

Emperor Menelik and the Italians

“The study of history is the best medicine for a sick mind!” Livy

Beide Mariam Ejigu Retta



Emperor Menelik II

Ethiopia has a rich history spanning more than five millennia, solidifying its status as one of the world's esteemed nations. As articulated by Mani in his literary work, Ethiopia held a prominent position among the four Great Powers during the 6th Century. Across this extensive timeline, our ancestors have left us an invaluable inheritance. Among this cherished legacy, the Axum stelae, the magnificent Lalibela rock-hewn churches, and the grand Gondar castles prominently stand as enduring symbols of our cultural heritage. Throughout the ages, Ethiopia has confronted numerous internal conflicts and skilfully repelled external invasions, though often at the grave cost of losing significant historical landmarks and countless lives. Despite these formidable challenges, the 18th and 19th centuries marked a crucial era in our nation's history, characterized by the rise of regional rulers colloquially known as the "era of princes" or "zemene mesafent." This period coincided with Europe's pursuit of African dominion, famously referred to as the scramble for Africa, as they embarked on expeditions into our continent.

During that era, Kassa Hailu, who would later ascend to the throne, exhibited a steadfast determination to reunify the nation that had witnessed a decline in her authority due to the incompetence of certain princes. Emperor Theodorus waged campaigns against these regional leaders, vanquishing them all and thus paving the way for the re-unification of Ethiopia. Remarkably, the emperor, who never tasted defeat in any of his military endeavors, chose to take his own life within the walls of the fortress of Meqdele rather than surrender to the invading British army, which had arrived in Ethiopia with the intent of liberating prisoners and repatriating them to their respective countries. The emperor harbored the belief that being captured and taken to Great Britain

would bring disgrace upon his homeland, and so, he resorted to using his handgun to end his own life, departing with a sense of dignity.



Emperor Theodoros II

While Emperor Theodoros did not live to witness the fruits of his labour, his successors successfully continued the work of reunification. Emperor Yohannes IV, who followed in the footsteps of Emperor Theodoros, ruled during a time when Menelik governed the Shewa province and Tekele Haimanot presided over Gojam. Both provincial kings acknowledged Emperor Yohannes as the paramount monarch. Nevertheless, historical records reveal that these monarchs engaged directly with foreign governments.

During the scramble for Africa, Italy established a foothold along the Bahere Negash coast of the Red Sea, which they later named Eritrea. However, Italy found Emperor Yohannes to be an obstacle to their expansionist ambitions and believed that cultivating a favorable relationship with King Menelik and King Tekle Haimanot would serve their interests better. The primary objective of this relationship was to secure the support of these two emperors when Italy launched its offensive against Emperor Yohannes. While this serves as the primary motivation, Pietro Antoneli visited King Menelik on the 21st of May in 1883. During this visit, they discussed matters related to the taxation of imported goods through the Asab port and the presence of Italian residents in Shewa. They also reached various agreements. In addition, the king signed additional documents that granted him the ability to acquire weaponry, which he intended to use in campaigns against Emperor Yohannes. The Italians held firm in their belief that King Menelik would eventually mount an attack against Emperor Yohannes, and they consequently provided him with more weaponry and extended financial support to bolster his army. Shortly after Emperor Yohannes conveyed his profound disappointment with the British government, particularly in light of their failure to fulfil their promises and their decision to grant the port of Mitsiwa to the Italians rather than return it to Ethiopia. King Menelik promptly summoned Antoneli to clarify the matter. However, the king found the explanation to be unsatisfactory, and from that moment onward, he harboured deep suspicions towards both Antoneli and the Italian government.

In April of 1889, during the visit of King Menelik and Etege Tayitu to Wuchale, they were imparted with the grievous tidings of Emperor Yohannes's demise at the battle of Metema. As it happened, Antoneli who was entrusted with the task of delivering additional armaments to King Menelik in Entoto, could not endure the delay until the King's return and consequently journeyed to Wuchale to meet him there. His impatience stemmed from the urgent need for the King to append his signature to a document meticulously prepared by the Italian government. This document, comprising 20 clauses, was duly signed by King Menelik, and Antoneli appended his signature on behalf of King Umberto. This document was christened the "Treaty of Wuchale", named after the place of its ratification. However, the 17th clause in the Amharic version stated, "The King of Ethiopia, when engaged in dealing with European governments, may seek the assistance of the Italian government", whereas the Italian version stipulated, "The King of Ethiopia when conducting affairs with European governments, must avail himself of the office of the Italian government". This particular clause would ultimately serve as the primary catalyst for the Adwa War that erupted a few years later.

King Menelik dispatched Ras Mekonnen Welde Michael to Italy with the noble purpose of attending the Wuchale agreement ratification. Upon his esteemed arrival at the Venecia Palace, preceding the formal ratification, a further document was presented for his signature, which stipulated that "the Italian territorial dominion in Eritrea would encompass the areas where the Italian military encamped on the 1st of October 1889." Just a few days before that, the Italian armed forces ventured into the Tigray province, thereby taking possession of these territories due to the prolonged engagement of Ras Mengesha's forces in persistent warfare, rendering them unable to defend themselves adequately. Promptly following the ratification of the treaty, various newspapers prominently featured articles bearing the headline "Ethiopia is now a colony of Ethiopia." On the 11th of October, in the year 1889, the Italian Prime Minister, Mr. Crispien, conveyed this significant development to the United States and a consortium of twelve European nations.

After the demise of Emperor Yohannes IV, King Menelik wasted no time in proclaiming himself as the Emperor of Ethiopia. All the regional dignitaries, including King Tekle Haimanot, swiftly acquiesced to his proclamation. Moreover, he dispatched missives to the governments of Italy, Great Britain, Germany, and France, formally declaring his ascension to the imperial throne of Ethiopia. In November 1889, Menelik underwent the anointment ceremony, presided over by Archbishop Matthews at the sacred Entoto Saint Mary Church, officially consecrating him as the Emperor of Ethiopia.

A mere month following his coronation, he embarked on a journey to Tigray with the aim of subjugating Ras Mengesha and Ras Alula. Upon his arrival, he was apprised of the Italian military's occupation of cities beyond the purview of the Wuchale Treaty. Much to his astonishment, the Italian forces, under the command of General Orero, had seized Adwa and Axum on the 29th of January in the year 1890. On the 23rd of February, Emperor Menelik traveled to Mekelle and dispatched a messenger to General Orero, seeking an explanation for the occupation of these two cities. General Orero's response asserted that the motive was humanitarian, as they entered the cities to provide sustenance to the famine-stricken populace, rather than for territorial expansion, a typical colonial pretext.

While Emperor Menelik was still in Tigrai, Ras Mekonen, who had traveled to Rome to participate in the ratification of the Wuchale agreement, returned to Ethiopia laden with weaponry. He rendezvoused with the emperor and conveyed the distressing news that he had inadvertently signed another document, which stipulated that the Italian territory would encompass the areas where the Italian military was stationed by the 1st of October. Furthermore, Emperor Menelik received reports from local sources revealing that the Italians had breached the borders outlined in the Treaty of Wuchale just days before the designated date and had occupied those territories. Although Menelik comprehended that the Italian government had duped Ras Mekonen, he issued a decree for the Italian forces to vacate the seized cities. Consequently, the Italians withdrew from Mekele and Axum but held their ground in the locations they had occupied on the 1st of October. Emperor Menelik then returned to his capital city and resumed negotiations on border matters. During this period, the nations of Great Britain and Germany, to whom Emperor Menelik had dispatched a missive proclaiming his ascension to the imperial throne of Ethiopia, responded with the assertion that, in accordance with the Treaty of Wuchale, their official interactions should be conducted through the government of Italy. This response incensed the emperor even further. Emperor Menelik summoned Salimbini, who had replaced Antoneli, to elucidate clause 17 of the treaty. It was observed that there existed disparities between the Amharic and Italian versions of the document. In a plain and straightforward manner, Emperor Menelik conveyed to Salimbini that this land was unequivocally his and did not belong to any other power; it could not be taken from him. In September 1890, he dispatched a missive to the Italian government requesting a revision of the agreement.

The Italian government perceived an unfavorable twist in the accord and dispatched Antonelli back to Ethiopia for its resolution. Antonelli arrived in the Ethiopian capital on the 17th of December in the year 1890 and conveyed to the emperor that Italy could not accept any notion that the 17th clause was flawed. In response to Antonelli's assertion of Italy's glory and pride, Empress Tayitu interjected, stating, "We have apprised the European governments of the Amharic rendition of the clause you are referring to. Just as you uphold your pride and desires for colonization, we too are resolute in preserving our dignity. Your wish to colonize us shall remain unfulfilled." Antonelli then proposed that they retain the Treaty of Wuchale for the remaining three years of its term, but Emperor Menelik countered that it needed improvements and could not stand for three days, let alone three years.



Empress Tayitu and Emperor Menelik

Antonelli persisted, advocating for postponing disputes and revising the clause once the agreement had expired. The Amharic word "ይቅር" had a dual meaning, signifying "leave" and based on this, Mr. Yosef translated the statement as "the 17th clause shall be set aside and never mentioned again." Upon hearing the translation, Emperor Menelik chimed in, "well, I've been saying it all along and he wanted the 17th clause to be left out and insisted on proceeding as such. The emperor and Antonelli were content with this translation, and the verbal agreement was transcribed in Amharic with the statement, "The 17th clause has been removed." Two copies were produced, one given to Antonelli, and the other retained in the palace archives. The following day, Antonelli had the Amharic version translated into Italian, discovering the true meaning of the statement. He was astounded and infuriated by the translation and visited the palace to inquire why the 17th clause had been removed. The emperor responded, explaining that it was written in accordance with their discussion and Antonelli's preference. As the argument escalated, Antonelli proposed referring to the French version of the agreement. However, Empress Tayitu pointed out, "We only know Amharic, not your French. You understand our language, and you can examine the Amharic version." In a fit of anger, Antonelli tore up the new agreement and declared that the Italian government would enforce it with military force.

Empress Tayitu, with a sly grin, quipped, "Oh, do hurry up and make it happen next week. We fear no one. Go ahead and implement your boasting. We will repel the invader. Do not underestimate that there is no one afraid to walk barefooted on the gravel path and heroic chest spearing to defend their country with their lives. Off you go before it's late and fulfill your bravado in your own time. We will be waiting for you there. I am a woman and abhor war, but I'd rather meet my maker than accept such a preposterous Treaty."

Emperor Menelik in the 4th year of the ratification of the Wuchali accord, informed the European governments in a letter dated February 1893, he rescinded the Treaty of Wuchali. In December 1893, Crispy, upon his reappointment as Prime Minister, appointed Antonelli the Foreign Secretary and General Bariteieri the governor of Eritrea. Towards the end of 1894, General Bariteieri led his army deep into Tigray and occupied cities. During the summer of 1895, when Bariteieri went to Rome on holiday, he was invited to the parliament to give an update. Before he gave a speech, the members gave him a standing ovation with applause. King Umberto called him the Victorious General Bariteieri. He admired and praised him for the progress he made and proved the civilized superiority over the backward people. During his speech, General Bariteieri mentioned that there would be a war in October. Our advanced 10,000 army will easily crash the untrained 20-30 thousand Ethiopian army and proudly said he would bring the Ethiopian emperor in a cage to Rome. After hearing the General's speech, the parliament, which was intoxicated with daydreaming of colony and expansion, approved a budget to recruit additional 1000 soldiers to fulfil his ambition. On 26 September 1895, General Bariteieri arrived back in Mitsewa.

Emperor Menelik, having alerted the European governments to the annulment of the Treaty of Wuchale, issued a call for the people of Tegrαι to rise and repel the foreign invaders. General Bariteieri, at the helm of a formidable 25,000-strong army, penetrated deep into Tegrαι, rapidly advancing and seizing Mekele, Adigerat, and Adewa by the 9th of October 1895. Subsequently, the

Italian forces secured the Ambalage Mountain and initiated fortification efforts, with Major Tozili entrusted with the command of the stationed troops. The defeated army of Ras Mengesha retreated from Tegraï into Wello where they stayed with Ras Michael until the Ethiopian army arrived.

The sagacious emperor Menelik was aware of the impending conflict with Italy after the rescission of the treaty of Wuchale; diligently prepared his army and procured weaponry from Russia and France via Djibouti. In the year 1895, Emperor Menelik successfully imported between 70,000 and 100,000 modern weapons along with over 5 million bullets.

Declaration of National Mobilization

On the 17th of September 1895, His Imperial Majesty Emperor Menelik summoned forth all dignitaries and governors to convene at Entoto for deliberations concerning the incursion by the Italians. During the proceedings, he affirmed that the resources of our nation shall be marshalled to repel the European aggressors. It was decreed that all regional leaders must rally their forces and march forth to the theatre of conflict. Hence, on the aforementioned date, the imminent onset of hostilities was proclaimed by the resonant beats of the grand Ethiopian kettledrum, reverberating from sunrise till dusk within the precincts of the palace.

Proclamation

"Thus far, by the benevolence of the Almighty, who has granted me the opportunity to thrive by vanquishing adversaries and extending the territorial dominion of our realm, I find myself sovereign through divine providence. Hence, should I meet my demise, I shall not lament, for mortality is the fate of all mankind. Crucially, I have never been forsaken by the Almighty, and I hold steadfast faith that His support shall endure henceforth."

"At present, a foe, intent on ravaging our homeland and altering our faith, has breached our sacred borders bestowed upon us by Providence; despite enduring substantial losses in livestock and the plight of our tillers, I maintained composure and forbearance. Yet, the enemy continued to dig deeper into the ground like a mole.

"Now, with the aid of Divine Providence, I shall not yield our nation. My fellow countrymen, I have never intentionally wronged you, nor have you wronged me. Rally to my cause, those of you endowed with fervor and determination; and for those lacking such ardour, I implore you, for the sake of your spouses and your faith, to support me through your prayers. However, should you seek to shirk your duty in the national struggle against our adversary, I shall be incensed and will show no mercy; retribution shall be swift. I swear in the name of Mary – there is no other intermediary."

As per the proclamation, between 75 and 120 thousand troops marched to the war front accompanied by their leaders. Emperor Menelik, Empress Tayitu, and other leaders with their soldiers travelled to Wereilu and arrived on 28 October 1895 after 18 days. In addition to the soldiers, farmers, women, and children numbered in thousands joined the marching army.

Ambalege (The initial incident of December 7th, 1895)

The vanguard of the Ethiopian forces, led by the distinguished military commanders Ras Mekonnen, Ras Mengesha Seyoum, and Ras Welle Bitul, was the first to reach the theatre of war. These three esteemed Generals, at the helm of their respective armies, advanced into the Tigray region, approaching the stronghold at Ambalege, where the Italian forces had established their fortifications. However, upon a meticulous assessment of the Italian army's fortifications atop Mount Ambalege, these seasoned Generals concluded that the terrain favored the Italians, making their annihilation a daunting task. Consequently, they relinquished the notion of launching an attack and instead proceeded towards Adigrat and Mekele, where other contingents of Italian troops were stationed. Nevertheless, a twist of fate brought about an unexpected encounter when a detachment of 1200 Ethiopian troops under the command of Fitawerari Gebeyehu traversed the same vicinity. They stumbled upon an Italian reconnaissance mission and promptly initiated hostilities, prompting the Italian forces to retreat to their fortifications. The Ethiopians relentlessly pursued the retreating Italians, and the battle swiftly escalated. Despite the orders from the Generals for Fitawerari Gebeyehu to cease hostilities and regroup, their commands fell on deaf ears.

Fitawerrai Gebeyehu's forces ascended the mountain, and the fierce conflict persisted. Matters escalated beyond control, leaving the Generals with no alternative but to join the fray. Although the Italians enjoyed an advantageous position, they inflicted substantial losses on the Ethiopian army, yet the unrelenting waves of Ethiopian troops ascending the mountain posed a serious concern for Tozili, the Italian army's commander. Tozili urgently dispatched a plea to Armondi for reinforcements. Armondi, in turn, conveyed the request to General Bariteieri, seeking approval for the dispatch of additional troops. Bariteieri; however, directed Armondi not to send any reinforcements but to instruct Tozili to gradually retreat and abandon their stronghold. However, inexplicably, this crucial message never reached Tozili. He remained sanguine, believing that reinforcements were en route, and continued to engage the Ethiopians with full vigor. After six hours of ferocious combat, approximately 2,000 Italian soldiers, including their commander Tozili have perished; the Ethiopian flag triumphantly unfurled atop Mount Ambalege at 4:30 p.m. The surviving Italian soldiers, fleeing in desperation, were relentlessly pursued by the Ethiopian forces and met their demise. Those who managed to escape the intense battle and the relentless pursuit eventually regrouped with Armondi's contingent. The Ethiopian troops continued their pursuit of those who managed to escape the maelstrom, harrying them until they reached the Italian Camp in Mekele the following morning. There, they joined their fellow Italian soldiers. Regrettably, the unexpected battle, though won by the Ethiopians, exacted a heavy toll, with an estimated 3000 Ethiopian lives lost that day.

Fitawerari Gebeyehu's valiant and heroic deeds during the Ambalege War earned him lasting recognition. Following the victory, the troops lauded and honored him by bestowing the title "Gobez Ayehu" upon him, which translates to "I witnessed a brave man" in English. Conversely, Ras Mekonnen and Ras Mengesha expressed their chagrin, holding Fitawerari Gebeyehu responsible for initiating an unplanned conflict that resulted in the loss of numerous Ethiopian lives. Although Emperor Menelik found solace in the triumph, he ordered Fitawerari Gebeyehu to be shackled for a period of three weeks as a reprimand for his disobedience. Nevertheless, Emperor Menelik, like others, continued to refer to him as "Gobez Ayehu" and bestowed upon him a benevolent smile.

Emperor Menelik issued an edict for the honorable burial of all those who perished in the conflict, including the fallen Italians. When Emperor Menelik instructed that Tozili's remains be collected from the battlefield and accorded a military burial with honors, the brothers of Baheta Hagos brought to light a grievance. They recounted that when their late brother had led an uprising in 1894 and subsequently met his end at the hands of the Italians. It was Tozili who had ordered their sibling's corpse to be left exposed for the scavenging hyenas. In light of this, they beseeched the emperor to administer a similar fate to Tozili. Nonetheless, Emperor Menelik, displaying his noble magnanimity, remarked, "Because the Italians are known for their cruelty and barbarism, do we wish to emulate their conduct?" and decreed that Tozili be accorded a proper burial.

The Battle of Mekele (The Second War, 6 -21 January 1896)

The Battle of Mekele, which transpired between the 6th and 12th of January 1896, marked a significant chapter in history. The second battle, commonly referred to as the Siege of Mekele, unfolded within the confines of this Ethiopian city. Although the Italian forces stationed in Mekele had established formidable defenses, they recognized the necessity of reinforcing their encampment to thwart the relentless pursuit of the Ethiopian army that chased the Italian army who miraculously survived the massacre at Ambalage. To fortify their position, they took the meticulous step of planting sharp wooden obstacles at approximately 30 meters beyond their fortifications and interwove them with barbed wire. Further still, they scattered shattered glass bottles, undoubtedly an unconventional measure, but a strategic one- The primary objective behind these defensive measures was to impede the advance of the Ethiopian forces, who were often barefoot. By slowing their approach to the fortifications, the Italian defenders aimed to gain valuable time to take precise shots at their approaching adversaries, preventing them from closing in swiftly.

The Ethiopian forces, having savored an initial triumph at the Ambalege, advanced into the heart of Tigrai. Simultaneously, the Italians fortified their positions as they awaited the arrival of the Ethiopian army. In the interim, King Tekle Haimanot, along with his contingent of 5000 troops, joined Emperor Menelik's forces on the 24th of December, thereby presenting a vexing predicament for the Italians. This quandary stemmed from the amicable relations the Italians had previously cultivated with King Tekle Haimanot, characterized by the exchange of numerous gifts. Intelligence gathered from their sources suggested that King Tekle Haimanot harbored grievances against Emperor Menelik and the Tigrains, which might lead him to adopt a stance of neutrality or even rebel against the emperor. Unbeknownst to the Italians, their informants operated as double agents and deliberately disseminated erroneous intelligence. Adding to their woes, the Italians had forged an alliance with the Ausa leader to launch an assault on the Ethiopian army from an alternative direction. However, this plan was foiled as their forces found themselves encircled by Ras Welde Giorgis, Ras Tessema Nadew, and Azaje Welde Tsadek before they could execute the maneuver. The Ausa fighters, ill-prepared to face these seasoned generals, fled and sought refuge in remote territories. Despite their initial disappointment at not receiving the anticipated assistance, the Italians remained confident that the indigenous population, whom they regarded as backward, could not possibly vanquish a well-armed European force equipped with modern weaponry.



King Tekle Haimanot

The commencement of the Mekele conflict transpired on the 27th of December 1895. As the Ethiopian ground forces and cavalry advanced methodically towards the fortifications, negotiating the impediments of sharp wooden barriers and barbed wire, the Italian troops initiated a barrage of artillery fire from a considerable distance. Despite the formidable challenge of breaching the fortifications, the Ethiopians valiantly pressed forward, albeit succumbing to the onslaught like leaves in the wind. Consequently, a cessation of hostilities became imperative. Troops under the command of Ras Mekonnen, Rase Mengesha, and Ras Welle, encamped in proximity to Mekele, dispatched a missive to the Italians proposing the relinquishment of the fortifications in exchange for a secure passage. On the 5th of January 1896, Ras Mekonnen penned a letter to Galiano, the overseer of the Italian forces at Enda Iyesus. "I did not embark on hostilities against this diminutive fortification. Our numbers are formidable, and we are undeterred by your weaponry. Recall Ambalege and the denouement of Tozili. It is in your best interest to surrender the fortification and depart to Metsiwa in tranquility." However, the Italians, instead of acceding to the proposition, chose to rely on their fortifications and armaments, electing to maintain their position.

The conflict in Mekele commenced on the 27th of December 1895. As the Ethiopian ground forces, accompanied by cavalry, advanced gradually towards the fortification, negotiating the formidable wooden barriers and barbed wire, the Italian troops unleashed a barrage of artillery rounds from a considerable distance. Despite the seemingly insurmountable nature of the fortification, the Ethiopians valiantly pressed forward, enduring the onslaught with courage. Alas, they fell like leaves in the wind, succumbing to the relentless shots. Consequently, they found it imperative to cease hostilities.

The troops under the command of Ras Mekonnen, Rase Mengesha, and Ras Welle, encamped in the vicinity of Mekele, conveyed a message to the Italians, proposing the relinquishment of the fortification in exchange for a secure passage. On the 5th of January in the year 1896, Ras Mekonnen penned a letter to Galiano, the individual overseeing the Italian army at Enda Iyesus. In his letter, Ras Mekonnen stated, "I did not come to wage war on this diminutive fortification. Our forces are

formidable, and we do not fear your weaponry. Recall Ambalege and the conclusion of Tozili. It is in your best interest to surrender the fortification and depart for Mesewa in tranquillity." However, the Italians, instead of accepting the proposition, chose to place their reliance on the fortification and armaments, opting to remain entrenched.



Ras Mekonnen

On the morrow, the 6th Of January 1896, Emperor Menelik, at the helm of his formidable army, united with the three distinguished Rases. The next day, the 7th of January, marked the Ethiopian Christmas, as the Italians encamped at Enda Iyesus and commenced a barrage upon the Ethiopian troops in transit. Despite the emperor's discernment of the fortress's potency, he refrained from retaliatory fire. Nevertheless, in the face of escalating hostilities, the emperor commanded Lique Mekuas Abate and Bejirond Balcha to assail the stronghold. Throughout the day, these leaders and their forces assiduously attacked the entrenchment to no avail. Consequently, they fortified their position through the night and, as dawn broke on the 8th of January, initiated an assault on the Italian stronghold, catching the Italians off guard. Particularly noteworthy was Lique Mekuas Abate's precision when he discharged the cannon; not only did he strike the window of the church housing the Italian encampment, but he also succeeded in demolishing one of their cannons. Despite the relentless efforts of the 60,000 troops led by Ras Mekonnen between the 8th and 11th of January, the fortress remained impervious. During these hostilities, approximately 500 Ethiopians met their demise, while a mere 6 Italians lost their lives, with 9 sustaining injuries.

Empress Tayitu, upon observing the considerable casualties suffered by the troops during the assault on the fortification, diligently inquired about the whereabouts of the water well and its surroundings. Upon discovering the feasibility of capturing it, she promptly relayed this information to Emperor Menelik. The emperor, in turn, granted her the authority to proceed, leading her to command her troops to seize the water well. Under the cover of darkness, 900 troops adeptly and effortlessly secured control of the vital water source. The Italians, awakening to the loss of the water well the following morning, endeavored to reclaim it but met with failure as the Ethiopians valiantly resisted. Empress Tayitu, exhibiting her strategic acumen, ensured that the troops were provided with meals

and beverages each night. The overconfident Italian forces, previously secure in their fortification, now found themselves grappling with adversity. Consequently, water rations were imposed from that point onward. Galiano, the fortification's overseer, urgently dispatched a letter to Barteri for assistance, yet no response was forthcoming. Barteri's lack of reply stemmed from his lack of inclination and energy to abandon his stronghold in Adigrat and confront Emperor Menelik. Instead, he delegated Pietro Filter to negotiate and facilitate the surrender of the Mekele fortification to Emperor Menelik.

Pietro Filter presented himself to Emperor Menelik and explained his visit. Following a rigorous debate, on 17th January, the emperor declared that if the Italian government consented to the revocation of the Treaty of Wuchali, the besieged Italian troops would be permitted to depart. On 19th January, Barteri conveyed a message to the emperor through Pietro Filter, indicating that the Treaty of Wuchali and the boundary conflict would be re-examined, and Galiano was to concede the fortification and withdraw. Emperor Menelik conveyed to the messenger that “we are not savages but follow the Christian faith, which commands us to love our enemies.” He then stated that the Christians, referring to the Italians, should not be killed but allowed to leave. However, the emperor informed Pietro that if he still wished to fight, he could wait with them. The following day, on the 20th of January, after the Italians surrendered their fortification, they were permitted to collect water from the well. In the meantime, Bejerond Balcha raised the Ethiopian flag on the fortification. On 21st January, the Ethiopian army positioned themselves on the right and left side, while the Italian soldiers passed through the centre, bowed to the emperor, and departed to Adigrat. Nevertheless, 10 Italian soldiers were detained pending the arrival of a negotiator from the Italian camp.



Dejazmach Balcha Abba Nefso

Upon the Italian army's entrance into Adigrat, Major Salsa was on the verge of departing for Mekele to engage in discussions regarding the initial agreement. However, Bariteier discovered the presence of Italian soldiers being held as hostages and intervened, preventing his departure. Emperor Menelik, having patiently waited for ten days for the arrival of the Italian negotiator, grew suspicious that the Italians intentionally delayed allowing for additional reinforcements, causing him considerable annoyance. The apprehensive Italian soldiers, uncertain about their fate due to the negotiator's

tardiness, were escorted to Ras Makonnen. Addressing them in accordance with the initial agreement, Ras Makonnen declared that, as Major Salsa had not yet arrived, it had been decided that they should be executed. However, Emperor Menelik, guided by the principle that individuals should not be punished for the faults of others, granted them permission to return to their people. Ras Makonnen instructed them to convey to General Bartieri that if Major Salsa could not be sent, Mr. Filter could be an alternative. In the absence of both, they were to inform him that Christian blood would be spilled and then dismissed them.

On the 11th of February, Major Salsa, following a significant defeat, presented an improbable request. This entailed the renewal of the Wuchale Accord, and the restitution of all territories seized by the Ethiopians. Emperor Menelik, taken aback by such a proposal, promptly directed Major Salsa to return without delay. Bariterieri, adopting an arrogant stance, issued a stern ultimatum, declaring an end to negotiations and asserting the intention to take any deemed necessary action. A couple of days later, Ras Sebhat Aregawi and Dejazemach Hagos Teferi, who had previously aligned with the Italians after disputes with Ras Mengesha, defected with their 500 soldiers and pledged allegiance to Emperor Menelik. Armed with intimate knowledge of the Italians' movements and encampments, these two leaders decimated the Italian army en route from Antecho to Adigrat, severing telegraph lines in the process. Subsequently, Ras Welde Michael, the governor of Hamasen, also switched allegiances and sided with the Ethiopian forces. By the 23rd of February 1886, the Ethiopian army advanced and camped around Adwa. Emperor Menelik, recognizing the formidable fortifications of the Italians, chose a strategic approach, opting not to launch an immediate assault. Instead, he awaited the Italians to emerge and engage in battle.

The Battle of Adwa (The third war, 1 March 1896)

The Ethiopian forces stationed around Adwa had fortified their positions between February 23 and February 28 in preparation for a significant conflict. Concurrently, an Ethiopian propaganda campaign was initiated to encourage the Italians to leave their camp. This involved a strategic approach where the Ethiopian army, during their quest for provisions in villages, deliberately provided false information to Italian informants secretly working for Emperor Menelik.

Numerous soldiers expressed concerns about the prolonged duration of the war and their apprehensions regarding the Italians' artillery. Consequently, some soldiers were deserting and returning to their villages. Additionally, a dispute between the King of Gojam and Emperor Menelik led the former to decide to return to Gojam with his army. Ras Mekonnen was also reportedly preparing for a revolt, while a significant portion of the army had departed for Axum Tsion on pilgrimage.

On February 28, General Baritieri convened a meeting with fellow Generals Albertoni, Arimondi, Dabormeda, and Ellena. Baritieri, briefing his colleagues about their limited rations lasting only four days, proposed either retreating to Asmera or launching an attack on the Ethiopian army. The other four Generals unanimously opposed the retreat to Asmera, expressing a collective desire to take

action against the Ethiopian army and avenge their previous humiliations at Ambalege and Mekele. Consequently, they resolved to attack the Ethiopian army the following day, on February 29.

The Ethiopian army's strategic positions in Adwa were as follows: Emperor Menelik, accompanied by his imperial guards, camped on the hills of Abba Gerima, with Empress Tayitu and her 5000-strong army and cannons nearby. Empress Tayitu was supported by a group of women, including Zeweditu Menelik, who provided ammunition, water, and assistance to wounded soldiers. King Tekle Haymanot and his 12,000 soldiers were positioned on the right flank of Emperor Menelik, while Ras Menegesha and Ras Alula, commanding 13,000 soldiers, camped at Kidane Miheret. The army of Ras Mekonne, Ras Michael, and Ras Welle occupied the middle position.

February 29, 1896 – on the eve of the conflict.

9:00 p.m. – At 9:00 p.m. on Saturday, General Baratieri, under the cover of darkness, led his four brigades comprising 17,000 soldiers (10,600 Italians and 7,000 natives) in an attack on the Ethiopian army at Adwa. The plan envisaged the four brigades advancing in four directions, each reaching its assigned position before sunrise. However, amidst the pitch darkness, an outdated map and Eritrean guides in service of Emperor Menelik made the journey arduous.

2:30 a.m. – The Italian army, led by Generals Baratieri and Giuseppe, reached Eshasho Mountain at 2:30 a.m. Following the plan, General Albertoni's brigade turned left towards Kidane Meheret, while General Dabormeda's brigade turned right, heading for the hill, with Armondi's army positioned in the middle.

4:00 a.m. – General Albertoni, as instructed, led his brigade to Kidane Miheret. However, the Eritrean guides, in the employ of Emperor Menelik, insisted they were still far from their destination, leading them another 4.5 miles. After covering 2.5 miles, they unexpectedly encountered Ras Alula's army, resulting in the first exchange of fire. Despite attempts by other brigades to camp close together, the outdated map and misguided Eritreans led them astray.

In the early morning, as the Italians navigated the Adwa terrain, Emperor Menelik, Empress Tayitu, King Tegle Haymanot, and other Rases were attending morning services at Saint Michael Church in Adwa. Some historians claim Emperor Menelik was in the Royal tent, but a messenger arrived at the church, signaling the enemy's arrival and the commencement of hostilities. The archbishop emerged, declaring, "My children, today God's judgment will prevail. Go and fight for your religion and Emperor. May the Divine absolve you of your transgressions. Following the benediction, the congregation proceeded to venerate the cross bestowed by the bishop.

5:30 a.m. – The Shewa cavalry informed Emperor Menelik of the enemy's presence at Abba Gerima. The emperor, along with Empress Tayitu and the cavalry, proceeded to Abba Gerima.

6:00 a.m. – The reconnaissance units of the emperor were deployed in every compass point, diligently surveying enemy activity and relaying pertinent intelligence to His Majesty. Albertoni, accompanied by his contingent of 4,500 soldiers, reached Kidane Miheret.

6:10 a.m. – A detachment from the Albertoni Brigade altered its course and proceeded independently. This particular unit advanced directly towards the encampment of the army under King Tekle Haimanot, equipped with formidable weaponry. The commencement of hostilities ensued promptly at that juncture.

6:15 a.m. – General Baritieri, stationed on Mount Eshasho with the reserve army, dispatched a messenger to locate Albertoni.

7:15 a.m. – Baritieri, learning of the distance between Albertoni and Armonidi, instructed Dabormeda to assist the centre army from the left. However, Dabormeda turned right, moving towards Mariam Sheweto, far from the main forces. (Perhaps the messenger could have been working for the emperor too?)

At that moment, Ras Mekonnen and Ras Alula exploited the opportunity to engage the isolated brigade in open combat. Observing Albertoni's prowess against King Tekle Haimanot, Empress Tayitu and Ras Menegsha urged the emperor to dispatch the strongest 25,000 imperial army against the Italians.

8:15 a.m. – Albertoni urgently requested additional soldiers from Baritieri.

8:30 a.m. – In addition to the 25,000 imperial army, 3,000 soldiers under Empress Tayitu were sent to attack Albertoni.

9:00 a.m. – The esteemed imperial army, celebrated for their valour and instilling fear, launched an assault upon Albertoni's position, swiftly apprehending him within a mere half-hour. The residual Italian forces promptly fled to join Arimondi's brigade 2 miles away.

Whilst Arimondi was engrossed in a fierce battle, the imperial army, in pursuit of Albertoni's retreating forces, successfully overwhelmed his position. Regrettably, Arimondi found himself unable to secure and safeguard his strategic location.

9:15 a.m. – The Ethiopian army surged towards Arimondi, engaging in hand-to-hand combat.

Upon Baritieri's arrival at the theatre of war alongside his reserve forces, he could only see Arimondi engaged in combat, and unable to discern the presence of his comrades. Surveying the scene from a distance, Baritieri discerned Albertoni's troops corps dispersed across the terrain, while indigenous inhabitants scattered in retreat. However, the whereabouts of Dabormeda remained elusive to him.

10:00 a.m. – Ras Mengesha and Ras Michael attacked Arimondi's position from another direction, resulting in the decimation of Arimondi and his soldiers. Colonel Galiano's army on the left also scattered and was swiftly eliminated by the Imperial army.

11:30 a.m. – Baritieri and his soldiers engaged in battle with the Ethiopian forces. Unable to withstand the Ethiopians, Baritieri realized the imminent defeat and gathered the remaining soldiers, fleeing to Adigrat. Some soldiers did not halt until they reached the border.

2:00 p.m. – For the preceding four hours, Dabormeda had been locked in combat with Ethiopian forces at Mariam Sheweto. With no word received from Baritieri and no reinforcements dispatched, he intuited that a significant event had transpired. Consequently, he resolved to initiate a strategic withdrawal towards the northern front.

3:00 p.m. – Emperor Menelik, informed of the war's progress and learning that all except Dabormeda's army had been vanquished, ordered Ras Michael's 20,000-strong army and 8,000 cavalries to attack Dabormeda's forces, sparing no one.

As the Dabormeda's army retreated through the narrow valley, they fell prey to a swift cavalry attack. In under half an hour, Dabormeda and his 4,500 soldiers were annihilated.

The Ethiopians pursued the remaining Italians, inflicting casualties and capturing them until nightfall. Emperor Menelik, returning from Amba Gerima to Adwa before sunset, issued a decree prohibiting the killing of Italians but directing their capture.

A jubilant atmosphere with war chants and songs of victory filled the air, prompting the emperor's inquiry. Upon learning that the fallen were Christians, he ordered the cessation of celebrations, replacing the red royal umbrella with a black one. Heavy rain followed, and as the empress received the names of fallen heroes, tears streamed down her face. Despite the Ethiopian victory, nobles and the army stood in mournful contemplation, deeply saddened by the loss of their compatriots.

Under the leadership of Emperor Menelik, the Ethiopians secured a resounding triumph in the Adwa War against the Italians. The conflict witnessed the demise of 13,300 Italian troops, among them Generals Arimondi and Dabormeda, while 700 were taken captive, including General Albertoni. Conversely, the Ethiopian forces suffered significant losses, with 20,000 sacrificing their lives and a further 7,000 sustaining injuries.

Upon the cessation of hostilities, Emperor Menelik undertook the interment of the fallen and diligently endeavored to restore a semblance of normalcy. On the 2nd of April 1896, he dispatched a letter to the European governments, articulating Ethiopia's longstanding status as a sovereign and independent nation. In this communication, he expounded upon the initial catalysts for the Adwa conflict, elucidating how Italy, through the deployment of its military might, sought to annex our territories. Consequently, a considerable volume of Christian blood was shed. Nonetheless, our

benevolent deity, who has safeguarded our nation since time immemorial, remains steadfast in our favor, poised to thwart any encroaching adversary.

During this concurrent period, another epistle was dispatched to Muse Shifene, wherein the Emperor remarked, "...due to their arrogance, they engaged in the Battle of Adwa and suffered defeat. I refrain from boasting about our triumph, cognizant that the ignorance of others resulted in the unjust spilling of Christian blood."

After the triumph, 15,000 Italian soldiers under General Baldesera arrived at Messewa. Seeking peace, they repeatedly requested the release of prisoners. However, Emperor Menelik, aware of their deceitful intentions, insisted on an official revocation of the Treaty of Wuchale before considering the release.

With preparations completed, the POWs and captured weapons were ready to be transported to the capital city.

The victorious Emperor entered his capital city

In the triumphant return to his capital city, Emperor Menelik re-entered with his army and prisoners of war on June 12, 1896, precisely 8 months after his victorious departure. The populace gathered to extend a warm welcome, expressing their enthusiasm through martial chants, applause, and ululations, while the clergy resonated with hymns. In commemoration, cannons, once intended for the assault on Ethiopia by Italy and seized at Adwa, fired a hundred rounds.

Post-celebration, the prisoners of war were allocated to various nobles for care until a resolution could be reached between Ethiopia and Italy. Despite numerous pleas from the Italian government, conveyed through messengers, and even a letter from Pope Leo XIII on June 11, 1896, requesting the release of the captives, Emperor Menelik remained resolute. His response to the Pope on October 3, 1896, conveyed appreciation for the appeal but cited the sacrifices of Ethiopian lives in defence of their nation as the reason for his decision. Nevertheless, he assured proper treatment for the prisoners during their captivity in Ethiopia.

Upon receiving intelligence that a particular soldier was overcome with inconsolable grief upon reading a letter from his mother, Emperor Menelik summoned the distressed soldier to have the letter recited in his presence. The contents of the maternal communication were poignant. The bereaved mother expressed, "If news of my son's demise had reached me, I would have mourned and overcome the grief, as any mother would. However, I have been in ceaseless tears, ignorant of your whereabouts. I nourished you with wholesome sustenance, but now I am unaware of the provisions that sustain you. My son, you comprehend the depth of my affection. My reliance is upon the Almighty, fervently anticipating the day we reunite. Until then, my days are spent in unwavering devotion at Saint Mary's church, where I lit a candle, kneel, and beseech the divine on your behalf. I fervently pray for your liberation, and I implore you to offer your prayers from wherever you are. My

cherished son, conduct yourself virtuously and persevere; I am aware of your yearning for me. Rest assured; my tears shall not be in vain; we shall be reunited.” The compassionate Emperor Menelik, moved by the emotional depth of the letter, succumbed to a sense of sorrow and shed tears. He addressed the prisoner, stating, "Go, I grant you release. Your mother's tears have interceded on your behalf." Subsequently, the liberated prisoner embarked on a journey to Asmera and thence to Italy.

Recognizing that the release of prisoners hinged upon the annulment of the Wuchale treaty, the Italian government, on August 23, 1896, formally declared the abrogation of the aforementioned treaty. Simultaneously, they affirmed Ethiopia's status as an independent nation. Subsequently, at the behest of Emperor Menelik, a comprehensive document comprising nine sections was drafted and executed between the two nations on October 26, 1896. Notably, as part of the settlement, the Italian government was obligated to remit reparations amounting to 10 million Lira to the Ethiopian government.

The significance of the triumph at Adwa

The astonishment that befell the global community when an African nation vanquished a well-equipped European power elevated Ethiopia's reputation while discomfiting the Italians. The Adwa victory instilled optimism in individuals subjected to the shackles of slavery and colonial rule. It suggested that through coordinated efforts, they too could overcome any encroaching force and mount a resistance against oppressors.

Written for the 117th Adwa anniversary.

28 February 2013