhe, the demands of the 1978 opposition included, first, that constitutional provisions be agreed upon to protect the democratic rights of individual members; secondly, that appointment and promotion be based on merit and not personal loyalty and regional origin; thirdly, that action be taken against a member of the leadership guilty of cowardice in battle; and lastly, that an investigation be carried out into allegations that the leadership killed eight members who requested to go home.<sup>68</sup>

For the TPLF leadership these concerns were resolved when the First Organisational Congress condemned the 'right opportunists'. But according to Kahsay and Gebru Tareke the movement conducted a purge of dissidents and four men charged with spearheading the SAA protest were executed.<sup>69</sup> Gebru concludes that, 'imposed unity ensured survivability, and indeed expansion, but had a stultifying effect on democracy as dissent became a hazardous political enterprise'.<sup>70</sup> This judgement may be unduly harsh when measured against the Eritrean Fronts, but it does point to the intolerance by the leadership of dissent within its ranks.

As a national liberation movement, the TPLF embraced all classes with the exception of the 'comprador bourgeoisie' and the 'feudalists'. Poor, middle, and rich peasants were defined economically, but they were also understood in relative terms and considered in their geographical context. It was the place of the rich peasants and the national bourgeoisie in the class alliance that became a source of controversy. The TPLF leadership's concern with achieving the widest possible unity against the Derg largely overrode whatever misgivings they might have had about embracing the national bourgeoisie and rich peasants in their alliance. Although suspect, these groups were considered important to the development of the province, but were deemed too small to threaten the goals of the revolution.<sup>71</sup>

'Rich peasant' must be considered in the Tigrayan context where poverty was (and is) endemic and consumer goods, particularly during the revolution, were so limited as to severely reduce significant differences in consumption patterns. Distinctions in wealth probably had their largest impact on the opportunities for children to acquire formal education, but this was more likely to result in opposition to the imperial and Derg regimes than support for them. A further difficulty arises from the complexity of land tenure systems in Tigray where, to provide but one example, poor peasants were sometimes landlords while their tenants were likely to be rich, an anomaly that arose because wealth was largely a result of ownership of capital, particularly oxen which could be used to plough additional land beyond the owner's *risti* entitlements. Historically classes were always in flux as rich peasants might lose their status from one generation to the next through famine, war, loss of land in court cases, or by a reduction in live-stock caused by disease.

The TPLF's rural class analysis was thus a broad-brush affair which led some Front leaders to claim that class was not an important factor in mobilising peasants. This would appear to be a very different approach to that of the early EPLF and Chinese revolutionaries who often had an enormous influence on the thinking of the Front leadership.<sup>72</sup> However, while Mao closely studied rural classes, he too was prepared, at least in the early stages of the revolution, to accept rich peasants and guarantee their properties if they abolished feudal exploitation. Not only was the rich peasants' support needed at a time when the revolution was weak, but the policy also served to reassure middle peasants that their property would not be exploited. It was only later that middle and poor peasants were enjoined to struggle against the political dominance of rich peasants and this led to the better-mobilised middle peasants assuming a leading position in the countryside.<sup>73</sup> The Chinese experience was that initially the poor peasants were the least militant rural class because they were more subject to the authority of the gentry and local officialdom and thus it was only in the final stages of the revolution that the poor peasants acquired the perspective to begin, with the assistance of the Communist Party, to displace the middle peasants.<sup>74</sup> This was not apparent in Tigray, but that may be because the nobility had largely deserted the countryside, or at any rate lost their gulti privileges and status as a result of the Derg's reforms, before the TPLF began its rural reforms.

TPLF leaders contend that rich peasants were often easier to organise than other peasants because they were more conscious of the benefits to be gained from the Front's reforms, notably in security over their land and possessions.<sup>75</sup> While rich peasants had more opportunities to ingratiate themselves or marry into privileged families, they more frequently



identified their interests with the poorer peasants beneath them than with those richer and more powerful above them. Moreover, their perspective could undergo revision during the course of the struggle. According to one rich peasant, 'once one has accepted that democracy is a good thing for our people, then one must accept that the majority decides – and the majority is poor.'<sup>76</sup>

None the less, the Front's agrarian reforms were principally designed to benefit middle, poor, and landless peasants. Typically middle and poor peasants were organised separately from other classes of the community. Apart from a minority group headed by Ghidey Zera Tsion, former vice-chairman and a leading Marxist theoretician of the movement, the TPLF leadership was not seriously disturbed at the prospect of wealthier peasants playing a significant part in the administration of their communities once the nobility was displaced and the Front's mass organisations were operational. Although there are reports that in the late 1970s the TPLF carried out a campaign against former members of the nobility who obstructed rural reforms, it would appear that those killed were selected on the basis of their political affiliations and not because of their class origins *per se*. Pre-revolutionary Tigray was a society characterised by patron–client relationships and a weakly developed sense of class consciousness, as the initial acceptance by peasants of the noble-led EDU demonstrated. In most cases personal or family ties or displays of loyalty could overcome unfavourable class backgrounds in the eyes of the TPLF.

Moving further to achieve rural equality could only be accomplished by redistributing capital and intensifying class conflict and this would cause divisions among the peasants that would threaten the TPLF's capacity to wage war against the Derg. Ultimately pragmatism figured in the TPLF's approach to rich peasants, with one cadre describing them as 'friends of the revolution', and therefore the Front was reluctant to alienate them, which would have occurred if they had redistributed their cattle.<sup>77</sup>

However, the very success of the TPLF's approach to rural mobilisation prompted Ghidey to forcefully oppose the policy, arguing that the national bourgeoisie and the rich peasantry would come to dominate the national struggle through control of the mass organisations. In the view of Ghidey and his supporters, these groups would use their traditional power and possession of capital, which the TPLF reforms did not interfere with, to gain control of local government institutions and subvert the land reforms.

The TPLF leadership acknowledged that rich peasants 'wavered' in their alliances, supporting the Front when the revolution was advancing, and the government when it was not. Although the TPLF did not officially encourage any particular class of peasants for leadership in mass organisations, a criterion for selection was established based on 'devotion to the peoples'

cause', and this largely precluded anyone whose loyalty was in doubt. Available information suggests that rich peasants did gain local positions of power through the TPLF organisation of local administrations, but not in greater numbers than their negligible proportion of the population.

Ghidey's concerns about rich peasant domination of the rural areas were only part of a broader quarrel that pitted him, and sometimes Aregowie, against the majority of the TPLF leadership, a situation which eventually led to them both leaving the organisation. Ghidey also had disagreements with the other Central Committee members on issues such as foreign policy, and in particular the Front's approach to Albania, and later on the question of a united front multiparty system.<sup>78</sup> Aregowie in turn criticised the TPLF's approach to forming a united front, arguing that it should include multinational movements like the EPRP,<sup>79</sup> and he was also strongly committed to a non-conventional military strategy which emphasised multiple guerrilla actions throughout the country, a strategy his critics dubbed the 'war of the fleas'.<sup>80</sup>

Current TPLF leaders attribute Aregowie's decline in the movement, from general-secretary and military commander to the loss of both positions and eventual dismissal from the Central Committee in 1984, to a growing view that he did not have the military capabilities required to take advantage of the new opportunities arising in the mid-1980s. They claim that he left the movement after refusing to accept a transfer from the position of Military Commander to a position he considered to be of lesser importance, a contention that Aregowie denies. This series of quarrels climaxed with a sixteen-hour debate before the TPLF army between Meles and Ghidey. The army voted in favour of Meles, and shortly thereafter Ghidey and Aregowie left the organisation.

Aregowie and Ghidey conversely argue that behind the disagreements on theoretical and strategic issues was a power grab by Meles, Abbay, Sebat, and Seye, and their vehicle for the 'conspiracy' was the Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray (commonly called *Malalit*).<sup>81</sup> Ghidey contends that the areas of contention had existed since 1981, but were largely set aside because issues that had no immediate significance to the struggle were not allowed to interfere with the operation of the movement. However, they came to the fore and became a source of division in 1984 with the decision to form the MLLT. In any event, the departure of Aregowie and Ghidey led to the appointment of Siye Abraha and Gebre Tsadkan to lead the TPLF forces.<sup>82</sup>

The MLLT claims that 'communist elements played a big role in founding and consolidating the TPLF', and that these elements established a 'pre-party organisation' called the 'Organisation of the Vanguard Elements' in 1983 which was a precursor of the MLLT which was founded

after a thirteen-day conference ending on 25 July 1985.<sup>83</sup> The League was designed to serve as a 'vanguard party' within the TPLF and Abbay was selected as its first chairman.

The actual relationship of the MLLT to the TPLF is not clear, but the League holds that the 'minimum programme of the MLLT . . . is the maximum programme of the TPLF' and thus 'the tasks of the Front and the League until the consummation of the Peoples Democratic revolution are one and the same'.<sup>84</sup> In its statement of objectives the MLLT committed itself to 'spreading Marxism-Leninism throughout the world' and engaging in a 'bitter struggle against all brands of revisionism (Kruschevism, Titoism, Trotskyism, Euro-communism, Maoism . . .)'.<sup>85</sup> The fact that most, if not all, the TPLF leadership (including Ghidey and Aregowie) joined the MLLT *en masse* meant that in practice there was little to distinguish it from the TPLF.

However, one notable exception is the absence in the MLLT's stated objectives of any reference to support for Tigrayan nationalism. Indeed, it would appear that apart from strengthening the TPLF's Marxist character, a principal objective of the League was the formation of a unitary multinational Marxist-Leninist party of Ethiopia. Consistent with this Ethiopia-wide perspective, the League announced that it would accept members irrespective of their national origin or place of residence. Establishing a united front against the Derg was always a primary objective of the TPLF and building alliances must have been even more important in July 1985 when the MLLT was officially launched, one month after the EPLF broke relations with the TPLF. It may be that presenting itself in a more orthodox Marxist-Leninist light was the best means to win support among other similarly minded opposition movements then existing in Ethiopia. However, it appears that there was considerable debate within the TPLF over the establishment of the MLLT, and many opposed it because Marxism-Leninism was widely hated in Ethiopia because of its association with the Derg and thus it would not serve to build bridges to the non-Tigrayan masses.<sup>86</sup> The fact that the party was established in spite of this opposition speaks of the strength of those in the TPLF who favoured establishing the MLLT. In the event, the declining appeal of Marxism-Leninism internationally and in Ethiopia led the MLLT to focus almost exclusively on Tigray.

This highly influential, but virtually impenetrable, organisation soon dominated the TPLF's mass organisations. In the post-1991 period TPLF respondents typically denied any knowledge of the MLLT, but as late as June 1990 Front Chairman Meles Zenawi acknowledged that the programme of the MLLT was 'in essence not very much different from those of the EPRDF and TPLF'.<sup>87</sup> In 1988, however, Meles denied that MLLT

members formed a majority of the leadership of the TPLF.<sup>88</sup> None the less, the Front has acknowledged that the MLLT's programme which emphasised Marxism-Leninism had widespread support in the TPLF, principally among teachers, but also among peasants. While the TPLF leadership claims that the MLLT was dissolved at approximately the time the EPRDF assumed governmental powers in 1991,<sup>89</sup> one more forthcoming vice-chairman of a rural woreda admitted to me in 1993 that ten of the eleven members on his woreda executive were sponsored by the MLLT and that the League's representation was equally strong in the woreda's mass organisations.

Meles has said that, 'the developments in Tigray are directly linked to the role that MLLT has been playing in the revolution over the past few years'.<sup>90</sup> Some critics contend that the MLLT paved the way for Meles's replacement of Sebat as chairman of the TPLF and EPRDF in 1989, but even if that was the case there is no evidence that there were any serious ideological divisions between them, as had been the case with Aregowie and Ghidey. The TPLF maintains that the leadership change was due to Sebat wanting to relinquish the leadership and Meles was younger and deemed more suitable to meet future challenges. The fact that in 1997 Sebat remained a powerful figure in both the TPLF and EPRDF gives credence to this argument.

Whatever else the formation of the MLLT accomplished, it clearly served to block the leadership ambitions of Ghidey and Aregowie, in spite of their following in the TPLF. After a year at the rear base at Dejene, Ghidey engineered his dismissal from the TPLF at a public meeting to ensure his safety, and in 1988 Aregowie gained permission to visit a relative in Gederef and then slipped off to Khartoum where he applied for, and received, refugee status through the UNHCR.<sup>91</sup>

The TPLF holds that the survival of these two top defecting leaders serves as evidence of both the small number of disputes that have divided their leadership and their amicable way of resolving them. In comparison to the ELF and the EPRP which were wracked by ideological divisions that led to many deaths, this is true. However, the fact that Aregowie's wife, who was not an ideologue but a fighter of long standing, spent three years in a TPLF prison after his defection, two of them in solitary confinement underground, belies any notion that open dissent on matters of principle was widely accepted in the Front.<sup>92</sup> Indeed, although details are hard to come by, a senior TPLF cadre has acknowledged that in the 1970s there were executions within the leadership because, in his words, they 'betrayed the trust of the TPLF'. There is no evidence, however, that these leadership disputes had much lasting impact on rank-and-file fighters or on the conduct of the war.

### Conclusion

Critical to the TPLF's success and even survival was the resolution of ideological problems both internally and with other movements, the most important being those with the EPLF. Ideological struggles, which often are, or become, contests about leadership, are intrinsic to revolutionary parties and they often lead to divisions or even their complete dissolution. The TPLF did have ideological divisions and other problems which resulted in members of the leadership defecting to the Derg, going into exile, and still others being killed. Aregowie, in particular, achieved a reputation while leader of strictly enforcing rules and ordering the execution of numerous erring fighters. The climate of fear the TPLF operated in and repeated Derg attempts at subversion led to constant suspicion, particularly at times of crisis, such as in 1978 when the Front came perilously close to dismemberment in the wake of struggles with the EDU, EPRP, and the Derg, and during the 1984–85 famine. At these times there were undoubtedly innocent cadres mistakenly killed.

Among the leadership, Harlu Netebe, an early senior member of the TPLF, left the movement for reasons that remain unclear, but probably the most notorious case involved Teclu Hawaz, a former teacher from Adwa and a Central Committee member who disappeared in the late 1980s. Teclu was in charge of intelligence in the occupied towns and after an accomplice of his was found to have betrayed a number of TPLF members operating underground which led to both their deaths and that of their betrayer at the hands of the Derg, he was arrested and imprisoned while his case was investigated. According to TPLF sources, during an escape attempt he took a guard's weapon and was killed in a subsequent shoot-out. The TPLF was never able to ascertain whether in fact Teclu was a traitor.

None the less, unlike the experience of other revolutionary movements in Africa, none of these disputes produced significant schisms or break-away movements.<sup>93</sup> Moreover, in its twenty-two-year history from 1975 to 1997 the TPLF has only had three leaders and although one of these leaders is now living in exile, the transfer of power between them generally went smoothly.

In the final stages of the revolution there were indications that a number of cadres and peasants were jailed for their perceived opposition to the leadership. There is, however, no evidence to date which would support Kriger's finding, based on her study of Zimbabwe, that coercion by revolutionaries was of central importance in winning the compliance of the population.<sup>94</sup> Kriger attributes the revolutionaries' use of coercion to their inability to provide utilitarian benefits to peasants in return for the costly sacrifices they demanded, but that bears little resemblance to the

circumstances in Tigray where the TPLF provided or established a wide range of services. The TPLF's success in not allowing potentially explosive issues of ideology and leadership to interfere with the war against the Derg or in its efforts to reform Tigrayan society can be attributed to three features of the TPLF: the leadership's pragmatism; the Front's refusal to allow a personality cult to develop; and the extent of democratic participation in the movement.

Gebru Tareke has argued that the search for realistic solutions to concrete problems 'probably explains why the Front has not been afflicted by internal squabbles and splits so characteristic of other African liberation movements'.<sup>95</sup> Former Tigrayan Governor Kalechristos reached a similar conclusion. He held that the TPLF's Maoist rhetoric 'was solely for the benefit of students and to impress progressive sections of the army and the international community . . . it was the politics of the time'.<sup>96</sup> Kalechristos felt that even the TPLF's first leaders, Sebhat Nega and Aregowie Berhe, were primarily nationalists, and not 'committed Marxist-Leninists'. He held also that the TPLF's success should be attributed largely to the Front's pragmatic espousal of community grievances.

But why this should be the case is by no means clear, particularly in view of the fact that the TPLF was a product of the Ethiopian student movement which divided on ideological grounds after 1974. Part of the explanation may be because the Front, unlike organisations such as the EPRP, originally lacked a clearly formulated political agenda and thus was more prepared to base its programme on practical experience acquired in the course of the armed struggle. The initial small membership of the TPLF, together with its limited resources and poor prospects compared to those of the EPRP and the EDU, meant that unlike these organisations it quickly appreciated that success depended upon winning peasant support. And to win that support it placed far greater emphasis than the EPRP and EDU on learning from the peasants, gaining their respect, and developing a programme that met their needs. This approach was, of course, also consistent with the teachings of Mao who stressed developing a genuinely popular mass movement based on peasant discontent and avoiding the unproductive and dogmatic application of Marxism-Leninism.

Although power struggles were by no means absent in the TPLF, one of the reasons they were not as destructive as those in other Ethiopian and Eritrean movements was the absence of a personality cult. It was apparently a conscious decision of the early TPLF leadership not to allow such a cult to develop and this decision was reflected in the early practice of revolving the chairmanship of the Front between Aregowie and Sebhat.<sup>97</sup> As a result, only Suhul among the TPLF leaders developed something of a

personal following and this was because of his prominence in Tigray before the revolution.

Individual leaders were constrained by the emphasis on collective decision-making which was also encouraged by the absence of any rigid adherence to rank or distinction between members. This is demonstrated by the extent of the leadership's presence in the countryside rather than on the diplomatic circuit often favoured by opposition elites, and the easygoing relationships between leaders and rank-and-file fighters that I observed in Tigray in 1988. Moreover, the TPLF leadership impressed the peasants and inspired its fighters by going into battle and dying in large numbers with them. Striking evidence of the lack of a personality cult in Tigray is the absence in the province, either during the rebellion or after, of any visual images of living leaders for propaganda purposes. The only pictures of TPLF leaders which are displayed in Tigray are those of the Front's 'martyrs'.

Critical to the TPLF's conception of democratic decision-making, and the link between the civilian population and the leadership and the rank-and-file fighters, has been the role of *tabia*, *woreda*, and *zoba* administrations, the mass associations, and the people's courts. It was, however, less the structure of the TPLF-established rural administration than the level of participation and open debate that distinguished it from similar structures established by the Derg. According to Meles, 'there is no point in trying to speed things up. We can't enforce anything. If we try to force anything on the peasants and at the same time fight the Derg then we are stuck. So we let the peasants go their own way.'<sup>98</sup> While Derg rural administrative structures were initially popular bodies, very quickly they became in the words of Pausewang 'tools of the government [which] lost their functions of nurturing local discussion and local action'.<sup>99</sup> The accounts of many outside observers suggest that this deterioration did not happen in the liberated territories of Tigray.<sup>100</sup> Indeed, the relative openness of the TPLF rural administration was critical in maintaining peasant support for the Front.

The TPLF also made regular use of long, and usually widely attended, mass meeting evaluations known as *gim gima* to achieve a high level of agreement on the goals of the revolution and the means to pursue them.<sup>101</sup> This system developed in the TPLF army, but was soon introduced to all the mass organisations and became a critical component of the Front's populist democracy. What gave the meetings or evaluations their appearance of consensual decision-making when they were to some extent orchestrated by the TPLF was the leadership's willingness to accept criticism collectively and individually and to allow virtually unlimited debate on issues. No individual or policy was immune to critical evaluation. The

result was that fighters and peasants did not perceive a significant gap between themselves and the TPLF leadership. They were not intimidated by the leadership and while their opinions might not carry the day, their views were heard. Although this process cannot be compared to true consensual decision-making, it did give peasants and fighters a voice in their government and established a measure of accountability that had never existed before in Tigray.



## 6 Triumph 1985–1991

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### **Introduction**

The TPLF entered the final period of the war against the Derg weakened by the famine which disrupted the peasant economy and diverted energies away from mobilisation and military campaigns, to relief and later reconstruction. But by this point in time the TPLF and peasants were united in struggle, and with the passing of the famine many peasants were able to resume their livelihoods and continue their support of the guerrilla fighters in their midst. Thus the TPLF was soon focused on the key elements of this stage of the struggle: confronting the Derg's plans to forcibly remove its peasant supporters; taking the revolution to the heterogeneous peoples of southern Tigray; and resolving political disagreements with the EPLF in preparation for the removal of the Derg from Tigray and the country.

### **The Derg's resettlement programme**

The Derg's war against the liberation movements had many dimensions: military campaigns; reform programmes to win the support of civilians; and efforts to isolate peasants from the appeal of dissidents, such as its resettlement programme. Because of the extent of environmental degradation and poverty in the northern provinces, proposals had frequently been made by a variety of sources to relocate northern peasants to the richer and less populated lands in the south. Indeed, between 1950 and 1974 an estimated one million peasants voluntarily left the northern highlands and moved to the south and west of the country,<sup>1</sup> and what evidence there is suggests that Tigray had the largest net outflows of any of the provinces.<sup>2</sup> In early 1978 the Derg launched a resettlement programme with the stated aims of combating drought, averting famine, and increasing agricultural productivity, although it was not until 1984–5 that the program assumed massive proportions. Its objective was to move 1,500,000 peasants from the northern provinces, and by the end of 1986 half a million had been moved, most of them forcibly.<sup>3</sup>

By 1979, and well before the resettlement programme had much impact in Tigray, the TPLF contended that the programme's unstated objectives included weakening the national movements, creating a human buffer zone in the territories inhabited by Somalis and Oromos, encouraging enmity among the masses and rekindling national antagonism which could be exploited and used against the Western Somali and Oromo Liberation Fronts, weakening the unity and national identity of the different struggling peoples by uprooting them from their homes, and using the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) as a means of acquiring income.<sup>4</sup>

The famine of 1984 permitted the government to hold out the bait of food for starving peasants in the garrisoned towns, and when peasants went to claim it they were frequently arrested and trucked to settlement camps in southern Ethiopia. Resettlement camps were usually ill-prepared for the peasants and many died of malaria and sleeping sickness because of poor sanitation, a lack of housing, food, and water, and inadequate health care, as well as the absence of the necessary seeds and tools to support themselves.

Indeed, the former head of the RRC, Dawit Wolde Giorgis, has acknowledged that reducing the population in rebel areas as a means of depriving the guerrillas of access to their peasant followers was a consideration of the programme.<sup>5</sup> Realising the danger posed by the programme to their rural insurgency, the TPLF attempted to disrupt it. The Derg's resettlement involved massive human rights violations, proved to be environmentally disastrous, and the final tally showed that only a small minority of peasants removed from the northern region by the government were from Tigray, a targeted area of the programme.<sup>6</sup> Resettlement was designed to weaken opposition to the Derg, but the brutal means by which it was enacted deepened resentment against the regime.

In 1985 the Derg began its villagisation programme with the objective of relocating thirty million peasants over a nine-year period. The government argued that existing dispersed settlements were difficult to service and inefficient, and that the establishment of larger villages would improve services and lead to increased agricultural production and higher standards of living. The Derg also saw villagisation as a critical means to introduce agricultural collectivisation and – of particular importance to the TPLF – increase the level of army control over peasants and reduce their contact with, and support for, the revolutionaries. However, as was the case with resettlement, it involved massive human rights abuses, poor preparation, lack of resources, and almost certainly led to further impoverishment of Ethiopia's peasants. Moreover, while villagisation was rapidly implemented in some parts of the country, it was notably ineffective in Tigray and Eritrea where insurgents controlled much of the countryside.

Although by the mid-1980s the Derg had lost control of virtually all of rural Tigray, the army continued to attack population centres in the liberated territories until the final days of the war. It is virtually impossible to make an overall assessment of the human and material costs of the war since detailed figures have not been released of the number of fighters killed. However, the TPLF has recently revealed that approximately 50,000 people were killed as a direct result of combat, 99 per cent of them fighters and militia members, and this number also includes those killed in the Red Terror.<sup>7</sup>

### **Revolt in the south**

A difficult physical environment and a heterogeneous population in the south meant that the TPLF did not establish a secure basis of operations in the region until the late 1970s, and as a result the key elements of the campaign were fought much later here than elsewhere in Tigray. From positions of strength in Tembien, the TPLF only moved south in the late 1970s setting up a headquarters in Samre, a village whose only road link was with the distant capital of Mekelle. The TPLF was on occasion forced to retreat from Samre in the face of superior forces, but the Derg found it impossible to supply and defend this remote area, and hence very early in the struggle gave up *de facto* control to the TPLF.

Operating from Samre the TPLF could conduct further operations to the south, and this led to the early capture of Bora and the lands of the adjacent Agaw peoples. This minority people had largely been assimilated into the dominant Semitic culture as evidenced by the extent of inter-marriages with Tigrayans and Amhara who also lived in the area. From the position of strength in Bora the TPLF was able to capture and briefly hold the key Wollo town of Sokota. To pursue the Front's political and military objectives a rough road was constructed, at TPLF urging, using the labour and resources of local people from Tembien, south to Lasta parallel to the main Derg-controlled north–south highway. This provided the final link in a road network that stretched from Shire in western Tigray to Sokota in the south-east. Notwithstanding TPLF successes in this area, it was unable to use the road effectively as a base from which to bring larger numbers of peoples and territories to the east under Front control.

More important for the TPLF, however, was to move from its base areas in the north along the eastern lowland corridor. The Front had four reasons for wanting to do this: first, to respond to the demands of the local peoples to bring them into the political and military struggle against the Derg; secondly, to gain access to the rich agricultural lands of the area at a time when the Front was largely dependent on food production from its farms

in the far west; thirdly, to use the territory as a point of departure from which to launch attacks on the main Derg bases strung out along the major north-south road from Addis Ababa to Asmara; and lastly, operating from secure centres in the south, to carry out attacks on the road links from Kembolcha in Wollo to the Red Sea port of Assab. However, the Front was not entirely successful in meeting these objectives and significant parts of even the eastern plains were not fully brought under TPLF control until the Derg's expulsion from Tigray in 1989.

There are many reasons for the relative slowness of the TPLF to establish itself in the south. The corridor to the south along which the TPLF had to move its fighters and supplies was long, passing through narrow canyons easily defended by the Derg, and as a result the Front was not able to effectively extend its road network through to Wollo on the east side of the main highway as it intended. High temperatures and water shortages in the lowlands added to the difficulty for the predominantly highland fighters of the TPLF. Transporting food from bases in the west was also a significant problem. While the Raya wanted to be mobilised, these local-bound people were not prepared to leave their homeland and go to the western bases of the TPLF for military training.<sup>8</sup> But a bigger problem for the TPLF was the need to win the support of the Afar who inhabited the lowlands from where the Front hoped to launch its attacks on Derg positions on the plains. And that in turn forced the TPLF to confront the political economy of ethnic conflict in the region.

Since the sixteenth century the rich grazing plains of south-eastern Tigray have been inhabited by the Raya and Azebo people, but these same lands have been utilised by the nomadic Afar, and this has proved to be an enduring source of conflict, particularly during the Belg rains when the nomads bring their cattle to the plains to graze. After their defeat in the Woyene the Raya were forced to give up much of their semi-nomadic culture and become settled farmers, often as tenants on lands they formerly owned. In the past fifty years most of them lost their original language and now speak Tigrigna and adhere to Orthodox Christianity. Until recently Tigrayans held the Raya and Azebo to be 'uncultured' peoples, but increasingly they are accepted into mainstream society and most Tigrayans now identify the Raya and Azebo merely as the names of the areas which they inhabit, not as a distinctive people.

Unlike the Raya and Azebo, it was far more difficult for the Afar to assimilate into Tigrayan society. They generally only met their Tigrayan neighbours in markets such as that of Mahoni in the south-eastern plains, which has become one of the largest in the province as a result of their trade. The Afar brought their cattle, consumer goods from Djibouti, and, in some areas salt, to market in exchange for grains, cloth, and other products of

settled highland society. As a result of these limited contacts they have retained their language and Islamic faith and have not intermarried with non-Afars.<sup>9</sup>

‘The main conflict between the Raya and the Afar stemmed from similar cultures and customs for proving manhood,’ noted a Raya elder.<sup>10</sup> The economies of both peoples were based on cattle and nomadism (the Raya gradually adapting to settled forms of existence), thus ensuring disputes over grazing lands and water that had the potential of ending in violence. Both peoples also placed much value on the tradition of raiding, and in particular on castrating one’s opponent to demonstrate manliness before a young man could marry. An Afar said, ‘in the past the Raya people were horsemen and warriors and robbed the cattle of the Afar . . . Raya were taking testicles and many men today do not have wives because they don’t have penises’.<sup>11</sup> Although not horsemen, a similar, and equally accurate, observation could be made about the Afar.

To bring the struggle to the south and operate from secure bases the predominantly Tigrigna-speaking Christian TPLF had to win the support of the Afar and this proved very difficult. Although for administrative purposes the Afar lands were included in Tigray, the Afar were not ethnic Tigrayans and did not consider themselves as such. Initially the TPLF did not have a policy with regard to the Afar and simply concentrated on mobilising them in a similar manner as other Tigrayans, but their differences soon became apparent. A TPLF cadre training the Afar militia reported his astonishment at finding that many of the Afar had never visited towns, had no understanding of the elements of modern society, and could not even explain why they were taking the training.<sup>12</sup>

Afar support for the TPLF developed, however, as it did among other peoples in Tigray against a background of Derg brutality and the Front’s mobilisation efforts. According to an Afar leader, ‘the problem was the same for all. Afar were also robbed, their houses burned, cattle stolen, and women raped.’<sup>13</sup> Derg violence against the Afar was also stimulated by suspicion that their long-standing trade in cattle with the Eritreans served as a cover for relations with the Eritrean Fronts and the TPLF. As a result of such persecution many young Afar men living within Tigray joined the TPLF. Mobilisation of Afar living outside the provincial boundaries who had less contact with Tigrayans and the TPLF, however, proved more difficult. Derg depredations alone would not drive the Afar into the arms of the Front. As with other peoples in Tigray, the TPLF had to gain their support by making positive contributions to their lives. For the Afar this meant working to end political and economic discrimination against them, and it took a number of forms: economic development, political appeals and education, and punishment of those who transgressed rules and laws.

Since the Afar were among the least developed peoples in the province, building bridges to the community necessarily entailed a development component. However, unlike other areas in Tigray where resources were mobilised locally for development, this was usually not possible in the Afar areas and hence the TPLF had to raise the necessary capital from other parts of the province. Even then, according to one TPLF cadre involved in these projects, the Afar were sometimes reluctant to see their lands developed, fearing that their political weakness would encourage highlanders to move in and reap the rewards.<sup>14</sup> Such projects had the dual objectives of convincing the Afar of the TPLF's commitment to their welfare, and of providing a community of settled farmers who could be more readily mobilised. Thus historical highland prejudice against the nomads and the desire to build a viable political and military force converged in efforts to create a sedentary economy. Land reform was not a crucial issue for the predominantly nomadic Afar, but those few who accepted a sedentary life were given access to land under the same conditions as those of other Tigrayans.

There were two other elements in the TPLF's strategy of gaining Afar support. The first, and seemingly most contradictory, was in building a political alliance with the traditional feudal leader of the Afar, Sultan Ali Mira, through the auspices of his Saudi-supported and Jiddah-based Afar Liberation Front (ALF). Established in March 1975 the ALF was led by the Sultan's son, Hanfari, who left Ethiopia for Saudi Arabia after the Derg's land reform.<sup>15</sup> A number of joint TPLF-ALF ambushes were carried out over the years, particularly on sites along the road to the port of Assab which runs through Afar territory. The TPLF justified this affiliation on two grounds: first, that the alliance was 'tactical', that is to say, it was based solely on the Sultan's opposition to the Derg and did not constitute acceptance of the feudalism the Sultan represented.<sup>16</sup> Secondly, in the strongly traditional clan society of the Afar the Sultan represented the closest thing to a popular leader. None the less, the TPLF's relations with the ALF did much to undermine the position of the fledgling, but TPLF-inspired, Afar People's Democratic Organisation (APDO). The policy, however, did help gain Afar acceptance for the TPLF.

A second component in the TPLF's strategy of gaining Afar support, or at least reducing the prospect of their dissent, was the promise of a right to national self-determination. Although the TPLF's programme explicitly acknowledged the right to self-determination to all of Ethiopia's national minorities, initially this demand was not raised by the politically weak Afars. Instead, recognition of their unique cultural character and the imprudence of administering them from Mekelle came from the TPLF. Both the Afar and the TPLF affirm that the promise of self-determination was not an early Front commitment to gain their support, but was made

only in the mid-1980s when the need for an indigenous administration separate from that of Tigray became apparent.

The TPLF assisted the Afar in holding a conference where self-determination was debated and approved, after which efforts were made to build Afar political institutions separate from those of Tigrayans.<sup>17</sup> At a more practical level the TPLF also revitalised, apparently with some success, the traditional reconciliation council of elders, known as *Abagore*, which attempts to resolve disputes between the nomadic and settled peoples. Building institutions of local administration created a crucial vehicle through which the disparate ethnic groups of the southern region could work together for collective goals. However, in spite of real progress at overcoming historical animosities, there were still isolated cases of violence and in those instances the TPLF resorted to rapid trials followed by summary executions.<sup>18</sup>

Through negotiations the TPLF was given permission by the Afar in 1982 to operate a base at Rabat in the isolated Megale region, but even here security concerns were such that signs of a road leading to the base which might attract attention from aerial observers had to be wiped out each morning.<sup>19</sup> Rabat did, however, have the major advantage of possessing a perennial water supply in a land where water sources were rare. It was also difficult to access by Derg ground forces even though it was only forty-two kilometres from their base at Mahoni. Megale had a clinic, training centre for fighters and militia, a POW camp, and became the TPLF's headquarters for the entire eastern part of Tigray. From this base the TPLF conducted operations in the agriculturally rich eastern plains and harassed traffic on what was still known as the Imperial Highway.

One of the biggest problems faced by the TPLF in this area during the latter years of the struggle was to defend itself against the Derg-directed, but Afar-manned, *Ugugumo*. This organisation was a creation of the Derg, often led by Derg officers and supplied with arms by the Derg, and while it could not seriously challenge the TPLF, it was an obstacle that was difficult for the Front to counter. *Ugugumo* was motivated by the promise of Afar autonomy but, as the Derg pointed out, autonomy could not be realised if the EPLF and TPLF 'secessionists' succeeded in dividing up Ethiopia, with the inevitable result of the division of the Afar people between an independent Eritrea, an 'independent' Tigray, a rump Ethiopia, and Djibouti.

Perhaps because this reasoning was not entirely erroneous, *Ugugumo* did achieve a measure of political legitimacy among the Afar, particularly those resident outside of Tigray. When the TPLF took up the problem with the Afar people they received mixed messages: Afar elders urged them to go after *Ugugumo*, while Afar women stressed caution and patience.<sup>20</sup> Aware of the danger of affronting national sensitivities, the Front decided not to

attack Ugugumo within Afar territory and risk alienating the wider community which might do lasting damage to the TPLF's objectives in the area.

However, this decision allowed Ugugumo to attack TPLF liberated territories and positions almost with impunity along a wide stretch of eastern Tigray and it was usually only confronted by TPLF militias. Ugugumo's most serious impact was its virtual destruction of the camel trains that carried salt blocks from deposits in the Danikal lowlands to the Tigrayan highland town of Wukro. Ugugumo's depredations continued as irritants to the TPLF up to, and even briefly after, the collapse of the Derg, and remnants of the organisation were still in existence and causing minor problems for the government in the Afar autonomous region and on the borders with Tigray in early 1996.<sup>21</sup> None the less, the TPLF's successes among the Afar meant they were better placed to carry the war to the plains.

As in other parts of Tigray the TPLF objective was to build up its support on either side of the heavily defended main road that runs through the province so that it could bring increasing pressure on the Derg's strong points. This goal proved far more difficult in the south where, apart from the need to overcome ethnic antagonisms, the TPLF had to launch attacks from the Afar-populated hot dry eastern lowlands onto the plains which were guarded by the Derg-garrisoned towns strung out along the main road in Alamata (then in Wollo), Kuha, Adichewu, and their major base of some 10,000 soldiers at Maichew, which possessed the regime's largest concentration of troops between Mekelle and the Wollo provincial capital of Desie.

Illustrative of the problem was the TPLF's brief occupation in 1980 of the then only lightly defended town of Mahoni. With only a small contingent the TPLF was able to drive the retreating troops back to the Derg's main base at Maichew, but that town's commanding position in the mountains only a few kilometres away forced TPLF forces to quickly evacuate. Mahoni's garrison was subsequently reinforced by two brigades of some 3,000 soldiers and the TPLF was not able to capture the town again until the Derg's retreat without a fight in 1989.<sup>22</sup> However, the town of Chercha, also on the plains, but to the south of Mahoni and less accessible to highland Derg garrisons, passed back and forth from Derg to TPLF hands in similar fashion to Abi Adi.<sup>23</sup>

### **TPLF and EPLF: a marriage of necessity**

Although never without tension, the alliance between the TPLF and EPLF was critical to the course and outcome of the revolutionary wars both were engaged in. According to the EPLF, 'the relationship was based on the EPLF's recognition of the rights of the oppressed nationalities of Ethiopia and on the TPLF's recognition of the just right of the Eritrean people for



self-determination'.<sup>24</sup> The fledgling TPLF welcomed outside support, and in the wake of massive Soviet backing for the Derg, the Eritrean Fronts recognised that their success depended on working closely with other armed opposition forces in Ethiopia.<sup>25</sup> But that did not mean that the TPLF and EPLF were always in agreement on ideological matters.

A major area of contention between the two movements was over the TPLF's claim that the right to independence it proclaimed for Tigray and other Ethiopian nationalities also applied to the various Eritrean nationalities. The TPLF categorically stated, 'if the future Eritrea is to be truly democratic it will have to respect the right of nations and nationalities to self-determination up to, and including, secession'.<sup>26</sup> Elsewhere the TPLF noted that to 'rule out the possibility of secession [of Eritrea's nationalities] would amount to contradicting its [the EPLF's] own democratic principles'.<sup>27</sup> Unlike Tigray with its largely ethnically homogeneous population, Eritrea possessed some nine different nationalities, and faced with the task of uniting these nationalities in a revolution the EPLF was reticent about taking on board the TPLF's interpretation of the rights of nationalities.

The EPLF's response to the TPLF was that Ethiopian nationalities had the right to self-determination, but not to independence. The right to independence was conditional on, first, the nationalities previously being independent, and secondly, on their being economically cohesive. Moreover the EPLF claimed that:

once a progressive state is set up in Ethiopia and the system of national domination and oppression gives way to one based on the equal rights of all nationalities, there would be no historical, economic or other factors that would make the demand for secession correct and justifiable from the standpoint of the interests of the masses.<sup>28</sup>

The EPLF's interpretation of national self-determination had three objectives: first, to deny Tigrayans and other Ethiopian nationalities the right to independence; secondly, to affirm the right of Eritrea as a colonial-defined territory to independence; third, to deny its own nationalities the right to independence by restricting anti-colonial struggles to those of 'multinational peoples'<sup>29</sup> which it assumed Eritreans to be. Moreover, while initially the EPLF held that acceptance of the right of the Eritrean people to independence was all that was necessary to join in a political–military alliance against the Derg, as the controversy with the TPLF developed, it argued that acceptance of its interpretation of national self-determination was a 'precondition' for the formation of a united front of all national and multinational organisations in Ethiopia.<sup>30</sup>

A related area of controversy that divided the TPLF and EPLF was the place of multinational movements in the united front that both movements tried to organise. The EPLF held that multinational Ethiopian opposition

groups, such as EPRP and MEISON, were eligible for membership in the united front, but this was only grudgingly accepted by the TPLF. It acknowledged the right of multinational organisations to operate in Tigray, but maintained that they should pursue their activities in areas of Ethiopia where no 'vanguard organisations' (such as the TPLF) already existed to lead the people.<sup>31</sup> Generally the TPLF attacked multinational revolutionary movements, arguing that 'any tendency that advocates an empire-wide multinational struggle be it from the left or the right' did not accept the realities and implications of Amhara domination in Ethiopia.<sup>32</sup> The TPLF thus accused the EPRP of Amhara chauvinism because by not acknowledging the primacy of the national contradiction it affirmed Amhara dominance in the state. Markakis came to a similar conclusion: 'The young radicals (i.e. the EPRP) were fighting to overthrow the incumbent regime, not to dismantle the state, for that would have rendered their struggle meaningless, since they were planning to use the state apparatus to carry out a social revolution.'<sup>33</sup>

Based on the conclusion that Ethiopia's primary contradiction arose from the Amhara state's domination of the oppressed nations, the TPLF concluded that national and not multinational opposition movements should confront the Derg and establish the nation-based federalism with which the TPLF hoped to replace the centralised state. Moreover, there was a widespread view among both the TPLF leadership and the peasantry that only a Tigrayan-based movement should struggle for the liberation of Tigray, and similarly based movements should be established among the other nationalities of Ethiopia.

Stretching credibility, the TPLF further argued that the multinational Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement, which had taken form with TPLF support in the wake of the collapse of the EPRP, did not operate in Tigray 'only because they have the confidence in the democratic line of the TPLF, and also because they know that the outcome would be no different if they were to be in Tigray'.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, EPDM leader Tamrat Layne (Prime Minister in the TGE and former Defence Minister and Deputy Prime Minister of Ethiopia in the FDRE) acknowledged that the policies and programmes of the movement largely mirrored those of the TPLF, including its approach to national self-determination and its views on the Soviet Union, China, and Albania.<sup>35</sup> TPLF support for EPDM suggested there were limits to its opposition to multinational movements when they did not challenge the Front's hegemony and could supplement its efforts.

Another element in the TPLF-EPLF debate was over the question of whom the united front was to be primarily directed against, and this brought equally divisive concerns of foreign policy to the fore as the TPLF

fought for, and the EPLF resisted, a hard line against the Soviet Union and refused to condemn the United States. The socialist bloc had favoured Eritrean independence during the UN debates and after the ELF began military operations against the regime of Haile-Selassie, it further cemented its ties with the Eritrean nationalists through diplomatic support, and indirectly through Cuban and other allies in the Middle East, who provided the insurgents with arms and training facilities. Although this was to change abruptly when the socialist bloc cast its lot in with the Derg, there remained a residue of sentiment in favour of the Soviet Union within the EPLF leadership that was to cause some dissent within the movement internationally.<sup>36</sup> Sympathy for the socialist bloc was due to a shared affinity for Marxism, the view that Soviet support for the Derg was based on a policy blunder and did not reflect on the overall character of Soviet society, fear of US imperialist interests in the region, and the expectation that with independence Eritrea would take its place internationally within the Soviet-dominated 'progressive' camp.

In contrast, the TPLF held the post-Stalin Soviet Union to be 'social imperialist', and argued that along with the Derg it 'should be singled out as the principal enemy against whom a broad alliance should be formed'.<sup>37</sup> The issue of the Soviet Union, according to Meles Zenawi in 1988, was 'the main dividing point between the EPLF and the TPLF'.<sup>38</sup> Although massive Soviet support for the Derg would seem reason enough for condemnation, the TPLF decision not to condemn the United States was reached after long debates and was based on a number of considerations. First, the TPLF reasoned that condemning the USA would necessarily make an enemy of the country and it saw no reason for that. Secondly, it concluded that the implication of such a position was that after the Derg and its Soviet supporters were defeated, the fight would continue with the USA. Sound as this reasoning was, the TPLF learned that the USA did not read its pronouncements and continued largely to view the movement as an EPLF-controlled group of unreconstructed Marxists.<sup>39</sup>

In other areas of foreign policy, the TPLF's emphasis on self-reliance policies led it to look favourably at Albania. There is no evidence that the TPLF ever received support or had formal relations with that isolationist outpost of socialism which condemned both the Soviet Union and China. However, the Front leadership remained deeply interested in its development and in the late 1980s its European Foreign Relations Bureau, with the knowledge of the Albanian government, sent a group of Tigrayans carrying French passports unofficially to Albania.<sup>40</sup> According to TPLF sources, their requests for assistance were not met, perhaps in part because the Front's praise of Albania was not open-ended and the country's policies in a number of areas, including its isolationism, were criticised.

The TPLF demand that the Soviet Union be explicitly condemned because of its alliance with the Derg, and that the EPLF drop its view that the Soviets constituted 'strategic allies', was not accepted in the Eritrean camp. Clearly referring to the TPLF, the EPLF Central Committee held that, 'the groups that draw their swords at the Dergue and Soviet intervention but bow to western imperialism are precisely those whom imperialism has been sustaining, those who still carry the smell of the overthrown autocratic regime'.<sup>41</sup> Parties which held such views were also not eligible for membership in its proposed united front, concluded the EPLF.

Although the TPLF relied on the EPLF in its first years, as it developed into a mass movement in the early 1980s it increasingly took on a political and military character of its own. The massive influx of peasants into its ranks in 1980-1 began this process, and it increased due to the TPLF's role in the defence of EPLF positions during the Red Star Campaign. The military stalemate that evolved as a result of the Derg's failure in that campaign, and the increasingly important role that a rapidly growing TPLF would play in any offensive against the regime, gave the Front the confidence to openly challenge the EPLF on a range of ideological and, as was seen, military issues. The central issue in dispute throughout this period was over the national question, but this was not the issue that precipitated the collapse in their relations in June 1985.

According to the EPLF the immediate cause of its decision to end ties with the TPLF was its discovery that the Front denigrated their relationship. The EPLF found that, since 1979, 'the TPLF had concluded that the EPLF was not a democratic organisation and that its (TPLF) relationship with the EPLF was "tactical". The EPLF had thought that its cooperation with the TPLF was genuine and not based on temporary tactical considerations. And so, when the TPLF's secret stand became public the EPLF realised its naiveté and although it did not regret its past actions, decided to break its relationship with TPLF and not enter into polemics with it.'<sup>42</sup>

By defining its relationship with the EPLF as tactical, the TPLF was making it clear that the only thing it had in common with the Eritrean movement was a shared commitment to overthrowing the Derg. The movements thus did not have similar positions on political or ideological concerns, and this cast the long-term viability of their alliance in doubt. Moreover, by claiming that their relationship was only tactical, the TPLF called into question the legitimacy of the EPLF's relationship with the Eritrean masses. That is, if the EPLF's relationship with the Eritrean masses was not 'democratic' as the TPLF understood the term, it had the right to enter into tactical alliances with other movements, even if those movements opposed the EPLF.

This was the EPLF's fear, which was not misplaced, as in the mid-1980s

the Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Eritrea (DMLE), a break-away faction of the ELF which opposed EPLF hegemony, was organised with TPLF support. At a conference in early 1990 a DMLE delegation led by its vice-chairman, Salah Ayay, met with a TPLF delegation led by Politburo members Seyum Musa and Awalom Wolde and three Central Committee members and agreed upon a statement of principles.<sup>43</sup> The TPLF leadership acknowledges that the DMLE was an 'ally', claim that this relationship did not trouble the EPLF, and that after 1991 the organisation only existed abroad.<sup>44</sup>

However, the EPLF's decision to end relations with the TPLF solely because of its identification of their relationship as tactical is not entirely credible. As has been noted, there were a number of areas of disagreement between the Fronts. But, having learned to live with these differences for ten years in return for the obvious benefits derived from their relationship, questions arise as to why the EPLF ended ties with the TPLF, and why it did so in 1985. The TPLF's explanation is that after long being the senior partner in the alliance, the EPLF could not accept the TPLF as an equal. No longer the fledgling guerrilla band dependent on the EPLF, by the mid-1980s the TPLF's rapidly growing military capacity was approaching that of the EPLF. The TPLF further contends that the timing of the EPLF's break in relations was designed to have the maximum impact because Tigray (and Eritrea) were being devastated by famine in the period 1984–5.

Ultimately, however, neither the EPLF nor the TPLF would have survived and prospered under the conditions they did without being led by pragmatic leaders, which the quick resolution of their conflict in 1988 demonstrated. Reconciliation was facilitated by the TPLF's unstinting support of the right of Eritrea to independence even in the midst of a highly polemical and public debate. But rapprochement was actually achieved, according to Meles Zenawi, because of the string of military victories achieved by the EPLF at Afabet and by the TPLF in the towns of Tigray.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, one of the reasons the TPLF launched these attacks was to draw the EPLF's attention to its power and the need to overcome their differences and form a military alliance that would bring the war with the Derg to an end.

Three other factors also encouraged an agreement at this time. First, the leadership of the two movements were mindful of the agreements recently reached between Somalia and Ethiopia over the Ogaden. According to TPLF Secretary-General Sebhat Nega this freed up 15,000–20,000 troops for deployment in the rebellious northern provinces.<sup>46</sup> Secondly, Tigray was again facing drought and would have to import grains from the Sudan over its road link to Gederef, which would be closed with the onset of the main season of rains that normally began in late June. Agreement with the EPLF

would provide access to the all-weather road connection through Eritrea to Kassala in Sudan. Thirdly, although denied in 1988, TPLF officials have since acknowledged that they had some fears that secret EPLF–Derg negotiations being conducted at the time could be successful, and with the EPLF out of the war, the TPLF would face the full force of the Derg virtually alone.

The agreement reached between the movements' politburos in April 1988 included provisions to co-ordinate their struggle on the basis of common views and aims.<sup>47</sup> These common views included a commitment to work cooperatively to destroy the Derg, a condemnation of the intervention of both superpowers in the region, recognition of the legitimacy of the Eritrean people's struggle for independence, recognition of the right of Ethiopia's nationalities to self-determination, and the need for national and multinational opposition groups to unite in the struggle.<sup>48</sup> The agreement thus reflected considerable compromise on the part of both parties, as well as a considerable amount left unsaid.

The EPLF agreement to form a common front on a commensurate basis with the TPLF gave the latter organisation the equal recognition that it wanted. Condemnation of both superpowers in the region amounted to a retreat by the TPLF, which had focused its wrath on the Soviet Union,<sup>49</sup> as well as by the EPLF, which had focused its ire on the West.<sup>50</sup> The statement on self-determination was constructed in a deliberately unclear manner, but on balance the TPLF would appear to have backed down somewhat from its earlier position since no reference was made to the right of Eritrea's nationalities to self-determination and independence. The statement did not explicitly grant Ethiopian nationalities the right to independence which the TPLF had also repeatedly called for, but gave greater weight to the place of multinational opposition forces in the united front than the TPLF had previously been prepared to acknowledge.

What complicates any assessment of the agreement is that the positions of the Fronts appear to have changed somewhat over time from those stated at the outset of their quarrel. For example, the EPLF was less insistent about defending the Soviet Union in 1988 when its days as a superpower appeared to be numbered. The TPLF in turn may have been less insistent about the rights of Ethiopian nationalities to independence when it anticipated being in a position within the Ethiopian state to arbitrate the outcome of demands for national self-determination. As a journalist in Tigray in the immediate wake of the TPLF–EPLF agreement, it was clear that there remained a considerable residue of suspicion and bitterness. Indeed, REST officials were only guardedly optimistic that EPLF promises of access to their all-weather road to Kassala would be fulfilled. Ultimately, however, the agreement demonstrated the pragmatism of both

Fronts and their recognition that they needed each other if victory was to be achieved.

### **March to victory**

In spite of the military setback caused by the famine of 1984–5, the vast majority of the peasantry were irrevocably wedded to the TPLF and it was clear that the Derg did not have the capacity to defeat its northern-based opposition. With the stabilisation of the rural economy resulting from better harvests and the return of some of the refugees from the Sudan, the TPLF was soon able to re-exert its control over the rural areas and resume the siege of the towns. Indeed, by 1987 the TPLF leadership had reached the conclusion that their forces and those of the Derg were roughly in balance and that a ‘stalemate’ existed. As a consequence, the Front leadership began preparing plans to break it.<sup>51</sup>

While the TPLF was able to mobilise growing human and material resources, the inability of the Derg to cause serious damage to the Front’s fighting forces led to declining morale among its officers and men. In spite of its ability to recruit and field ever larger armies to replace those lost in battle, the Derg was none the less singularly unsuccessful in inculcating a faith in the regime, or a willingness on the part of its soldiers to fight. Derg POWs in Tigray reported widespread forced conscription, ineffectual training, not seeing their families for years, and receiving rations in lieu of pay. Typically they had little understanding of why they were fighting. Indicative of the declining conditions in Tigray, the Commander of the First Division, Colonel Hailu Ghebre Yohannis, reported that he ordered the theft of food stocks from the NGO World Vision in Maichew to feed his hungry troops.<sup>52</sup> At the urging of his senior officers the Deputy Commander of the 17th Division in Axum began meeting with local Tigrayan leaders to learn of the situation and gain their confidence with the idea of going over to the enemy.<sup>53</sup> In retrospect he thinks that discontent was running so high among his troops that he could have taken the entire division over to the TPLF.

Meanwhile, growing TPLF inroads into the provinces of Wollo and Gondar led the Derg to plan another major campaign against the Front in the summer and autumn of 1987, a campaign that was aborted after the TPLF launched a three-pronged pre-emptive strike against the communications centre of Mugulat outside Adigrat, and the eastern towns of Sinkata and Wukro.<sup>54</sup> The Derg’s counter-attack failed badly and the stage was set for the TPLF’s biggest military triumph up to that point in the war, the 1988 capture of the towns.

If troop morale was not already a serious problem, between 17 and 18 March 1988, Derg forces suffered their biggest defeat of the war at Afabet

in the southern Sahel at the hands of the EPLF. Basil Davidson described Afabet as 'one of the biggest [victories] ever scored by any liberation movement anywhere since Dien Bien Phu in 1954',<sup>55</sup> but the fact that the war continued for another three years suggests that was an exaggeration. Over 15,000 government soldiers from the Nadew Command and a well-armed mechanised division were put out of action, a large number of heavy weapons were acquired, three senior Soviet officers were captured, and the Derg's Eritrean army were forced to retreat in disarray. Once the scale of the army's defeat was apparent units of the 17th and 6th divisions were moved from western Tigray into Eritrea in spite of signs that the TPLF was planning an attack.<sup>56</sup> In the event, within days of their defeat at Afabet, the TPLF launched its largest attack to date. The close timing of the EPLF and TPLF attacks suggests co-ordination, although at the time the two Fronts did not have relations.<sup>57</sup>

A campaign on the scale of that launched by the TPLF in 1988 could not be based solely on military considerations, however favourable they might appear. Among the political considerations was a desire to re-establish working relations with the EPLF. The TPLF view was that the EPLF wanted to dominate their movement and that it underrated the TPLF's military capacity. A major TPLF victory would serve to convince the EPLF that success against the Derg was not possible without unity with the TPLF and that unity must be achieved between equal partners. Capture of the towns would also bring the struggle of the TPLF to the attention of a much broader international audience.

There were other reasons. The towns were centres for Derg power and were constantly destabilising and interfering with the TPLF-controlled countryside. The TPLF also needed to break the stalemate between its and the government's forces and to prepare for the final contest by acquiring the needed experience of attacking and taking over the towns.

However, perhaps the most important motive for launching the attack against the towns was concern over the extended alienation of the urban population from the rural-focused revolution of the TPLF. Life was difficult under Derg administration in the towns, but the regime also created and supported an (albeit artificial) service economy of bars, restaurants, hotels, and brothels that fed a substantial number of people, and enriched a minority, mostly traders and merchants. Significantly, in the government-occupied towns most products, including grain, were controlled by the Agricultural Marketing Corporation, effectively blocking demand from local peasants and increasing the division between town and countryside.<sup>58</sup>

Some people in the town anxiously waited for liberation, but others tried to put political considerations aside and devote themselves to their private lives. Under a regime designed to break down social solidarity this was a



natural response. It was a response, however, which alarmed the TPLF. Fearing divisions between urban and rural Tigrayans, the Front concluded that the best means to bring the townspeople into the wider conflict was to take the struggle to them. This was a major reason for the TPLF being prepared to expend so many lives in capturing towns when it did not have the resources to administer or defend them.

The focus of the struggle was the western Tigrayan town of Endaselasie which was ‘a centre of gravity in the Derg’s military strategy’, and particularly Hill 2005, which dominated the town and served as the army’s headquarters.<sup>59</sup> With some 35,000 soldiers in and around the town, the Derg’s 604 Army Corps was the key to the regime’s hold on western and central Tigray. Endaselasie was at the terminus of the east–west highway that linked Tigray, and beyond its defensive perimeters were areas of TPLF control: south to the lowlands of the Tekezzé river, west across the plains to the Sudanese border, and north to Eritrea. For months before the battle TPLF fighters ambushed Derg positions on the hills surrounding the town and sent sharpshooters to kill or wound exposed Derg soldiers in the vicinity of the town.

The battle for the town began with an attack on the Derg’s communication centre of Mugulat in the north-east and, after it was destroyed, the TPLF launched offensives against the army bases at Axum and Adwa in central Tigray. So quick was the collapse of these towns that Derg forces sent from Endaselasie to relieve the garrisons found themselves attacked at Selekleka, and instead were forced to retreat before TPLF fighters moving west along the highway. The brunt of the TPLF attack, however, involved moving large numbers of fighters at night from the surrounding hillsides of Endaselasie, across the plains that circled the town, and launching a dawn attack on Derg positions, first, on a small bluff immediately adjacent to Hill 2005, and then on the hill itself which served as the final defence of the town. The TPLF relied on light artillery and, most importantly, sudden and rapidly launched attacks, while the defenders operated from well-fortified positions with underground trenches, heavy artillery and tanks, and were able to call upon MiGs for support.

The fighting, which was the heaviest of the Tigrayan war, went on for two days before the army’s positions were overrun. But before Endaselasie fell Derg troops went on a rampage and their own imprisoned soldiers were taken to nearby Dagabuna, sprayed with fuel, and burned to death.<sup>60</sup> The fall of Endaselasie caused terror among Derg forces throughout Tigray, and in the following days Derg garrisons were evacuated from Adigrat in the north-east and then from the towns of Sinkata, Hagerselam, and Wukro along the eastern corridor, and from Abi Adi in Tembien. The retreating army did not regroup and take up defensive positions until they reached the

provincial capital of Mekelle. The TPLF followed this attack with the capture of Alamata, Korem, and Maichew to the south of Mekelle and also netted the Front the Derg's divisional commander, Hailu Gebre Yohannes. Despite these reverses, the army still found time to destroy civilian electrical generators, pumping stations, and clinics in the towns before they withdrew. The TPLF claimed that more than ten brigades were destroyed and over 7,000 troops captured in the rout.<sup>61</sup>

Having captured the towns, the TPLF then informed their inhabitants that in the event of a major counter-attack, which was anticipated, the towns would not be defended. The TPLF's willingness to give up the towns was based on a number of considerations. First, was the acceptance of the basic guerrilla warfare principle of not defending positions where the attacker could bring superior numbers to bear. Secondly, the mere capture of the towns had accomplished the TPLF's objectives of changing the balance of forces and demonstrating their power to the urban population and the EPLF. Lastly, the TPLF did not want to expose the towns to Derg attacks which could lead to their destruction.

The TPLF was also not prepared to hold the towns at this time when it did not have the resources to manage them. Government employees and teachers who could not be paid from the Front's meagre funds were encouraged to move to Derg-held towns. The capture of the towns alerted the TPLF to the need to develop the human resources that would be required to administer the urban centres that the Front was confident would soon again be in their hands. In particular it responded by quickly moving to establish schools of public administration in the liberated territories of Tembien.

Although it is clear that both the people and the fighters were unhappy at the impending turnover of the towns to the Derg, the TPLF was able to carry out its political work, establish underground cells, and prepare for the next stage of the war. The people were assured that the TPLF would return soon and remove the Derg permanently. Those who wished to leave the towns and go to the countryside with the TPLF were assisted in doing so, and those who stayed behind were advised to 'greet the Derg, dance, and demonstrate in the street as a tactic to protect [them]selves'.<sup>62</sup>

In consequence of its losses in Eritrea and Tigray, the Derg ended its state of belligerence with Somalia, thus freeing up troops and materials which could be transferred to the northern war zones. Another mobilisation campaign was started, and the Derg ordered the expulsion of all foreign aid workers from Tigray and Eritrea on 6 April 1988, for 'security reasons', a move interpreted as ensuring that foreign observers would not be able to witness the events that followed. Making clear the regime's priorities, RRC Commissioner Berhane Jembere said, 'the relief activities will be carried

out only after the bandits are militarily crushed'.<sup>63</sup> On 14 May, the Derg announced a state of emergency in Eritrea and Tigray,<sup>64</sup> but the effect of the proclamation in Tigray was not clear since with the exception of the south-east, the Derg no longer had a presence in the province.

Three months after its expulsion from the towns the Derg fielded a force of over 150,000 in Tigray, the largest army ever assembled in the province, according to TPLF sources.<sup>65</sup> Confronted with massive Derg reinforcements TPLF forces retreated, but often no more than five kilometres outside the towns, after which they resumed their pre-1988 sieges. And as the army re-established its garrisons along the highway it became progressively smaller and weaker, although with the recapture of Endaselasie its total strength in the province was considerably greater than before. Most of the TPLF's forces were once again concentrated in the western Shire region, but the army's failure to capitalise on its string of victories was considered a major disappointment by the government. This broadly conformed to the TPLF's view which was that although numerically much larger, the Derg was in reality a weakened force since its troops, having already been defeated, were demoralised and expected to be overrun again.

Some of the Derg's most heinous atrocities inflicted against the Tigrayan civilian population during the entire course of the war took place in the following months. In particular, the attack on the north-eastern town of Hausien on 22 June 1988 stands out. An all-day attack by helicopter gun ships and MiGs produced 1,800 civilian deaths, the worst single atrocity of the entire war going back to the start of the ELF insurrection in 1961.<sup>66</sup> In a similar attack, 250 people in the southern town of Chercha were killed during a market day in 1989.<sup>67</sup> According to eye-witnesses, MiGs flew low over the defenceless town strafing and bombing. All victims were civilians.<sup>68</sup> There was no immediately discernible military reason to justify either attack, although de Waal argues convincingly that such attacks were part of an attempt to disrupt markets across Tigray with the objective of intimidating peasants who the Derg implicitly acknowledged were almost all supporting the TPLF.<sup>69</sup> As was the case during 1984–5 such attacks in surplus-food growing areas had the additional effect of discouraging poor farmers from elsewhere in Tigray going to the region to undertake farm labour.

However, with the Derg largely restricted to the towns along the main roads and the TPLF in almost complete control of the countryside, the regime no longer had the capacity to cause the civilian dislocation that was needed if the TPLF was to be seriously weakened. The string of EPLF and TPLF victories changed the entire course of the war and made it essential that the two Fronts resolve their political disagreements and begin the final

campaign to defeat the Derg, and after three years of bickering this was accomplished after a series of meetings in Khartoum.

In the event, the Derg's collapse in Tigray came more quickly than the TPLF anticipated. Once again the struggle focused around Endaselasie where the 603rd, 604th, and 605th Army Corps and the elite 103rd Commando Division combined to provide the Derg's last hope of reversing its fortunes in Tigray. But the TPLF's hold on the countryside was tighter than ever and the army found itself under siege with dwindling supplies. Attempts to open supply lines between Endaselasie and Asmara in September and again in December were repulsed, and in February the Commando Division was completely defeated. Five days later the command centre of the 604th at Selekleka, forty kilometres east of Endaselasie, was taken over by the TPLF.<sup>70</sup>

The end was now only a matter of time, and on 19 February 1989 the area in and around Endaselasie was captured and 12,000–13,000 Derg soldiers killed or taken prisoner in a joint operation of TPLF forces supported by a small EPLF armoured brigade. The presence of the EPLF brigade represented both the result in tangible form of the recent unity agreement and the TPLF's continuing weakness in the sphere of heavy artillery. The capture of enormous amounts of Derg supplies in the following weeks was to rapidly overcome that weakness and facilitate the development of a conventional TPLF force.

The defeat of the army in western Tigray sent a shockwave through the Derg's remaining forces in Tigray and within two weeks all the garrisoned towns north of the Wollo border, including Humera, were abandoned, usually without a fight. So rapid was the Derg's collapse in the province that it was three days before the TPLF was able to occupy the abandoned capital of Mekelle on 25 February. As a result considerable equipment including tanks, armoured cars, automatic weapons and stockpiles of ammunition fell into TPLF hands. None the less, as was the case in 1988, the retreating Derg forces still found time to remove cash from the banks and sabotage public facilities. But the vandalism was not entirely one-sided, and in the interim between the Derg's evacuation and the TPLF's exertion of control, some local citizens in Mekelle, Maichew, and other towns went on rampages which included the pillaging of schools until parents of the students attending those schools could organise their defence.

The last major battle that ensured Tigray's security was fought on the border region of northern Wollo, where retreating Derg forces regrouped for a final engagement. The army fought surprisingly well and even dropped paratroopers, but it could not stop the triumphant TPLF fighters. The Derg's defeat in the border lands did not, as many Tigrayans naively hoped, bring the war to an end. Aerial bombing and ambushes carried out

by small groups called *bandas* continued until virtually the final days of the regime.<sup>71</sup>

### **From Tigray to Addis Ababa**

Although Mengistu claimed that the loss of Tigray was unimportant because the province had always been supported by transfers from the rest of the country, many of his generals apparently thought otherwise and in May 1989 they attempted a mutiny while their leader was on a visit to East Germany.<sup>72</sup> The mutineers based in Eritrea called for negotiations with the rebels, formation of a transitional government, and a ceasefire, conditions which the EPLF and TPLF agreed to. In the event, the mutiny was put down and those participants not killed during the abortive attempt were later executed by Mengistu. None the less, the coup served as graphic evidence of the rapidly declining morale of the government forces and forced Mengistu to make a clean sweep of senior army positions and to restructure the defence ministry, air force command, and significantly, the command of the 2nd army in Eritrea.<sup>73</sup>

That was not his only climb-down. The civilian population suffered declining living standards as military expenditures increased an average of 19 per cent a year from 1974 to 1988 when it represented at least 54 per cent of Ethiopia's gross income.<sup>74</sup> In the face of growing criticism from within the Derg's leadership and the loss of the Red Sea port of Massawa to the EPLF in February, Mengistu announced on 5 March 1990 that the WPE would be replaced and a multiparty system introduced, private enterprise would be encouraged, and the whole apparatus of collectivised agriculture, including the hated Agricultural Marketing Corporation, would be dissolved. This was clearly a last and desperate attempt to give his regime a measure of legitimacy, but it was too late and only served to further its decline as peasants began demolishing producer co-operatives and the other institutions of rural state socialism.<sup>75</sup>

The Derg's military defeats, increasing economic problems, declining legitimacy, and moves to encourage private capital must also be seen in the context of the growing crisis internationally of state socialism. The weakening of international Communism and the reforms initiated by Gorbachev facilitated an easing of Cold War tensions which in turn led the Soviet Union to make clear to Mengistu that its support could no longer be relied upon, and further that the Ethiopian economy should be liberalised and attempts made to reach a non-military solution to the rebellions in Eritrea and Tigray.

It does not appear that the evolving Soviet appraisal of conditions in Ethiopia seriously diminished its supply of military hardware since supplies

continued until the final days of the regime. However, it did lead Mengistu to begin a search for new allies, most notably and surprisingly, with Israel. As well as looking for foreign benefactors, the Derg tried – as it successfully did in the 1970s – to raise the banner of an Amhara-imbued Ethiopian nationalism, but such appeals only raised the ire of Oromos and had little effect on Amharas who were now thoroughly disenchanted with the regime.<sup>76</sup>

Meanwhile, the TPLF and other opposition movements increasingly directed their energy to alliance building and planning for the post-Derg administration of the country. Having long advocated a coalition of ethnic-based opposition movements, the TPLF set about organising one, the EPRDF. Led by the TPLF, it initially only included the EPDM, and later the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation, which was largely based on former Oromo soldiers of the Derg whom the TPLF had captured and from among the EPDM. The much smaller Ethiopian Democratic Officers' Revolutionary Movement (EDORM) was made up of officers captured by the TPLF in the large-scale battles of 1988 and 1989 and from among those who had defected from the government. TPLF dependence upon the creation of its own allies was largely due to fears by much smaller movements of TPLF or MLLT domination; this was particularly the case with the OLF which tended to view Tigrayans, along with Amharas, as historical colonisers of the Oromo. TPLF appeals for unity that went hand-in-hand with claims that the groups in question were bourgeois rightists or reactionaries who would only serve as allies in the short run and be liquidated in the long term, also, not surprisingly, did not win approval.

Beginning in August 1989 after the capture of Tigray, the TPLF, together with the EPDM, launched a southern offensive with an estimated force of 15,000–20,000 fighters, and despite huge supplies of weapons distributed by the Derg to local Amharas, by late October the towns of Gondar and Dessie were under siege.<sup>77</sup> The TPLF announced its willingness to conduct negotiations, but these proposed negotiations did not preclude continuing the war. Government fears at the speed of the advance were sufficient to risk transferring the 3rd and 15th divisions from Asmara to Addis Ababa to ensure the capital's defence and provide the forces needed to launch a counter-attack.

However, apart from efforts to create an alliance among anti-Derg movements, a more immediate obstacle to the EPRDF's advance was caused by TPLF fighters, and Tigrayans generally, questioning the need to carry the war south into Oromo and the Amhara populated lands. Fighters in Gondar and Wollo reportedly 'thought they were at the end of the world', while others were surprised and objected to the civilian opposition faced in the towns such as Desie. In response some 10,000 fighters virtually

spontaneously withdrew and returned to Tigray. One TPLF cadre attributed this problem to the Front's emphasis on the national problem and the legacy of feudalism which fostered parochialism.

As a result, a province-wide debate was organised by the new TPLF administration and until it was completed almost one year later, there was little progress in the war. Two factors seem critical in this debate: first, the argument that as in the case of the first Woyene, aerial bombing would continue unless the Derg was completely destroyed; and secondly, the priests forcefully argued that Tigrayans were part of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and they should not be separated from it.<sup>78</sup> The outcome of the debate convinced Tigrayans that their peace and security could be assured only with the Derg's elimination, after which there were significant developments on the political and military fronts.

The rapidly declining military situation in 1989 set in motion processes which forced the government of Colonel Mengistu to at least entertain the possibility of a political solution to its problems. Internationally interest in the Horn was largely directed to resolving the Eritrean dispute and former US President Jimmy Carter made numerous visits to meet with Issayas and Mengistu before delegations of the EPLF and the Derg finally met, first in Atlanta, Georgia and later in Nairobi. Talks were also held in late 1989 in Rome between the Derg and the TPLF, although as it later acknowledged, these talks were chiefly viewed as a forum in which to communicate to the Ethiopian people and not to reach a political agreement since the Front was committed to a military solution.<sup>79</sup> As a result, the talks quickly foundered although contacts between the government and the TPLF did continue sporadically.

In 1989 James Cheek, US Ambassador to the Sudan, met with TPLF Chairman Meles Zenawi in Khartoum and in the same year Meles visited the UK.<sup>80</sup> Meles's expression of admiration for Albania during that visit, however, led to harsh criticism in the British press, but by the time he visited Washington in March 1990 he was reported to have renounced Marxism-Leninism.<sup>81</sup> Observers have also noted a marked change in TPLF rhetoric as it moved to adopt the language of Western-style liberal democracy.<sup>82</sup> With the collapse of the socialist countries of Eastern Europe the TPLF stopped singing the praises of Albanian Marxism. However, in January 1991 it established the Ethiopian Workers Revolutionary Party as an umbrella grouping of EPRDF political counterparts to the Front's own MLLT,<sup>83</sup> although TPLF sources say the new organisation was disbanded a few months later.<sup>84</sup> Mengistu also officially dissociated himself from Communism, but unlike Meles, he did not win US favour, either because he was not believed, or it was recognised that his days were numbered.

In March 1990 the TPLF indicated its willingness to engage in talks with the Derg based on the following conditions: setting up a provisional government of all political organisations, including the WPE; the release of political prisoners and return of exiles; the expulsion of foreign military experts; and closure of military camps.<sup>85</sup> Initially Mengistu refused all negotiations with the TPLF, but its continuing military victories forced the regime to the table, although again nothing was resolved. The TPLF dropped its demand for immediate Eritrean independence which was widely opposed in Ethiopia and instead called for a vote in Eritrea and a transitional period leading to independence.

The TPLF, however, did not pursue its efforts at negotiations and with consensus in Tigray achieved on the need to continue the war outside the province, the focus again turned to the military front. On 23 February 1991 the EPRDF announced that 'Operation Twedros' had been launched with the assistance of the EPLF. Less than a month later Derg forces were removed from Gondar and Gojjam. EPRDF successes in this area brought it into contact with forces of the EDU and EPRP, and reputedly 2,000 fighters of the latter organisation were captured, some of whom are unaccounted for to date. In May 'Operation Walleigne' was launched in Wollo and made rapid progress down the eastern corridor of Ethiopia. The Derg's desperate response was to remove forces assigned to Eritrea and launch attacks into Tigray from positions in Eritrea, but while temporarily delaying the EPRDF's advance, the government no longer had the capacity to stop it.

The relative role of TPLF forces in this campaign compared to those of EPDM, which was the designated movement in the predominantly Amhara lands, cannot be readily ascertained. Clearly a major consideration in the TPLF's alliance with EPDM was fears that Tigrayans would not be readily accepted as liberators when operating outside their home province. What can be said is that EPDM forces had been reinforced with TPLF fighters from the mid-1980s onwards, that when TPLF fighters abandoned the battlefields in Amhara territories in 1989 the advance against the Derg came to an abrupt halt, and that peasant mobilisation in this area never came close to that achieved in Tigray.

In any case, the strength of the EPRDF, the declining morale of the Derg's forces, and their lack of support were all evident in the final days of the regime. None the less, at least one member of the TPLF leadership, Assefa Mamo, has acknowledged his surprise at the willingness of Oromo peasants to accept, or at least not oppose, the advancing EPRDF forces.<sup>86</sup> Assefa discounts the influence of EPRDF propaganda, testimonies of freed POWs, and even that of the TPLF-supporting priests, and ultimately concludes that hatred of the Derg overcame whatever concerns the peasants might have about the 'sons of Yohannis'.



The army's ineffectual defence led Mengistu to fly to Zimbabwe on 21 May, after which the regime rapidly disintegrated. Collectively these developments set the stage for the US-brokered London conference of late May 1991 in which Herman Cohen invited leaders of the TPLF, EPLF, OLF, and a weak Addis Ababa government rump led by General Tesfaye and Ato Tesfaye Dinka after the departure of Mengistu. At that meeting Cohen attempted to establish round-table discussions between the EPRDF, Derg, and other forces. Incredibly even at this late date the United States and its Western allies seem to have had little idea of the balance of forces within Ethiopia. TPLF/EPRDF sources acknowledge that while for many years Western ignorance of their movement and its military strength proved advantageous, totally unrealistic US attempts based on poor intelligence to put together a coalition involving such spent forces as the EPRP needlessly confused a conference whose principal function could only be to arrange the handover of power to the EPRDF.<sup>87</sup>

With the conference deadlocked, EPLF forces marched into Asmara on 24 May. Four days later EPRDF troops, which were at that time on the outskirts of Addis Ababa, entered the city and, together with mechanised units from the EPLF, and fighters from the OLF, the Oromo Islamic Front, the Abba Oromo, and representatives from other minor ethnic groups, set up an interim government of Ethiopia.<sup>88</sup> The USA had little choice but to gracefully accept the *fait accompli*. The almost anti-climactic collapse of the Derg obscured the incredible military achievement of the TPLF: from its humble beginnings in the west of Tigray the Front had grown from a handful of students to an army that defeated what was widely considered the strongest armed forces in sub-Saharan Africa

### Conclusion

The Derg's resettlement and villagisation programmes could be defended on development grounds, but in the context of a bitterly fought war the TPLF was correct in interpreting them as instruments whose primary objective was to undermine their – and other liberation movements' – growing support among the peasants. The fact that neither programme met with much success in Tigray can be largely attributed to the peasants' opposition, but also to the Derg's incapacity to fully implement such ambitious plans, and the extent of TPLF control in the countryside by the mid-1980s when they were being implemented.

While the Derg cannot be said to have caused the famine of 1984–5, it clearly exacerbated conditions and did its utmost to use the plight of the peasants as a means to change the balance of forces in Tigray and Eritrea. Like the resettlement and villagisation programmes, the Derg attempted

to weaken the TPLF's relationship with the peasants, in this case by starvation, forcing peasants into government-controlled towns, or driving them into refugee camps in the Sudan. Although unlike the Derg, the survival of the TPLF depended on the peasants, it too considered the famine in terms of how it could affect the outcome of its struggle. While its efforts at providing relief were sincere, the Front's threats of overwhelming Sudan with refugees and its controversial movement of peasants out of Tigray suggest that the conduct of the war was at least as important as the welfare of the peasants. In the event, the famine did set back the TPLF's military efforts, but only temporarily.

Although the TPLF's mobilisation in south-eastern Tigray had much in common with those conducted in other parts of the province, the fact that it was not able to establish a secure base of operations in this area until the 1980s speaks of the difficulty the Front had in moving down the well-defended eastern corridor, but importantly it also speaks of the difficulties in mobilising in a pluralist context. This area marks a number of transitions: between Tigrayans to the north and Amharas to the south; between highland peoples and those living on the plains and lowlands; between the Raya and Azebo peoples and the Afar; and between Christians and Moslems.

In particular, the existence of a large politically marginalised and economically underdeveloped ethnic minority in the form of the nomadic Moslem Afar posed problems for the TPLF. Although some efforts were made at settling the population, introducing the kind of reforms that proved popular among ethnic Tigrayans, and later establishing the APDO, a similar movement to the TPLF, pragmatism eventually won out and the Front shunted aside (at least temporarily) the APDO, supported the traditional ALF, and granted the Afar self-determination. The TPLF, a movement based on ethnic identity, not surprisingly found its appeal limited when attempting to attract support outside its ethnic core.

Other groups on the Tigrayan periphery, but much closer to the core than the Afar were the Raya and Wejerat who for many years managed to retain much of their traditional culture and avoid state incorporation. What sustained their struggle and ensured that the unique character of their communities were preserved long after most Tigrayan peasants had been forcibly linked to the state, were their communal institutions and egalitarian values. These same institutions proved highly effective at mobilising peasants in the Woyene. However, in spite of their tradition of opposition to the state, the Raya and Wejerat did not stand out for their involvement in the Tigrayan rebellion that is the subject of this study.

This may simply be because defeat in the Woyene and the state repression that followed destroyed the autonomy and undermined the militancy

of these communities. Alternatively, it may be that Derg land reforms which gave many Raya and Wejerat peasants lands they had lost as a result of the Woyene served to win their support, or at least acquiescence. But gratitude did not win the Derg lasting support among Moslems and it is unlikely to have been the case with the Raya and Wejerat. The explanation that is favoured here is that the communal structures of the Raya and Wejerat were only effective at mobilising resistance to incorporation when confronted by a weak pre-modern state. When confronting the later Haile-Selassie and Derg regimes the remnants of their communal traditions did not figure significantly.

In contrast to the Raya and Wejerat, most Tigrayan peasants did not have strong communal institutions or traditions of egalitarianism. They had long since been caught up in a web of state relations, patron–client ties, and divided by wealth, religion and most significantly, the risti land tenure system which fostered insecurity and made peasants potential rivals of one another. There are many examples in Tigray of individual peasants rebelling against authority, but apart from the Woyene (which was largely restricted to eastern Tigray) there are very few examples of peasants taking collective action to assert their interests.

The brief examination of TPLF–EPLF relations carried out here makes clear the mistake of both those who contend that the TPLF blindly followed the EPLF, as well as Eritreans and their supporters who ignore or deny the role the TPLF played in overcoming their joint enemy and facilitating Eritrean independence. Although initially dependent upon the EPLF, as the TPLF's basis of support and military skills grew in the early 1980s the Tigrayans developed their own distinctive policies and conceptions of revolutionary struggle. These differences not only served to define and distinguish the TPLF from the EPLF, but were also the cause of increasing tensions and their three-year break in relations between 1985 and 1988. Although ideologically driven movements, their reconciliation and joint military efforts demonstrated their pragmatism and laid the basis for the destruction of the Derg. In the following chapter the role of pragmatic political leadership will again be considered by examining in various contexts the TPLF's relationship with the peasants.

## 7 TPLF and the peasants

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### **Introduction**

The desire to transform both Tigray, and its relationship with the state, was the fundamental reason why the TPLF launched its revolution, but realising this objective could only come about through successfully waging revolutionary war. What this meant in practice was that no matter how worthy this transformative project was, it could not be considered independently from the impact it had on the war effort. What was necessary then was a programme of reforms which balanced the needs of peasants for land redistribution, effective services, and accountable administration, with the needs of the TPLF for growing committed support for armed struggle. In an environment where the Derg and most revolutionary movements treated peasants with contempt, the TPLF leadership understood that success depended on its ability to maintain the unwavering commitment of the peasants. The objective here is to consider the TPLF–peasant relationship in five areas critical to winning peasant support and directing it to the war effort: education and culture, the Church and religion, women, land reform, and local administration.

### **Education and culture**

Much of the TPLF nationalist appeal made the point that peasant poverty and lack of infrastructure in the villages were the result of state domination by an Amhara elite which wanted to keep Tigray in subjugation. Peasants responded by asking the TPLF as ‘sons of Tigray’ to supply their communities with the facilities they needed, and high on the list were schools. Although initially the TPLF had limited access to material and human resources, after 1980 it had a growing supply of skilled personnel fleeing the Derg’s terror in the towns who could be employed on such projects. The Front thus responded by preparing the curriculum and overseeing construction of ‘green’ (camouflaged) schools which could be hidden from the Derg. Merchants typically supplied blackboards, exercise books, and materials from the towns, and maintenance and salaries of 100 Birr a

month were paid by local residents. Fighters used the same curriculum, but their education had to be pursued in a mobile environment and when convenient. Educational policy was developed with the peasants and approved at congresses at the district, zone, and national levels.

Schools were particularly attractive for the TPLF, because not only did they advance the cultural level of the people, but they also served to deepen political and national consciousness, and train a future generation of youth who could be utilised in the struggle. Employment of Tigrigna as the language of instruction in schools graphically illustrated the TPLF's goal of winning control of Tigray's culture from outsiders. The study of history in turn was used as a means to examine the oppression of the Tigrayan people, the record of resistance, and the role of the TPLF in the struggle for self-determination. Indeed, all the subjects taught in the TPLF-established schools were used to advance the consciousness of the people and strengthen their loyalty to the Front. According to the leading figure on TPLF education policy, Gebru Desta:

political education cannot be separated from so-called non-political education since the very acts of building local administration which in turn created schools was inherently political and served to mobilise and politicise the peasantry. These activities underpinned and fostered Tigrayan nationalism.<sup>1</sup>

Although peasants were involved in all aspects of the educational reforms, when it was found that there were insufficient resources to meet all the demands for schooling, the TPLF chose to educate those who could soon be utilised as fighters and administrators in the mass organisations. Thus the initial emphasis on schooling for children aged six to twelve was changed to youths between twelve and eighteen, a clear reflection of the primacy of TPLF military objectives. As Gebru has acknowledged, 'this was not readily agreed to by peasants who may have seen their younger children denied education because of a lack of resources, but they were eventually won over'.<sup>2</sup>

Apart from formal education, throughout the revolution the TPLF placed great emphasis on developing Tigrayan culture as a means to mobilise peasants. In particular the peasants' oral tradition was put to considerable use, and from the earliest days of the revolution the Front introduced drama, which although new to the peasants, proved highly effective. According to a Front cultural troupe member, 'through our revolutionary songs we are trying to instil confidence in the people themselves, telling them that they are the source of political power and that they will one day destroy their oppressors'.<sup>3</sup> A cultural magazine has also been published by the TPLF since the 1970s. Nor were contemporary popular forms of culture ignored and the Front organised pop music groups that played to large appreciative audiences (as witnessed by the author in

Tigray) who in turn produced tapes that were widely available in the province and internationally to Tigrayans and their supporters. Such was the importance of cultural development to peasant mobilisation that it was made a responsibility of the Political Affairs branch of the Central Committee.

### **Church and religion**

While the TPLF's organisation of schools and clinics in the rural areas advanced the movement's popularity, its Marxist-Leninist sympathies risked gaining the ire of the powerful Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the strong religious sentiments of the Tigrayan peasants. Indeed, Henze quite appropriately raised the question, 'how does the movement's relatively doctrinaire Marxism square with the fact that Tigreans have long been known to be among Ethiopia's most tradition-loyal peoples, strong in their adherence to religion, whether Christianity or Islam?'<sup>4</sup> The answer is that the TPLF did not attack the local church, challenge the religious sensitivities of the peasants, or ill-treat the parish priests. With the Derg widely considered to be atheists, the TPLF presented itself as defenders of religion. The Front's message emphasised that its fighters were 'operating from Christ [and] concentrated on exposing the suffering of people and practising good as a way of appealing to the peasants' religious sentiments'.<sup>5</sup> TPLF cadres spent considerable time studying the Bible and the teachings of the Church so as to intellectually equip themselves for the task of linking the Front's social and political objectives to the humanitarian and spiritual mission of Christianity.<sup>6</sup> However, while the TPLF's approach won the favour of peasants, it did at times restrict the scope of reforms and has left the Church a still powerful and sometimes suspect institution.

The Derg's approach to the established Church was as ill-adapted to winning popular support as its victimisation of students and teachers. Distributing Church lands was widely approved of, but atheism and attacks on Church dogma, practices, and priests, were abhorred by the conservative Tigrayan peasants. As Church officials acknowledged, 'the Derg knew that the Ethiopian people followed their religion and if it opposed the Church directly, people would oppose the Derg, but at the same time he [the Derg] undermined the Church and religion indirectly'.<sup>7</sup> The Derg used its mass associations to urge people to end baptisms, grieving ceremonies, fasting, and even attending church. It used every opportunity to interfere with Church activities, even going so far as to prevent traders from selling grapes used for sacramental wines. But subtle or indirect means of undermining the Church were not the only methods used.

According to charts prominently displayed in the administrative offices

of Zion Mariam Church, some fifty-four church officials were killed by the Derg in Axum awardja, 110 imprisoned, nine churches burned, twenty-seven churches damaged, and many wives of priests 'abducted'.<sup>8</sup> The Derg mistakenly assumed that because Tigrayans welcomed the destruction of the Church's feudal authority and the confiscation of the land and loss of gulti privileges, that their ancient ties to Orthodox Christianity could be readily severed. Instead, the destruction of the traditional power structure in the country served to increase the authority of the parish priests.

Unlike the Derg, the TPLF recognised that although the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was a major component of Ethiopian feudalism, it was not a monolithic institution. Many of the rural churches were not wealthy and their parish priests were often little better off than the peasants among whom they lived and served. The TPLF made considerable efforts at gaining the support of these parish priests who were figures of authority and respect in the villages. Their task was certainly made easier by the harshness with which the Derg dealt with the Church and its priests. Rural priests were often beneficiaries of the TPLF's land reforms, and as a result many of them became active supporters of the TPLF, and their advocacy did much to win the peasants over to the Front.

Some priests rejected the Church's prohibition against taking up arms and became TPLF fighters, but most were too old to keep up with the youthful fighters and were more likely to join local militias or serve as teachers in Front-established schools. With the TPLF's blessing many participated in local administration, although they were never permitted to dominate the mass associations.<sup>9</sup> Many deacons and *dabtara*, or lay priests, who were usually younger than the priests, did join the TPLF as fighters, and according to one estimate about 2,000 *dabtara* and 500 priests were killed during the revolution.<sup>10</sup> Some priests played an important role in introducing fighters to other priests and local people in recently liberated territories. Such priests told the people that unlike the atheistic Derg, the TPLF was made up of true Christians.

Other priests assumed a similar role outside Tigray. Two such priests from Abi Adi, Kashi Terka Abara and Kashi Melhakabraham Gebrujesus Gebremariam, reported that they served in the TPLF for seventeen years as political cadres, not carrying guns, but 'agitating' people throughout newly liberated territories in Tigray and beyond to Gondar and Wollo, as the Front took the struggle south in the final stages of the war.<sup>11</sup> Since Amharigna and Geez were the languages of the Church, they could be effectively employed throughout northern Ethiopia by the priests. Following the TPLF, these ambassador-priests held meetings where fighters would be introduced to the priests and peoples of newly liberated territories as 'their children', and always the contrast was made between the

TPLF who came as liberators and the 'atheistic Derg'. Older and respected priests would then be recruited from each area to carry the word forth.

Although Orthodox authorities testify that some forty-three churches were destroyed and seventy-two priests killed in the six woredas of Tembien,<sup>12</sup> the awardja was none the less deemed sufficiently secure to hold two conferences of priests from the liberated territories. These conferences held near Abi Adi in 1983 and Roba Kazi in 1984 did much to consolidate TPLF support from the priesthood. Some 747 priests attended the first conference and 550 priests attended the second, at which delegates agreed to reduce the large number of holy days celebrated. Significantly they also agreed to establish an Ethiopian Orthodox Church Secretariat in the liberated territories, thus giving rise to a 'TPLF Secretariat' and a 'Derg Secretariat', which continued to function out of Mekelle.<sup>13</sup>

At two further conferences held in Ambara Metaga woreda of Tembien during 1987, resolutions on religious laws, holy day celebrations, weddings, and the administration of monasteries and churches were passed. The TPLF organised all these conferences, provided the security, and took an active part in the proceedings, and reaped considerable political dividends. When Mekelle was captured by the TPLF in 1989 the Derg-supported Tigrayan Secretariat was transferred to Wollo, and the TPLF-supported Secretariat assumed responsibility for the administration of all Tigray.

The TPLF's success in mobilising Tigrayan peasants can in part be attributed to its commitment to operating within the structures of a deeply religious peasant culture, but at the same time this placed limits on the Front's capacity to alter those structures. The TPLF pressed for changes within the Church and in the practices of its adherents, but it was never prepared to allow confrontation to develop over these issues, and therefore beyond the largely secular cadres, most Tigrayan peasants remained as devoted to their ancient and conservative religious traditions as they were during the imperial era. Many examples attest to this. In the Orthodox Church more than half of the days in the year denote religious events or commemorate saints, and many Tigrayans celebrate them by fasting and not working, thus causing considerable damage to the economy and lowering the standard of living of peasants. The TPLF endeavoured to reduce these celebrations, but with only mixed results, even in the woredas where it had been active since the 1970s. Nor has the TPLF had much success in reducing the number of Church officials, which during the imperial era, and now, can run into hundreds in some woredas.

The most striking example, however, of the unwillingness of the TPLF to press a programme of social transformation when it threatened to disrupt rural communities and thus interfere with the war effort is provided by the monasteries. In spite of otherwise far-reaching land reforms, some



monasteries in Tigray in 1993 still retained packages of land, while their monks worked on land nearby, and in some cases held other land which was farmed for them in their home areas. In some cases monks still receive tej and other luxuries from the near-destitute peasants, just as they did under the old regime. One TPLF official acknowledged that the Front was 'not in a hurry to penetrate the monasteries' and 'kept quiet' about their conditions, while another official said that the TPLF 'must respect monasteries' and that it 'won't interfere' with them. Since the TPLF had the capacity to force through desired changes in the monasteries, its reticence demonstrates the extent to which it would go to avoid confrontations with monks who were influential members of traditional Tigrayan society.

The TPLF proved equally adept at capitalising on Moslem disenchantment with the Derg. Since many Moslems in Tigray had been denied access to land, and all Moslems suffered religious discrimination under the old regime, the Derg's proclamations on religious equality and land reform should have won it considerable support from this community. Indeed, unlike some of their Christian counterparts, Moslems in Tigray had few regrets about the passing of the Haile-Selassie regime, or the collapse of Ras Mengesha's administration. They welcomed the Derg-proclaimed religious freedoms and were among the biggest beneficiaries of the land reform which provided equal entitlements for all, irrespective of religion. While Christian peasants often argue that the Derg's land redistribution led to disproportionate shares being acquired by their supporters, Tigray's Moslems acknowledge they received allotments of comparable size and quality as their Christian neighbours, and generally they welcomed the land reforms.

However, because most Moslems had historically been restricted to non-farming occupations, such as weaving and trading, virtually none of them had the necessary oxen or ploughing tools to engage in full-time farming. As a result, few of them then, or after the TPLF land reforms, have given up their traditional village and town-centred occupations. Instead, as weavers they were frequently without work when Derg-imposed restrictions reduced the supply of materials they needed, and as merchants they suffered like their Christian counterparts from harassment and the loss of trade. Indeed, Moslem leaders in Tigray do not complain of systemic Derg discrimination against their community to account for their alienation from the regime. They consider themselves little different from their Christian neighbours, and therefore motivated by the same broad concerns.

And like their Christian neighbours, Moslem suspicion of the Derg grew when its opposition to religion became better known. Derg attacks on mosques and the execution of local sheikhs alienated Moslems just as

similar attacks on churches and parish priests alienated Christians. In particular, the execution of Sheikh Sadiq, a resident of the heavily Moslem-populated south-eastern plains, served to antagonise his co-religionists across Tigray.<sup>14</sup> Sadiq was a 'known sheikh', a hereditary Moslem leader, and a large landowner, and his murder was widely interpreted by Moslems as an attack on their faith.<sup>15</sup>

With its doctrinaire fixation on the establishment of a Marxist state in Ethiopia, the Derg proved incapable of understanding the peasants' religious attachments. Like its attacks on the educated youth in the towns, the Derg's assault on the Church and mosque and their rural representatives was a major cause of peasant estrangement. While the Derg's insensitive approach to the values and institutions of the peasants cannot alone account for the TPLF's accomplishments in the countryside, it is inconceivable that the TPLF could have succeeded in gaining the support of the peasants if the Derg had not first infuriated them by its attack on religion. The TPLF worked within and through the religiously overlaid society of Tigray, demonstrated great sensitivity to the peasants' religious sensitivities, and while this placed constraints on its reforms, it also served to preclude Church-based opposition, and win the support of peasants.

### **Mobilisation of women**

Overcoming the age-old fetters on the role of women was a major concern of the TPLF from its earliest days in the west, in part because attacking female oppression was consistent with its liberation philosophy, but also because the TPLF needed to use to the full all the human resources of Tigray in the struggle against the Derg. Among the reforms enacted by the TPLF were: raising the minimum marrying age; making dowries voluntary rather than obligatory; assuring women of their property rights; guaranteeing their rights in divorce actions; endeavouring to reduce women's heavy work loads; and raising their educational levels. Most importantly, women have gained a political voice in their communities through their participation in the mass associations. In spite of this record of achievement, TPLF efforts to advance the condition of women have been constrained by the need to maintain the support of peasants who have often been sceptical about changing the traditional status of women.

The first Women's Mass Associations were established in 1978 in Sheraro and Zana, which were among the earliest woredas to be liberated and were deemed to have a high level of political consciousness.<sup>16</sup> The importance given to women and the organising of the associations can be dated to the Red Terror when women who had been active in the TPLF's underground

movement in the towns were forced to flee; until then there were few women in the field.<sup>17</sup> Initially the TPLF established separate associations for young and old women because of their different experiences, but they were later dissolved in favour of a united organisation of all women between the age of eighteen and fifty, after which they were considered 'aged, house-bound, not active'.<sup>18</sup>

While the separation of women from men during mobilisation drives might suggest that their problems were perceived as being unique, this was not the general philosophy subscribed to by the TPLF. The Chairman of Zana's Women's Association, Negi Bito, held that, 'women have the same problems as men . . . problems of the society are women's problems also'.<sup>19</sup> According to a woman fighter, the focus of the Women's Associations was class struggle because 'it unites everybody, not just women, not just men – they are not separated'.<sup>20</sup> While this perspective is consistent with the TPLF's Marxism-Leninism, it also reflects the movement's concern not to allow divisions to develop when mobilising the various components of rural society.

Although women were not at first welcomed as fighters into the TPLF, by 1982 the Front claimed that one-third of the fighters were women,<sup>21</sup> it being recognised that the term 'fighter' referred to a range of positions and not just those involved in combat. Involvement of women as fighters, and particularly in combat, was held to demonstrate that women were equally as capable as men. In recognition that women were equal in law but not in practice, the second Congress of the TPLF established two schools, the March 8 School, whose membership included both peasant women and women fighters, and Marta School,<sup>22</sup> whose students were restricted to women fighters. In addition, to assist women fighters and encourage discussion on women's issues among all fighters the Women Fighters Association of Tigray (WFAT) was established under the auspices of the Mass Bureau.

In spite of these measures and the support they had among Tigrayan women, in the mid-1980s it was decided to restrict the number of women recruited as fighters. The TPLF argued that the reasons for this change of policy were that domestic life was being disrupted because so many women became fighters; women could make a valuable contribution to the war effort through activities in their home and villages; the educational levels for becoming a fighter were raised to five years and many women did not meet these criteria; and lastly, the war was moving to a conventional form that placed more emphasis on physical strength.<sup>23</sup>

As TPLF Central Committee member Aregash acknowledged, for peasant women 'being a fighter is such a liberation for them', and as a result the decision to reduce the number of women fighters 'created resentment among the women in the villages'.<sup>24</sup> Feelings ran so high that the Women

Fighters Association of Tigray was forced to hold a special conference to discuss the issue. Some young women joined the Front without their father's or husband's permission in order to escape the harshness of domestic life in rigidly structured patriarchal families. Although war conditions encouraged more liberal attitudes, the decision of Moslem women in particular to become fighters against the wishes of their fathers and/or husbands was frequently seen as 'a crime in the holy book'.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the Chairman of the Democratic Association of Tigrayan Women (DATW), Roman, acknowledged that some men took a 'chauvinist interpretation' of the decision and argued that it demonstrated women's weakness.<sup>26</sup>

It seems likely that the TPLF's decision to restrict the numbers of women into their ranks was a response to unease in the villages and, more specifically, the appeals of Tigrayan fathers, and the influence of the Church and the mosque. There was particular resentment in Moslem households where unmarried women were closely supervised, and the freedom, clothes, and weaponry of the female fighters caused upset. It is insightful that while large numbers of women became fighters, very few were militia members. In the TPLF stronghold of Zana only ten of 500 militia members were women; in other woredas the proportion of women was often even lower, or non-existent. It can be surmised that it was far more difficult for women to assume combat roles that challenged traditional values in their own villages than to serve as fighters where they were likely to be sent further afield and not be a source of embarrassment to their families. Indeed, the TPLF has acknowledged the lack of women in local militias and has attributed this to the demands placed on them in the household.<sup>27</sup>

Another example of the constraints placed on the TPLF's reforming zeal is provided by the aborted programme to teach women how to plough. This programme, which began as a means to break down the traditional gender-driven division of labour, ran up against the same conservative village values that restricted women's participation as combatants. In rural areas a rigid division of roles had long existed between men who ploughed and women who did the planting, weeding, and harvesting.<sup>28</sup> This division became particularly onerous when young men left the rural areas in large numbers to join the TPLF, or to escape from the Derg's forced conscription campaigns. As a result, single, divorced, separated, or widowed women who had land as a result of the land reforms, none the less often had to give as much as half their harvested produce to male neighbours to do their ploughing. The ploughing programme thus responded to particular problems caused by the war, as well as challenging traditional restrictions placed on women.

Two years after it was started, the programme was abruptly ended because, according to the TPLF, teaching women how to plough only

served to increase their already burdensome responsibilities; in addition, it was argued that ploughing was too heavy for women. As a result, in Zana, which was one of the first woredas where this programme was introduced, no women were ploughing in early 1993. The TPLF assertion that rural Tigrayan women's domestic responsibilities leave them with little time is certainly true, but it does not confront the problem of husbandless women vulnerable to economic dependency and exploitation, made worse by the large number of young men engaged in the war against the Derg. Moreover, female weakness was not a convincing reason for cancelling the programme when it is not uncommon in Tigray to see boys no older than ten ploughing and women carrying heavy loads of firewood.<sup>29</sup> If the official reasons for discontinuing the ploughing programme can be discounted, then the assumption must be that the TPLF feared that by encouraging women to plough it was causing offence by challenging core religious and social beliefs about women in rural Tigrayan society.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, one forthcoming TPLF women cadre acknowledged as much when she said that, 'traditional men don't accept that women must plough because they are equal. If we forced it on them they would be against the TPLF.'<sup>31</sup>

### **Land reform**

In the *risti*-held lands of Ethiopia, which includes Tigray, peasants have always taken a close interest in government measures that could impact on their access to land. Efforts to in any way alter land tenure in particular raises suspicions, and in 1968 when the imperial government introduced a tax in Gojjam province peasants feared that it was a prelude to the alienation of their lands and responded by revolting.<sup>32</sup> Similar sentiments prevailed in Tigray and came to the fore with the Derg's Land Proclamation, in spite of the fact that most of the measures were highly beneficial to the peasants. Instead of being sensitive to peasant concerns, the Derg's lack of appreciation of local conditions, its dogmatic approach, and the speed and harshness with which the reforms were implemented, created a crisis for the regime. Equally significantly, the Derg's land distributions provided a model against which the TPLF's own reforms could be favourably compared.

The extent to which the Derg's land reform was carried out in Tigray is difficult to ascertain. It is clear that land held by the nobility was confiscated, and *gulti* obligations terminated by the peasants on their own, very quickly after they heard of the Derg's 1975 proclamation. However, formal land redistributions were rarely initiated by peasants, and the Derg's weak presence in the province before 1977–8 meant that they were probably not carried out in most of the province. After this period the Derg was

challenged by the TPLF which served to restrict their efforts to secure areas close to main roads and urban centres. Where land reforms were carried out, they were typically top-down quick affairs where as one peasant put it, 'the Derg merely looked at the land and then divided it up'.<sup>33</sup>

Unlike some other areas of Ethiopia, highland Tigray had little commercial potential and therefore no state farms were established, but a surplus of land in the southern *kola* lands led the Derg to organise a number of co-operative farms and move poor peasants from Agame and central Tigray to work on them. These co-operatives were resented by indigenous residents, some of whom were killed by the Derg for resisting them. In the event the scheme did not prove successful, apparently because of the difficulty individualistic Tigrayan peasants had in working collectively. After the Derg's retreat from the area, the TPLF organised a conference where various systems of land tenure were discussed and voted on, and co-operative farming was overwhelmingly rejected.<sup>34</sup>

The Derg also failed to appreciate the different level of interest in land reform across regions. In Agame awardja and much of central Tigray land shortages were a major problem and for this reason the TPLF conducted its first land redistributions in these areas. However, in the far west, the lowlands of Tembien, and the plains of south-east Tigray, there were usually land surpluses and the demand for land did not figure highly. However, everywhere in the province peasants supported land reforms that were fair and carried out with their participation. As one respondent from the eastern plains explained, land distribution was not a crucial issue in the area, but the rights of the people were.<sup>35</sup>

Land reform should have gained the Derg a basis of peasant support in Tigray; instead it was a major cause of peasant disaffection. The haste with which the land redistributions were carried out reflected the regime's insecurity and need to quickly implement reforms which would eliminate the social base of the old regime.<sup>36</sup> The Derg's prohibition against the employment of farm labour in a province where many peasants depended upon seasonal work for survival caused great resentment. Ignorance of local conditions suggests that the Derg lacked the support of competent native cadres, while the brutality with which the reforms were implemented and the inclusion of the prohibition on the hiring of labour, points to both the narrow militaristic origins of the regime and its dogmatic commitment to a Marxist-Leninist programme.

Both Derg and TPLF land reforms were designed to restructure the rural political economy and win peasant support, but the regime's reforms proved to be a political failure, and the Front's reforms served as the basis around which they mobilised the peasants of the province. While the Derg's land distribution involved violence and resulted in their friends getting

superior shares, the TPLF ensured that their programme provided an equitable distribution of land and was carried out by the peasants. A widowed and previously landless seller of *suwa* (traditional beer) said that, initially, 'the people didn't know how these small boys could accomplish their aims; they liked them, but had no confidence in their ability to do what they said. But they supported them and prayed for them. After a year they started the land distribution and every peasant had his own land.'<sup>37</sup>

The TPLF's land reform did not always lead to peasants increasing their land-holdings, either over what they held under the imperial regime, or as a result of the Derg's land redistribution, as the following example makes clear. The Front first came to Taquomlesh woreda in Tembien in 1976, but it was only in 1978 that the Derg-established Peasant Association was replaced with their own and it was not until 1981 that the TPLF carried out its own land reform. Three peasants of Adi Sumuon tabia in Taquomlesh woreda, Kashi Marasa Abara, Nagash Gebre Shidan, and Girmay Esgabihir, had respectively 1.0, 1.25, and 1.75 hectares of land at the time of the revolution; as a result of the Derg's reforms they had 2.0, 1.25, and 1.5 hectares, and under the TPLF their families each held 1.25 hectares of land.<sup>38</sup> Although such unscientific surveys cannot take into account such differences as soil fertility and access to water, according to these men their land-holdings declined because the distribution was according to family size, and two of them had sons who had departed.

There were only 200 registered farmers in Abi Adi, but similar questioning found that Alesmu Hailu, Mengesha Gerechal, and Gebrehaiwit Gebre Selassie respectively held 1.0, 1.0, and 1.5 hectares of land at the time of the revolution; they retained the same amount of land after the Derg's land reform, and as a result of a TPLF distribution in 1993 they hold respectively 0.5, 0.75, and 0.75 hectares of land.<sup>39</sup> The peasants attributed this result to the fact that Alesmu was initially a richer peasant and lost land, while the other peasants' plots decreased when former non-landholders such as weavers, priests, and traders received land as a result of the TPLF reforms, and further, after victory many people returned to the area and claimed rights to land.

The most detailed description of a TPLF land reform is that carried out in the woreda of Adi Nebried in western Tigray over a five-month period beginning in mid-October 1980. Although the report can be criticised for its obvious sympathies (TPLF cadre Tekeste Agazi is listed as the author and supposedly wrote the booklet which was then published by a TPLF support group<sup>40</sup>), it is an important report that provides the most detailed picture of a Front land reform.<sup>41</sup>

While implemented in October, the decision to carry out the land reform was made at an earlier 'regional meeting of Agit-Prop cadres of the TPLF'

and conveyed to the thirty-one men and women already recruited and trained from among the peasants of the nine tabias of the woreda who would oversee the land redistribution.<sup>42</sup> The reforms were largely geared to the agricultural cycle: the local harvest took place in late October and early November, after which there was a slack period until the sowing season started in late June or early July. Thus the 'heated part of the reform movement' took place when peasants had the time to attend meetings and participate in the process.

After discussions in the peasant committee on ways to combat the expected attempts at sabotage by feudal landowners, and means to mobilise people for the reform, the committee studied the amount and type of arable land in each tabia; how much was owned by feudals, churches, monasteries, rich, middle and poor peasants, and also the attitude of these land-holders to the reform. While this process was going forward, 'intensive agitational work' in the form of general meetings and dramas were carried out in each tabia to explain the 'unjust nature of the previous land ownership system and why and how it must be changed'. Further meetings were held that brought middle and poor peasants and youth into the process of mobilising their communities and combating the sabotage of large landowners.

The next step was the election of delegates to draft rules for the agrarian reform and carry out the complex task of redrawing the boundaries, both with surrounding woredas, and individual tabias of Adi Nebried. Nine peasants were elected for this task, of whom four were poor peasants, three were middle peasants, and two were rich peasants. After the boundary revisions were completed, the committee debated the TPLF-prepared draft rules for carrying out the actual land reform. When agreement was reached, both the committee of nine and the TPLF agit-prop cadres went to each tabia, to explain and discuss in detail the rules that would apply in carrying out the reforms.

Having reached agreement on the need for land reform and the rules by which it would be carried out, a further committee of eighty-one peasants made up of forty middle peasants, thirty poor peasants, and eleven rich peasants, was elected to actually execute the reforms. This committee met for two and a half days to closely study the rules before approving a code of conduct. After a woreda-wide mass demonstration was held to coincide with the completion of the land redistribution committee's first meeting, the committee members went to the nine tabias and started redistributing the land.

In the first instance land was divided to ensure that everyone was given some land near their home, while other land further afield was shared by lots. Land was also divided according to fertility with, ideally, each peasant



getting some land of each quality and, where this was not possible, land of another quality in suitable proportions. In addition, land distribution was based on the number of family members, with unmarried, divorced or widowed men and women receiving commensurate shares. Hence the land reform was held to be a 'milestone' in the liberation of women in the woreda. Under the old regime women lost rights to land when they divorced, but with the land reform this ended. Further, the beating of women by their husbands which had frequently precipitated divorces, was reported to have almost disappeared after the land reform because men feared the loss of family land if their marriages ended.<sup>43</sup>

Land previously held by churches and monasteries was nationalised as a means to destroy feudalism. In addition, the reforms served to divide the clergy along economic lines and link the interests of poor priests with those of poor peasants, and thus make clear that the reforms were not part of an organised attack on the Christian faith.<sup>44</sup>

At the end of the distribution it was estimated that of the 4,352 households in the woreda, 1,150 families who had little or no land before the reform, and a further group of 1,055 families which had previously held insufficient amounts of land, received significant additions of land; 1,507 households did not get significant additions, and 640 households had their land-holdings significantly reduced.<sup>45</sup> On 23 March 1981, a mass demonstration of some 13,000 of the woreda's total population of 17,000 was held to commemorate the achievement of land reform. The process was finalised two days later when a final meeting of peasant cadres who had played a decisive role in the reforms was held to assess the movement, compare this experience with that of others in Tigray, and record their achievements.

This was the formal process and results, but Tekeste also provided a picture of the struggles which went on during the land distribution. Because the land reforms were carried out after the large landowners had been militarily and politically isolated with the collapse of the old regime, armed opposition was not an option for them, but that did not stop 'intensive feudal intrigue and sabotage'.<sup>46</sup> It began with attempts to set woreda against woreda, and tabia against tabia, during the boundary revisions. Some of the large landowners appealed directly to the Derg to disrupt the agrarian reforms and then spread rumours that those participating in them would have their property burned and lives endangered when the Derg came. The TPLF responded by exposing the key conspirators in mass meetings and having them 'severely punished', although the nature of this punishment is not given. In addition, poor and middle peasants were organised and repeatedly explained the character of the opposition to the reforms.

Anti-reform elements from the upper clergy argued that God had

ordained inequality and it was evil to try to change His will and forcibly impose equality. Priests of poor and middle-peasant background were organised and used to counter these notions. Members of the former nobility also tried to enlist the support of rich peasants by arguing that TPLF plans included confiscation of all their land, cattle, and farm implements, and this manoeuvre succeeded in bringing 'a significant number of rich peasants to their side'.<sup>47</sup> A meeting of rich peasants was immediately held and they were assured that, 'since the rich peasants were rich primarily because they had more farm animals and implements and not because they had more land, the redistribution of land would not harm most of them significantly'.<sup>48</sup> It took several such meetings, together with a number of one-on-one talks with the more influential among them, to neutralise dissent from this quarter.

The TPLF also approached the former nobles directly during the course of the agrarian reform as a means to 'divide them and prevent the formation of a solid feudal conspiracy against the reform movement [and] intimidate them' with threats of severe punishment should they not accept their fate which had been 'sealed by history'.<sup>49</sup> Those who co-operated were assured they would be treated benevolently. Tekeste acknowledged that this feudal-inspired opposition to the reforms was not broken, but generally the nobles were intimidated and their solidarity impaired.

Tekeste also reported numerous instances of anti-reform forces bribing, blackmailing, or defaming members of the land redistribution committee, and each case had to be discussed at meetings of the committee, and then resolved before public forums. In five cases committee members were found to have been in breach of their code of conduct and were required to resign, and others elected to replace them.

The Adi Nebried land reform appears to have been carried out in a more systematic manner than was usually the case. Often the land reform process continued for years in response to the needs of the peasants, changing local military and political conditions, problems stemming from earlier reforms that later came to light, or by the need to make adjustments based on population changes. Although by 1981 the TPLF had considerable experience in carrying out land reforms, it did not follow a rigid model: there were always differences across woredas, based on when and where they were carried out, and a host of minor factors ranging from the physical to the political. Land reform always had two objectives for the TPLF: breaking up feudal society, but probably even more importantly, it was a means by which peasants could be organised around a collective endeavour, develop self-confidence, establish an institutional base independent of the state, and win support for the TPLF. Such a project had to rely on political skills with minimum resort to violence if peasant solidarity was to be achieved.

### **Rural administration**

While the demand for equitable and democratically implemented land reform was heard across Tigray, in the less populated and lower lands of the west, Tembien, and the south-east, the major issue for peasants was 'unfair' administration. Peasants from these areas repeatedly expressed their concern over inadequate and corrupt administration, poor infrastructure, land insecurity, and shiftas who emerged from the forests at night to prey on poor farmers. The lack, or weakness, of imperial government institutions, or the steady decline in effectiveness of the central state as distance increased from the core, explains the prevalence of shifta in these areas. Without established state institutions, or the traditions of social control they provided, constraints of a political or social nature were less developed in these areas.

The attraction of shifta to the outlying and predominately lowland areas was also facilitated by the physical environment. Although shifta require a settled population to prey on, they also need underpopulated areas in which to hide from authority. Greater numbers of trees provided cover and together with the hostile climate, detracted would-be pursuers from the highlands. Adjacent areas also provided a measure of protection: to the west is the ill-defined and long fought over border of Sudan; to the south is the Takezze river gorge, long a region notorious for banditry; and to the east lay the inhospitable Danikal lowlands.

Shifta groups operated with little threat from established authority and this led many peasants to conclude that the nobility and shiftas worked in conjunction. Peasants across Tigray also believe that educated nobles became local government officials, while their uneducated relatives become shiftas. While a direct link is hard to confirm, the prevalence of banditry and the weak infrastructure had three consequences. First, the inability of the imperial state to protect peasants from the depredations of the shifta reduced the state's legitimacy in the eyes of peasants. Secondly, conditions of lawlessness favoured the establishment of revolutionary movements as is evident by the attraction of Teranafit/EDU, TPLF, and EPRP to such areas. The same lawlessness encouraged peasants inhabiting these areas to acquire weapons to defend themselves and their property and thus made them particularly attractive recruits to revolutionary movements. Lastly, TPLF efforts to combat lawlessness and establish effective rural administrations were warmly welcomed by peasants.

The case of Adi Ahferom in south-central Tigray illustrates the importance even very poor peasants attached to having an effective and accessible administration and how the TPLF gained support by meeting local

demands. Members of the nobility held an estimated one-third of this woreda's land; considerably less than half of woreda families had ploughing oxen, and land shortages were severe.<sup>50</sup> Conditions were so poor that according to a local priest, 'if a farmer had four sons, three would have to find work outside the woreda and one would work for a feudal'.<sup>51</sup>

A large and rugged area with only long and rough paths linking it to the woreda administrative centre, the people wanted their own officials. From the late 1960s residents petitioned the imperial regime to separate the area presently recognised as Adi Ahferom and have it made a woreda. The High Court in Addis Ababa replied positively to their request, but it was rejected in Mekelle. Later the Derg agreed to establish a woreda administration, but the decision was never implemented. The TPLF, however, responded to the people's appeal, organised a woreda baito, and carried out its second land reform in the province after Sobia. Contrary to the views of theorists who assume that peasants oppose state intrusion, the example of Adi Ahferom demonstrates, first, that peasants want responsible public administration to meet their needs for security and in particular land adjudication, and secondly, they will support the party or government that provides it.

While the peasants of Adi Ahferom were among the poorest in Tigray, the woreda of Zana in the south-west was relatively affluent, but none the less peasants still highly valued effective and responsible local government. With 47,000 people, average family-size farms of 1.5 hectares, fertile soils, and, by Tigrayan standards, plentiful water supplies that could be used for producing off-season garden crops, Zana had a relatively high standard of living and real potential for economic growth.<sup>52</sup> There were three monasteries and forty-two churches in Zana, but local people acknowledge that feudal land-holdings were not large in the woreda.

None the less, until the land reform there was a minority without land, and many small landholders were forced to sell their labour in Humera. Moreover, probably half the farmers did not have cattle (among single women and Moslems the figure rose to more than 90 per cent) and had to pay one-third of their production to use them, and one-half if the owner was hired to do the ploughing. Despite its economic potential, Zana's lack of irrigation resources, schools for the woreda's children, and roads to market peasant surpluses, led to it stagnating under the old regime. Added to this was a history of government corruption and inability to contain the shiftas who plagued the woreda. Zana was ripe for establishing new popular government structures when the imperial regime collapsed, but although the Derg's local representative was Tigrayan, he could not guarantee the people's loyalty or meet their needs, and the harshness which typified Derg rule fostered peasant disaffection. The TPLF was able to capitalise on the Derg's inadequacies, establish mass associations and a local government,

and propose programmes which gained the support and participation of the people. By the early 1980s the reforms were largely in place and the people demonstrated their willingness to commit themselves to the struggle by sending their sons and daughters to the TPLF as fighters.

The establishment of mass associations and local administrations in the liberated territories was a critical element in the TPLF's peasant mobilisation. The first baito was organised in Sheraro, and when the town was shortly thereafter captured by the Derg, many citizens and the baito officials moved to the surrounding countryside and continued working to expand their operation to include the entire woreda. Other administrations were formed in Zana in the west, and Adegä Arbi in central Tigray, and together these baitos served as models for the rest of the province. Anyone over the age of sixteen and a member of a TPLF mass association could stand for election to baitos which assumed responsibility through three standing committees for administration (justice, security, and self-defence), economics (agriculture, cottage industry, road building, and technical development), and social affairs (health, education, relief and rehabilitation). Peasants who were particularly active in their districts were given the opportunity of attending cadre schools which focused on the aims of the revolution and public administration, after which they went back to 'agitate' in the mass associations. Unlike fighters, these cadres stayed within their local communities.

Of particular importance in achieving the legitimacy of local administration was the establishment of a system of courts. Although there was considerable variation in the local courts across liberated Tigray, a number of principles united them: while initiated by the TPLF, they were accountable, accessible, and operated by local people; decisions were made promptly, and court costs were minimal. The differences between courts under the imperial regime and those under the TPLF are best described by Meruse Woldeman, a former prison guard who was elected a woreda judge in the liberated territories in 1982 and in 1993 was made a Maichew Zoba Judge. He said:

Judges during Haile-Selassie's reign were appointed by top people, such as feudal landlords and governors; judges are now selected by the people. Cases during Haile-Selassie's time took a long time and would not net a quick decision; now cases are heard quickly and judgements are given. Now if a judge makes a mistake people can make corrections or suggestions, and decisions can be reviewed by the people. Under Haile-Selassie people felt they couldn't get a fair judgement and had to give bribes. Fines are now according to how much money you have, or you may be required to do labour. In the past people were afraid in court and had to stand and bow to the court; now people sit and are not afraid. During Haile-Selassie's reign a woman could not get a judgement or be a witness unless she had a lawyer to represent her. Now women can apply to the courts, be witnesses, or become judges.<sup>53</sup>

And of the Derg judicial system, Meruse had the following observation:

During the Derg everyone watched you so people avoided the courts. Police would tell people what to say in court as witnesses and you could not say what you wanted. After the Red Terror even members of a family didn't trust one another. Laws didn't have any meaning any more and there were no rights. If you could pay cash you could get a decision; if poor you wouldn't get a favourable decision. [Unlike now] court was in Amharigna under the Derg. Judges were appointed by the Derg.<sup>54</sup>

The TPLF's first tribunal was organised in their original base at Dedebit, and across Tigray the Front established courts at all levels of their administration – kushette, tabia, woreda, zoba, and (after liberation) provincial. In the post-1991 period the court system is being revised, but during the years of struggle it was very much a grassroots affair with different processes for establishing courts and even different laws from one area to the next.

In Sobia woreda, for example, the procedure for electing woreda level judges involved candidates first meeting the eligibility criteria which included being a native of the woreda, respected, literate, and above twenty-five years of age.<sup>55</sup> Based on these measures small tabia baitos would nominate seventeen candidates, middle tabias twenty to twenty-five, and large tabias would put forward thirty candidates. A mass meeting would be held in the woreda administrative centre that might go on for days while peasants considered the many candidates' suitability, after which three judges, one of whom served as a chairman, were elected. Judges received training from the TPLF, but in Sobia were not given a salary. Depending on the season they heard cases approximately three days each week which allowed them to continue working on their farms; in isolated cases other peasants would help them with their farm work. Decisions of the courts were achieved by majority voting of the judges. Judges could hold office until retirement, but their decisions were always open to debate at regular woreda meetings, and if they were found negligent they could be immediately dismissed.

Cases heard by the local-level courts typically varied by season: after the harvest, fights as a result of drinking at weddings were common; the post-harvest period was also a time when peasants might have disputes over the exchange of fields; and after the rainy season altercations caused by cattle grazing on a neighbour's crops were widespread. Based on the local economy there were also regional variations in the laws, such as the western Tigray prohibitions against damaging gum arabic trees. Punishments for local-level crimes also varied across the province.<sup>56</sup>

Local administrations were effective, accountable, and served to raise support for the TPLF. They also played a direct role in the war against the Derg through such projects as construction of roads and recruiting militias.

The function of the roads included transporting weapons and rations to fighters, bringing relief to famine victims, and providing a route to the refugee camps in the Sudan. Traders also sporadically used these routes. At the instigation of the TPLF, *baitos* in the liberated territories organised and carried out the construction of two road systems running parallel to the main highway from Endaselasie to Adigrat and then continuing adjacent to the Addis Ababa–Asmara highway south to Wollo. Plans and organisation were developed by liaising with officials in neighbouring liberated territories. The building season was restricted to the three months of the dry season when weather conditions were suitable and peasants were free from the agricultural cycle. Most work was done at night to ensure safety from marauding MiGs. Only male youth and the middle-aged worked on the road, but women prepared food for the five-day stints of those participating. There was no mechanised equipment and workers were entirely dependent on picks, axes, and hoes. By 1984 the road system was completed.

In the early period of the revolution the TPLF attempted to closely control trade and merchandising, set prices, and apply taxes. The result was that trade declined, commodity shortages developed, and dissent grew, particularly among the many traders and merchants who were poor peasants forced to pursue such activities to supplement their meagre returns from farming. After consultations with the peasantry, the TPLF ended these policies and encouraged traders to make voluntary contributions, a system that proved to be administratively simpler than taxation, fostered less opposition, and produced more revenue.<sup>57</sup> However, there were exceptions: traders taking cattle to Eritrea had to pay taxes to the TPLF to cover the costs of their escort and for receipts to present to the EPLF; in addition, the export of necessities and the import of luxuries were taxed. Generally the TPLF was reluctant to establish the kind of regime of controls and restrictions on trade that the Derg imposed which had the effect of depressing rural production and alienating the peasants.<sup>58</sup> There was, however, a small number of merchants who worked closely with the Derg and were richly rewarded. None the less, it appears that none of them was punished either before or after victory because, it was reasoned, such activities were a result of the system and not the fault of the individual.<sup>59</sup>

Apart from a handful of peasants, in the early years the TPLF was composed almost exclusively of intellectuals. Peasants were not recruited for a number of reasons: first, the Front had a limited supply of weapons and resources; secondly, it was highly mobile and peasants were reticent about leaving their local areas; and thirdly, few peasants were prepared to make the necessary commitment in the early period of the revolution. But after

the initial period when *baitos* were established and land reforms carried out, the TPLF did encourage the formation of *woreda* militias as a means to provide a measure of security, protect the achievements of the revolution, and support the fighters. TPLF militia members were selected at *woreda* meetings and had to appear regularly before such meetings and account for their activities.<sup>60</sup>

Peasant militia members took varied periods of training in TPLF bases around the province. Most of the training was of a military nature, and while peasants from some of the particularly lawless areas of Tigray were familiar with weapons, they lacked skills in warfare. In addition, for one or two hours every day trainees were instructed in such things as the nature of class struggle, the rationale for conducting the struggle, the instruments of a people's government, the means to support the Front against the Derg and the feudal landowners, and Tigray's economic potential if freed from Amhara domination.<sup>61</sup> The political training also reflected regional differences with peasants in the west taught about Teranafit/EDU and those in the east about the EPRP. Such instruction was delivered orally because few peasants could read.

The early and extensive presence of the TPLF in areas such as Sheraro and Abi Adi meant that Front administrators and militia members were repeatedly moving from the countryside to the town and then back again. As a result their militia members were not always peasants, but held urban occupations.<sup>62</sup> The Abi Adi area also became the site in the later stages of the war for the training of public administrators and political cadres badly needed to assume leadership positions in the growing number of *tabias* and *woredas* that were being brought under TPLF control.

Militia members' tasks included general security, raising material and financial contributions for the TPLF, defending their home areas when Derg forces were small enough to challenge, bringing in TPLF fighters if the army came in strength and was to be engaged or, as was often the case, assisting in the evacuation of the area in the event of a major Derg assault. Local militias were also used to assist TPLF fighters during major campaigns which were usually arranged for the dry season to ensure that crops were not damaged and farmers would be free to participate in the fighting. Many fighters had initially been militia members, and infirm or ageing fighters in turn would frequently take up positions in the militia. Militia casualties varied enormously, but units near army bases suffered the most. In one *tabia* near the garrison town of Mahoni in southern Tigray, forty-six members of a force of 130 were reported killed.<sup>63</sup> The militias not only provided a valuable military function, but also served as an instrument to mobilise peasants and a critical link between the TPLF and the village.



### Conclusion

Structuralist explanations of revolution emphasise the national and international context in which revolutions emerge. However, only rarely do propitious structural conditions produce revolutionary responses; when they do, it cannot readily be predicted which movement will dominate the opposition to the regime; nor can it be foreseen if the opposition will be triumphant. The link between structural conditions favouring revolution, which movement leads the opposition, and the successful outcome of the struggle, is political leadership. This chapter has brought leadership to the fore by examining the role of the TPLF in mobilising support through the creation of a range of institutions that met peasant needs.

In the power vacuum that existed in Tigray after the overthrow of the old regime in 1974 peasants were confused, fearful that the incoming regime represented a new and more powerful form of Amhara domination, suspicious that its agrarian reform was a prelude to the confiscation of their land, and furious that it prohibited the employment of labour that many of them depended upon for survival. The authoritarian implementation of the Derg's reforms, together with its resettlement and villagisation programmes, bred further distrust and disaffection. Peasants were thus receptive to the appeal of anti-Derg dissidents even before the new regime established a secure presence in the province.

And thus began a cycle of peasant disaffection with the Derg creating an environment in which rebels could operate, and the regime responding to deteriorating security conditions with harsh measures, which in turn increased disaffection and support for the rebels. The same dynamics were at work in the urban areas of Tigray, notably with the Red Terror which successfully banished political dissidents from the towns, but only at the cost of increasing popular revulsion with the regime and gaining sympathy for those mounting an opposition to it. Not responsive to either peasant or nationalist sensitivities, and dogmatically committed to a programme which did not meet local needs, the Derg turned increasingly to repression and concern with security.

The Derg was thus in many ways the author of its own destruction. None the less, however necessary, hatred of the regime did not produce revolution, and it is important to appreciate the critical part played by the TPLF in giving expression to that hatred and in creating an environment in which a revolutionary movement could take form and develop. Although ignored by theorists who look to explanations of revolution based on structure, peasant initiative, and spontaneity, the analysis developed here has demonstrated that an understanding of the role of the TPLF

in leading and mobilising peasants in the pursuit of war better explains the course, conduct, and end result of the revolution.

The TPLF responded positively to peasant demands for schools, land reforms, local administrations, and improving the condition of women. But crucially the institutions created had to serve as vehicles to unite peasants and advance the armed struggle. If the institutions did not meet these requirements they would be revised or discarded. Thus organising rural schools met both TPLF and peasant interests; where their interests contrasted over which students should attend, the Front's need for fighters and administrators prevailed. Pursuing the war was the primary objective of the TPLF.

The Marxist students who made up the TPLF leadership had little sympathy for religion, and even less for the feudal Ethiopian Orthodox Church. However, they appreciated its influence over the conservative Tigrayan peasants and were astute enough to only challenge that influence on the margins; to confront it head on threatened to undermine their relationship with the peasants, and thus impact on their capacity to wage war. Their task was made easier by the fact that the 1974 revolution and the Derg-promulgated land reforms seriously weakened the political and economic power of the Church, and the TPLF further benefited from the widely held perception that the Derg was opposed to religion. Concern with upsetting peasant religious sensitivities, however, meant that religion and the Church continue to play a role in Tigray that is not entirely consistent with the anti-feudal objectives of the TPLF.

A similar pattern can be observed with respect to the TPLF's approach to women. Front efforts were designed to advance the condition of women, destroy backward-looking values and practices, and encourage women to play an active role in the struggle. Indeed, these efforts were highly successful, but as with other social reforms, they had to be balanced against the carefully cultivated consensus in the rural community necessary to carry on the war against the Derg. When social reforms designed to improve the lives of women caused dissension within the paternalistic culture of rural Tigray, compromises had to be, and indeed were, made.

The TPLF's land reforms demonstrated the same, probably necessary, compromises. Unlike peasants, the TPLF did not see land reform as an end in itself, but as a means to break down feudal structures and begin the process of establishing a vibrant rural economy. Equally important, land reform was a key component in mobilising the peasantry. It is significant that although class figured in the TPLF's mobilisation, the Front did not encourage class struggle, except against the nobility. Nor did it explicitly identify with the poor peasants. The TPLF's land reforms illustrate the importance of involving peasants in the process, and of ensuring that their

sensitivities and values were not affronted. Christianity was not challenged, although the land-holdings of the Church nobility were distributed. Concerned with raising the ire of rich peasants, the Front did not redistribute capital and as a result such peasants usually maintained a higher standard of living than their neighbours even with the loss of land. Instead, the TPLF sought to win the support of rich peasants by convincing them its land reform would provide security of land tenure and corruption-free administration.

The TPLF-established rural administrations may well prove to be the movement's most enduring accomplishment. Through mobilisation on the one hand, and a willingness to allow peasants a measure of autonomy in their own affairs on the other, the TPLF has made a major contribution to rural administration and development in the province. While these were TPLF objectives from the beginning of the struggle, the movement's primary objective was – indeed, had to be – expanding and deepening the war against the Derg, and the many elements of rural administration were means of preparing peasants for that task. The role of peasants in their own administration symbolised and carried forward the key elements of the Tigrayan revolution and most clearly distinguished the TPLF project from the authoritarian regimes of Haile-Selassie and the Derg.

And the means by which the revolution took form and was advanced demonstrates the critical role of the TPLF, a role that was of a completely different character than that ascribed to revolutionary parties by theoreticians of peasant revolt. Those theoreticians focused on the structural context in which revolutions emerge and held revolutionary parties to be little more than facilitators of conditions and events beyond their control. While the above analysis does not dispute the significance of structural conditions, it illustrates the importance of closely examining political factors in understanding the forces of change and their outcome. In this light, peasant revolt theorists are mistaken in limiting their focus to peasants within the context of upheaval brought about by agricultural commercialisation and the decline of patron–client relations. This kind of dislocation may well produce isolated and undirected acts of rebellion, such as those in western Tigray under Teranafit, but they are unlikely to produce sustained revolutionary struggles, and will almost certainly not give rise to movements with realistic programmes designed to capture state power.

Peasant revolt theorists usually recognise that peasants and movements that emerge from within peasant society have historically been directed to escaping the state, not pursuing a programme designed to dominate it. These theorists thus acknowledge that peasants must link their struggles with other discontented forces in society, but they have not always accepted the implications of that insight, namely that those outside forces will nec-

essarily attempt to impose their own agenda on the struggle. This is the context in which revolutionary struggles emerge, but this chapter has demonstrated the subtlety and sophistication in which the linkage between the petit bourgeois-led TPLF and the peasants took place and was pursued. While the TPLF was usually the initiator of change, it could only successfully pursue its programme through a process of experimentation, reappraisal, bargaining, and consensus-building with the peasants.

## 8 Conclusion

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### **Introduction**

It is easier to date the beginning of revolutions than their endings. The dismissal of the Derg from Tigray in 1989 marked an ending of sorts, but the war went on until the overthrow of the Derg and the EPRDF's capture of the entire country in 1991. That date served as another important marker, although struggles within the state and for development continued unabated, albeit under the very different conditions of peace and with the TPLF in a leading position in which to influence the political agenda of all Ethiopia. It is these new conditions and the challenges they pose in Tigray in the period from 1991 to 1996 that will be outlined in the first part of this concluding chapter. The second part of the chapter will summarily examine political developments at the Ethiopia-wide level during this period, and in particular, link the revolutionary struggle for Tigayran national self-determination with the EPRDF's efforts to reconstruct the Ethiopian state.

### **Tigray: from revolutionary struggles to peace-time struggles**

Although the overthrow of the Derg brought much-desired peace, Tigray's transition from a regime of virtual independence to one of measured autonomy in post-1991 Ethiopia has not always been easy. In spite of the widely held assumption outside Tigray that the province was the beneficiary of enormous funds from a government dominated by Tigrayans, development, and even emergency, funds for war-affected areas in the province were slow to materialise.<sup>1</sup> Central budget restraint, structural readjustment, and lack of awareness by government bureaucrats in Addis Ababa of conditions in the province were part of the problem. There were also difficulties in moving from the central control that characterised the governments of Haile-Selassie and the Derg to the decentralised forms of administration favoured by the in-coming EPRDF government. But an equally significant obstacle was posed by an entrenched, and largely Amhara-dominated, central bureaucracy which used its power to block government-authorised funds from reaching Tigray. According to an

observer on the scene, the battle cry in Tigray in 1992 was 'war with the bureaucrats', and it was a war that many at the time felt the province was losing.<sup>2</sup>

There were other problems in the transition. Not only did Tigrayans resent the role of central bureaucrats in funding decisions, they also had little sympathy for their management style that increasingly came to the fore as provincial and national ministries were integrated. In a not isolated case, Ministry of Health (MOH) officials sent to Tigray who had previously only operated in a traditional bureaucratic environment attempted to dispense with the practices of democratic decision-making in hospitals which had been introduced by the TPLF. As well as differences in management practices, many Tigrayans reported that unlike dedicated TPLF cadres, the incoming MOH staff were more interested in their salaries than in their work. The result, even according to the MOH, was that in spite of forty-seven doctors being sent to Tigray since 1991, there was initially a decline in standards of health care.<sup>3</sup> A similar situation was reported in the Ministry of Agriculture (MOA), with returning staff not accustomed to walking long distances in order to reach people in the countryside and – like the MOH – officials did not readily adapt to working in an environment of popular decision-making.

In 1993 transitional problems were still evident, although funding was getting through and some investment was taking place, as people repaired damaged buildings, constructed new ones, and a minority of Tigrayan entrepreneurs began investing in the province. Most people in business, however, remained sceptical of the intentions of the government and refrained from investing, and as a result the economic future of the province remained unclear. The role of the TPLF-instituted system of local decision-making and evaluation of government services and officials known as *gim gima* continued to face opposition by government bureaucrats and some townspeople and was in doubt. Also open to question was the future of the rural economy which faced a crisis as pressing as when the TPLF launched its revolution eighteen years earlier. Evidence of this was apparent in 1994 when parts of Tigray again suffered famine conditions.<sup>4</sup>

Such conditions, the collapse of statist policies in Eastern Europe, and growing Western hegemony led many academics and business people to call for the introduction of a free market in land in Ethiopia. However, without exception the peasants I interviewed in 1993 voiced their strong opposition to such proposals. Their view was that in the absence of off-farm work, a free land market would only benefit a small minority, while poor peasants would be forced into the towns and a life of destitution. As a result, conditions would replicate, as more than one peasant noted, the feudalism of the past. The TPLF leadership also subscribed to this view,<sup>5</sup> although they

maintained their desire to move towards a free market in land as and when economic conditions in the province allow.

Although peasants are prohibited from buying and selling land, they are guaranteed unrestricted use and cautioned against unnecessary land redistributions; they are compensated for improvements made to the land if redistribution becomes unavoidable, and are ensured the freedom to sell their produce in markets of their choice. Conditions under this system of land-holding thus very closely approximate those which would exist in a free market, with the exception that peasants are to some extent protected from the insecurity of such a market.

The TPLF is committed to rehabilitating and developing the rural economy. The centre-piece of these efforts has for some time been a soil and water conservation programme, the most prominent element being the terracing of the countryside, which involves peasants and townspeople across the province. While the programme is designed to revive Tigray's ecologically damaged environment and thus provide the basis to expand food supplies for a growing population, it also meets the TPLF's political objective of maintaining a high level of mobilisation among the people. In 1993 peasants from across Tigray were demanding food for their work, but the TPLF refused to acquiesce, insisting that this would create dependency. Two years later, however, pragmatism again overcame ideology and the TPLF had largely given in to peasant demands and unpaid work on the terracing programme had been reduced from three months a year to only twenty days, and payment was being given for work on other community projects.

In spite of its rural-focused efforts, the TPLF has long recognised that its land reforms and rehabilitation programmes cannot by themselves overcome the contradiction between an ever-increasing population on the one hand, and a fertile land base which can only be marginally enlarged in the near future, on the other. As a result, in addition to environmental rehabilitation and a vast expansion of infrastructure in the rural areas (albeit from extremely low levels), the TPLF pressed ahead with attempts to establish large-scale commercial agriculture in the lowlands, particularly in the Humera area, where land shortages are not a problem.

Major efforts are also underway to establish, and facilitate the establishment, of an industrial base in the province. Although by 1995 private investors had overcome their fears of government policy and instability, investment was largely restricted to the service sector as hotels, restaurants, and stores proliferated in the towns of Tigray, particularly Mekelle. Private investment in industry, and particularly agro-industrial enterprises, was virtually non-existent. As a result, in mid-1995 the Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray (EFFORT) was established to meet this need and provide funding for war veterans and their families. This body began operations by taking possession of

the considerable amount of non-military equipment captured from the Derg; it further acquired companies established during and after liberation by the TPLF, and has also received limited financial contributions from supportive NGOs.<sup>6</sup> With this capital, bank borrowing, and a team of seven TPLF Central Committee members, who form the sitting Board of Directors and possess MBAs from the University of London, the Fund will no doubt assume a leading role in future development efforts in the province and is already active in a number of projects.<sup>7</sup>

Most of these projects can only bear fruit in the medium to long term and in any case cannot begin to absorb the growing population of peasants without land or sufficient land to support themselves. Moreover, having borne a heavy burden during the years of war peasants are impatient with the pace of development. Indeed, in 1993 peasants from across the province could be heard criticising the government, sometimes accusing TPLF leaders of living in luxury in Addis Ababa and forgetting them, questioning what had been gained from years of struggle, and condemning the lack of resources. The TPLF leadership's response to these complaints was to argue that they represented an individualistic perspective and that there have been important collective gains, notably in achieving peace and democracy, putting development programmes in local hands, and ensuring that Tigrayan concerns are heard at the national level. TPLF leaders also stressed local initiative and urged peasants not to look to the government for solutions for all their problems. However, it is clear that having been repeatedly told that their poverty was largely due to the state being controlled by regimes unsympathetic to their plight, peasants look for support from a government led by those they consider their sons. And it will be very difficult in these circumstances to maintain the spirit of independence and local initiative that was characteristic of, and produced by, years of revolutionary struggle.

Although this challenge to the leadership underlines the self-confidence of peasants, it has at times unsettled those it is directed against. According to one TPLF cadre, 'if development doesn't succeed Tigray is lost', and development is clearly the criterion by which peasants will evaluate the revolution and the TPLF, both now and in the future. While other factors also figured in the decision, in early 1995 a number of the leading members of the EPRDF were reassigned to Tigray to reinforce efforts to realise the objectives of the province's five-year development programme.<sup>8</sup> These transfers make clear the commitment of the TPLF leadership to the development of Tigray, as well as the importance attached to retaining the loyalty of the movement's peasant base in an Ethiopia where the EPRDF-led government faces considerable opposition from the intelligentsia and often scepticism by non-Tigrayan peasantry.



Apart from the key concern of Tigray's chronic underdevelopment, the approach to, and outcome of, three other issues will speak forcefully to the evolving character of Tigrayan society. These issues are, first, the challenges and implications of growing economic and regional inequality produced in Tigray in the post-Derg period; secondly, whether local-level populist democratic institutions developed during the revolutionary war to meet the needs of the TPLF's peasant base are still appropriate or can be reformed to meet the needs of a more heterogeneous populace in an era of peace; and lastly, the variance between the ethos of revolutionary transformation and peasant traditionalism as reflected in the latter's attachment to the faith of the Orthodox Church.

In spite of the TPLF's decision not to redistribute capital, restricted consumption and the limited availability of consumer goods during the revolution ensured that rural class differentiation had little opportunity to develop. By creating equal land-holdings within *tabias*, the TPLF's reforms solidified differences between *tabias*, *woredas*, and *zobas*, but again under conditions imposed by the revolution these measures did not undermine the overall commitment to equality and unity. However, by encouraging markets and building rural infrastructure, particularly irrigation projects and roads in the very different context of the post-1991 period, the TPLF is fostering agricultural commercialisation which will be most beneficial to capital-rich peasants better able to supply the market with surplus production and cash crops.

Increasing rural and regional inequality is furthered by TPLF support for plantation agriculture in lowland areas, particularly in the Humera area of western Tigray where boom conditions exist. Schemes in these areas that allow farmers, or groups of farmers, to acquire land above their usual entitlements if they possess sufficient resources to purchase tractors and engage in capitalist farming, challenge the egalitarian spirit on which the TPLF's land reforms are based. Central government efforts to dismantle command structures and open up the national economy to competition in turn accentuate these local-level developments.

Even more significant in producing rural inequality, is the growing number of landless peasants, the result of the TPLF decision not to allow any further major land redistributions because of fears that with a limited land base and a growing population, farm plots would quickly become uneconomic. None the less, landholders fear that the Front will give in to the demands of those without land for another redistribution. By 1996 this was creating an environment of insecurity and speculation and may be inhibiting investment in land, even though existing laws ensure compensation for such improvements.

Indeed, contrary to my findings of 1993 when peasant opinion appeared

virtually unanimous in rejecting any alternative forms of land tenure, in 1996 a canvassing of a limited number of land-holding peasants produced a wide spectrum of opinion. Some peasants favoured entrenchment of the existing system; others indicated a preference for extended periods between redistributions; still others wanted 'privatised' land but were opposed to any market in land; while a small minority favoured allowing a genuine free market in land to emerge. More surprising, a number of peasants reprovved the TPLF's land redistributions, arguing that they were carried out too quickly because of war conditions and benefited those having relatives or friends among the distributors, the very criticisms peasants previously voiced against the Derg's land reforms.

Changing peasant attitudes to land appear to be based on a number of factors. First, in 1993 peasants held that with little work in the urban areas any weakening of the existing system of land tenure would produce landlessness and force land-poor peasants to move to the towns and lives of destitution. In 1996, however, landlessness was already a serious problem without any changes to the existing system of land tenure. Moreover, a growing urban economy based largely on private investment in the service sector was providing many opportunities for unskilled off-farm labour. Secondly, this buoyant urban economy, together with a more stable rural economy, and the effects of road building and dam construction, created increasing opportunities for commercial agriculture and the establishment of small rural enterprises for a minority of peasants. However, existing forms of land tenure and the TPLF's prohibition against using a limited stock of farm land for non-farm commercial purposes are sometimes seen as obstacles to realising these opportunities.

Thirdly, while government-initiated programmes to supply fertilisers and seeds to poor peasants at marginal costs are proving successful at reducing poverty and stabilising the rural economy, other programmes, such as Global 2000, are designed for the limited number of peasants in a position to seriously engage in commercial agriculture. These latter programmes will inevitably reinforce other processes, all of which will have the effect of producing economic differentiation and the emergence of rural classes. While growing inegalitarianism in Tigray may not in itself prove destabilising given the individualistic character of the society, this process could prove contentious if significant numbers of peasants fail to quickly and substantially improve their material conditions, and if they further perceive that this failure is a result of some systemic injustice. The TPLF's mobilisation of peasants was largely based on their sense of grievance and injustice and they are undoubtedly even more conscious of perceived injustices now than when the struggle began.

Another issue of concern is whether a range of administrative institutions created during the revolution to meet the needs of that period can survive or will have to be modified with the advent of peace when the all-consuming objective is no longer the pursuit of revolutionary war, but development. Complaints are made, mostly by urban residents, about pressure to attend kebele meetings, controls over people's movements, and by Tigrayans who lived outside the province during the years of struggle, of the regimentation of life under the TPLF.<sup>9</sup> It is unlikely that those who have not directly shared the experience of life in the liberated territories under TPLF administration will readily adapt to conditions under a TPLF-directed state which involves itself in the lives of its citizens to an extent beyond that elsewhere in Ethiopia. To radically alter these structures could upset the carefully constructed relationship between peasants and the TPLF, and would certainly reduce the role of the Front government in directing and controlling the pace and direction of change. However, to not make adjustments risks alienating various groups returning to the province and those in the towns, particularly the emerging urban petit bourgeoisie which is critical to the future development of Tigray, and whose numbers are quickly expanding with the growth of the private economy and government services.

Indeed, as a result of these pressures and other concerns, notably economic, there has been a marked loosening of TPLF control in both the urban areas and in the countryside. In the towns attendance at kebele meetings is no longer compulsory and the length of evaluations has been reduced. However, the most significant changes have taken place in the countryside, particularly with the late 1995 administrative reforms which reduced the number of woredas from eighty-one to thirty-five.<sup>10</sup> While deemed necessary on grounds of cost and efficiency, it was highly unpopular among peasants in outlying areas which lost their status as woredas, the services that went with them, and the eleven-member woreda executives whose salaries were important to the economic welfare of their communities. Even more important, the reforms have had the effect of diminishing the authority of woreda cadres in outlying areas and increasing that of tabia officials who are virtually all local peasants and more likely to articulate local concerns, even when they are at odds with the TPLF's official position.

Often at the centre of the debate over administrative reform is *gim gima*, an institution that derives its origins from Maoism, the EPLF, traditional means of accountability employed by Tigrayan elders, and the TPLF's own innovations. Primarily a means to ensure accountability and democratic decision-making in the TPLF army and by the Front leadership as a whole, it was later adapted to the various mass associations of the Front. With solid support from TPLF fighters who entered these bureaucracies and

from peasants long familiar with *gim gima*, the institution was introduced into government bureaucracies throughout Tigray after liberation. Defended by the TPLF leadership, who are themselves subject to *gim gima*, it initially faced considerable opposition from bureaucrats unwilling to have their performance evaluated by fellow employees and the community, and it still faces opposition, but the need for such evaluations seems to be firmly established.

There is, however, widespread recognition that an institution developed in a predominately peasant milieu must be reformed if it is to be accepted in urban society and among the middle classes. As one member of the Tigrayan government put it, 'how do you ask a businessman to come back in two months for a licence while the office (or government) closes down for an evaluation?'<sup>11</sup> With the exception of the Church and mosque, civil society in Tigray exerts few controls on the TPLF government and administration, and *gim gima*, even with its dangers of manipulation and human rights abuse, is a powerful weapon of control and accountability in the hands of the people.

It would be a mistake to assume that the discontent referred to above indicates widespread dissatisfaction with the TPLF; after twenty years the TPLF is the only political party that Tigrayans know and there are few demands, at least by peasants, for a genuine multiparty system or respect for human rights as they are understood in the West. Nor is the province's insularity a matter of concern to peasants. Democracy, as it is understood by Tigrayan peasants, has been virtually synonymous with the collectivist notion of national self-determination, something which has been won under the banner of the TPLF. Moreover, as the examples of the willingness of the TPLF to bend before peasant opposition to community labour without recompense, and the Front's commitment to *gim gima* make clear, it remains a movement broadly accountable to its peasant base.

The emerging urban-based middle class, intelligentsia, and national bourgeoisie, however, pose a new challenge to the government and one that it is only beginning to confront, although it considers these groups, and not the EDU, EPRP, or dissident TPLF factions of the previous generation, as the likely sources of an opposition, if one is to take form. According to EPRDF Politburo member Abbay, 'this class is pressing us'.<sup>12</sup> For twenty years TPLF policy consisted of embracing the national bourgeoisie, but for much of that time the problem was theoretical, while now, as the TPLF acknowledges, it is real and complex.

The final issue considered here also relates to the problem of adjustment in the post-revolutionary period. Although the landowning institutional basis of feudalism was destroyed early in the revolution, its legacy, particularly as epitomised by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, retains deep roots

in rural Tigrayan society, and continues to pose a threat to the kind of society to which the TPLF aspires. As noted in this study, through pragmatism, weakness, and the authority of religion in Tigray, the TPLF was extremely circumspect in its dealings with the Church and the religious beliefs of the peasants, and that has continued to be the case in the post-1991 period. Thus it is significant that while the TPLF has permitted priests to be elected to positions on most of the executives of rural *baitos*, they are never elected chairmen, and their numbers steadily decrease as one advances from *woreda* to the provincial council. However, the influence of the Church remains deep and pervasive in rural Tigray and it would appear that the TPLF is even less willing to challenge that influence in the period after 1991 than was the case during the revolution.

Indicative of this is a celebrated incident in early 1992 in Axum when Moslems were physically prevented from building a mosque, even after acquiring the necessary permits from the civil authorities, because of a demonstration (which quickly became a riot) led by officials from the town's powerful Zion Mariam Church. While the TPLF has repeatedly reaffirmed the rights of all Tigrayans to practise the religion of their choice in the place of their choice, a year later Church officials spoke proudly of their role as defenders of the Christian faith in organising the demonstration.<sup>13</sup> In the aftermath the local TPLF administration did not, as they had announced, conduct a programme to educate residents about religious rights. At the beginning of 1996 there were no plans to resume construction of the mosque and there remained a sense of grievance on the part of the town's Moslems. Nor is there reason to think this case of Church obstruction is unique: I witnessed the bishop of Tigray speak against the use of contraceptives immediately after a TPLF MOH official gave an impassioned speech advocating such measures as a means of protection against the spread of AIDS.<sup>14</sup>

If the TPLF had only a limited capacity to reduce religious holidays and fasting during the revolution when its prestige was at a peak, there must be doubt as to the extent of its authority in these and other matters influenced by traditional religious values, such as gender relations and the role of women, in the post-revolutionary period. The fact that Meles Zenawi and other TPLF leaders who once shunned the Church, publicly kiss crosses held out by priests will reassure Church leaders who now sing their praises, but such actions cause chagrin among those Front cadres committed to a thorough-going transformation of Tigrayan society. Confronting the Church clearly risks gaining the ire of its officials and upsetting the religious-minded peasants, but ignoring its continuing profession of reactionary values not only undermines the objectives for which the revolution was fought, but also places a major obstacle on the road to development.

### **Ethiopia: decentering the state**

The US-organised London Conference led to an agreement between the EPLF, TPLF, and OLF to meet in Addis Ababa and prepare a draft document that would serve as the basis of a Charter under which Ethiopia would be administered for a transitional period of two years. Indeed, a draft was subsequently agreed to by these parties and the EPRDF began a round of meetings with a wide number of groups interested in attending the planned conference. Significantly, those who participated and were encouraged to participate in the conference, were predominantly nationally based, either liberation fronts, or groups which had been organised immediately prior to the conference, but often claimed origins under the imperial regime.<sup>15</sup> In turn the EPRDF refused to allow members of the Derg's Workers' Party of Ethiopia and those of the Coalition of Ethiopian Democratic Forces (COEDF), whose membership was dominated by the EPRP, MEISON, and EDU, to participate, although as a result of US pressure the latter organisation did attend the conference.<sup>16</sup> The EPLF, as the only Eritrean representative organisation, attended the conference as an observer.

The most contentious issue taken up by the conference was the status of Eritrea, and in the end with four abstentions and a vote in opposition from Professor Mesfin Wolde Mariam representing Addis Ababa University, the conference agreed, first, that the TGE should recognise the right of Eritreans to determine their political future by an internationally supervised referendum; secondly, that the Provisional Government of Eritrea (PGE) should defer the referendum for two years; and thirdly, that it should recognise Assab as a free port for Ethiopia.<sup>17</sup> Remarkably, given the political agenda of the EPRDF, there was almost no discussion at the conference of plans to radically restructure the Ethiopian state along national lines. Instead, after approving the right of the country's nationalities to self-determination, up to and including secession, the conference in effect left it up to the incoming government to deliver national self-determination by proclamation.<sup>18</sup>

The national basis of the majority of the organisations, together with the prestige of the EPRDF as victors over the Derg, and the authority of its transitional programme calling for an ethnic-based devolution of state powers, thus crucially shaped the outcome of the conference. Indeed, Vaughan's conclusion that, 'whilst the conference of July 1991 may not have resulted in a one-party government, its convention reflects – to a large degree – a one-party dynamic', seems entirely appropriate.<sup>19</sup> After the conference, a Council of Representatives was appointed made up of thirty-two representatives from the EPRDF, twelve from the OLF, and the rest from a large number of small liberation fronts and ethnic groups. Meles

Zenawi became president of the TGE, and EPDM leader Tamrat Layne was appointed prime minister. On 22 July 1991 the Council adopted the Addis Ababa Charter to serve as an interim constitution and the basis of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia.

Contrary to widespread expectations, the EPRDF refused to integrate the Derg's forces into the new national army which was led and dominated by fighters of the TPLF. Not only did the decision to completely disband the former government's army go against African experience, opposition critics suggested that it indicated a less than strong commitment to national unity. In fact, according to TPLF sources, this decision was made months before, after it was concluded that the new government could not rely on the Derg's army because it was KGB/Soviet trained, did not respect the people, and was poorly disciplined.<sup>20</sup> The TPLF has also claimed that it accepted that one of the implications of this decision would be a rise of *shifita* activity from demobilised soldiers. The intellectual community of Addis Ababa was equally surprised to find itself largely excluded from positions of responsibility and influence in the new government which, at least initially, relied almost entirely upon its own members and a few trusted allies.

In Eritrea one of the first acts of the PGE government was the expulsion of the resident 'Ethiopian' population, even though some of these people had lived most of their lives in Eritrea and others had even been born in the territory. That this action was not challenged by the TGE made both governments complicit in the human rights abuse. The United Nations agreed to oversee a referendum on Eritrean independence in two years time and the TGE affirmed its support for Eritrean self-determination and acceptance of the outcome of the vote. Meanwhile, Assab was declared a free transit port for materials entering Ethiopia. In the Eritrean referendum held on 23–25 April, 1993, an astonishing 99.8 per cent voted in favour of independence.<sup>21</sup> The PGE became the Government of Eritrea and at its Third Congress in February 1994 the EPLF formally changed its status from a liberation movement to a political party, the People's Front for Justice and Democracy (PFJD).

After many delays regional elections were held in most of Ethiopia on 20 June 1992, but after alleging intimidation and other irregularities the OLF announced it would boycott them and then withdrew from the government. In the aftermath OLF forces launched an armed insurrection in eastern parts of the country populated by Oromos. Many of those involved were former Derg soldiers, another result of the EPRDF's decision not to integrate this army with its own. In the event, the uprising was quickly put down and 20,000 suspected OLF members were arrested and imprisoned, thus testifying to both continuing disputes over the distribution of state

power, as well as the ability of EPRDF forces to ensure the security of the new government. Indeed, the EPRDF leadership considers its rapid containment of the insurrection as evidence of the skills its army acquired in the war in Tigray and its capacity to neutralise, if not win over, peasants whom urban-based opposition forces attempt to mobilise. In the event, most OLF prisoners were released in early 1993 and by the following year only a handful were still in custody. While small guerrilla actions have continued, to date they have posed little threat to the government.

Since the mid-1980s the TPLF leadership attempted to develop relations with the OLF, but as a result of its concerns that the latter wanted to carve an independent Oromia out of Ethiopia, and its contempt for OLF leaders and their lack of military successes against the Derg, these efforts were never productive. The OLF in turn claimed that the TPLF insisted on its dominance and that of its ideological line in any united Front, and also that Tigrayans retained a traditional antipathy to Oromos.<sup>22</sup> These problems led directly to the TPLF decision in 1990 to create the OPDO which further exacerbated tensions with the OLF. While some opposition groups have consistently opposed the EPRDF's plans to devolve powers to regional administrations because of concerns that these moves would bring about the dismemberment of Ethiopia, the OLF has feared that the government intends to deny Oromos the right to national self-determination that would include independence.<sup>23</sup> Thus the break in relations between the EPRDF and the OLF was in some respects less surprising than the latter's decision to join the post-Derg government in the first place. More significant was the rapidity of the OLF's military and political collapse, which it had not recovered from by 1997 in spite of the support it retained within the Oromo intelligentsia.

In the early post-1991 period opposition to the new government was mostly reflected in struggles within the state which pit Amhara, and to a lesser extent Oromo functionaries, against their largely Tigrayan political masters and their usually Tigrayan appointees. By 1997 the EPRDF was much more restrained about pursuing the kind of reforms to the central state which raised the ire of bureaucrats. None the less, the brunt of the government's opposition still derived from the non-Tigrayan middle classes and intelligentsia inhabiting the urban centres of the country. As well as the challenge by OLF supporters, the national army has also had to deal with continuing problems posed by dissident Somalis and Afars in the Ethiopian borderlands, but in early 1997 this had not proved beyond its capacity.

While non-Tigrayan peasants often remain sceptical of the new regime, their concerns have been diluted by the return of peace, the end of forced conscription, government encouragement of trade and markets in agricultural produce. Initially the low levels of peasant taxation seemed designed



to win the government support and serve as a positive basis in which to contrast it with the Derg, and thus reduce, if not preclude, the possibility that discontented urban intellectuals could find a basis of support in the countryside. However, while taxation levels remain low, the peasantry and salaried employees are increasingly being forced to contribute to EPRDF affiliates and development associations which also sometimes have private businesses temporarily closed so that money earning 'fairs' can be held, a practice reminiscent of the Derg's Motherland Festivals.

Although the sincerity of the government's pledge to permit Ethiopia's nations to break away from the country is as yet untested, the EPRDF appears committed to devolving powers to local administrations, the first step being the 1992 regional elections, although as noted, they were not without human rights violations.<sup>24</sup> This was followed in 1994 with elections to the Constituent Assembly to complete and ratify a new constitution. Again there were reports of human rights violations, and of the thirty-nine parties participating most supported the government, and the major opposition forces, including the OLF, boycotted them. As a result of these elections, a new and permanent constitution was approved by the Assembly in December 1994 which in turn led to the creation of a federal state of fourteen regions.

This paved the way for national elections on 7 May 1995, that in the absence of most major opposition parties, produced a massive victory for the EPRDF.<sup>25</sup> Meles Zenawi became executive Prime Minister, Dr Negaso Gidada (an Oromo), was made President, and Tamrat Layne (an Amhara), became Defence Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, in the new government. Apart from Meles, Seyoum Mesfin, who retained his position as Minister of Foreign Affairs, was the only other Tigrayan among seventeen ministers, although there is reason to believe that Tigrayans still play a critical role in the government,<sup>26</sup> and the TPLF remains the most dynamic political force in the country. To reflect the new constitutional arrangements the country was formally proclaimed the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) on 24 August by the Council of People's Representatives.

At the centre of the EPRDF's agenda since 1991 have been efforts to supplant the hegemonic Ethiopian state through the establishment of decentralised ethnic-based administrations. The federal structure is the EPRDF's answer to the problem of the centrist state and Amhara domination, while Tigray is the prototype for local administrations. During the revolution the TPLF consistently linked the struggle against an Amhara-dominated state, and for Tigrayan national self-determination, with the independence struggle of Eritreans, and the liberation of all of Ethiopia's nations and nationalities. The Front's opposition to multinational parties,

espousal of national-based movements, and formation of the EPRDF, were all designed to reinforce this perspective, achieve these ends, and establish the basis for a radically different Ethiopian state than that which existed for the past 100 years under successive feudal regimes and the Derg.

While the TPLF's rendition of Ethiopian history is open to dispute, it is this interpretation and the Front's experience gained in Tigray from sixteen years of revolutionary war that forms the basis of the EPRDF's constitutional agenda. Two other factors are important. First, is the TPLF's contention that success on the battlefield confirms the superiority of its political precepts. And secondly, it is clear that the best means for the TPLF to retain a leading position in an Ethiopia where Tigrayans constitute a small proportion of the country's population is to maintain an ethnic-based coalition with elements from the numerically superior Oromos and the historically politically dominant Amhara. And this is best achieved under a decentralised state where power is diffused to ethnic-based administrations in the regions.

While the logic of the TPLF's revolutionary war to achieve Tigrayan national self-determination would in any case have suggested a devolution of state powers to the provinces, the fact that the Front assumed power in a period in which the centralised administrative states of the socialist bloc were collapsing undoubtedly enhanced this process and gave it a measure of legitimacy. As Clapham has noted, throughout the former socialist world there is a recognition that, 'the state hierarchy cannot achieve its basic goals of national unity and food self-sufficiency because success requires a devolution of decision making . . . which challenges the Leninist model of the all-powerful party-state'.<sup>27</sup>

This process, however, has been uneven as the EPRDF as a party has assumed roles formerly held by the state, notably its active involvement in the economy where it is pursuing a programme of purchasing, establishing, and managing private companies. This policy, which to some extent mirrors developments in Eritrea, seems designed, first, to ensure the political dominance of the EPRDF; secondly, to pursue 'statist' economic measures which are at least formally outside the state and thus, at least until now, immune to international criticism; thirdly, to utilise its supply of talented individuals (particularly TPLF cadres forced to leave positions of leadership in the central government as a result of efforts to increase non-Tigrayan representation); and lastly, to provide a ready supply of employment for its supporters. Moreover, in the absence of a viable opposition, traditions of voluntary organisations autonomous of the state and the government's sometimes heavy-handed approach to critics in the privately owned media, EPRDF power has been further reinforced by increasing and strengthening the media in state and party hands.

A lack of transparency is evident at every level of government, in spite of the ready reference of the EPRDF leadership to democratic jargon. Whether a product of Ethiopia's traditions wherein the country's leaders were kept and lived lives distant and apart from their fellows, or patterns of secrecy acquired to ensure their survival during the years of armed struggle, or a result of a government that still does not feel secure, the EPRDF leadership appears remote and has little interaction with those beyond a select group of political allies, most of whom are Tigrayan. Its communications with the public are limited, largely ritualistic, and almost completely restricted to expressions through the government and party-controlled media. Outside Addis Ababa most formally legal regional and zonal parties are effectively banned, independent meetings forbidden, and opposition newspapers are not permitted.

While many are – and justifiably – highly critical of the EPRDF's lack of transparency, it must be borne in mind that Ethiopian, and particularly Abyssinian culture, typically endorses secretive, evasive, and distrustful behaviour, and sees openness as akin to innocence and simplicity. Perhaps for this reason, as much as the lack of democratic traditions, there has been far more criticism about the government's lack of transparency from foreigners than from Ethiopians. And this raises the question of whether cultural, rather than political or development, barriers pose greater obstacles to achieving transparency and democracy. These barriers may also figure in the clearly declining EPRDF interest in overhauling the still largely authoritarian state that it inherited.

Although committed to the devolution of state powers to regional administrations, apart from Tigray where the TPLF is solidly entrenched and has widespread support, the success of the other regional administrations are, and will at least for some time continue to be, problematic. Unlike the TPLF which has a rich base of dedicated and talented party personnel to draw upon at both the centre and regional levels of government, the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), the successor of the EPDM, is still struggling to establish itself and is largely opposed by intellectuals and townspeople, although it does appear to be developing roots and a measure of legitimacy among the peasants in Region Number 3, the Amhara territory.

To date, however, legitimacy has not been achieved by the other EPRDF components which were established much later at the behest of the TPLF. Of particular concern is the OPDO which is weak, widely perceived as corrupt and being an instrument of the TPLF, and is challenged by many Oromo intellectuals. As long as the EPRDF manages to maintain security in the Oromo-populated rural areas, is not seen as heavy-handed, and the economy remains reasonably buoyant, then the OPDO may yet achieve

legitimacy, but if it fails to establish effective organs of local government, or if conditions deteriorate, it could quickly find itself under severe pressure.

The southern regional and zonal governments are even weaker than their counterparts in Oromia, although for essentially the same reasons. While the OPDO did play a very minor role during the final days of the conflict in the liberation of its territory, the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Front (SEPDF) was largely created after the defeat of the military and it was TPLF forces that first occupied the region when the Derg army evacuated its bases without in most cases any resistance whatsoever. As a result, the first administrations established were made up solely of Tigrayans and only afterwards were southern Ethiopians captured during the war given political training and assigned to various administrative and 'elected' positions. It is indicative of the TPLF's need to control the political process that its leadership did not seriously entertain the idea of building alliances with existing southern parties and instead largely drove them out of existence. The result is that unlike their counterparts in Tigray, the southern party cadres typically have little political or military experience, generally have low levels of education, frequently appear to be motivated by opportunism, and not surprisingly, have little legitimacy among their constituents. Weak leadership gives rise to accusations of theft, bribery, and incompetence, and these charges are given at least some credence by the frequent changes and short tenures in office of many leading officials in the region.

The performance record of peripheral regional governments such as those of the Afar, Somali, Gambela, and Beneshanghual is far worse, a fact acknowledged by the EPRDF. However, two points should be borne in mind. First, the people inhabiting these areas are predominantly pastoralist with – unlike the Abyssinians – no tradition of centralised administration apart from largely tribute-based regimes prior to the Derg. Secondly, while it is unrealistic to expect that such territories will soon develop effective governments, it must be noted that the present extremely low levels of development that characterise them are largely due to the failures of past centralised regimes. What remains unclear is whether the highlander, Orthodox Christian, and peasant-focused leadership of the TPLF/EPRDF will prove to be more responsive and sympathetic to the largely lowland, non-Orthodox, and pastoralist peoples that inhabit the non-core areas of Ethiopia than were their Amhara counterparts that previously dominated the country's governments.

As well as devolving powers to the regions, the EPRDF government has also moved to reduce the role of the state in the economy, although as noted this may in some cases be a sleight-of-hand operation as the party expands

its role in the economic sphere. In any case, these efforts meshed closely with the proscriptions of the developed West and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and as a result they quickly won the new government support from quarters that might have been suspicious of revolutionaries who had only months before proclaimed their admiration for Albanian socialism. That such apparently anti-socialist measures were adopted by a party with Marxist-Leninist traditions is not, however, as paradoxical as it might at first appear.

The EPRDF took over a state whose existence had long been based on the exploitation of the peasants, and in the latter period of the Derg's rule this assumed extreme forms. Quite apart from a vast array of mechanisms through which the Derg acquired the peasants' usually meagre production, the government also created a whole network of urban-based state corporations that were, or became, inefficient, corrupt, and ultimately depended upon the peasants for their continuation. Ethiopian, no less than Tigrayan, peasants have long looked upon the state as a major cause of their poverty, and with EPRDF support derived almost entirely from rural areas, the new government had few compunctions about dismantling this costly, oppressive, and inefficient apparatus. Moreover, the elimination of such state organs and corporations serves to weaken centres of opposition to the regime and can be justified by reference to the economic postulates of the IMF, and at the same time readily explained to the EPRDF's peasant supporters as removing parasitic bodies that survive through their exploitation.

EPRDF measures which challenge the supremacy of the central state and particularly its role in the economy, must also be seen within the context of the Horn of Africa where for more than thirty years ethnic-based opposition to the state has been the cause of enormous disruption and loss of life and property. Policies designed to increase the authority of central states as a means of weakening primordial identities and encouraging economic development have a long history in both Ethiopia and the Horn generally, but continuing problems of ethnic conflict and economic stagnation make clear the failure of these approaches and the theory on which they are based.

This failure derives from the mistaken notions that, empowering the state and overcoming ethnicities are best pursued through state centralisation, and secondly, that economic development can take place without confronting the political and structural problems of the state and its relationship with ethnic minorities. Contrary to these assumptions, state centralisation fosters ethnic conflict as the example of Ethiopia demonstrates, since as Brass has argued, ethnicity is a product of the competition between ethnic elites for power in the state and state centralisation encourages alienated elites to raise ethnic demands.<sup>28</sup> Nor is it feasible to restructure the economy

independently of the state whose elite has benefited from the existing balance of power.

It is clear that patterns of development that have favoured some groups and regions at the expense of others have made the state, as the arbitrator over the distribution of scarce resources, the focus of endemic political conflict between competing ethnic groups in the Horn.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, liberation movements which have come to power in recent years in Uganda, Eritrea, and Ethiopia have all taken the form of marginalised ethnic elites that went to the countryside and mobilised peasantries around opposition to hegemonic states. These liberation movements-cum-governments are, however, confronting the problem of the relationship between the state and its ethnic communities in very different ways. The Ugandan and Eritrean governments are trying to overcome, or reduce, ethnic-based struggles for power in the state and over the distribution of scarce resources, by disavowing political expressions of ethnicity and attempting to channel ethnic sentiments along cultural lines.

Unique in the Horn and perhaps Africa, the EPRDF government holds that ethnonationalism cannot be restricted to the cultural sphere, and that the only means to ensure that conflicts over state power do not produce secessionist movements and war is to grant Ethiopia's various ethnic communities full political rights. Consistent with this conviction, it has facilitated the separation of Eritrea, renounced long-held Ethiopian policies designed to strengthen the central state, is proceeding with the devolution of powers, and through its new constitution has granted the ethnically based administrations the right to peacefully and democratically leave the federation. It is a highly innovative and even daring approach and the object of much criticism by usually Amhara intellectuals who argue that it fosters ethnic politics that will bring about the destruction of Ethiopia. However, in the absence of a strong opposition with convincing alternative national policies to confront the problems faced by post-Derg Ethiopia, the government's approach must be considered the only viable one at present.

Constitutional change can only be evaluated in the long term, but the failure of many efforts to accomplish such breakthroughs in Africa is often due to the short incumbency and limited political will of governments introducing the measures, and by the weakness of the states implementing them. That, however, is not the case with the EPRDF and the Ethiopian state. The TPLF, and the EPRDF government it dominates, has consistently been underestimated by the Derg, its political opponents, and the academic community.<sup>30</sup> Part of the lack of appreciation of the TPLF's strengths has been due to a narrow focus on the only too apparent poverty of Tigray, the relatively small numbers of Tigrayans in Ethiopia, and the sometimes obscure ideologies espoused by its leaders.

What is missing in this perspective, and what this study has attempted to bring to light, is the extraordinary strength of even the most poverty-stricken peasants when they are united and committed to fighting for what they believe to be their rights. And this study has repeatedly underlined the critical role of the TPLF in achieving that unity of purpose. Instead of focusing on the TPLF's rhetoric and finding it lacking by the standards of the day or circumstances, the mettle of the Front is best understood by its deeds, and most notably by its enduring and successful relationship with the peasants of Tigray. The past, however, does not determine the future, and the Tigrayan revolution demonstrated that peasant loyalty and commitment had to be constantly renewed and reaffirmed by the TPLF.

None the less, if those lessons are not forgotten by the increasingly urban-based TPLF leadership, it can rely on a continuing basis of support in the Tigrayan countryside and no opposition movement is likely to soon gain widespread support elsewhere in the country. The clearest reflection of that support, and upon which the government's authority ultimately depends, is its peasant-based army. This army not only took the TPLF to power in Addis Ababa, but continues to overwhelm all military challengers, and its discipline and reserve in the face of suspicion and even harassment that it initially faced in many parts of the country have done much to neutralise, if not win over, those who might be receptive to the appeals of the government's opponents.

However, beginning in 1993 a series of reforms has led to the reduction of the TPLF-Tigrayan component of the army, a shift in emphasis to increasing its skills and use of military technology, the formal ending of membership in the TPLF by the army's leadership, and the introduction of a system of ranks. In spite of these changes there is little indication of either a consolidation of military influences in Ethiopia, or any tensions between the army command and the country's civilian leadership, developments that have occurred in other revolutionary African states.<sup>31</sup> Some factors, however could still serve to undermine the army's legitimacy, notably credible reports of corruption among some of those assigned to contain contraband from Djibouti, Somalia, and Kenya, and also its direct involvement in civic administration in areas of the country under stress and with weak governments. It is thus this army and the related security forces that allow the government an opportunity in which to carry out a programme of constitutional change and reform and achieve legitimacy beyond its core in Tigray.

The second fundamental obstacle to positive change in Africa, including the kind of constitutional objectives of the EPRDF, has been the almost universal recognition of the incapacity or softness<sup>32</sup> of the continent's states. This has variously been attributed to such factors as the artificiality

of post-colonial states, their lack of legitimacy, ethnic fragmentation, and poverty. As a result, such states are held to be incapable of assuming the responsibilities and carrying out the tasks normally associated with statehood, and instead are forced to rely upon the legitimacy acquired through participation in the international state system.<sup>33</sup> However, Ethiopia has a state that exists in the very environment – ethnic fragmentation and poverty – which has been identified as causing the incapacity of African states. The Ethiopian state has been able to achieve a measure of firmness in spite of these obstacles because unlike states established under European colonialism, it is not an artificially imposed construct. It has roots in the past and this has produced a genuine nationalism and ensured that it usually had a measure of international legitimacy. But having a state past has meant carrying the legacy of the past into the present and for Ethiopia and its peoples that burden has been particularly heavy.

The failure of this state in the second half of the twentieth century under both Haile-Selassie and the Derg has thus not been due to its lack of roots, but instead a result of its inability to respond to the aspirations of Ethiopians for democracy, national self-determination, and development. The problem for the EPRDF is not one of dismantling the state, which is one of Ethiopia's most valuable historical legacies, but to give it a democratic character and ensure that there is a place in it, and an attachment to it, by all of Ethiopia's heterogeneous peoples. That this task must be taken up by a movement which achieved power by attacking the state is ironic and says much about the tumultuous times in which we live. Whether the EPRDF can accomplish that mission remains to be seen, but the fact that this is its stated and clearly understood objective means that will be the main criterion by which it will be evaluated as a government.



## Notes

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### INTRODUCTION

- 1 See in particular, James Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile*, ed. C. Beckingham (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 1964); Mansfield Parkyns, *Life in Abyssinia: Three Years' Residence and Travels in That Country* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1854); Walter Plowden, *Travels in Abyssinia and the Gala Country, with an Account of a Mission to Ras Ali in 1848* (London: 1868); Nathaniel Pearce, *The Life and Adventures of Nathaniel Pearce* (London: Sasor Publishers, 1980); and Augustus Wylde, *Modern Ethiopia* (London: Methuen, 1901).
- 2 A. Triulzi, 'Centre-Periphery Relations in Ethiopian Studies: Reflections on Ten Years of Research on Wellega History', *Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Ethiopian Studies* (Addis Ababa: 1984, p. 361).
- 3 D. Levine, *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).
- 4 Gebru Tareke, 'Rural Protest in Ethiopia, 1941–1970: A Study of Three Rebellions' (PhD dissertation, Syracuse University, 1977), p. 7.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 See in particular J. Markakis, *Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Polity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), and J. Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
- 7 J. Firebrace and G. Smith, *The Hidden Revolution: An Analysis of Social Change in Tigray, Northern Ethiopia* (London: War on Want, 1982).
- 8 M. Peberdy, *Tigray: Ethiopia's Untold Story* (London: REST, UK Support Committee, 1985).
- 9 Solomon Inquai, 'The Hidden Revolution in Tigray', *Horn of Africa*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 1981.
- 10 D. Beisel, *Reise ins Land der Rebellen: Tigray – eine afrikanische Zukunft* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1989).
- 11 J. Hammond (ed.), *Sweeter Than Honey: Testimonies of Tigrayan Women* (Oxford: Third World First, 1989).
- 12 Gebru Tareke, 'Resistance in Tigray: From Weyane to TPLF', in P. Dunn (ed.), *Quo Vadis Ethiopia Conference Proceedings* (Washington: Howard University, 1983).
- 13 Aregowie Berhe, 'The MLLT Jump: Our Struggle that was Impaired by Narrow Nationalism', unpublished (June 1987).

- 14 Kabsay Berhe, 'TPLF: Where, How?', unpublished paper (March 1989); Kabsay Berhe, 'The National Movement in Tigray: Myths and Realities', unpublished (February 1991).
- 15 A. de Waal, *Evil Days: Thirty Years of War and Famine in Ethiopia* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1991).
- 16 S. Vaughan, 'The Addis Ababa Transitional Conference of July 1991: its origins, history and significance,' *Occasional Papers*, No. 51 (Edinburgh University: Centre of African Studies, 1994).
- 17 de Waal, *Evil Days*, p. ii.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Beisel, *Reise ins Land der Rebellen*, pp. 124–5.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 N. Kriger, *Zimbabwe's Guerrilla War: Peasant Voices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 9.
- 22 The person chosen as translator revealed on the eve of my departure from the province that his father, who had been a sub-district administrator under the imperial regime, together with three half-brothers, had all been killed by the TPLF during the revolution. He thus could not be considered a TPLF supporter, although at the same time it would be inaccurate to describe him as being opposed to the TPLF.
- 23 For reasons that will be made clear later in the dissertation the term 'liberated territories' is not an entirely appropriate term.
- 24 Since there were some differences in land-holdings between tabias within woredas, even more between woredas within zobas, and still more between zobas, one of the impacts of land reform has been to solidify regional economic differences.
- 25 Indeed, according to Markakis, even under the old regime the limited means for wealth accumulation meant that the style of life in Amhara-Tigrayan society did not differ significantly between classes except in terms of consumption. See Markakis, *Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Polity*, p. 101.
- 26 S. Pausewang, *Methods and Concepts of Social Research in a Rural Developing Society: A Critical Appraisal based on Experience in Ethiopia* (München: Weltforum Verlag, 1973), p. 182.
- 27 Pausewang, *Methods and Concepts of Social Research*, p. 47.

## 1 PEASANTS AND REVOLUTIONS: THEORETICAL DIRECTIONS

- 1 Derg is an Amharigna term which literally means 'committee' and refers to the military group which took power after the collapse of the imperial regime.
- 2 According to a census carried out by the Ethiopian government in May 1984, Tigray had a population of 2.4 million people which represented less than 5.7 per cent of the country's population. See *Challenges of Drought: Ethiopia's Struggle in Relief and Rehabilitation* (Addis Ababa: Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, 1985), p. 260. However, these figures almost certainly underestimate the true population of the province because, first, they were collected during a period of famine when many people were mobile or had left the country for the refugee camps of Sudan; secondly, because of the war parts of

- the province were inaccessible to the census takers; thirdly, many nomadic Afar were not included; and lastly the figures do not include Tigrayan populated areas removed from the province. The 1994 official census found that Tigray had a population of 3,136,267 and this broke down into 2,667,789 rural residents and 468,478 urban residents. See Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Office of Population and Housing, *The 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia. Results for Tigray Region*, Vol. 1, Statistical Report (Addis Ababa: Government of Ethiopia, 1996), p. 10.
- 3 Ministry of Land Reform and Administration, *Report on Land Tenure Survey of Tigre Province* (Addis Ababa: 1969), p. 54.
  - 4 S. Taylor, *Social Science and Revolution* (London: Macmillan Press, 1984), p. 114.
  - 5 See in particular E. Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968); J. Migdal, *Peasants, Politics, and Revolution: Pressures Towards Political and Social Change in the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974); J. Paige, *Agrarian Revolution: Social Movements and Export Agriculture in the Underdeveloped World* (London: The Free Press, 1975); J. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976). Walton has identified Wolf, Paige, and Scott as exponents of the peasant revolt thesis and for reasons which will become apparent, Migdal should also be so grouped. See J. Walton, *Reluctant Rebels: Comparative Studies of Revolution and Underdevelopment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 15.
  - 6 Wolf, *Peasant Wars*, pp. 290–4.
  - 7 Wolf, *Peasant Wars*, p. 292.
  - 8 Migdal, *Peasants, Politics, and Revolution*, pp. 33–46.
  - 9 Migdal, *Peasants, Politics, and Revolution*, p. 153.
  - 10 M. Kimmel, *Revolution: A Sociological Interpretation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p. 139.
  - 11 Paige, *Agrarian Revolution*, pp. 311–16.
  - 12 Scott, *Moral Economy*, p. 201.
  - 13 This latter reasoning is similar to that of Barrington Moore who argued that peasant society with weak solidarity, which he called ‘conservative solidarity’, put severe difficulties in the way of any political action while societies with traditions of strong solidarity, or ‘radical solidarity’, favoured rebellion or revolution. See B. Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), pp. 475–6.
  - 14 Under the Amhara-Tigray land tenure system efforts were directed to acquiring rights over land. See J. Markakis, *Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Polity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).
  - 15 Wolf, *Peasant Wars*, p. 276.
  - 16 Migdal, *Peasants, Politics, and Revolution*, p. 129.
  - 17 Scott, *Moral Economy*, p. 57.
  - 18 Scott, *Moral Economy*, p. 41.
  - 19 K. Griffin (ed.), *The Economy of Ethiopia* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), pp. 289–90.
  - 20 Taylor, *Social Science and Revolution*, p. 26.

- 21 See S. Popkin, *The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).
- 22 Popkin, *The Rational Peasant*, p. 29.
- 23 Migdal, *Peasants, Politics, and Revolution*, p. 229.
- 24 Migdal, *Peasants, Politics, and Revolution*, pp. 231–3.
- 25 Migdal, *Peasants, Politics, and Revolution*, pp. 263.
- 26 Paige, *Agrarian Revolution*, p. 68.
- 27 Scott, *Moral Economy*, pp. 279–80.
- 28 Scott, *Moral Economy*, pp. 294–5.
- 29 See in particular Walton, *Reluctant Rebels*, p. 17.
- 30 Paul Henze has described Tigrayans who proved to be the most revolutionary in the post-imperial period as being ‘among Ethiopia’s most tradition-loyal peoples, strong in their adherence to religion, whether Christianity or Islam’. See P. Henze, *Rebels and Separatists in Ethiopia: Regional Resistance to a Marxist Regime* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1986), p. 72.
- 31 T. Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
- 32 Moore, *Social Origins*, p. 457.
- 33 Leaders of the Tigrayan Teachers Association estimate that more than one-half of Tigrayan teachers left their employment and joined the rebels in the countryside in the period between 1975 and 1978 as a result of government terror, and sources within the TPLF confirm the accuracy of this estimate. As a result urban elements, largely made up of teachers, numerically dominated the Front during its first years in the field. See Gebrekidan Abay, President ETA and Gebregiorgis Gegziabher, Secretary ETA, Mekelle, 1 January 1993.
- 34 H. Erlich, ‘Tigrean Nationalism, British Involvement and Haile-Selassie’s Emerging Absolutism – Northern Ethiopia, 1941–1943’, *Asian and African Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (1981), p. 198.
- 35 W. Connor, *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 36.
- 36 Connor, *Ethnonationalism*, p. 37.
- 37 P. Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison* (Sage Publications, 1991), pp. 8–9.
- 38 D. Levine, *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965).
- 39 The belief that nationalism is a result of exploitation of one ethnic group by another is supported by a not inconsiderable number of academic observers. See Chong-do Hah and J. Martin, ‘Towards a Synthesis of Conflict and Integration Theories of Nationalism,’ *World Politics*, Vol. XXVII, No. 3 (April 1975), pp. 372–4.
- 40 Moore, *Social Origins*, p. 454.
- 41 Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, pp. 41–2.
- 42 C. Clapham, ‘The Structure of Regional Conflict in Northern Ethiopia’, *Disasters*, Vol. 15, No. 3, p. 247.
- 43 See in particular P. Chabal, *Amical Cabral: Revolutionary Leadership and People’s War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 12.
- 44 Chabal, *Amical Cabral*, p. 218.

- 45 C. Johnson, 'The Third Generation of Guerrilla Warfare', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 8, No. 6 (June 1968).
- 46 Specifically Mao identified a three-stage periodisation of the war: first, the enemy's strategic offensive; secondly, the enemy's strategic defence and the revolutionaries' preparations for counter-offensive; and lastly, the revolutionaries' counter-offensive. For each stage Mao stipulated various tactics to be pursued.
- 47 Migdal, *Peasants, Politics, and Revolution*, p. 263.
- 48 Popkin, *The Rational Peasant*, p. 26.
- 49 According to Popkin a political entrepreneur is 'someone willing to invest his own time and resources to coordinate the inputs of others in order to produce collective action or collective goods'. Popkin, *The Rational Peasant*, p. 259.
- 50 Based on her study of Zimbabwe, Kriger is highly critical of Popkin's analysis and his conclusion that the success of revolutionary parties is dependent on their ability to build a basis of popular support and that the use of coercion as a policy is necessarily self-defeating. She attributes Popkin's error to the fact that he 'never obtains direct peasant voices to support his argument about the centrality of popular support in a revolution, but draws on an impressive volume of secondary literature to show that organisations that offered utilitarian appeals could induce rational, cost-calculating peasants to participate' (N. Kriger, *Zimbabwe's Guerilla War: Peasant Voices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 15). However, the research on which this book has been based has listened closely to peasant voices in Tigray and they do not support Kriger's emphasis on the importance of coercion in mobilisation or her critique of Popkin.
- 51 Interview: Gebru Asrat, TPLF Politburo member and Chairman of Tigray Region, Mekelle, 6 April 1993.
- 52 See A. Cabral, *Revolution in Guinea: Selected Texts* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969). Interviews of TPLF cadres make clear that the leadership only became acquainted with the writings of Cabral after they had already learned their craft through practical experience.
- 53 Popkin, *The Rational Peasant*, p. 259.
- 54 Popkin, *The Rational Peasant*, p. 260.
- 55 However, there is no evidence that the TPLF's mobilisation of the peasants involved the kind of acceptance of local belief systems as those described in Lan's study of the Dande people and the revolutionaries of the Zimbabwe African National Army. See D. Lan, *Guns and Rains: Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe* (London: James Currey, 1985).
- 56 Kimmel, *Revolution*, p. 185.
- 57 T. Skocpol, 'What Makes Peasants Revolutionary?' *Comparative Politics*, No. 2 (1982), pp. 371–3.
- 58 J. Hawes, 'Theories of Peasant Revolution: A Critique and Contribution from the Philippines', *World Politics*, Vol. 42 (January 1990), p. 262.

## 2 HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND

- 1 R. Greenfield, *Ethiopia: A New Political History* (New York: Praeger, 1965), p. 24.

- 2 J. Markakis, *Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Polity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 73.
- 3 Ministry of Land Reform and Administration, *Report on Land Tenure Survey of Tigre Province*, Addis Ababa (1969).
- 4 Markakis, *Ethiopia*, pp. 74–7.
- 5 Markakis, *Ethiopia*, p. 76.
- 6 John Bruce, 'Land Reform Planning and Indigenous Communal Tenures: A Case Study of the Tenure "Chigurafgwozes" in Tigray Ethiopia' (SJD dissertation, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1976), p. 53.
- 7 Markakis, *Ethiopia*, p. 87.
- 8 According to Markakis, the nobility's efforts to limit the emperor's power in appointments 'was assisted by the peasantry's provincial attachments and its own role as the focus of provincial consciousness; and it was generally successful in limiting the emperor's discretion in the choice of appointments'. See Markakis, *Ethiopia*, p. 88.
- 9 Interview: Halekay Fitzum Tafare, Lekaruryinie Takaste Asaha, Lekarkarnat Gebre Medhin Gebre Selassie, Axum, 12 February 1993.
- 10 Markakis, *Ethiopia*, p. 96.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 A. Hobben, 'Social Stratification in Traditional Amhara Society', in A. Tuden and L. Plotnicov (eds), *Social Stratification in Africa* (New York: The Free Press, 1970), p. 192.
- 13 D. Crummey, 'Abyssinian Feudalism', *Past and Present*, No. 89 (1979), p. 23, quoted in Gebru Tareke, 'Rural Protest in Ethiopia 1941–1970: A Study of Three Rebellions', PhD dissertation (Syracuse University, 1977), p. 17.
- 14 For a detailed analysis see D. Bauer, *Household and Society in Ethiopia: An Economic and Social Analysis of Tigray Social Principles and Household Organisation* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1977).
- 15 John Bruce, 'Land Reform Planning', p. 460.
- 16 Article Two of the 1955 Ethiopian constitution recognised a direct line of descent from Solomon and Sheba to Haile-Selassie, while the emperor's divinity was proclaimed in Article Four. See J. Sorenson, *Imagining Ethiopia: Struggles for History and Identity in the Horn of Africa* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1993), p. 23.
- 17 Markakis, *Ethiopia*, pp. 29–32.
- 18 M. Perham, *The Government of Ethiopia* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), p. 37.
- 19 Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia: 1855–1974* (London: James Currey, 1991), p. 9.
- 20 R. Hess, *Ethiopia: The Modernisation of Autocracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 50.
- 21 R. Pankhurst, *A Social History of Ethiopia: The Northern and Central Highlands from Early Medieval Times to the Rise of Emperor Tewodros II* (Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies, 1990), p. 88.
- 22 Zwede Gabre-Selassie, *Yohannis IV of Ethiopia: A Political Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 18. Zwede further estimates that at mid-century there were 28,000 matchlocks in Tigray against a mere 1,000 in Shoa and comparable numbers in the other Abyssinian provinces (p. 19).

- 23 M. Abir, *Ethiopia: The Era of the Princes* (New York: Praeger, 1968), p. 160.
- 24 C. Clapham, 'The Structure of Regional Conflict in Northern Ethiopia', *Disasters*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (1991), p. 251.
- 25 Abir, *Ethiopia*, p. 151.
- 26 Perham, *The Government of Ethiopia*, p. 253.
- 27 Bahru Zewde, *History of Modern Ethiopia*, p. 44.
- 28 W. Plowden, *Travels in Abyssinia and the Gala Country* (London: 1868), p. 128, quoted in John Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile*, ed. C. Beckingham (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1964), p. 459.
- 29 H. Marcus, 'Imperialism and Expansion in Ethiopia from 1865 to 1900', in L. Gann and P. Duegan (eds), *The History and Politics of Colonialism 1870–1914*, Vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 424.
- 30 S. Rubenson, 'Aspects of the Survival of Ethiopian Independence', in P. McEwan (ed.), *Nineteenth Century Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 360.
- 31 M. Wubneh and Y. Abate, *Ethiopia: Transition and Development in the Horn of Africa* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), p. 15.
- 32 It appears that Yasu was overthrown because his association with Islam and his Oromo ancestry were seen by the Shoan nobility as a threat to the privileges they had acquired during the reign of Menelik. See Markakis, *Ethiopia*, p. 196.
- 33 J. Markakis, 'Social Formation and Political Adaptation in Ethiopia', *Journal of Modern African Studies* (1973), p. 370.
- 34 According to Clapham, 'When commercial links with the external world regained their central importance to the Ethiopian state in the later nineteenth century, these turned on the export of cash crops, notably coffee, which were grown not in the highlands, but at lower altitudes to the south and west. This was a process from which the southernmost old Ethiopian province of Shoa was the natural beneficiary.' See Clapham, 'The Structure of Regional Conflict', p. 251.
- 35 Markakis, 'Social Formation and Political Adaptation', p. 372.
- 36 H. Erlich, 'Tigrean Nationalism', British Involvement and Haile-Selassie's Emerging Absolutism – Northern Ethiopia, 1941–1943', *Asian and African Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (1981), p. 195.
- 37 The Abyssinian peasants were not always passive victims of marauding armies, however, and it was not uncommon for well-armed northern peasants to defend themselves against, and even attack, imperial armies. See R. CauIk, 'Armies as Predators: Soldiers and Peasants in Ethiopia c. 1852–1935', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (1979). Yohannis's army retreating from their defeat by the Mahdists was attacked by peasants in the Semien mountains of Gondar; Menelik's victorious troops were attacked in their withdrawal from Adwa, as were those of Haile-Selassie by the Raya and Azebo people of southern Tigray as he retreated before the Italians in 1935.
- 38 Markakis, *Ethiopia*, p. 48.
- 39 C. Clapham, 'Conclusion: Revolution, Nationality, and the Ethiopian State', in M. Ottaway (ed.), *The Political Economy of Ethiopia* (New York: Praeger, 1990), p. 228.

- 40 Adhana Haile Adhana, 'Mutation of Statehood and Contemporary Politics', in Abebe Zegeye and S. Pausewang (eds), *Ethiopia in Change: Peasantry, Nationalism and Democracy* (London: British Academic Press, 1994), p. 14.
- 41 E. Keller, *Revolutionary Ethiopia: From Empire to People's Republic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 160.
- 42 H. Erlich, 'Tigrean Politics 1930–1935 and the Approaching Italo-Ethiopian War', *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Ethiopian Studies* (Tel Aviv: 1980), p. 105.
- 43 Bruce, 'Land Reform Planning', p. 33.
- 44 Gebru Tareke, 'Rural Protest in Ethiopia', p. 132.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 132.
- 46 Erlich, 'Tigrean Politics', p. 117.
- 47 Bruce, 'Land Reform Planning', p. 124.
- 48 N. Pearce, *The Life and Adventures of Nathaniel Pearce* (London: Sasor Publishers, 1980), p. 251.
- 49 Pankhurst, *Social History of Ethiopia*, p. 276. It is significant that Napier's army paid for the poles and other supplies, something which no other army had done before, or would do again for the next eighty years.
- 50 R. Pankhurst, 'The Great Ethiopian Famine of 1888–1892: A New Assessment', *Journal of the History of Medicine* (1966), p. 289.
- 51 J. McCann, *From Poverty to Famine in Ethiopia: 1958–1977* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), pp. 32–4.
- 52 Environmentalists and foresters typically point to massive destruction arising in the last century, and there is evidence of this. However, the historian Richard Pankhurst suggests much earlier origins for environmental problems and notes that the Portuguese priest Francisco Alvarez who spent six years in Abyssinia between 1520 and 1526 described the highlands as already being grasslands. See Pankhurst, *Social History of Ethiopia*, pp. 275–6.
- 53 Bruce, 'Land Reform Planning', p. 196.
- 54 J. Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 251.
- 55 W. Connor, *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 167.
- 56 C. Rosen, 'Warring with Words: Patterns of Political Activity in a Northern Ethiopian Town', PhD dissertation (University of Illinois, 1976), p. 86.
- 57 Interview: Abraham Aley, Abey Gobast, Kashi Bercher Kasa, and Grazmach Berhe Dumzu, all veterans of the Woyene, Mahoni, 31 March 1993.
- 58 Asafa Jalata, *Oromia and Ethiopia: State Formation and Ethnonational Conflict, 1868–1992* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993), p. 84.
- 59 Rosen, 'Warring with Words', p. 87.
- 60 Gebru Tareke, 'Rural Protest in Ethiopia', p. 141.
- 61 *Ibid.*
- 62 Erlich, 'Tigrean Nationalism', p. 216.
- 63 Gebru Tareke, 'Rural Protest in Ethiopia', pp. 152–3.
- 64 Gebru Tareke, 'Rural Protest in Ethiopia', p. 156.
- 65 Gebru Tareke, 'Rural Protest in Ethiopia', p. 167.
- 66 Gebru Tareke, 'Rural Protest in Ethiopia', p. 222.
- 67 Interview: Solomon Inquai, Mekelle, 7 January 1993.



- 68 Gebru Tareke, 'Rural Protest in Ethiopia', p. 215.
- 69 Erlich, 'Tigrayan Nationalism', pp.197–8.
- 70 T. Ranger, 'Connections Between "Primary Resistance" Movements and Modern Mass Nationalism in East and Central Africa', *Journal of African History*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (1968), p. 437–8.
- 71 Interview: Negussie Lilly, Endaselasie, 6 February 1993.
- 72 In spite of support for a federal arrangement, the USA accepted Haile-Selassie's dissolution of the federation and integration of Eritrea into Ethiopia in 1961. It was not until February 1990 that Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Herman Cohen, testified before Congress that the dissolution had been illegal and that Eritreans had a right to self-determination.
- 73 Bahru Zewde, *History of Modern Ethiopia*, p. 201.
- 74 Bahru Zewde, *History of Modern Ethiopia*, p. 206.
- 75 C. Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 3.
- 76 P. Koehn and L. Hayes, 'Student Politics in Traditional Monarchies: A Comparative Analysis of Ethiopia and Nepal', *Asian and African Studies*, Vol. 13, Nos. 1–2 (1978), p. 39.
- 77 Girma Kebede, *The State and Development in Ethiopia* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1992), p. 76.
- 78 R. Lefort, *Ethiopia: An Heretical Revolution?* (London: Zed Press, 1983), p. 49.
- 79 Markakis, *National and Class Conflict*, p. 100.
- 80 Koehn and Hayes, 'Student Politics', pp. 35–6.
- 81 Koehn and Hayes, 'Student Politics', pp. 36–7.
- 82 Michael Chege, 'The Revolution Betrayed: Ethiopia, 1974–79', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (1979), p. 365.
- 83 Chege, 'Revolution Betrayed', p. 366.
- 84 Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation: The History of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party—Part I From the Early Beginnings to 1975* (Trenton: Red Sea Press, 1993), p. 19.
- 85 Bahru Zewde, *History of Modern Ethiopia*, p. 222. None the less, while students were early champions of the peasants, their political orientation remained overwhelmingly urban until 1975 when the TPLF and other dissident groups increasingly found it impossible to conduct their activities in the cities and took their opposition to the countryside.
- 86 Markakis, *Ethiopia*, p. 182.
- 87 M. and D. Ottaway, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution* (New York: Africa Publishing, 1978), p. 23.
- 88 Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation*, p. 18.
- 89 M. Ottaway, 'Social Classes and Corporate Interests in the Ethiopian Revolution', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (1976), p. 475.
- 90 R. Balsvik, 'An Important Root of the Ethiopian Revolution: The Student Movement', in Abebe Zegeye and Pausewang, *Ethiopia in Change*, p. 86.
- 91 Ibid.
- 92 HSIU, Sociology Students Associations and Department of Sociology and Anthropology, 'Research on the Social Situation of HSIU Students' (Addis Ababa: 1974), p. 14, quoted in Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation*, p. 17.
- 93 J. Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1952), p. 15.

- 94 Legesse Lemma, *Political Economy of Ethiopia 1875–1974* (1979), p. 303, quoted in Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation*, p. 17.
- 95 P. Koehn, 'Forecast for Political Change in Ethiopia: An Urban Perspective', in J. Scarrit (ed.), *Analysing Political Change in Africa: Applications of a New Multidimensional Framework* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1980), p. 82.
- 96 Koehn, 'Forecast for Political Change', p. 84.
- 97 J. Harbeson, *The Ethiopian Transformation: The Quest for the Post-Imperial State* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), p. 86.
- 98 Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation*, p. 209.
- 99 Clapham, 'Conclusion', p. 226.
- 100 Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation*, p. 209.
- 101 A. de Waal, *Evil Days: Thirty Years of War and Famine in Ethiopia* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1991), p. 104.
- 102 Girma Kebede, *State and Development in Ethiopia*, p. 4.
- 103 Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity*, p. 92.
- 104 Clapham, 'Conclusion', p. 229.
- 105 Harbeson, *Ethiopian Transformation*, p. 169.
- 106 Girma Kebede, *State and Development in Ethiopia*, pp. 117–18.
- 107 The TPLF has never provided figures of the number of its fighters at any stage of the revolution, but by 1988 its leadership was claiming to have larger forces than the EPLF. While this contention may never be either proved or disproved, the fact that Tigray and Eritrea have approximately the same population, and the extent of the TPLF's military victories in 1988, emphasise the success of its political mobilisation and make its claim believable. Moreover, the TPLF's capture of the entire province of Tigray in 1989 which produced expectations that the final defeat of the Derg was in sight brought even larger numbers into the ranks of the Front.
- 108 Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity*, p. 241.

### 3 TIGRAY ON THE EVE OF INSURRECTION

- 1 As noted above, the Ethiopian government's census of 1984 is questionable. This study thus finds it more useful to refer to reports of the Central Statistical Office, *Report on a Survey of Tigre Province*, Addis Ababa (1966) (hereafter CSO) and the Ministry of Land Reform and Administration, *Report on Land Tenure Survey of Tigre Province*, Addis Ababa (1969) (hereafter Ministry of Land Reform).
- 2 For a discussion of this see D. Hicks, 'Tigray and North Wollo Situation Report April–May 1992', UN Emergency Prevention and Preparedness Group (Addis Ababa: 15 June 1992).
- 3 Contrary to TPLF claims, Clapham writes that Wolkait has never been governed as part of Tigray and that the territory has always been administered by Gondar or Semien. See C. Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), footnote number 29, p. 259. This is questionable, but in any case the TPLF does not base its claim for Wolkait on historical grounds, but instead simply on the fact that most of the people inhabiting the territory are Tigrigna speaking. See Interview: Gebru Asrat and Abbay Tsehaye, Addis Ababa, 9 January 1996.

- 4 CSO, p. 1.
- 5 Hicks, 'Tigray and North Wollo Situation Report', Appendix 1 and FDRE, Office of Population and Housing Census Commission, CSA, *The 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia, Results for Tigray Region*, Vol. 1, Statistical Report (Addis Ababa: Government of Ethiopia, 1996), p. 10.
- 6 Ministry of Land Reform, p. 3. Boundary changes after liberation increased Tigray's area to just over 100,000 square kilometres.
- 7 Ministry of Land Reform, p. 54.
- 8 CSO, p. 27.
- 9 Ministry of Land Reform, p. 16.
- 10 CSO, p. 10.
- 11 Solomon Inquai, 'Adult Literacy in Ethiopia – A Profile', *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol. 2, No. I (January 1969), p. 58.
- 12 Solomon Inquai, 'Adult Literacy', p. 18.
- 13 CSO, p. 26.
- 14 CSO, p. 27.
- 15 Typical of this is Haile, a peasant resident in Adi Hagari who was born in Filfli, Axum awardja in 1939 and moved west in 1959 with the intention of getting farmland. He reckoned that had he stayed in central Tigray he would have inherited about 'two pairs of oxen land' (a measurement that would approximate 0.25 hectares) thus leaving him both poor and dependent on wage labour for survival. Instead, he set out by himself at age twenty for western Tigray. Although he had no oxen or tools to plough what he refers to as 'virgin land', the low population in the west meant that wages were higher than elsewhere in Tigray and a few years' saving enabled him to acquire ten pairs of oxen land (or 1.25 hectares) and the tools to plough it. Interview: Haile, Adi Hagari, 3 February 1993.
- 16 Interview: Berihun Gebre, Bela, Chercha woreda, 27 March 1993.
- 17 Interview: Dada Mengesha, Adigrat, 3 March 1993.
- 18 Ministry of Land Reform, p. 42.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ministry of Land Reform, pp. 37–41.
- 21 Ministry of Land Reform, p. 59.
- 22 Interview: Haredgu Gebre Mariam, Gurish Gebre Miskel and Maressa Haile Mariam, Adwa, 21 February 1993.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ministry of Land Reform, p. 36.
- 25 Ministry of Land Reform, p. 19.
- 26 P. Gilkes, *The Dying Lion: Feudalism and Modernisation in Ethiopia* (London: Julian Friedman, 1975), p. 116.
- 27 Gilkes, *The Dying Lion*, p. 117.
- 28 Interview: Gazey Kassa, Gebre Medhin Wolde Gebriel, and Kasha Berhe, Axum, 13 February 1993.
- 29 Interview: Kashi Gebre Medhin Desta, Dagalousie, 14 February 1993.
- 30 J. Markakis and Nega Ayele, *Class and Revolution in Ethiopia* (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1978), p. 59.
- 31 Mesfin Wolde Mariam, *Rural Vulnerability to Famine in Ethiopia 1958–1977* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University, 1984), p. 106.

- 32 A. Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 86–112.
- 33 'Tigray: Forced Labour but no Relief', *Horn of Africa*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (1981), p. 29.
- 34 Axum is still a focal point for the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and under TPLF administration it has been made the administrative headquarters for the central zoba, but otherwise it is a small town in the shadow of its larger neighbour, Adwa.
- 35 Interview: Gebru Aregey and Berhane Desta, Adwa, 21 February 1993.
- 36 Resentment at Mengesha's taxation must have had some bearing on the peasants' unwillingness to support him when he went to the countryside in November 1974 to launch his anti-Derg rebellion.
- 37 C. Rosen, 'Warring with Words: Patterns of Political Activity in a Northern Ethiopian Town', PhD dissertation (University of Illinois, 1976), p. 90.
- 38 Rosen, 'Warring with Words', p. 92.
- 39 C. Rosen, 'Tigrean Political Identity', in R. Hess (ed.), *Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Ethiopian Studies*, University of Illinois (1979), p. 261.
- 40 Rosen, 'Tigrean Political Identity', p. 263. Kalechristos, governor of Tigray from 1976 to 1978, also singled out the people of Adwa as being particularly resistant to unjust authority and obstinate in their struggles for justice. See Interview: Colonel Kalechristos Abbay, Addis Ababa, 4 June 1993.
- 41 Interview: Tsighe Hagos, Abi Adi, 19 March 1993.
- 42 Statistics from Huntings, Consultants to the Ethiopian Government, 'Tigray, a Rural Development Study', Main Report (London: 1977), quoted in J. Firebrace and G. Smith, *The Hidden Revolution: An Analysis of Social Change in Tigray, Northern Ethiopia* (London: War on Want, 1982), p. 54.
- 43 Interview: Gebregiorgis Gegziabher, Mekelle, 5 January 1993.
- 44 Interview: Solomon Inquai, Mekelle, 7 January 1993.
- 45 *People's Voice*, September/December 1989, p. 22.
- 46 Even in the present and very different circumstances, the native Tigrayan who was serving as the Church's bishop for the province was heard to preach in Amharigna in his home village; witnessed Colloquot, January 22, 1993.
- 47 Many of the teachers were blind because it was believed that sightless teachers were better at reciting.
- 48 According to Tigrayan Church officials, 'feudals and administrators used Amharigna and in order to make them happy, we taught Amharigna'. See Interview: Halekay Fitzum Tafare, Lekarurynie Takaste Asaha, Lekarkarnat Gebre Medhin Gebre Selassie, Axum, 12 February 1993.
- 49 By first becoming Church deacons and then going on to the priesthood, Church schools were one of the few vehicles by which children of poor peasants could advance their social and economic standing.
- 50 Interview: Teishe Hagos and Mulu Hailu, Abi Adi, 19 March 1993. It appears that such literature was brought into Ethiopia by a handful of university radicals who had it printed, and in some cases translated, and then distributed throughout the country.
- 51 Meles Zenawi was, however, to later attend General Wingate Secondary School, the elite British school in Addis Ababa.

- 52 Interview: Berhane Mengesha, Adwa, 20 February 1993.
- 53 Ibid.
- 54 Interview: Sessay Medana Mariam, Axum, 11 February 1993.
- 55 When news of the overthrow of the Haile-Selassie regime reached the town it was welcomed by local students, but older people were sometimes troubled by the rapid turn of events and supported Ras Mengesha who briefly hid in Axum's Zion Mariam Church during his escape to the Sudan.
- 56 Interview: Mohammed Esumane, Nurehysne, Melite Beyene, Endaselasie, 6 February 1993.
- 57 Interview: Alesmu Hailu, Mengesha Gerechal and Gebrehaiwit Gebre Selassie, Abi Adi, 17 March 1993.
- 58 Gebrekidan Abay, President ETA, Tigray branch and Gebregiorgis Gegziabher, Secretary ETA, Mekelle, 1 January 1993.
- 59 Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation: The History of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party—Part I: From the Early Beginnings to 1975* (Trenton: Red Sea Press, 1993), p. 51.
- 60 R. Balsvik, *Haile-Selassie's Students: the Intellectuals and Social Background to a Revolution 1952–1977* (East Lansing: African Studies Center, Michigan State University, 1985), pp. 277–8.
- 61 Walleligne Makonnen, 'Struggle', November 1969, quoted in Balsvik, *Haile-Selassie's Students*, p. 277.
- 62 Walleligne Makonnen, in Balsvik, *Haile-Selassie's Students*, p. 285.
- 63 O. Klineberg and M. Zavalloni, *Nationalism and Tribalism among African Students: A Study of Social Identity* (Mouton and Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, 1969), p. 76.
- 64 Klineberg and Zavalloni, *Nationalism and Tribalism*, p. 127.
- 65 Klineberg and Zavalloni, *Nationalism and Tribalism*, p. 233.
- 66 Balsvik, *Haile-Selassie's Students*, p. 280.
- 67 Balsvik, *Haile-Selassie's Students*, p. 281.
- 68 Interview: Eschetu Chole, Faculty of Business and Economics, AAU, Addis Ababa, 23 December 1992.
- 69 Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation*, p. 52.
- 70 Klineberg and Zavalloni, *Nationalism and Tribalism*, p. 128.
- 71 Klineberg and Zavalloni, *Nationalism and Tribalism*, p. 143.
- 72 Klineberg and Zavalloni, *Nationalism and Tribalism*, p. 93.
- 73 Balsvik, *Haile-Selassie's Students*, p. 281.
- 74 R. Pateman, *Eritrea: Even the Stones are Burning* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1990), p. 13.
- 75 Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation*, p. 140.
- 76 J. Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 252.
- 77 Ghidey Zera Tsion, e-mail correspondence to the author, 29 December 1995.
- 78 Woyene, August 1978, p. 25.
- 79 Ibid.
- 80 Interview: Tecklehaimonot Gebre-Selesie, Department of History, AAU, 2 November 1992.
- 81 Markakis, *National and Class Conflict*, p. 252.
- 82 Ghidey Zera Tsion, e-mail correspondence to the author, 29 December 1995.

- 83 Interview: Merara Gudina, Political Science and International Relations Department, AAU, 24 December 1992.
- 84 According to Markakis the ELF has since admitted responsibility for the bombings. See Interview: J. Markakis, Addis Ababa, 10 June 1993.
- 85 *Woyene*, 21 February 1979, p. 3.
- 86 'Forced Labour but no Relief', *Horn of Africa*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 1981.
- 87 P. Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison* (Sage Publications, 1991), p. 43.
- 88 K. Griffin (ed.), *The Economy of Ethiopia* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1992), p. 42.
- 89 Even the Swedish-sponsored Chilalo Agricultural Development Unit (CADU) which was specifically designed to benefit small farmers by improving communications and marketing arrangements and introducing new farming techniques, was found instead to have increased the value of their land and this encouraged commercially minded large farmers to acquire the land and evict share-croppers in favour of mechanised farming; see L. Cliffe, 'Feudalism, Capitalism and Famine', *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (August–November 1974), p. 39. And in the most extreme example, the loss of valuable grazing lands of the nomadic Afar in the Awash river basin as a result of the introduction of large commercial cotton-growing schemes was responsible for the enormous number of nomads who died in the drought of 1972–4. The lion's share of the benefits from commercial farming in every case went to a small number of large farmers who were either members of the nobility or had close relations with this privileged group.

#### 4 STRUGGLE FOR OPPOSITION ASCENDANCY: 1975–1978

- 1 It is indicative of the importance the TPLF attached to Tigrayans living abroad that for mobilisation purposes they were considered part of 'region four'.
- 2 For reasons that will be examined, it was only much later that the TPLF was able to establish itself in the southern parts of region three.
- 3 Paul Henze interview with Meles Zenawi, Washington, February 1991.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Interview: Mohammed Esumane, Nurehsyne and Melite Beyene, Endaselasie, 6 February 1993.
- 6 Interview: Tasabet Hagos, Dagalousie, 14 February 1993.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Interview: Meles Adet, Adega Arbi, 28 February 1993.
- 9 Interview: Gebru Aregey and Berhane Desta, Adwa, 21 February 1993.
- 10 Interview: Kidane Hailu, Afarly Emir and Tadesse Woldelabanos, Mahoni, 30 March 1993.
- 11 Interview: Beranberas Seyum Meles, Melakus Asmlem Gebre Mariam, Berhane Hagos, Berhane Asgdam, and Svegai Masa, Adigrat, 3 March 1993.
- 12 A. de Waal, *Evil Days: Thirty Years of War and Famine in Ethiopia* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1991), p. 101.
- 13 Interview: Berhe Belay, Maichew, 25 March 1993. Berhe's reference to

'surviv[ing] tactically' should be understood to be collaborating when necessary.

- 14 Interview: Gebregiorgis Gegziabher and Gebrekidan Abay, Mekelle, 1 January 1993. After the EPRDF victory it was learned that the teachers had been taken to Wollo where they were set on fire and then buried by a grader.
- 15 Interview: Sessay Medana Mariam, Axum, 11 February 1993.
- 16 Such titles were given primarily as a means for Haile-Selassie to gain support for his regime since it cannot have been overlooked that Suhul's father later went on to support the Italians in opposition to his regime.
- 17 After a number of imprisonments and death threats Suhul 'went to the forest' to ensure his safety, only to come out at the personal appeal of Ras Mengesha, who promptly appointed him head of the Gum Arabic Corporation.
- 18 Interview: Medhin, Sheraro, 29 January 1993.
- 19 Interview: Yemane Kidane, Addis Ababa, 1 December 1992.
- 20 *Woyene*, 21 February 1979.
- 21 Ghidey Zera Tsion, e-mail communication with author, 13 November 1995.
- 22 The TPLF journal *Revolt* recorded the movement's 'military accomplishments' at the end of the first year of operations: 'on Hamle 29/67 our forces freed a comrade who had been imprisoned in the fascist police station at Shire. With this a series of successful operations began. On Nehase 27/67 our forces controlled Axum for a limited time and confiscated \$E170,000 from the bank there. They also gave due punishment to the representatives of fascism there. In the meantime they took a considerable amount of arms from the police station of the town. On Tekemti 25/68 our forces burned a bus of the national transport company at Sero and confiscated some valuable properties of the bus. On Tahsas 4/68 our forces seized an enemy lorry at a place called Desa in Kelete Awalo. They confiscated arms from the enemy and gave political education to the people around. On Tahses 19/68 our fighters imprisoned 9 officials of the reactionary Derg near Edaga Hagus, Agame which were set free after been given stern warning and advice. On Tahsas 7/68 our forces took 1 duplicating machine, 2 type writers and various printing materials from the comprehensive high school at Adigrat.' *Revolt*, No. 1, 3rd year, p. 12. According to Markakis the stolen typewriters and printing materials were used to establish the Front's propaganda organ *Woyene*. See J. Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 253.
- 23 Interview: Sessay Medana Mariam, Axum, 11 February 1992.
- 24 Markakis, *National and Class Conflict*, p. 253.
- 25 Theodros Dagne, 'EPRDF's Rise to Political Dominance', *Ethiopian Review*, December 1992, p. 17.
- 26 *Woyene*, August 1978, p. 8.
- 27 *Revolt*, No. 7, 1st year, p. 29; *Revolt*, No. 8, 1st year, p. 26.
- 28 Girma, Karen Eritrea, 27 April 1993.
- 29 *Revolt*, No. 3, Yekat, 1968 EC, p. 12.
- 30 TPLF Foreign Bureau, 'A Short History of the Tigray People and the Activities of the TPLF', December 1977, p. 6.
- 31 EPLF, *Adulis*, July 1990, p. 7.
- 32 Interview: Colonel Asaminew Bedane, Addis Ababa, 13 June 1993.

- 33 H. Erlich, *The Struggle Over Eritrea, 1962–1978: War and Revolution in the Horn of Africa* (Stanford: Hoover International Press, 1983), p. 76.
- 34 'Manifesto of the TPLF', February 1976, p. 24.
- 35 According to Ghidey, the final draft of the Manifesto was written by Seyoum Mesfin, but he does not characterise him as a nationalist and writes that 'such [a] reaction could have come from any one of us'. Ghidey Zera Tsion, e-mail communication with the author, 13 November 1995.
- 36 'Manifesto', pp. v-vi.
- 37 'Manifesto', p. xiv.
- 38 Interview: Gebru Asrat and Abbay Tsehaye, Addis Ababa, 9 January 1996.
- 39 TPLF Foreign Relations Bureau, 'Tigray a Nation in Struggle', 1980, p. 12.
- 40 *Revolt*, No. 1, 1st year, Tiri, 1968 EC.
- 41 'The Just Struggle of the Tigrayan People', 11 December 1981, p. 2.
- 42 A. Taban, 'Inside Tigray', *New African*, August 1988, p. 39.
- 43 Interview: Aregesh Adane, Mekelle, 8 April 1993.
- 44 Interview: Tekle Berhane, Gondar, 6 May 1993.
- 45 As well as Mengesha Seyoum, the leadership included General Nega Tegegn, who had been governor of Begemdir and was a relative through marriage of Haile-Selassie, and General Iyassu Mengesha, former ambassador to Britain.
- 46 Erlich, *The Struggle Over Eritrea*, p. 73.
- 47 C. Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 209.
- 48 A women's section of the project was organised in which Aregesh was active, but in spite of their efforts which included wearing traditional peasant clothes, they were largely met with indifference. See interview: Aregesh Adane, Mekelle, 8 April 1993.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Ghidey Zera Tsion, e-mail correspondence with author, 13 November 1995.
- 51 Suhul was killed in the western Tigrayan town of Adi Nebried while trying to prevent Teranafit from hijacking a public bus. His killer was Sazabed Douri, a former leader of the TLF who joined the EDU after the defeat of that fledgling group in eastern Tigray by the TPLF. Sazabed was later captured by the TPLF in Gondar and handed over to the peasants' peoples' council in Adi Nebried where he was ordered to be executed. Suhul's death led to TPLF forces from across Tigray returning to their base areas in the west to confront the crisis. As well as Suhul, the Eritrean Mussie was killed in another incident by Teranafit.
- 52 Legum reports that three Central Committee members led by Sebhat Nega met with a breakaway EDU faction. See C. Legum (ed.), *Contemporary African Record: Annual Survey and Documents 1977–78* (New York: African Publishing Company, 1978), p. 217.
- 53 Interview: Tekle Berhane, Gondar, 6 May 1993.
- 54 In the early years the TPLF prohibited marriage among its fighters because, it was argued, the Front depended on its mobility and could not cope with children, but in the mid-1980s marriage was allowed.
- 55 Interview: Kashi Berhe Gerengi, Dagalousie, 14 February 1993.
- 56 Interview: Beher Teka, Dagalousie, 14 February 1993.
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 Fighters and mass association members elect in equal numbers representatives



to the TPLF Congress so the mass associations influence the TPLF and it in turn influences the mass associations.

- 59 Interview: Zemichael G/Mehdan, Mekelle, 17 January 1993.
- 60 Ghidey Zera Tsion, e-mail correspondence with the author, 29 December 1995.
- 61 Interview: Yemane Kidane, Addis Ababa, 1 December 1992. These videos were probably acquired in the thriving illicit trade across the Red Sea and passed on to the TPLF by wealthy supporters.
- 62 Interview: Negusie Lilly, Endaselasie, 6 February 1993.
- 63 Interview: Aela Assesse, Sobia, 7 March 1993.
- 64 Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation: The History of the People's Revolutionary Party—Part I: From the Early Beginnings to 1975* (Trenton: Red Sea Press, 1993), p. 193.
- 65 Interview: Bereket Simon, Addis Ababa, 16 June 1993.
- 66 Ibid.
- 67 Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation*, p. 193.
- 68 Ibid.
- 69 Interview: Twedros Hagos, 2 January 1996, Mekelle, and Gebru Mersha, 9 December 1995, Addis Ababa.
- 70 Interview: Bereket Simon, Addis Ababa, 16 June 1993.
- 71 Ibid.
- 72 Interview: Gersgeher Sebhat, Kashi Herur Merhiri, Biru Gese and Hagos Meginna, Sobia, 7 March 1993.
- 73 Ibid.
- 74 Interview: Mabrat Adhana, Sobia, 8 March 1993.
- 75 Interview: Kashi Feseha, Adigrat, 10 March 1993.
- 76 Ibid.
- 77 Interview: Gersgeher Sebhat, Kashi Herur Merhiri, Biru Gese, Hagos Meginna, Sobia, 7 March 1993.
- 78 Interview: Mabrat Adhana, Sobia, 8 March 1993.
- 79 Ibid.
- 80 Interview: Gersgeher Sebhat, Kashi Herur Merhiri, Biru Gese and Hagos Meginna, Sobia, 7 March 1993.
- 81 Ibid.
- 82 Ghidey Zera Tsion, e-mail correspondence with the author, 29 December 1995.
- 83 Interview: Simon Bereket, Addis Ababa, 16 June 1993.
- 84 Interview: Kashi Gebremeden Gragis, Adega Arbi, 28 February 1993.
- 85 Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution 1974–1987: A Transformation from an Aristocratic to a Totalitarian Autocracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) p. 174.
- 86 Ibid.
- 87 Kahsay Berhe, 'TPLF: Where, How?' (March 1989), p. 6.
- 88 Markakis, *National and Class Conflict*, p. 254. There is some confusion in the literature regarding the TLF with Ottaway ('Social Classes and Corporate Interests', p. 86) and Halliday and Molyneux (*The Ethiopian Revolution* (London, Verso, 1981), p. 206) both claiming that the TLF was founded by Ras Mengesha Seyoum in 1974 and that in 1976 it joined the EDU. They appear to be mistaking the TLF with Teranafit and they are also mistaken in having the TPLF emerge as a faction from the TLF in 1976. In fact the TLF

was entirely separate from the TPLF and the EDU, although it did align with Mengesha.

- 89 Interview: Mabratu Adhana and Tuku Beyene, Sobia, 8 March 1993.
- 90 *Tigray*, February 1980.
- 91 The TLF was affiliated with the ELF, while the TPLF was affiliated with the EPLF.
- 92 Interview: Gebru Asrat and Abbay Tsehaye, Addis Ababa, 9 January 1996.
- 93 Kahsay Berhe, 'TPLF', pp. 9–10.
- 94 According to the TPLF, in September 1977 the ELF and the EPRP formed an alliance. See *Woyeen*, August 1978, p. 39.
- 95 S. Vaughan, 'The Addis Ababa Transitional Conference of July 1991: its origins, history and significance', *Occasional Papers*, No. 51 (Edinburgh University: Centre of African Studies, 1994), pp. 16–17
- 96 Vaughan, 'Addis Ababa Transitional Conference', pp. 18–19.
- 97 Interview: Colonel Kalechristos Abbay, Addis Ababa, 4 June 1993.
- 98 Paul Henze reached a similar conclusion: 'it seems unlikely that its Marxism is the prime reason for the TPLF's relative success in gaining the support of a sizeable proportion of the Tigrean population'. See P. Henze, *Rebels and Separatists in Ethiopia: Regional Resistance to a Marxist Regime* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1986), p. 73.
- 99 Interview: Colonel Kalechristos Abbay, Addis Ababa, 4 June 1993.
- 100 Interview: Kashi Gebremeden Gragis, Adega Arbi, 28 February 1993.

## 5 CHALLENGES AND ADVANCES: 1978–1985

- 1 Interview: Colonel Asaminew, Addis Ababa, 13 June 1993.
- 2 The TPLF's Seyoum Mesfin in an interview with the journalist Dan Connell. See D. Connell, *Against All Odds: A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1993), p. 157.
- 3 J. Firebrace and G. Smith, *The Hidden Revolution: An Analysis of Social Change in Tigray, Northern Ethiopia* (London: War on Want, 1982), p. 38.
- 4 J. Hammond (ed.), *Sweeter than Honey: Testimonies of Tigrean Women* (Oxford: Third World First, 1989), p. 146.
- 5 Interview: Berhe Belay, Maichew, 25 March 1993.
- 6 *Woyene*, August 1978, p. 12.
- 7 J. Bennett, 'Socialism and the Nationalities Question in the Horn of Africa – the Case of Tigray', unpublished paper, May 1982, quoted in Firebrace and Smith, *The Hidden Revolution*.
- 8 Interview: Mohammed Said and Bedru Mohammed Yesaid, Abi Adi, 18 March 1993.
- 9 B. Hendrie, 'The Tigrayan Refugee Repatriation 1985–1987', *Oxford Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1991), p. 24.
- 10 Interview: Kiros Abay and Mamo Demerka, Chercha, 28 March 1993.
- 11 Interview: Kidane Hailu, Afarly Emir and Tadesse Woldelebanos, Mahoni, 30 March 1993.
- 12 Interview: Zemichael G/Mehdan, Mekelle, 11 April 1993.
- 13 REST, 'Humanitarian and Socio-Economic Development Activities' (Vancouver: Oxfam/Canada, 1987), p. 1.

- 14 Theodoros Dagne, p. 18.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 J. Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 257.
- 17 *Woyene*, August 1978.
- 18 D. Connell, 'A Lesson of Hope from Eritrea', *New Statesman*, 7 November 1980, p. 20.
- 19 '10 Held by Rebels in Ethiopia', *Associated Press*, Addis Ababa, 21 November 1984.
- 20 *Woyene*, August 1978, p. 38.
- 21 Ibid. It says much about the political times that the EPLF, EPRP, or the Derg could have issued the same appeal.
- 22 As well as the market killing of many civilians, Abi Adi was bombed by the Derg thirteen times, 340 houses were burned or destroyed, and over 400 of the town's inhabitants were killed or wounded. In the face of this violence many people left the area, some for Mekelle, and others as far as the liberated territories around Sheraro where even merchants took up farming. See interview: Farada Hagos, Mohammed Abdel Kadir, and Tabere Gebre Michael, Abi Adi, 17 February 1993.
- 23 R. Moore, 'Ethiopia's Widening Cracks', *The Middle East*, September 1980, p. 32.
- 24 Connell, 'Lesson of Hope'.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Interview: Aregowie Berhe, The Hague, Netherlands, 22 June 1993.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 In spite of these efforts, the governor of Tigray between 1976 and 1978, Colonel Kalechristos Abbay, reported that through his contacts among Tigrayan elders he was able to identify virtually all TPLF members. Interview: Colonel Kalechristos Abbay, Addis Ababa, 4 June 1993.
- 29 TPLF statistics are invariably difficult to come by, but in early 1980 the Front reported that it had 572 mass associations of workers, peasants, youth, students, traders, and others inside and outside Tigray with a membership of 171,000; in addition there were 12,670 militia members. See *People's Voice*, 18 February 1980.
- 30 Interview: Colonel Asaminew Bedane, Addis Ababa, 13 June 1993.
- 31 One journal gives the figure of 4,000 TPLF fighters being sent to the EPLF (see *New Statesman*, 28 May 1982, p. 15), but my informants hold this figure to be too high.
- 32 D. Beisel, *Reise ins Land der Rebellen: Tigray—eine afrikanische Zukunft* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1989), p. 59.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Interview: Gebru Asrat and Abbay Tsehaye, Addis Ababa, 9 January 1996.
- 35 P. Andreas, p. 67.
- 36 Hayloum, who was to become the most popular military leader in the country, was tragically assassinated in Addis Ababa on 14 February 1996 by a lone gunman whose motives to date are unknown.
- 37 Interview: Colonel Asaminew Bedane, POW Camp, Tigray, 5 May 1988. Asimenew found the EPLF's strategy and tactics to be superior to those of the

- TPLF, but the latter more terrifying in combat because of its ability to launch surprise attacks and the courage of its fighters.
- 38 Interview: Abadi Zemo, Mekelle, 21 December 1995.
- 39 See *Adulis*, Vol. 1, No. 9, March 1985, p. 7.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Information based on my visit to a TPLF POW camp of some 4,000 Derg soldiers in western Tigray in May 1988.
- 42 A. de Waal, *Evil Days: Thirty Years of War and Famine in Ethiopia* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1991), p. 309.
- 43 Tekeste Agazi, *Agrarian Reform in Tigray: A Case of the Land Reform in the District of Adi-Nebried* (London: Friends of Tigray in the UK, 1983), p. 3.
- 44 Interview: Colonel Asaminew Bedane, Addis Ababa, 13 June 1993.
- 45 Interview: Ahmed Karadowie, Mekelle, 7 January 1993.
- 46 Interview: Abadi Zemo, Mekelle, 21 December 1995.
- 47 EPLF Political Bureau member Al-Amin Mohammed Said made this point clear when he said, 'neither Sudan nor anybody else can close the border, because the border regions contain overlapping Eritrean and Sudanese tribes. Nimeiri's regime repeatedly strove in vain to close the border in the early 1970s.' See *Adulis*, Vol. 3, No. 5, May 1986, p. 4.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 L. Clarke, 'Early Warning Case Study: The 1984–85 Influx of Tigrayans into Eastern Sudan, Working Paper #2' (Washington, DC: Refugee Study Group, 1986), quoted in W. DeMars, 'Tactics of Protection: International Human Rights Organizations in the Ethiopian Conflict, 1980–1986', in E. McCarthy-Arnold (ed.), *Africa, Human Rights and the Global System* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), p. 97. Hendrie makes the important observation that unlike the drought-induced famine of 1973–4 when thousands of Tigrayans went to the urban centres in search of relief assistance, in the 1980s peasants went to Sudan. She attributes this to, first, fear of conscription; secondly, fear of being charged overdue taxes; thirdly, fear of imprisonment for being TPLF sympathisers; and lastly, fear of harassment or physical abuse by soldiers. She further notes that according to REST only 180,000 of the estimated one million Tigrayans internally displaced in the war zones migrated to the towns for assistance during 1984–5. See Hendrie, 'Tigrayan Refugee Repatriation', p. 28.
- 50 Interview: Ahmed Karadowie, Addis Ababa, 28 May 1993.
- 51 Interview: Abadi Zemo, Mekelle, 21 December 1995.
- 52 Interview: Chekol Kidane, Mekelle, 4 January 1993.
- 53 J. English, J. Bennett, and B. Dick, 'Tigray 1984: An Investigation' (Oxford: Oxfam-UK, 1984), p. 17 quoted in DeMars, 'Tactics of Protection', p. 97.
- 54 Hendrie, 'Tigrayan Refugee Repatriation', p. 26.
- 55 Gebru Tareke has noted that with the TPLF, 'the classic guerrilla–peasant relationship [is] reversed: instead of being dependants, guerrillas have become providers'. See Gebru Tareke, 'Continuity and Discontinuity in Peasant Mobilisation: The Cases of Bale and Tigray', in M. Ottaway (ed.), *The Political Economy of Ethiopia* (New York: Praeger, 1990), p. 152.

- 56 REST, 'Humanitarian and Socio-Economic Development Activities', p. 6.
- 57 Connell, *Against All Odds*, p. 222.
- 58 de Waal, *Evil Days*, pp. 196–202. It must be noted, however, that until 1984 most relief agencies did not question their assumed obligation to work with and through host governments, and it was in fact the experience of the Ethiopian famine that was instrumental in changing that attitude.
- 59 de Waal, *Evil Days*, p. 196.
- 60 C. Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 212.
- 61 The TPLF acknowledges that many of its members left the movement at this time, but attributes these losses to the strain caused by the famine and not because of political manipulation of the peasants. See interview: Abadi Zemo, Mekelle, 21 December 1995. The Front also denies that the EPLF opposed the evacuation of the peasants. Interview: Gebru Asrat and Abbay Tsehaye, Addis Ababa, 9 January 1996. It further claims that many of those who deserted the movement at this time later returned. Interview: Assefa Mamo, Addis Ababa, 26 January 1996.
- 62 de Waal, *Evil Days*, p. 203.
- 63 Interview: Abadi Zemo, Mekelle, 21 December 1995.
- 64 TPLF Chairmen Aregowie, Sebhat, and Meles all came from Adwa.
- 65 Ghidey Zera Tsion, e-mail communication with the author, 13 November 1995.
- 66 Interview: Gebru Asrat and Abbay Tsehaye, Addis Ababa, 9 January 1996.
- 67 *Woyene*, first English issue, August 1978, p. 18.
- 68 Kahsay Berhe, 'TPLF: Where, How?' (March 1989), p. 30.
- 69 Gebru Tareke, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest. Peasant Revolts in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 217.
- 70 Gebru Tareke, *Ethiopia*, pp. 217–18.
- 71 Interview: Gebru Asrat, Mekelle, 25 January 1993.
- 72 Studies of the Chinese Communist Party's land reforms, with which the TPLF leadership were closely acquainted, point to the Party's direct involvement in keeping rich peasants out, and getting poor peasants into, positions of power in mass associations.
- 73 See H. Alavi, 'Peasants and Revolution', in R. Miliband and J. Saville (eds), *Socialist Register* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1965).
- 74 Alavi, 'Peasants and Revolution', p. 274.
- 75 Abraha, a former rich peasant from a village near Sinkata in eastern Tigray, told the journalist Dieter Beisel that at first he opposed the TPLF's land reforms, but in time was won over because under the TPLF administration he was no longer prey to bandits and forced to pay bribes to corrupt officials, which had meant that 'a large part of my wealth existed so that others could take it from me'. See Beisel, *Reise ins Land der Rebellen*, p. 68.
- 76 Beisel, *Reise ins Land der Rebellen*, p. 69.
- 77 Interview: Tsegaye Berhe, Mekelle, 23 January 1993.
- 78 Ghidey Zera Tsion, e-mail correspondence with the author, 29 December 1995.
- 79 Interview: Aregowie Berhe, The Hague, 22 June 1993.
- 80 Interview: Gebru Asrat, Mekelle, 25 January 1993.

- 81 Ghidey Zera Tsion, e-mail correspondence with the author, 29 December 1995.
- 82 In the subsequent EPRDF administration Siye was appointed Defence Minister and Tsadkan G/Tensay the Military Chief of Staff. In 1995 Siye was reassigned to Tigray and Tamrat Layne was appointed Defence Minister and Deputy Prime Minister.
- 83 *People's Voice*, July/September 1986, p. 12. The fact that planning for the establishment of the MLLT began some months, if not years, before its 1985 founding serves to question de Waal's claim linking the movement to disagreements among the leadership over the handling of famine policy, and notably over TPLF/REST's hopes for support from the international community.
- 84 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- 85 *Ibid.*
- 86 Interview: Assefa Mamo, Addis Ababa, 26 January 1996.
- 87 *People's Voice*, January–June 1990, p. 24.
- 88 Interview: Meles Zenawi, Dejene, 29 April 1993.
- 89 Interview: Gebru Asrat and Abbay Tsehaye, Addis Ababa, 9 January 1996.
- 90 Hammond, *Sweeter than Honey*, p. 170.
- 91 Interview: Aregowie Berhe, The Hague, 22 June 1993. In 1997 Ghidey was living in exile in Norway and Aregowie in the Netherlands.
- 92 Hagos Atsbeha, a brother-in-law of Aregowie's was also reported by Amnesty International to have 'disappeared' in liberated territory in 1988 after being detained by the TPLF. See Amnesty International, *Ethiopia: Accountability Past and Present: Human Rights in Transition* (London: 25 June 1995).
- 93 The word 'significant' is used deliberately here as there were certainly attempts to form alternative movements, notably the Tigray People's Democratic Movement which was founded in 1979 by ex-TPLF member Dr Haile Atabeha (see Kahsay Berhe, 'TPLF: Where, How?' p. 20), and various movements instigated by Aregowie and Ghidey, the latest of which, in 1995, is the Tigrian Alliance for National Democracy.
- 94 N. Kriger, *Zimbabwe's Guerrilla War: Peasant Voices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 17.
- 95 Gebru Tareke, 'Resistance to Liberation', p. 44.
- 96 Interview: Colonel Kalechristos Abbay, Addis Ababa, 4 June 1993.
- 97 Interview: Aregowie Berhe, The Hague, 22 June 1993.
- 98 Meles Zenawi in conversation with Jenny Hammond. See Hammond, *Sweeter than Honey*, p. 71.
- 99 S. Pausewang, 'Local Democracy and Central Control', in Abebe Zegeye and S. Pausewang (eds.), *Ethiopia in Change: Peasantry, Nationalism and Democracy* (London: British Academic Press, 1994), p. 214
- 100 According to John Bruce who did research in Tigray between 1971 and 1974 and returned to the province in 1993, 'There is genuine engagement on issues in the meetings. There is, of course, a certain amount of direction by cadres. After all, the party cadres and fighters leading the meetings have seen themselves in a vanguard role, with their task as mobilisation of the peasantry. But they are open to objections and discuss them patiently. They discuss them so thoroughly and patiently that, at least in the meetings which I saw, consensus

seemed to emerge from exhaustion and the peasants' need to walk home to the villages.' (John Bruce, in a letter to the author, 29 November 1993).

- 101 Illustrative of these meetings were those held in the wake of the collapse of the TPLF's advance against the Derg in 1989 when fighters left the battlefronts and returned to Tigray. At every level of the administration meetings were organised, culminating in a month-long conference held in Mekelle which was attended by elected representatives from each tabia, woreda, and zoba to consider the advantages and disadvantages of ending the war or carrying on until the entire country was in EPRDF hands.

## 6 TRIUMPH: 1985–1991

- 1 A. de Waal, *Evil Days: Thirty Years of War and Famine in Ethiopia* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1991), p. 121.
- 2 A study of temporary inter-regional migration carried out in 1969–70 showed that the largest net outflow was from Tigray with 31,100 temporary emigrants, followed by Wollo with 6,960. See F. Ponsi, 'Available Demographic Data and the Level and Patterns of Population Concentration and Migration in Ethiopia', quoted in C. Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 165.
- 3 Girma Kebede, *The State and Development in Ethiopia* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1992), p. 81.
- 4 *People's Voice*, 11 January 1979, p. 4.
- 5 Dawit Wolde Giorgis, *Red Tears: War, Famine and Revolution in Ethiopia* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1989), p. 277.
- 6 According to figures supplied by the RRC, less than 90,000 settlers were moved from Tigray as opposed to 107,000 from Shoa and over 370,000 from Wollo; see Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity*, p. 193.
- 7 Interview: Gebru Asrat and Abbay Tsehaye, Addis Ababa, 9 January 1996.
- 8 Interview: Zemichael G/Medan, Mekelle, 11 April 1993.
- 9 Highland prejudices against the lowland nomadic Afar people have a long history in Ethiopia, although the TPLF claims that Tigrayans had closer relations with the Afar than highlanders to the south because of a mixing of nobility and genealogical lines between the two peoples, notably by the marriage of Yohannes to an Afar woman.
- 10 Interview: Fitwari Kebede Arayah, Mahoni, 30 March 1993.
- 11 Interview: Barento Abadayma, Chercha, 27 March 1993.
- 12 Interview: Zemichael G/Medan, Mekelle, 11 April 1993.
- 13 Interview: Barento Abadayma, Chercha, 27 March 1993.
- 14 Interview: Zemichael G/Medan, Mekelle, 11 April 1993.
- 15 H. Erlich, *The Struggle Over Eritrea, 1962–1978: War and Revolution in the Horn of Africa* (Stanford: Hoover International Press, 1983), p. 74.
- 16 However, it was precisely Ras Mengesha's feudalism that the TPLF argued precluded an alliance with Teranafit/EDU.
- 17 Afar self-determination was realised when the EPRDF carved an autonomous region, Zone Two, out of Afar populated lands in Tigray, Wollo, and Shoa. A small minority of Afar continue to live in Tigray, often on the border of Zone Two, and these people would prefer to be in Zone Two, but the boundaries seem to be

- drawn fairly with the resident Afar usually living in majority Tigrayan communities which would not accept the transfer of their land to Afar administration.
- 18 Although in March of 1993 all Raya and Afar that I interviewed said that ethnic antagonism between them had ended and they were now living in peace, isolated crimes still cropped up. However, in the period 1995–97 there were increasing reports, confirmed by TPLF officials, of clashes between civil forces and armed Afar groups.
  - 19 Interview: Zemichael G/Medan, Mekelle, 11 April 1993.
  - 20 Ibid.
  - 21 Interview: Gebru Asrat and Abbay Tsehaye, Addis Ababa, 9 January 1996.
  - 22 Interview: Abadi Marasa, Maichew, 24 March 1993.
  - 23 For the Derg, Chercha was too far from its main bases to be able to keep their supply lines open. From the hill that towers over the town the army could exert control, but at the same time TPLF attacks on the town and its supply lines largely restricted Derg soldiers to the hill. Conversely, the TPLF could not long defend the town from sustained ground or aerial attack, nor did it want to invite that kind of retribution on the town. As a result of the level of fighting, all but the oldest of the town's residents left for the lowlands of the east controlled by the TPLF, where they were supported by their relatives. See interview: Yemane Berhe and Kabede Gebriot, Chercha, 27 March 1993.
  - 24 'EPLF Political Report and NDP', adopted at the Second and Unity Congress of the EPLF and the ELF-Central Leadership, 16 March 1987, p. 152.
  - 25 P. Andreas, 'Politics and Liberation: The Eritrean Struggle 1961–86', PhD dissertation (Denmark: University of Aarhus, 1987), p. 93.
  - 26 'On Our Differences with the EPLF', *People's Voice*, Special Issue, 1986, p. 7.
  - 27 'A Great Leap Forward', *People's Voice*, 1986, p. 6.
  - 28 *Adulis*, May 1985, p. 5.
  - 29 *Adulis*, May 1985, p. 6.
  - 30 *Adulis*, May 1985, pp. 6–7.
  - 31 'A Great Leap Forward', p. 7.
  - 32 Ibid.
  - 33 J. Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 255.
  - 34 'A Great Leap Forward', p. 7.
  - 35 Interview: Tamrat Layne, Mihanse, Tigray, 2 May 1988.
  - 36 The Association of Eritrean Students and Women in North America (AESNA) broke from the EPLF in August 1978 in opposition to the Front's policy with regard to the Soviet Union, see D. Connell, *Against All Odds: A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1993), p. 169.
  - 37 'A Great Leap Forward', p. 8.
  - 38 Interview: Meles Zenawi, Dejene, 29 April 1988.
  - 39 Interview: Assefa Mamo, Addis Ababa, 26 January 1996.
  - 40 During this period the TPLF Foreign Relations Bureau sent teams of investigators to a number of countries in Europe, Latin America, and the Soviet Union. Interview: Assefa Mamo, Addis Ababa, 26 January 1996.
  - 41 *Adulis*, May 1985, p. 8.
  - 42 'EPLF Political Report and NDP', adopted at the Second and Unity



- Congress of the EPLF and the ELF-Central Leadership, 16 March 1987, pp. 148–9.
- 43 Statement of principles between DMLE and TPLF, 24–31 January 1990. In 1993 and later there were widespread but unconfirmed reports that the DMLE was still operational in Tigray.
- 44 Interview: Gebru Asrat and Abbay Tsehaye, Addis Ababa, 9 January 1996.
- 45 Interview: Meles Zenawi, Dejene, 28 April 1988.
- 46 Interview: Sebhat Nega, Wolkait, 27 April 1988. Other sources suggest a figure of 100,000 men with substantial quantities of armour and artillery, although forced conscription and poor morale would limit the effectiveness of the force. See ‘Ethiopia: A battle lost, a war in stalemate’, *Africa Confidential*, Vol. 29, No. 9, 29 April 1988, p. 3.
- 47 *People's Voice*, May 1988, p. 8.
- 48 ‘EPLF and TPLF Joint Statement’, *People's Voice*, August 1988, pp. 16–17.
- 49 However, seventeen months later the TPLF made an agreement with the DMLE which included a condemnation of the Soviet Union, but omitted any reference to the United States.
- 50 The EPLF's Second Congress in 1987 moved away from the anti-American imperialist and anti-Zionist rhetoric that figured so highly in the past. See Ruth Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence: Domination, Resistance, Nationalism, 1941–1993* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 132.
- 51 The TPLF has never been forthcoming about their numbers, but former Derg Colonel Asaminew, who was captured by the Front in April 1988, told me in his POW camp at Kalema that army intelligence at that time estimated TPLF strength to be 60,000 fighters. He thought that was a serious under-estimation and concluded that, ‘the whole population of the province is armed . . . everyone supports the TPLF’. Interview: Colonel Asaminew Bedane, POW Camp Tigray, 5 May 1988.
- 52 *People's Voice*, September/December, 1989, p. 20.
- 53 Interview: Colonel Asaminew Bedane, Addis Ababa, 13 June 1993.
- 54 Colonel Asaminew as reported in *People's Voice*, September/December, 1989, p. 20.
- 55 BBC news broadcast, 21 March 1988.
- 56 ‘Ethiopia: A battle lost, a war in stalemate’, *Africa Confidential*, Vol. 29, No. 9, 29 April 1988, p. 2.
- 57 The apparent coincidence may be due to the preference of both Fronts to launch attacks in the dry season so that the agricultural cycle on which the peasants depended would not be disrupted.
- 58 B. Hendrie, ‘The Tigrayan Refugee Repatriation 1985–1987’, *Oxford Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1991), p. 22.
- 59 Interview: Negusie Lilly, Endaselasie, 8 February 1993.
- 60 Interview: Mohammed Esumane, Nurehsyne and Melite Beyene, Endaselasie, 6 February 1993.
- 61 *People's Voice*, May 1988, p. 7.
- 62 Interview: Mohammed Esumane, Nurehsyne and Melite Beyene, Endaselasie, 6 February 1993.
- 63 *Adulis*, May 1988, p. 4.
- 64 *African Defence*, July 1988, p. 1, August 1989, p. 4.

- 65 'Ethiopia: The diplomatic battle', *Africa Confidential*, Vol. 28, No. 23, 18 November 1988, p. 5.
- 66 de Waal, *Evil Days*, p. 258.
- 67 Interview: Yemane Bere and Kebede Gebriot, Chercha, 27 March 1993.
- 68 So terrifying was the aerial attack on Chercha that in 1993 the market on which the town's economy depends had not recovered, the Afar in particular avoiding it. While previously possessing a larger market than that of Mahoni, Chercha's market was reduced to only a fraction of that of its neighbour. Indeed, representatives of the Traders' Association in Mahoni attribute the relative success of their market in part to Chercha's misfortune and the fact that their town was only once, and very briefly, in TPLF hands, and hence never a MiG target. See interview: Kidane Hailu, Afarly Emir, and Tadesse Woldelebanos, Mahoni, 30 March 1993.
- 69 de Waal, *Evil Days*, pp. 263–4.
- 70 *People's Voice*, May/August 1989, pp. 4–5.
- 71 For example, in April 1991 with EPRDF forces on the outskirts of Addis Ababa, some ninety-eight people in Sheraro were killed or wounded as a result of an aerial bombardment. See interview: Mohammed Esumane, Nurehsyne, and Melite Beyene, Endaselasia, 6 February 1993.
- 72 Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution 1974–1987: A Transformation from an Aristocratic to a Totalitarian Autocracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 355.
- 73 'Ethiopia: The politics of power and the politics of peace', *Africa Confidential*, Vol. 30, No. 12, p. 6.
- 74 'Ethiopia: Dark days for Mengistu', *Africa Confidential*, Vol. 30, No. 4, 17 February 1989, p. 5.
- 75 Dessalegn Rahmato, 'The Unquiet Countryside: The Collapse of "Socialism" and Rural Agitation, 1990 and 1991', in Abebe Zegeye and S. Pausewang (eds.), *Ethiopia in Change: Peasantry, Nationalism and Democracy* (London: British Academic press, 1994), p. 259.
- 76 'Ethiopia: The peasants revolt,' *Africa Confidential*, Vol. 31, No. 10, 18 May 1990, p. 6.
- 77 'Ethiopia: Mengistu survives by his fingertips', *Africa Confidential*, Vol. 30, No. 22, November 1989, p. 1.
- 78 Interview: Assefa Mamo, Addis Ababa, 15 December 1995.
- 79 Ibid.
- 80 Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, p. 362.
- 81 Ibid.
- 82 S. Vaughan, 'The Addis Ababa Transitional Conference of July 1991: its origins, history and significance', *Occasional Papers*, No. 51 (Edinburgh University: Centre of African Studies, 1994), p. 31.
- 83 'Ethiopia: TPLF Multiplies', *Africa Confidential*, Vol. 32, No. 4, 22 February 1991.
- 84 Interview: Gebru Asrat and Abbay Tsehaye, Addis Ababa, 9 January 1996.
- 85 'Ethiopia: EPRDF Issues Peace Programme', Summary of World Broadcasts BBC Monitoring, Third World Series, 24 March 1990.
- 86 Interview: Assefa Mamo, Addis Ababa, 15 December 1995.
- 87 Ibid. Assefa admitted that since 1990 TPLF policy was directed to totally

destroying the Derg and thus ‘negotiations’ could only be over the Derg’s surrender.

- 88 This decision caused great anger among TPLF/EPRDF opponents who considered it an act of US betrayal. However, it was almost certainly not the result of any US–EPRDF collusion, since, as it has been argued here, the USA had little control over the rapidly unfolding events. In any event, the Derg’s army had collapsed and the EPRDF was the only force that could ensure stability, an important consideration given the destruction and anarchy that was taking place at that time in Monrovia and Mogadishu where the Dole and Barre regimes disintegrated.

## 7 TPLF AND THE PEASANTS

- 1 Interview: Gebru Desta, Mekelle, 1 January 1993.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 As told to Dan Connell and quoted in C. Legum (ed.), *Contemporary African Record: Annual Survey and Documents 1977–78* (New York: African Publishing Company, 1978), p. 219. Wright’s observations are also germane: ‘previously the peasant culture consisted of singing dirges of their own misfortunes and hymns of praise for the feudal lords who bled them white. Now everywhere people gather, at weddings, after battles, mass meetings, they sing songs of the revolution and national pride ... Every mass association, every fighting unit has its own cultural troupe. The TPLF as a whole has a cultural troupe who develop new songs and theatre which are taped in the field for outside consumption.’ See K. Wright, ‘Tigray: A Political Report’, September 1979, p. 9.
- 4 P. Henze, *Rebels and Separatists in Ethiopia: Regional Resistance to a Marxist Regime* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1986), p. 72.
- 5 Interview: Aregesh Adane, Mekelle, 8 April 1993.
- 6 While recognising the importance of religion in the lives of Tigrayan peasants, the TPLF leadership remained distinctly wary of religion and the role of religious leaders, and ensured that priests did not assume a leading role in any of the mass associations or have the degree of influence in the conduct of fighting as that described by Lan in his study of the Zimbabwean revolution. See D. Lan, *Guns and Rains: Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe* (London: James Currey, 1985).
- 7 Interview: Halaka Fitzum Tafare, Lekaruryini Takaste Asaha and Lekarkamat Gebre Medhin Gebre Selassie, Axum, 12 February 1993. Note that Tigrayans invariably refer to the Derg as ‘he’.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Priests have a considerable, but never dominating, influence in local administration, but their numbers steadily decrease with advancement up the administrative hierarchy, and this must be a result of TPLF design.
- 10 Interview: Tsegaye Berhe, Mekelle, 11 April 1993.
- 11 Interview: Kashi Terka Abara and Melhakabraham Gebrujesus Gebremariam, Abi Adi, 17 March 1993.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.

- 14 Interview: Sheikh Nuri Barantu, Husien Omar and Ali Mahdi, Mahoni, 31 March 1993.
- 15 Interview: Sheikh Ahmed Ibrahim, Maichew, 26 March 1993.
- 16 Interview: Roman and Herti, Mekelle, 6 January 1993.
- 17 Lemlem Gessesse, an early woman fighter and daughter of Suhul, quoted in J. Hammond (ed.), *Sweeter than Honey: Testimonies of Tigrean Women* (Oxford: Third World First, 1989), p. 47.
- 18 Interview: Negi Bito, Debre Krabae, 24 February 1993.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Laila, from the TPLF Information Bureau in Tigray, quoted in Hammond, *Sweeter than Honey*, p. 75.
- 21 Interview: Roman and Herti, Mekelle, 6 January 1993.
- 22 The school took its name from the first, and now deceased, TPLF woman fighter who joined the movement about five months after it went to the field. See interview: Roman and Herti, Mekelle, 6 January 1993.
- 23 In the wake of this policy change the TPLF began emphasising women's supportive role in supplying food to fighters and road-builders, and assuming sole responsibility for children and property if husbands were away or lost as a result of the war.
- 24 Aregash Adane as quoted in Hammond, *Sweeter than Honey*, p. 69.
- 25 Interview: Sheikhs Mohous Abdel Kadir, Ali Mohammed Siray and Ali Ahmed, Abi Adi, 19 March 1993.
- 26 Interview: Roman and Herti, Mekelle, 6 January 1993.
- 27 Interview: Gebru Asrat and Abbay Tsehaye, Addis Ababa, 6 January 1996.
- 28 So severe was this sanction that if a woman touched a plough it would have to be destroyed, see D. Beisel, *Reise ins Land der Rebellen: Tigray—eine afrikanische Zukunft* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1977), p. 100.
- 29 The difficulty in ploughing is largely dependent upon the condition of the soil and this is a result of whether the soil has been loosened by rain or previously ploughed. While a dry season first ploughing might well be too difficult for inexperienced women, that need not be the case for subsequent ploughing, or those carried out in damp soil.
- 30 Ghidey adds that in the face of local opposition there was a 'lack of followup and support from TPLF against the discouraging traditional values'. Ghidey Zera Tsion, e-mail correspondence with the author, 29 December 1995.
- 31 Mahta Embay, TPLF Information Bureau, quoted in Hammond, *Sweeter than Honey*, p. 95.
- 32 Gebru Tareke, 'Rural Protest in Ethiopia, 1941–1970: A Study of Three Rebellions', PhD dissertation (Syracuse University, 1977), p. 382.
- 33 Interview: Kashi Marasa Abara, Nagash Gebre Shidan and Girmay Esgabibir, Taquomlesh, Adi Sumuon tabia, 19 March 1993.
- 34 Migrants to the area were given the option by the TPLF of assistance in returning to their home areas or help in acquiring their own individual plots of land in the eastern plains.
- 35 Interview: Sheikh Nuri Barantu, Hussien Omar and Ali Mahdi, Mahoni, 31 March 1993.
- 36 This was not always the case, however, and according to peasants in the Tembien woreda of Taquomlesh, the Derg's land reform was 'according to family size and was fair'. See interview: Kashi Marasa Abara, Nagash Gebre

- Shidan and Girmay Esgabihir, Taquomlesh, Adi Sumuon tabia, 19 March 1993.
- 37 Interview: Tasabet Hagos, Dagalousie, 14 February 1993.
- 38 Interview: Kashi Marasa Abara, Nagash Gebre Shidan and Girmay Esgabihir, Taquomlesh, Adi Sumuon tabia, 19 March 1993.
- 39 Interview: Alesmu Hailu, Mengesha Gerechal and Gebrehaiwit Gebre Selassie, Abi Adi, 17 March 1993.
- 40 According to Ghidey, 'Tekeste Agazi' is not a real person and the report was written by the political department of the TPLF. Ghidey Zera Tsion, e-mail correspondence with the author, 29 December 1995.
- 41 Tekeste Agazi, *Agrarian Reform in Tigray: A Case of the Land Reform in the District of Adi-Nebried* (London: Friends of Tigray in the UK, 1983).
- 42 Tekeste Agazi, *Agrarian Reform in Tigray*, pp. 9–10.
- 43 Tekeste Agazi, *Agrarian Reform in Tigray*, p. 29.
- 44 Tekeste Agazi, *Agrarian Reform in Tigray*, p. 30.
- 45 Tekeste Agazi, *Agrarian Reform in Tigray*, p. 19.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Tekeste Agazi, *Agrarian Reform in Tigray*, p. 24.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Tekeste Agazi, *Agrarian Reform in Tigray*, p. 24–5.
- 50 Interview: Woldelelanos Woldegregis, Adega Arbi, 28 February 1993.
- 51 Interview: Kashi Gebremeden Gresgis, Adega Arbi, 28 February 1993.
- 52 Interview: Mulat Berhane and Gedeye Gebre Hiwat, Debre Krebae, 23 February 1993.
- 53 Interview: Meruse Woldeman, Zoba Judge, Maichew, 25 March 1993.
- 54 Ibid.
- 55 Interview: Gebre Gserges, Woreda Judge, Sobia, 6 March 1993.
- 56 A 1993 example of this was the wide variation across Tigray in punishments given for failing to participate in community soil and conservation work. While it has been suggested that instituting punishments for failing to participate in such work is evidence of TPLF authoritarianism, the different locally agreed upon punishments instead points to the influence of peasants.
- 57 Interview: Aregowie Berhe, The Hague, 23 June 1993.
- 58 B. Hendrie, 'The Impact of War in Tigray', a study produced for the Inter-Africa group, London (March 1991), pp. 33–4.
- 59 Interview: Haile Marasa and Woldu Kasa, Maichew, 24 March 1993.
- 60 In cases where the TPLF took over areas in which the Derg had established their own militias, they were rapidly disarmed, but their members were allowed to stay in the villages and continue farming.
- 61 Interview: Areyge, Sheraro, 31 January 1993.
- 62 See Woreda Teka, a trader, and Geogesgehe Abraham, a carpenter, both militia members from Abi Adi, interview: 18 March 1993.
- 63 Interview: Kiros Hawre, Hagos Barug and Manos Hailu, Mahoni, 31 March 1993.

## 8 CONCLUSION

- 1 The following analysis is largely based on a fascinating report by Deborah Hicks. See D. Hicks, 'Tigray and North Wollo Situation Report,

- April–May 1992’, unpublished UNDP report (Addis Ababa: 15 June 1992).
- 2 Hicks, ‘Tigray and North Wollo’, p. 3.
  - 3 Hicks, ‘Tigray and North Wollo’, p. 28.
  - 4 Widely noted among donors of emergency relief was the contrast between the negligence of the Derg in its handling of the 1984 famine and the humanity and competence that EPRDF officials displayed in 1994. See ‘The Horn of Africa: Famine at the Gate’, *The Economist*, 30 April 1994, p. 47.
  - 5 In light of the rural crisis which has depleted the accumulated wealth of most peasants the EPRDF has said in words that echo the peasants that as a result of the introduction of a market in land ‘they [the peasants] would be compelled to sell their land to a few wealthy individuals, leaving themselves landless and without any means of livelihood. This process would surely lead the peasants back to a situation similar to that of the feudal era, where a few landlords owned and controlled most of the land.’ See ‘Draft Economic Policy of the Transitional Government’, EPRDF News Bulletin, 30 September 1991.
  - 6 Interview: Arkebe Equbye, Mekkle, 22 December 1995.
  - 7 Similar organisations were in the process of being established in other areas of Ethiopia in late 1995.
  - 8 Among those reassigned were Sebhat Nega, Abbay Tsehaye, Siye Abraha, Abadi Zemo, Yemane Kidane, Teklowini Assefa, Hassen Shiffa, Tewdros Hagos, and others. See e-mail correspondence from Yusuf Reja, Chairman of the Tigray Development Association, Washington DC, 26 June 1995.
  - 9 These complaints usually relate to pressures to attend meetings, practise self-criticism, the role of the mass associations in resolving domestic disputes, and – among some teachers – such TPLF innovations as giving students the right to criticise their teachers and have them punished.
  - 10 Among the woredas thus consolidated was Adi Ahferom referred to above whose residents had long struggled for woreda status.
  - 11 Interview: Dr Solomon Inquai, Mekelle, 1 January 1996.
  - 12 Interview: Abbay Tsehaye, Mekelle, 22 December 1995.
  - 13 Interview: Halekay Fitzum Tafare, Lekarurynie Takaste Asaha, Lekarkamat Gebre Medhin Gebre Selassie, all of Zion Mariam Church, Axum, 12 February 1993.
  - 14 Witnessed in Colliquot, 22 January 1993.
  - 15 S. Vaughan, ‘The Addis Ababa Transitional Conference of July 1991: its origins, history and significance’, *Occasional Papers*, No. 51 (Edinburgh University: Centre of African Studies, 1994), pp. 45–6.
  - 16 Vaughan, ‘The Addis Ababa Transitional Conference’, pp. 42, 47.
  - 17 Vaughan, ‘The Addis Ababa Transitional Conference’, pp. 52–3.
  - 18 Vaughan, ‘The Addis Ababa Transitional Conference’, p. 58.
  - 19 Vaughan, ‘The Addis Ababa Transitional Conference’, p. 60.
  - 20 Interview: Assefa Mamo, Addis Ababa, 15 December 1995.
  - 21 Referendum Commission of Eritrea, press release, 27 April 1995.
  - 22 ‘Ethiopia: power-struggles and the ethnic weapon’, *Africa Confidential*, Vol. 33, No. 9 (8 May 1992), p. 7.
  - 23 While opposition groups such as the Council for the Alternative Forces of Peace and Democracy (CAFPDE) and the All-Amhara People’s Organisation

- (AAPO) which condemned Eritrean independence argue that the EPRDF's constitution programme threatens the dismemberment of the country, other groups such as the OLF make the more convincing case that the EPRDF provision accepting the right to succession is largely theoretical, rather than realisable. See 'Ethiopia: constitutional dilemmas', *Africa Confidential*, Vol. 35, No. 13 (1 July 1994), pp. 3–4.
- 24 Amnesty International, *Ethiopia: Accountability Past and Present: Human Rights in Transition* (London: International Secretariat, 26 June 1995).
  - 25 As a result of this election in the 547-seat Council of People's Representatives, the EPRDF holds 493. At the time of the 1995 elections the EPRDF components included the TPLF, the Amhara Nation's Democratic Movement (ANDM) which was previously the EPDM, OPDO, and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Front (SEPDF). A former member of the EPRDF, the EDORM, was dissolved with the end of the TGE and officers in the movement either joined the movements of their respective nationalities or stayed in the national army and ended their political affiliations.
  - 26 Five assistant ministers are from the TPLF and through various arrangements most of the security services are still dominated by Tigrayans. See 'Ethiopia: Looking Federal', *Africa Confidential*, Vol. 36, No. 19 (22 September 1995), pp. 5–6.
  - 27 C. Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 229.
  - 28 See P. Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison* (Sage Publications, 1991), pp. 8–9.
  - 29 See J. Markakis, 'Ethnic Conflict and the State in the Horn of Africa', in Y. Kurita and J. Markakis (eds.), *Ethnicity and Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (London: James Currey, 1994), p. 217.
  - 30 Indicative of this, a senior faculty member at Addis Ababa University confidently assured the author in December 1992 that the Eritrean independence referendum scheduled for April 1993 would not take place because the EPRDF government would be overthrown before the referendum could take place.
  - 31 R. Luckham, 'The Military, Militarization and Democratization in Africa: A Survey of Literature and Issues', *African Studies Review*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (September 1994), p. 58.
  - 32 This term was first used by Myrdal in his analysis of the states of south Asia, but it is widely applied to Africa. See G. Myrdal, *Asian Drama: An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968). Among students of Africa who have adapted this concept, see in particular Hyden who attributes state softness to the weak linkages between the state and the peasantry. G. Hyden, *Beyond Ujamaa in Tanzania: Underdevelopment and an Uncaptured Peasantry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).
  - 33 Jackson and Rosberg claim that African states cannot base their existence on empirical conditions, but need the legitimacy provided by an international state system. See R. Jackson and C. Rosberg, 'Why Africa's Weak States Persist: The Empirical and Juridical in Statehood', *World Politics*, Vol. 27 (1982).

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Interviews are arranged territorially into the following sections: Addis Ababa, Mekelle, Mixed, and Regions 1, 2 and 3. Within the regions interviews are grouped by woreda.

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Eschetu Chole, Faculty of Business and Economics, AAU, Addis Ababa, 23 December 1992.

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Merara Guidina, PSIR Department, AAU, 24 December 1992.

John Markakis, AAU, 10 June 1993.

Tecklehaimanot Gebre-Selasie, Department of History, AAU, 2 November 1992.

Adhana Haile, Department of History, AAU, 4 December 1992.

Haile-Selassie Woldegirma, Department of Education Administration, 5 December 1992.

Zaria, Representative for Tigray in PMO, Addis Ababa, 3 December 1992.

Netsannet Asfaw, Presidential Advisor, Addis Ababa, 9 December 1992.

Gashaw Kassie, AAU Student President, Addis Ababa, 25 December 1992.

Saleh Abdulkader Kebire, President African Jurists Association for East African Region, Addis Ababa, 4 December 1992; 10 June 1993.

Gayle Smith, journalist and author and long-time observer and associate of TPLF, Addis Ababa, 9 November 1992; 12 December 1992; 20 December 1993.

Gebregzi Tsehaye, Tigrayan businessman, Addis Ababa, 23 October 1992; 3 November 1992; 4 June 1993.

Dawit Yohannis (former AAU student activist), EPDM, Vice Chairman Election Commission, Member Council of Ministers, Addis Ababa, 18 December 1993.

Colonel Kalechristos Abbay (former Governor of Tigray 1976–78), Addis Ababa, 4 June 1993.

Abraham Fiseha, Regional Director Hope International NGO, Addis Ababa, 28 October 1992; 20 November 1992; 12 December 1992; 2 June 1993.

Bruce Bond, Director, Sudan Interior Mission, Addis Ababa, 22 December 1992.

Colonel Asaminiew Bedane (former Deputy Commander of 17th Division), presently with the Ethiopian Defence Forces and Member of the Council of



- Representatives of the TGE, POW Camp at Kalema in western Tigray, 5 May 1988; Addis Ababa, 13 June 1993; Addis Ababa, 22 January 1996.
- Yemane Kidane ('Jamaica'), Ministry of Defence official, Addis Ababa, 1 December 1992; 15 December 1992.
- Haile Kiros, Director EPRDF Foreign Relations Bureau and Member of the Council of Representatives of the TGE, Addis Ababa, 2 December 1992; 16 December 1992; 4 June 1993; 8 December 1995.
- Assefa Mamo, TPLF Representative in North America and participant in the London Conference, Addis Ababa, 15 December 1995; 26 January 1996.
- Gebru Asrat and Abbay Tsehaye, Addis Ababa, 9 January 1996.

## MEKELLE

- Tsegaye Berhe, Vice-chairman Region 1 (Tigray), Mekelle, 23 January 1993; 11 April 1993; 21 December 1995.
- Ahmed Karadowie, (former) Sudan Commissioner of Refugees, Mekelle, 7 January 1993; Addis Ababa, 28 May 1993.
- Solomon Inquai, (former Chairman REST), Mekelle, 7 January 1993; 8 January 1993; 5 January 1996.
- Zemichael Gebre Medhin, Director Natural Resources Department, Mekelle, 16 January 1992; 17 January 1992; 19 January 1992; 25 January 1992; 11 April 1993; 19 December 1995; 20 December 1995.
- Chekol Kidane, Regional Manager REST, Mekelle, January 4, 1993; Economic Advisor to Gebru Asrat, 5 January 1996.
- Mertta Christos, Bishop of Ethiopian Orthodox Church for Tigray, Mekelle, 4 January 1993.
- Ismail Ali, Chairman Afar People's Democratic Organization, Mohammed Abdul, Central Committee member, Mekelle, 10 April 1993.
- Gebre Meskel Hadgu and Hailu Gebre Yessus, EDU Co-ordinators, Mekelle, 6 April 1993.
- Hagos Hailu, former member of Teranafit and peasant from Enderta; Baranabas, EDU member and former Church official; Halika Aluf Gebremedian, EDU Vice-chairman for Mekelle region and middle farmer; Asbha Aley, EDU member and unemployed; and also in attendance were EDU members who identified themselves as a guard, a peasant from Tembien, a retired Ministry of Health employee, an unemployed woman, a former convict, and a former employee at Assab port, Mekelle, 9 April 1993.
- Gebrekidan Abay, President Ethiopian Teachers Association, Tigray branch; Gebregiorgis Gegziabher, Secretary, Mekelle, 1 January 1993.
- Gebregiorgis Gegziabher, Secretary ETA, Mekelle, 5 January 1993; 22 January 1993; 18 December 1995.
- Sheik Kadir, head sheik for Tigray, Mekelle, 5 January 1993.
- Wolde Yohannis Tedela, former member of Teranafit, Mekelle, 11 April 1993.
- Tadesse Haile, Planning Bureau of Tigray, Mekelle, 18 January 1993.
- Veronica Rogers and Hawa Fafana, research consultants for DATW, Mekelle, 14 January 1993; 18 January 1993.
- Afera, MOA, Mekelle, 1 January 1992; 2 January 1993.
- Chairman Mekelle baito, Mekelle, 22 January 1993.

- Gebru Desta, Department of Education, Mekelle, 1 January 1993.  
 Gebru Asrat, Chairman Region 1 (Tigray), Mekelle, 28 December 1993; 30 December 1993; 25 January 1993; 6 April 1993.  
 Roman, Chairman DATW, Herti, Vice-chairman DATW, Mekelle, 6 January 1993.  
 Abadi Zemo, former Director REST, former Assistant Director RRC, Mekelle, 21 December 1995.  
 Abbay Tsehaye, EPRDF Politbureau, Mekelle, 22 December 1995.  
 Tewedros Hagos, TPLF CC, Mekelle, 2 January 1996.  
 Mulgetta G/Heywet, TPLF CC, Mekelle, 22 December 1995.  
 Arkebe Equbye, TPLF CC, Mekelle, 22 December 1995.

MIXED

- Ayafew Solomon, Secretary EDU, Gondar Region, Gondar, 4 May 1993.  
 Tekle Berhane (former peasant in Shire; former shifta; two years in Teranafit/EDU), presently merchant in Gondar, 6 May 1993.  
 Bereket Simon (former EPRP cadre at Asimba), EPDM official and Member of the Council of Representatives of the TGE, Mihanse, Tigray, 5 May 1988; Addis Ababa, 16 June 1993.  
 Tamrat Layne, former Chairman of EPDM/ANDM and Prime Minister in TGE, Mihanse, 5 May 1988.  
 Teclewani Asfaw, Chairman REST, Tigray, 1–8 May 1988.  
 Tadesse Eba, OLF Central Committee, Khartoum, 8 January 1989; 28 February 1989; 2 April 1989.  
 Robert Thompson, former official in Haile-Selassie administration, Fort Langley BC, Canada, 22 October 1991; 18 February 1992; 16 April 1992.  
 Wolde Selassie Asfaw, former TPLF member, London, 26 June 1993.  
 David Pool, researcher, Asmara, 19 April 1993; 20 April 1993.  
 Girma, former ELF fighter, Karen, 27 April 1993.  
 Aregash Adane, Secretary Region 1 (Tigray), Endaselasie, 3 May 1988; Mekelle, 8 April 1993.  
 Fiseha, Aferworki, former TPLF Representative in Sudan, Khartoum, 14 April 1988; 19 October 1988; 16 March 1989.  
 Sebhat Nega, former Chairman TPLF, Wolkait, 28–29 April 1988; Addis Ababa, 7 November 1992.  
 Meles Zenawi, Prime Minister, TPLF base at Dejene Wolkait, 29 April 1988.  
 Aregowie Berhe (former Chairman of TPLF), The Hague, 22 June 1993; 23 June 1993.

REGION 1 (WEST)

- Seboah, Vice-chairman Adi Hagari Woreda, Adi Hagari, 2 February 1993.  
 Tsema (former member Teranafit and leader TPLF Adi Hagari militia), Adi Hagari, 29 January 1993; 3 February 1993.  
 Haile, peasant, Adi Hagari, 3 February 1993.  
 Asefa Habte, Vice-chairman Adi Nebried Woreda, Adi Nebried, 5 February 1993.  
 Roman, wife of late dejazmach of Adi Nebried and mother of TPLF military leader Hayloum, Adi Nebried, 4 February 1993.

- Mebrat, Chairman Sheraro Woreda and Kiros, TPLF cadre, Sheraro, 29 January 1993.
- Kiros, TPLF cadre; Aregey, Executive member Sheraro Woreda; Medhin, DATW Representative on Sheraro Woreda; Zagdy, guard, Sheraro, 30 January 1993.
- Michael, Executive member of Sheraro Woreda and teacher, Sheraro, 30 January 1993.
- Aregey, early TPLF peasant fighter, Sheraro, 31 January 1993.
- Tesfai, peasant, Dedebit, 1 February 1993.
- Mohammed Esumane, trader and farmer; Nurehsyne, trader; Melite Beyene, DATW, Endaselasia, 6 February 1993.
- Neguse Lilly, Secretary Endaselasia Woreda, Endaselasia, 6 February 1993; 8 February 1993.
- Dangwe Ayele (brother of Suhul); Makale Ayele and Zoditu Ayele (sisters of Suhul); Asano and Mulu Akim (nephews of Suhul), Endaselasia, 9 February 1993.
- Mulat Berhane and Gedeye Gebre Hiwat, MOA officials, Debre Krebae, 23 February 1993.
- Haile Gebremeska, Vice-chairman Zana Woreda; Goitem Gebre, member Woreda Executive; Desta Gebremedi, member of Woreda baito, Debre Krebae, 23 February 1993.
- Awal Mohammed Yaksin, Chairman of Zana Moslem Association; Abdul Mohammed Nuir, Vice-chairman of Moslem Association; Neja Bito, member of Moslem Association, Debre Krebae, 24 February 1993.
- Negi Bito, Chairman Woreda DATW, Debre Krebae, 24 February 1993.
- Tamene Woldu and Nagash Gebre Mariam, Woreda militia members, Debre Krebae, 24 February 1993.
- Margate Arafyne Woldemelate, Woreda Chairman Ethiopian Orthodox Secretariat; Halaka Amahamardos; Halaka Gebremedit Eysau, Debre Krebae, 24 February 1993.
- Bailay Gebru Selassie, member of Woreda PA Executive; Negash Bogalay, peasant; Zemichael Taqalal, trader, Debre Krebae, 24 February 1993.

## REGION 2 (CENTRAL)

- Makonnen Gebre Medin, Vice-chairman Adi Ahferom Woreda, Adegas Arbi, 28 February 1993.
- Meles Adek, head of woreda Ethiopian Orthodox Church; Rosadabe Gresgibe Hailirehal, Ethiopian Orthodox Church; Woldelelanos Woldegergis, peasant; Talanal Kahsay, peasant; Greorgiha Karberu, militia member; Tesfayraeda, militia member; Kashi Gebremeden Grassis, Adegas Arbi, 28 February 1993.
- Mulu Gebesadga and Safutafer, DATW, Adegas Arbi, 28 February 1993.
- Farada Hagos, Vice-chairman Abi Adi Woreda Council; Mohammed Abdel Kadir, Secretary Woreda Council; Tabere Gebre Michael, Woreda Council, Abi Adi, 17 March 1993.
- Tabere Gebre Michael, Judge, Abi Adi, 17 March 1993.

- Alesmu Hailu, Mengesha Gerechal, Gebrehaiwit Gebre Selassie, all peasants from Abi Adi, 17 March 1993.
- Kashi Terka Abara, priest from St Mary's Church; Melhakabraham Gebrujesus Gebremariam, Ethiopian Orthodox Church Secretariat, Abi Adi, 17 March 1993.
- Mohammed Said and Bedru, traders from Abi Adi, 18 March 1993.
- Woreda Teka and Geogesgehe Abraham, militia members from Abi Adi, 18 March 1993.
- Worku Ulif, Vice-chair regional DATW; Asafu Tesfay and Sodu Mabatu, members of DATW, Abi Adi, 18 March 1993.
- Teklu Woldegite, Department of Natural Resources; Mebratu, REST, MOA Offices, Abi Adi, 19 March 1993.
- Tsighe Hagos and Mulu Hailu, teachers, Abi Adi, 19 March 1993.
- Sheik Mohous Abdel Kadir; Sheik Ali Mohammed Siray; Sheik Ali Ahmed, all from local mosques, Abi Adi, 19 March 1993.
- Kashi Marasa Abara, Nagash Gebre Shidan, Girmay Esgabihir, peasants from Taquomlesh Woreda, Adi Sumuon tabia, 19 March 1993.
- Tkabo Berhe, Chairman Adet Woreda; Kashi Gebru Medhin, member Woreda Executive; Kashi Gebre Wolde Aregey Teckle, member Woreda Executive, Dagalousie, 13 February 1993.
- Kashi Gebri Medhin Desta and Kashi Gebri Wolde Teckle, Dagalousie, 14 February 1993.
- Tkabo Berhe, Chairman Adet Woreda, Dagalousie, 14 February 1993.
- Beher Teka, Debre Genet, Kashi Berhe Gerengi, Debre Genet, Tsabet Hagos, Makonnen Adane, peasants, Dagalousie, 14 February 1993.
- Tkabo Berhe, Chairman Woreda; Kefzion Mahari, member of Woreda Executive, Dagalousie, 14 February 1993.
- Berhane Mengesha, former Adwa school director; Berhane Girma, district Education Officer, Adwa, 20 February 1993.
- Terhe Taku, member Woreda Executive and judge; Gebre Kidan Wolnocha, member Adwa Woreda Executive, Adwa, 20 February 1993.
- Vice-chairman Adwa Woreda, Adwa, 20 February 1993.
- Haredgu Gebre Mariam, Gurish Gebre Miskel, Maressa Haile Mariam, all peasants from Adwa, 21 February 1993.
- Gebru Aregey and Berhane Desta, traders, Adwa, 21 February 1993.
- Haji Mahmoud, head sheik for Adwa Woreda, Adwa, 21 February 1993.
- Likemesemoran Isak Teklehaimanot and Kasis Ariaah, Ethiopian Orthodox Church officials, Adwa, 21 February 1993.
- Sesay Medana Mariam, Axum school inspector, Axum, 11 February 1993.
- Kashi Makonnen, member of Executive Central Zoba, Axum, 17 February 1993.
- Makonnen Haile-Selassie, trader, Axum, 17 February 1993.
- Bura Mohammed, Chairman DATW, Axum, 17 February 1993.
- Haleka Fitzum Tafare, Lekarurynie Takaste Asaha, Lekarkamat Gebre Medhin Gebre Selassie, all of Zion Mariam Church, Axum, 12 February 1993.
- Twolde, Lalay Machew Woreda MOA Co-ordinator, Axum, 11 February 1993.
- Gazey Kassa, Gebre Medhin Wolde Gebriel, Kasha Berhe, all peasants, Axum, 13 February 1993.
- Haile-Selassie and Kassa Gebru Mariam, Zoba MOA, Axum, 10 February 1993.

## REGION 3 (EAST)

- Teckle Awash and Tadele Alemsigel, Eastern Zoba Agriculture officials, Adigrat, 3 March 1993.
- Dada Mengesha, Chairman Adigrat baito, Meskel Gebre Sadik and Kiros Beyene, all teachers, Adigrat, 3 March 1993.
- Seyum Meles, Melakus Aemlem Gebre Mariam, Berhe Hagos, Berhane Asgdum, Degai Mara, all merchants and traders, Adigrat, 3 March 1993.
- Kadi Sharia Sheik Musa Ibrahim, Kadi Sharia Yemane Negesse, Kadi Shari Haji Mohammed Arab Human, Kadi Shari Sheik Omar Musa, Agame Moslem leaders, Adigrat, 4 March 1993.
- Melaksalam Gebre Aregowie Gemi, Eastern Zoba Chairman Ethiopian Orthodox Church Secretariat; Malak Abraham Gebre Zamer Berhe, Secretary Church Secretariat; Melaksalam Margatta Berhe Gebray, Education Church Secretariat, Adigrat, 4 March 1993.
- Father Kevin O'Mahoney, Adigrat Catholic Seminary, Adigrat, 4 March 1993.
- Kashi Geresger Hailu, Dasey Gebre Meskel, Hadish Teklehaimanot, all peasants from Gane Afashum Woreda, Adigrat, 5 March 1993.
- Dada Mengesha, Chairman Adigrat Woreda baito, 3 March 1993.
- Kashi Fesaha, priest from Embeto tabia Sobia, Adigrat, 10 March 1993.
- Aklulu G/Michael, teacher and former member of both TLF and TPLF, Adigrat, 10 March 1993.
- Aba Tesfa Michael Seyum, Catholic parish priest, Sobia, 6 March 1993.
- Ladese Alamayo, Secretary Sobia Woreda Executive; Arahale Terage, member of Woreda Executive; Gebre Gergis, member of Woreda Executive, 6 March 1993.
- Gebre Gergis, Judge, Sobia, 6 March 1993.
- Aela Assesse, Tsefa Baliho, Desta Hadimey, Rossine Mahafu, Hale Kademos, all peasants from Sobia tabia, Sobia, 7 March 1993.
- Gersgeher Sebhat, Kashi Herur Merhiri, Biru Gese, Hagos Meginna, all peasants from Sobia tabia, Sobia, 7 March 1993.
- Ladese Alamuyu, Secretary Sobia Woreda, Sobia, 7 March 1993.
- Mabrato Adhano and Tuku Beyene, members of militia, Sobia, 8 March 1993.
- Medhin Gebrahaus, Chairman Sobia Woreda DATW, Sobia, 8 March 1993.
- Kashi(s) Abraha Gedey, Berahi Tesfa, Berahi Abay, Hagos Kidan, Mulu Hasay, all priests from Sobia tabia, Sobia, 8 March 1993.
- Aradie Bezabe, South Zoba Secretary, Maichew, 29 March 1993.
- Abadi Marasa, South Zoba PA Vice-chairman, Maichew, 24 March 1993.
- Alamash Girma, Chairman Zoba DATW, Maichew, 24 March 1993.
- Haile Marasa and Woldu Kasa, both from Zoba Traders Association Executive, Maichew, 24 March 1993.
- Kashi Halefome Desta, Zoba Ethiopian Orthodox Church Secretariat Organiser, Maichew, 25 March 1993.
- Meruse Woldeman, Zoba Judge, Maichew, 25 March 1993.
- Hagos Tesfay, school director Tilhun Yigzaw Senior Secondary School, Berhe Belay, teacher and former COPWE member, Maichew, 25 March 1993.
- Sheik Ahmed Ibrahim, Sharia Court Judge for Chercha, Mahoni, Indamahoni and Adishuhu, Maichew, 26 March 1993.
- Biru Kiros, MOA Natural Resources Co-ordinator, Maichew, 26 March 1993.

- Berihin Gebre, Baito Chairman Bela tabia, Chercha Woreda, Bela, 27 March 1993.  
 Yemane Berhe, Vice-chair Chercha Woreda; Kabede Gebriot, member Woreda Executive, Chercha, 27 March 1993.
- Berento Abadayma, Dawit Awul, Mistapha Baalgeli, Marto Mogoley, all Afar from Chercha Woreda, Chercha, 27 March 1993.
- Gebre Abraha, retired court secretary; Arada Berhe, retired farmer, Chercha, 28 March 1993.
- Kiros Abay and Mamo Denmerka, Agaw merchants from Chercha, Chercha, 28 March 1993.
- Seyuun Negus and Dejazum Gebrecherkos, members of militia from Chercha, 28 March 1993.
- Abraha Tekle, MOA, Chercha, 29 March 1993.
- Iyasu Nigse, Zoba PA Secretary and Chercha Woreda Secretary; Kasha, auditor of Woreda and member of Woreda DATW Executive, Chercha, 29 March 1993.
- Somere Gersgi, Vice-chairman Mahoni Woreda; Asafa Hailu, Woreda Propaganda Organiser; Woldegiorgis Kiros, Secretary of Woreda, Mahoni, 30 March 1993.
- Abehaftu, Chairman Woreda PA, Hagos Gebre, member of PA Executive, Faradja Mohammed Amma, member of PA Executive, Mahoni, 30 March, 1993.
- Fitwari Kebede Arayah, Woyene veteran, Mahoni, 30 March 1993.
- Kidane Hailu, Chairman Mahoni Traders' Association; Afarly Emir, Secretary Traders' Association; Tadesse Woldelebanos, member of Association, Mahoni, 30 March 1993.
- Kiros Hawre, Hagos Barag, Manasu Hailu, all militia members, Mahoni, 31 March 1993.
- Abraham Aley, Abey Gobast, Kashi Bercher Kasa and Grazmach Berhe Dumzu, all veterans of the Woyene, Raya peasants, Mahoni, 31 March 1993.
- Sheik Nuri Barantu, Mahoni Woreda kadi; Hussien Omar, Secretary Woreda Moslem Association; Ali Mahdi, town resident, Mahoni, 31 March 1993.
- Mohammed Ibuahaym, nomad from Megale; Mohammed Mekela, trader from zone two, Nur Musa, farmer from Mahoni, all Afar, Mahoni, 1 April 1993.

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