

**ERITREA:**

**BACKGROUND TO REVOLUTION**

*BY*

*YORDANOS GEBRE-MEDHIN*

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In spite of the fact that Eritrea (pronounced Er-i-tré-a) and its struggle for independence from Ethiopian rule have been much in the news during the past few years, it seems likely that most Western readers are poorly informed about the country, its history, and the origins and nature of the independence movement. In the article which follows, Yordanos Gebre-Medhin, a member of Eritreans for Liberation in North America, supplies some of the basic information needed for a better understanding of the Eritrean situation. First of all, however, a few elementary facts of geography and earlier history may be in order.

Eritrea has an area variously estimated at between 46 and 48 thousand square miles (the size of Pennsylvania or New York). It is located on the east coast of Africa, bounded on the east by the Red Sea, on the north and west by Sudan, on the south by Ethiopia, and on the southeast by Affar-Issas. Asmara is the capital, and Massawa and Assab are the country's two important seaports.

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The last decades of the nineteenth century saw the carving up of the African continent by the European imperialist powers. Italy, coming late to the colonial feast, penetrated Eritrea in the 1880s and established a formal colony in 1890, intending to use it as a springboard for the conquest of Ethiopia. However, in one of the few decisive setbacks suffered by the Europeans in their drive to colonize Africa, the Italians were defeated by the Ethiopians at the famous battle of Aduwa in 1896, putting an end for nearly 40 years to Italian expansionist ambitions in that part of the world.

These ambitions were revived by Italian finance capital under Mussolini in the 1930s, and once again Eritrea was used as staging ground for an attack on Ethiopia, this time successfully. As Yordanos Gebre-Medhin makes clear below, the consequences for Eritrea of Fascist Italy's military-imperialist activities were decisive in reshaping the country's socio-economic structure. When the Second World War broke out, Mussolini saw an opportunity to expand further, at the expense of the British, and began moving into the then Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. But early in 1941 the British counter-attacked and by April completely occupied the country.

The British held Eritrea during the remainder of the 1940s, pending a decision on the fate of the former colonies of the Axis powers. In December 1950 the UN General Assembly, then completely dominated by the United States and its allies and clients, decreed that Eritrea should become an autonomous unit federated with Ethiopia. This arrangement, however, was never seriously respected by the Ethiopians, who proceeded to subjugate the country, eventually turning it into a mere province.

From this brief account it will be seen that Eritrea has its own history quite distinct from that of Ethiopia, and that the two countries have never been organically joined together.

—*The Editors*

Ever since Eritrea became a historically definite community its history has been one of confrontation and resistance to colonial adversaries: Italy (prior to 1941), England (dur-

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ing the 1940s), and now Ethiopia. Yet the Eritrean struggle has been described in such negative terms as "secessionist," "endemic insurgency," "foreign (Arab) instigated," etc. Such categorizations deny the real issues. The "inviolable and sacred unity" of Ethiopia serves only to cover the continued massacre, oppression, and domination of the Eritrean people.

The class struggles that are now being waged in Eritrea and Ethiopia, while coinciding, are different in substance. This is simply due to the differing historical circumstances of the two regions. In Eritrea the European imperialists had direct control of the means of production, while in Ethiopia they worked within the existing framework of a feudal class structure and in direct collaboration with the feudal ruling class.

*The Italian Colonial Period (1890-1941).* The history of modern Eritrea begins during the period of colonial consolidation.\* The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 facilitated the capitalist plunder by Europe of the Red Sea area. The already existing seaport at Massawa (Eritrea) was first briefly occupied by Egypt, and later by Italy, a colonial power. Italy was defeated by an indigenous army led by the feudal lords of Ethiopia at the battle of Aduwa in 1896. This humiliating defeat prevented Italy from expanding its Eritrean boundaries and shaped Italian colonial policy toward Eritrea. Conveniently and strategically located, Eritrea was to be a base from which goods imported from Italy were to be distributed across the sea to Arab countries and to the neighboring Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia. In return, Italy was to extract from these regions raw materials and, via Eritrea, export them to industries in Italy. It was Italy's policy to discourage the development of a local commercial bourgeoisie capable of competing with the Italians. Italy, in short, was an expansionist and monopolist colonial power.

The first phase of Italian colonialism was primarily administrative and repressive, aimed at making Eritrea governable. Italy did its best to break the cultural and religious ties between the highlands of Eritrea and Ethiopia by making Eritrean Coptic Church heads subject to Italian consecration and by confiscating church lands. Italy also built communica-

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\* Notes will be found at the end of the article.

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tions facilities to consolidate its domination, but did little to promote industrial growth.

A period of far-reaching change began in Eritrea in 1930 as the fascist government in Italy, partly in response to the depression which had begun to develop in 1929, opened a new phase of imperialist expansion in east Africa. Rome used Eritrea as a base, enlisting thousands of Eritreans into the armed forces which launched attacks on the colony's neighbors. Italy successfully, if briefly, occupied Ethiopia, Somalia, and parts of Sudan and Kenya before being defeated by Britain in 1941. During this period thousands of Italians moved into Eritrea: the European population which had been a bare 5,000 in 1930, skyrocketed to 50,000 by 1935; and Eritrea, which had been self-sufficient before 1930, became increasingly dependent on Italy after that date. Banks, hospitals, roads, bridges, garages, airports, etc., were built at a rapid rate. Excellent roads leading out of Asmara turned Eritrea into an increasingly unified economic and social unit; and the spread of the network toward western Sudan and northern Ethiopia encouraged greater contact between Eritrea and its neighbors. In addition to modernizing the ports at Massawa and Assab, the Italians built railroads, including one of the longest cable-ways in the world, linking Asmara with the port of Massawa.

The impact of all these changes on the population was drastic: peasants in significant numbers were transformed into wage workers, soldiers, and city dwellers. By 1941 one fifth of the total population was urbanized, in spite of the fact that relatively few jobs were provided in productive industry. It is not surprising, therefore, that with the collapse of the war economy in 1941, the situation turned desperate.

This led to the migration of many managerial and technically qualified workers to Sudan, Somalia, and especially Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia. The influx of Eritrean workers into Ethiopia, which was encouraged by the Ethiopian government for both economic and political reasons, was later to become the basis for the Ethiopian propaganda claim that the migration of workers to Ethiopia was the result not of the particular historical conjuncture of the early 1940s but rather of Eritrea's dependence on Ethiopia's wealth. What the Ethiopian ruling

class was incapable of comprehending was that by advocating and eventually achieving annexation of Eritrea, and at the same time encouraging worker migration, it would erode the bases of the feudal mode of production and ultimately bring about its own political extinction.

In terms of colonial administration the British occupation (1941-1952) was essentially a continuation of the Italian one that preceded it. By 1941 there were some 70,000 Italian nationals living in Eritrea, and they remained in control of the colonial government under overall British supervision.<sup>7</sup>

*The Peasant Revolutionary Transformation.* In seven of the eight subdivisions of Eritrea, where more than 95 percent of Eritreans live, Italian capital precipitated profound economic and social changes. It is important to note at the outset that in Eritrea feudalism in its classical form, or its Ethiopian variant, had never developed.<sup>8</sup> In the Christian highlands, however, the Coptic Church owned very valuable land and demanded and received free peasant labor time for its cultivation. In the lowlands, chiefs owned serfs, and the status of the serfs was abhorrent. However in both areas, Italian colonialism altered this "nascent feudalism."

In the highlands, the Church land was confiscated and converted to Italian Crown land, some of which was leased to peasant villages while other land was given to Italian settlers. The church as an economic force was destroyed.

In the lowlands, great serf revolts in the 1940s brought about the abolition of serf-subordination and serf-obligations to the chiefs. As Trevaskis notes, this was a fundamental revolutionary experience: in "a country where society has always been divided against itself by feuds and conflicting interests, there now emerged a real union embracing [all] the serfs."

However, in the highlands, the Church—no longer an economic power—still exerted influence because the ideology of the masses remained that of Coptic Christianity. In the lowlands where the tradition was quite different, with the emancipation of the serfs the socio-economic power of the chiefs was eliminated. In both cases, with the peasants freed from economic bondage, the power of the Church and that of the chiefs was "almost" annihilated. Almost, because neither the interests of the

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ruling class nor its ideas dies that quickly. With the political chaos of 1941, the temporary resurgence of these ruling interests and the strengthening of feudalism became a possibility. This was attempted in the following manner.

Immediately after the Italian defeat a clandestine organization (which became an official political party in December 1947) made every effort to reverse history. The Patriotic Association for the Union of Eritrea with Ethiopia (UP), sponsored by the Ethiopian government, cultivated as allies the dispossessed Coptic Church and the chiefs of the Moslem lowlands. The party founders and active members had already secured by the early 1940s important high offices in the Addis Ababa-based Ethiopian government. The main objective of the UP was to cultivate support among the masses for its unionist cause. In return, Ethiopia was to restore to the Church and the chiefs their lost economic and political power and, through royal intermarriage, make them part of the Ethiopian feudal ruling class.

The agent of this conspiracy was the Eritrean Coptic Church. It began intimidating the peasants, threatening excommunication, and refusing the holy services of baptism and burial if the Church's adherents did not support the unionist cause. However, when even these tactics did not work, the Church leaders began to propagate anti-Moslem paranoia. This ultimately resulted in the split of the alliance between the Church and the chiefs but did rally some anti-Moslem support for the UP.

With the partial success of the unionist cause, a counter party articulating the interest of the lowlands, the Moslem League (ML), was formed in 1946. Although the founders of this party were merchants, ex-serfs, and past functionaries of the Italian government, at the beginning they gave voice to the interests of the serfs and criticized the worn-out feudal system in Ethiopia. However, as it became increasingly clear that their real goal, in opposition to the UP, was to secure state independence for the lowlands, the ML became an opportunist and sectarian political organization, allowing the chiefs who had defected from the UP to infiltrate into the party organization. Finally in the summer of 1946 the hostility which was brewing

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between the leaders of the UP which supported union with Ethiopia and the new rulers of the ML who supported an independent lowland erupted into the worst political war in the history of both Asmara and Eritrea.

Thus for the time being the Ethiopian government was able to divide the Eritrean people, and especially the peasants, by sowing discord within the ruling class of Eritrea, and by appealing to the "sanctity" of the Ethiopians' official religion.

*Political Movements.* In the 1940s, during British occupation, freedom of speech and assembly and all the other liberal democratic paraphernalia flourished in Eritrea. Other than the already described UP and ML, the Eritrea for Eritreans Party, the New Eritrea Pro-Italian Party, and the National Party of Massawa comprised the most influential political organizations.

Generally, the political leadership was lacking in ideology to unite the masses of Eritreans on programs transcending local or religious limitations. Without solid mass support, the party apparatuses were weak and underdeveloped and most of their platforms unrealistic. As late as 1950, the philosophy of the numerous parties was guided by parochial, decadent, petty bourgeois, and comprador interests.

By July 1951, however, these various interests congealed into two distinct national parties. Almost all the opposition parties consolidated to form a pro-independence bloc called the Eritrean Democratic Front (EDF). The EDF challenged the UP, which in the UN General Assembly debate naturally sought a stronger federal link with feudal Ethiopia. But by 1952 with the nominal UN-sponsored federation and the actual annexation of Eritrea by Ethiopia, liberal politics began to disintegrate, and the EDF leadership was forced into exile. This was no surprise, for feudal authoritarian Ethiopia could hardly have been expected to tolerate a liberal political atmosphere in Eritrea. Nevertheless, this deteriorating situation was gradually and inevitably leading to an armed confrontation.

*The Rise of the Working Class.* Following the defeat of the Italians in 1941 and the ensuing economic collapse, a gradual recovery took place under the British occupation, based in the first instance on the infrastructure inherited from the Italian war economy and what qualified manpower remained



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in Eritrea. Taken as a whole, the decade of the 1940s was one of considerable industrial growth: whereas during the entire Italian colonial period only five industries with six plants had been established, by 1950 there were 18 more industries with 19 plants, an increase on the order of 300 percent.

By 1950 the principal manufacturing industries, mining, transport, administration, and public utilities were responsible for the employment of 38,800 Eritreans and 19,800 Europeans. In addition there were seasonal migratory laborers and individual farmers. This economic growth was a modest but important accomplishment for an Eritrean population estimated at 2.5 million by 1952.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, from 1940 to 1946 the number of livestock in Eritrea approximately doubled, and the export of agricultural goods was begun. Between 1943 and 1945 industrial exports rose threefold. The potential of Eritrea to be a self-sufficient and exporting country was demonstrated.

As a corollary to this economic development, a workers' movement arose. While workers had little voice in the late 1940s, with the formation of trade unions in the early 1950s they became the most vocal and militant and among the best organized workers on the African continent.

By December 1952 (11 years before labor unions were legalized in Ethiopia), the Eritrean General Union of Labor Syndicates was formed in accordance with provisions of the Eritrean constitution, only to be banned a few days later by the government of Ethiopia. The workers went underground, and the dock workers in Massawa and Assab staged a two-week strike to defend what they considered their legitimate rights to organize. This ended in armed clashes between the Ethiopian soldiers and the Eritrean workers, who were supported by the Eritrean police. In February 1958 the workers in Asmara and Massawa coordinated strike action "into the longest and biggest strike ever to take place in the country." The result was the "February Massacre," in which the occupying Ethiopian force killed or wounded more than 80 protesting workers.

*The Launching of the Eritrean Liberation Front.* As early as July 28, 1949, when it appeared that the international imperialist forces were favoring Ethiopia's claim to Eritrea, and

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Ethiopian-backed sabotage, terror, massacre, and assassination in Eritrea were at their peak, a discussion concerning the formation of an Eritrean liberation front appeared in *Eritrean Weekly News*. But the front did not materialize, and the UN parliamentary solution was given a chance.

It soon became clear, however, that the UN mandate was not working. Eritrea was gradually losing its sovereignty. The economic and social situation was deteriorating. In reaction to this, in 1959, the Eritrean Liberation Movement, an urban guerrilla force, was established. Among its objectives was to liquidate Eritrean traitors and agents of Ethiopian feudalism, to raise and collect funds, and to prepare for armed struggle against Ethiopian colonialism. In September 1961, with the establishment of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), the armed struggle officially began. The deplorable conditions in Eritrea combined with the world revolutionary atmosphere made the radicalization of ELF inevitable. Some of the cadres of the fighting forces have been assisted or trained by friendly socialist countries, notably Cuba and the People's Republic of China.

But the profundity of the Eritrean revolution, which is barely touched upon here, lies not only in the bearing of arms for the past 14 years. More important is its attempt to transform Eritrean society, to liberate men and women, transcend the remaining decadent and archaic traditions, and wage the Eritrean democratic revolution, paving the path to a people's republic. Difficult as this task is, its success is already having a cataclysmic effect on the masses of Ethiopia in their struggle against their exploiters. Moreover, the Eritrean revolution, as a class struggle against an African ruling class and its imperialist collaborators, will undoubtedly have a far-reaching impact on future African revolutions.

#### NOTES

1. All figures and statements of fact have been taken from *Four Power Commission of Investigation for the Former Italian Colonies: Report on Eritrea*, UN publication, (N.Y.: 1950). G. D. N. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition: 1941-1952* (London: 1960); J. C. Gray, L. Silberman, *The Fate of Italy's Colonies*, Fabian Publications

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- Ltd. (London: 1948); *Eritrea: History, Geography and Economy*, ELF publication (Damascus: n.d.).
2. Godfrey, Morrison, "Eritrea," Report #5, Minority Right Group Publication, 36 Craven Street, W.C. 2 (London: 1971).
  3. *Report on Land Tenure Survey of Eritrea Province*, prepared by Department of Land Tenure, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (January: 1969). "The Agrarian Question in Ethiopia," *Challenge* (July 1970). Taha Nur, "Eritrea: Significance of its Struggle Against Feudalism," *Tricontinental Bulletin* (June 1969).
  4. No accurate population count of Eritrea exists. According to the British estimate, the population of Eritrea was little more than one million. See Trevaskis, pp. 133-134. For the same year (1952) according to the above cited ELF publication, "The population of Eritrea is not less than 2.5 million," p. 11. At present the popular estimate is between two and three million.